



YADUK AND THE GODS OF SEABOR

ANITA VAANI

YADUK *and the*



GODS OF SEABOR

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LACHVI

THE year was 294 BC. It was summer in the ancient Himalayas. The highest mountains of the Earth faced the sun then as they have done forever - with freezing majesty. The rays of the sun were dripping with warmth, but the peaks remained frigid to them and defiantly kept their shimmering caps of snow. Lower down, glaciers lapped up the warmth and melted into rivers that gurgled down the mountains as thin silvery ribbons.

Seasonal shelters of herders dotted the upland pastures and lightly beaten trails could be seen leading the way to villages scattered on the slopes below. One such trampled path led to the village Lachvi.

Lachvi was situated against the backdrop of snow-capped mountains and it overlooked richly forested vales and gorges. However, the village itself was sparse - stone huts were scattered around an old temple with open enclosures for the herds.

The villagers of Lachvi were mostly cowherds. They led simple lives that were deeply entwined with the mountains they lived on and the sky, water and fire that they worshipped. 'Awk! Awk!' the cry rang poignantly in the vales when the cowherds took their yaks and goats to the upland pastures at dawn. Nimble and gutsy, the lads and their herds scampered easily up the treacherous rocks to find patches of fresh shrubs and grass.

Today, it was a bright summer day at Lachvi. The sky was clear and the breeze was fresh and cool. The herds were out in the pastures - goats, yaks and donkeys dotted the rocky slopes. While the animals grazed on the dewy shrubs, their herders basked lazily in the warm sunshine. As the day wore on, the lads took off their upper robes and sprawled down on the rocky outcrops. With drowsy eyes, they watched tiny *fur-birds* flit in their nests in the cracked mountain face.

'Play us a song, Gopi!' grunted one of the lads sleepily. Gopi was the oldest among them and played the flute melodiously. He raised his head and ran a slow gaze over the herds. The sun was very bright today and some of the goats had wandered to graze in the shade.

'Play!' the lad grunted again. Gopi took out his flute and began

playing a melody that sounded hauntingly like the wail of the *widow-raven* . ‘Play something merry...’ grumbled the cowherds. ‘It is for the mountain god to give us grief, not you!’

The lads had hardly uttered the words when a gust of cold air blew in and took them by surprise. ‘Brrrr...’ they shivered, springing to their feet in alarm. Dark clouds had suddenly welled up at the horizon. They rubbed their eyes open and before they could put on their robes, a cold gale began blowing strongly. ‘Hooooon...’ the wind wailed ominously, making the lads shiver with biting cold and fright.

‘Let’s hurry back...’ Gopi said in a trembling voice. He looked down at the village. No spirals of smoke could be seen rising from the huts - the villagers had snuffed out their hearths!

‘Look!’ a lad cried, pointing to the sky. The sun had rolled over to the west and was hurtling down the sky. The young cowherds gulped in their breaths and huddled close to each other. ‘Gopi, is the mountain god awake?’ they asked fearfully.

‘Yes...’ Gopi croaked, his face stricken with panic. ‘Run!’ he yelled, scrambling up the rocks to gather his goats. There was a stampede as the other lads scrambled behind him to gather their herds. Soon, they were all racing down the trail that led back to the village. Dust flew off the ground as the herds stomped down the mountain, bells clanging loudly. ‘Awk...awk...’ the cowboys cried, prodding the yaks and goats with their sticks to run faster.

Suddenly, Gopi noticed that one of the lads had strayed behind. ‘YADUK...’ he yelled, stopping in his tracks. ‘Hurry!’

Yaduk was the bravest one in the group. Unfazed by the clamor, he had decided to stay back on the rocky outcrop.

‘Yaduk!’ Gopi yelled again, climbing back up the trail. He found Yaduk gazing at the sky with an awestruck face. The sun had gone down and a pinkish haze lit the horizon like a garland of *bud-roses* . Gopi shivered. The air had become painfully cold. Lo, the mountain god was breathing down their necks after blowing away the sun! Soon, he would appear in his divine form and take a sacrifice. ‘Let’s go!’ he yanked Yaduk’s arm roughly.

‘But I want to see the mountain god!’ Yaduk begged, his eyes lit with excitement.

‘NO!’ Gopi hollered.

‘But, I want to ride on him...’ Yaduk protested.

‘Don’t be a fool!’ Gopi spluttered in anger. Impatient to get going, he rained a few sharp blows on the younger lad’s back and ears with his stick.

‘Aww...’ Yaduk howled, running away. Gopi lunged at the fleeing boy and grasping his scrawny arms, began dragging him down the mountain trail. ‘Let me go...’ Yaduk wrested himself free from the older lad’s hold. Realizing that he had to either obey Gopi or be prepared for more blows, he ran off to gather his goats.

‘Hurrr...’ he cried to his goats and began racing down the slopes with them. Gopi followed, hollering at them to hurry. They found the other lads and their herds waiting for them. Soon, they were all hurtling down the mountain together.

Yaduk glared at the older lads with ill-concealed disgust. The cowards had hearts made of gooey yak dung. ‘What’s it?’ Gopi gasped, catching his scornful eye.

‘Jugnu will mock me tonight...’ Yaduk blurted angrily.

‘What...who?’ Gopi retorted distractedly.

‘Nothing...’ Yaduk grumbled.

Jugnu was the potter’s son and the village bully. Only last night, when they had been squatting by the fire and chewing dry berries, Jugnu had slammed him on the ear and boasted that he had ridden the spirits of dead animals. Yaduk had retorted that he would ride the biggest and most feared spirit that roamed the mountains - the mountain god himself!

Bristling with disappointment, Yaduk kept looking back as he raced down the slope with the others. The yak and goat bells clanged loudly as if to mock him - he was running away when he should have stayed back to prove his bravado!

‘Run faster...’ Gopi yelled, glancing upwards. Dark storm clouds had loomed up and the wind was wailing loudly. Lightning crackled fiercely making the sky glow with a silvery haze and massive claps of thunder rumbled to shake the mountains. Trembling with fright, the lads and their herds trampled each other’s feet to get back quickly to their homes.

The cowherds entered the forest that skirted their village. Gopi caught Yaduk's arm and whispered, 'Watch your step...the spirits of the dead live in the trees here!' Yaduk's little heart thudded like a hundred drums as he ran forward. For every rustle, his heart skipped a beat and for every moo, his heart jumped into his mouth.

'Keep off that one...' Gopi shrieked, pointing to a gnarled tree. He had seen the spirit of an old hag hanging upside down from a branch on one stormy night!

The cowherds raced through the last stretch of the forest to come out in the open. Lachvi was yonder and they could hear the sound of beating drums coming from the huts.

'Where's Kaali?' Gopi cried suddenly. While the herds scampered to their enclosures, the lads halted in surprise. Kaali was sick and had gone missing from the group.

'KAALI...' yelled the cowherds. 'Kaali....'

'Look!' Yaduk cried, pointing down to the river. One of Kaali's yaks had strangely wandered to the riverbank.

'Shhh...' Gopi hushed, pointing to an old cave by the bank. The cave was lit with an eerie, iridescent glow and a freezing mist was pouring out of it.

'What's going on?' Yaduk's heart pounded loudly in his scrawny chest.

'Shhhhhh...' hushed the terrified cowherds, huddling close to each other. 'The mountain god is inside...he is taking his sacrifice!'

Yaduk's eyes widened with shock. 'What do you mean?'

'Shh...' scolded the cowherds, shaking with fear. 'He is eating Kaali inside...'

While the other cowherds stood petrified, Yaduk darted down to the cave. Braving the freezing mist bellowing out of it, he rushed inside.

Indeed, Kaali was inside. He was kneeling on the floor, his eyes lit strangely and his hands stretched out. An iridescent apparition was wavering near him. Yaduk stared at the apparition in shock. Lo, it was the spirit of a very old man. It was the mountain god!

‘My lord...’ Kaali whispered, stumbling towards the apparition.

‘Kaali...no....’ Yaduk cried instinctively.

But, Kaali did not listen and walked into the divine one’s embrace. The mountain god engulfed him with his divine form.

Yaduk was so shocked that he could not move or breathe. He tried to scream but his throat was frozen with shock. As if in a terrifying dream, he watched the mountain god carry Kaali deeper into the cave and disappear from sight.

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KAALI

KAALI was not the first cowherd to be eaten by the mountain god. For generations now, the mountain god had been appearing to take sacrifice from the villagers of Lachvi. Heart-rending wails rose from Kaali’s hut that night - the mountain god had left no remains of him. The morning after, however, his kin were festive. The mountain god was a benevolent spirit from heaven - he always gave divine bounty in return for a sacrifice!

Large pots of yak milk broth cooked slowly on fires outside Kaali’s hut, spreading an appetizing aroma in the village. The broth would be served to all villagers after his kin had collected the bounty. At an auspicious hour, the village priest led his kin to the forsaken cave where he had been devoured by the mountain god. The priest carried out purification rites at the entrance of the cave, following which the kin entered it to secure the bounty.

They found it easily - cracks in the rocks glowed where the bounty was hidden. ‘Thud!’ the priest’s axe fell sharply on the ground. The rocks split to reveal a bunch of glowing stems – the divine stems of the *Nahlu*!

Nahlu was the herb of the mountain god. The berries of this plant had miraculous healing powers - they cured all the aches and ailments of the sick and old. Traders from the kingdoms in the plains flocked to Lachvi to barter the *Nahlu* berries for cartloads of utensils, gold ornaments and fine silk clothes.

Kaali’s kin rushed back to the village and planted the divine stems in the enclosures outside their huts. The stems took root and within days grew

into shrubs laden with the divine berries. The berries glowed with blinding radiance and had potent healing powers, making traders flock to Lachvi in hordes. Kaali's kin gave away their herds and took to bartering the berries for fine gems, utensils and robes. Prosperity lit their huts. But, the light cast long shadows.

On dark nights, when the *moon-thrush* sang hauntingly of its sorrows, wisps of smoke rose from the *Nahlu* berries. The smoke had a rapturous effect on the cowherds and those who took in deep whiffs, fell prey to shameful sicknesses. Thick, bluish veins welled up in their loins to fork out to their chests and legs. More horrifically, their souls were filled with a fierce yearning for the mountain god!

'Wake up, O divine one...' they sighed, gazing longingly at the faraway mountain peaks. The *Nahlu* smoke soothed their anguish a little. But, it also filled their dreams with beautiful visions of the mountain god.

Wanting to unite with him, the sick cowherds wandered in a daze. From the high rocks to the dark forests and to the sweet vales, they searched every niche for the divine one. But, they did not find him. For, the mountain god, having taken his sacrifice, slept for months and at times, for years!

After Kaali's disappearance, there was no sign of the mountain god for months. Then, on an autumn dusk, an eerie chill crept into the sweet mountain air and the *widow-raven* let out a spate of haunting wails. The elders were startled. They looked up and saw dark clouds looming in the sky. In a low whisper, they declared, 'The mountain god is awake!'

Huddled around fires, the villagers kept an unwavering eye on the moon. The mountain god had the might of a hundred mountains and he always flayed the celestial bodies first! This night, the moon was tossed so hard across the sky that it caught fire. The silvery sliver suddenly turned into a flaming ball in the sky. The villagers trembled at the sight and whispered with deathly fear, 'He is coming...'

A terrified silence fell over the village as the cowherds ran to hide in their huts. Only the distraught kin of sick stayed out in the open to face the wrath of the mountain god. 'Dum...dum...dum...' the deathly beat of the drums boomed in the village as the kin of the sick chanted prayers to the mountain god to show mercy to their lads.

Alas, the sick lads wanted no mercy! They felt the divine one tugging at their souls like the earth pulls the moon and longed to unite with him. ‘He is calling us...’ they whispered with eyes lit with devotion and began walking towards the high rocks in a daze.

‘Stop them...’ their mothers wailed piercingly. But, to no avail. Not a single villager came out of his hut to stop the sick lads. The mountain god had to be appeased and put back to sleep again. Because, only when he fell asleep would peace return to the village!

Well, peace did return to Lachvi. The dawn broke calm and serene. And, the breeze became sweet and fresh again. It blew gently across the village and as the day wore on, became laden with the aroma of festivity. The kin of all the sacrificed lads had received the bounty from the mountain god!

Prosperity was multiplying unhindered in Lachvi now!

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MADHO

TIME flowed past Lachvi like a gushing stream. Five years had passed after Kaali’s disappearance and yet another summer had arrived in the ancient mountains.

Today, it was a dull day in Lachvi. The sky was overcast and thick clouds swirled down the mountains. By noon, however, the mist had thinned out and sunshine warmed the slopes. The sunshine fell on Lachvi too. But, its warmth was lost on the villagers. They were chilled to their souls with the death of their kin. Sickness had ravaged almost every family in the past years. So many cowherds had disappeared. Many maidens had disappeared too. And now, the mountain god was devouring little children!

Only last night, three children had walked into the mountains with faces gaunt from sickness but radiant with devotion for their lord. The wails of their mothers had been so piercing that it seemed that the heavens would rip apart.

The dawn brought no festivity to Lachvi. No milk broth cooked in pots outside the huts. For, that matter the villagers did not even light their

hearths. Only when the children began crying from hunger did their mothers get up to light a few yak dung cakes. The elders sat under a tree in the temple enclosure to grieve quietly. The villagers gathered around them and there were muffled sounds of weeping.

‘The mountain god is not a benevolent spirit from heaven...’ a brawny cowherd yelled, his brown eyes smoldering with rage. Lo, it was Yaduk! Eighteen years of age now, he had grown up to become the sturdiest lad in the village.

‘What is he then?’ another cowherd retorted irritably.

‘A snake spirit from *hell*!’

‘*Snake spirit?*’

‘Yes...and the *Nahlu* is cursed...it hides his snakelings!’ Yaduk declared angrily.

Yaduk had suffered like the rest of the villagers. His father had walked into the embrace of the mountain god years back. And, his mother had died of sorrow soon after, leaving behind Madho, his baby brother, in his care. Yaduk had grown sooner than his years and it was not long before he realized that the *Nahlu* berries were causing the sickness and misery!

‘We have to stop sniffing the *Nahlu* like wild bees...’ he urged fervently.

‘Be silent...’ the villagers scolded. They were well aware that the *Nahlu* smoke made people sick and walk into the embrace of the mountain god. But, how could they shun the bounty of the mountain god? The mountains would fall on them if they did so!

‘You be silent....’ Yaduk shot back. ‘Lazy lumps of dung!’

‘Who are you calling lazy?’ a cowherd asked heatedly.

‘You...’ Yaduk spat on the cowherd’s face. ‘How quickly you gave your goats away?’

‘But...’

‘For what?’ Yaduk continued scolding, ‘To eat yak butter cakes and pass foul wind the whole day?’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Shut up, you two...we are mourning the deaths of our little...’ the

villagers cried in choked voices. They turned to the elders to give them some kind of succor. But, the elders were in deep despair themselves, their old shoulders sagging from the huge burden of grief that had come upon the village. An uneasy calm settled on the gathering.

‘The village cannot give sacrifice to the mountain god anymore,’ the elders declared in quavering voices.

The gathering broke into a loud murmur. How could they deny the mountain god?

‘It is decided then...we will all shun the *Nahlu*,’ Yaduk declared shortly. ‘And, go back to tending our herds!’

A hush fell over the gathering. ‘But...’ protested a few cowherds. They were the aggrieved kin of the three children who had disappeared the night before. They were waiting to collect their share of the divine bounty!

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ Yaduk threatened, his stick raised high.

‘But...’ the kin began.

‘Thud...thud...’ he rained sharp blows on their bare backs. ‘Aww...’ they wailed, squirming with pain.

‘Yaduk...stop...’ the elders cried.

‘I shall beat them to death...’ Yaduk grunted in fury.

The aggrieved kin believed him! Lo, the lad’s chest heaved with the courage of a hundred men and his arms had the strength of a hundred clubs. ‘We shall forego the bounty...’ they gasped, running to hide behind the elders.

‘But, what if the mountain god becomes angry and directs his rage at us?’ frowned a few villagers worriedly.

‘I will slay him before that happens...’ Yaduk promised fiercely.

The villagers gazed at Yaduk with awe. The whole village knew that he had no fear of the mountain god. For days, he went about beating the rocky cliffs with his stick so that he could find the mountain god and slay him.

The elders were tired now and they decided to break the gathering. ‘We need time to think...’ they sighed wearily. ‘Everybody...take your herds to pasture,’ they declared.

‘All right...’ the cowherds mumbled.

‘And Yaduk, take Madho along with you...the lad needs fresh air,’ the elders added.

Yaduk nodded curtly. At least the elders had given weight to his words, he thought with satisfaction. He left with a group of lads going his way but not before darting a fiery parting glance at the villagers!

YADUK entered his hut to find Madho sitting on the cot with another cowherd. He peered to see who it was and the blood drained out of his face. It was Jugnu, the old bully.

Jugnu’s childhood fascination with animal spirits had grown with him. The whole village knew that he and his mates indulged in horrific devil worship in the caves by the river. The sound of heavy grunting and animals bleating could be heard on such nights.

Once, wanting to break Jugnu’s bones, Yaduk had barged in their orgy and had been rendered speechless with shock. Lo, Jugnu and his mates were convulsing in clouds of *Nahlu* smoke, drenched in the blood of the animals they had sacrificed. ‘Filthy snakelings...’ he had spat, convinced more than ever that the mountain god was nothing but a snake’s spirit and Jugnu his snakeling!

Alarmingly, the filthy snakeling had dared to enter his hut today. ‘Get out of here!’ Yaduk yelled, livid with rage.

Jugnu grinned. He was chewing something fragrant and the smell had spread in the hut.

‘What’s in your mouth?’ Yaduk asked suspiciously.

‘*Nahlu* leaves...’ Madho replied in wonder. ‘He says the *Nahlu* does not make him sick!’

‘What?’ Yaduk shrieked, his face ashen. He lunged forward and grasping Jugnu’s arm, yanked him away from his brother.

‘Hey...stop...’ Jugnu protested, ‘I have been dragged here!’ He pointed to a frail girl hiding behind the door. ‘She has dragged me here!’

Urmi was Jugnu’s sister and like many young maidens in the village admired Yaduk for his good looks and bravado.

‘She has brought broth for us!’ Madho grinned widely. He took great delight in all the gifts that came his way because of his brother’s popularity with the village belles.

‘I have brought milk broth for you...’ Urmi said shyly. She walked up to Yaduk and held out a small pot of fresh yak milk broth.

‘Good!’ Yaduk muttered, blushing furiously. The girl was staring at him with eyes bigger than a fowl’s eggs and her bosom was heaving like a bullock cart. ‘Give it to Madho...’ he mumbled and strode out of the hut.

‘Sure, give it to me,’ Madho said happily.

‘But...’ Urmi protested. She had spent the whole morning preparing the broth and would not have anyone other than Yaduk have it. Her brother Jugnu saw her reticence and urged, ‘Give it to him...and let’s go.’

‘No,’ Urmi refused, ‘I will give it to only Yaduk...call him back!’

‘Don’t be shameless,’ Jugnu scolded. He snatched the pot from his sister’s hands and thrust it in Madho’s hands. Urmi burst out crying and ran out of the hut. Her brother followed her hurriedly.

‘Poor girl....’ Madho sighed, shrugging his slender shoulders. If only the maidens would not break their hearts and just keep the butter cakes and the broth coming in!

‘Come quickly Madho...you are coming with me today!’ Yaduk yelled sharply from outside.

Madho quickly placed the pot near the fireplace and went out of the hut. Yaduk was in the enclosure outside. He had untied the yaks and goats and was leading them out of the wooden gate. Madho followed him and soon, they were all climbing the trail to the upland pastures.

‘Awk...awk...awk...’ Yaduk’s cry echoed in the vales as he shepherded the goats and the yaks up the mountain. Soon, they found a patch of tender shrubs. Yaduk led the herds to them and while the animals scampered to graze, he looked around for a spot to rest.

‘O wonder!’ he sighed, looking up at the sky. The clouds had receded and the sun had come out. White swallows were sailing past and a cool breeze, laden with the scent of pine blossoms, was flowing gently down the slopes.

Yaduk squatted on a jutting rock and took off his turban, revealing neat features and limpid, brown eyes. Small beads of sweat glistened on his young forehead, which he wiped with his hand as he turned to gaze down the trail. Madho was coming up slowly. He had a slender frame and was of a wistful nature. ‘Come quickly, lad...’ Yaduk called, taking out a pouch of dry nuts.

Madho climbed the rocks nimbly to squat beside Yaduk. ‘Look, *Pitr*,’ he cried, pointing to a clump of yellow *bud-roses* peeping through a crevice on the mountain rock face. Tiny birds were fluttering on them.

Yaduk smiled. He liked it when Madho addressed him as ‘*pitr*’ or ‘father’! Since their mother’s death, he had reared Madho like a child of his own body, granting his every wish but one - he did not allow him to wander with the other lads.

‘But, I want to go with them to the forest and hear the *moon-thrush* sing,’ Madho would protest. ‘And watch the *fur-birds*, too...’

‘NO!’ Yaduk would bellow. ‘If, you go wandering...I will ask the mountain god to eat me up!’

‘Nooooo...’ Madho’s little body would be wracked with sobs. He could not bear to lose Yaduk. But, as he grew older, he realized that if there was someone who the mountain god would never eat up, it was his brother! For, the mountain god ate only those who sniffed the smoky wisps curling out from the *Nahlu* shrubs. And, Yaduk began spitting rage at the mere mention of them!

Madho kept mostly to himself, playing his flute quietly inside the hut. Today, only at the behest of the elders, his brother had taken him to the pastures, out in the fresh breeze.

‘Play the flute, my child,’ Yaduk suggested gently. He knew that his brother loved playing rustic melodies when out in the open mountainside. Strangely, Madho did not take out his flute. His hair flying lightly in the breeze, he stared at the faraway mountains with an unbroken gaze.

Yaduk’s brow creased with worry. ‘Madho...’ he frowned, pulling his brother tenderly onto his lap and running his fingers through his wavy locks. He caressed his cheeks gently and covered his forehead with light kisses.

‘*Pitr*...’ Madho whispered sadly, turning to meet his older brother’s

gaze. His eyes were big and honey tinted like Yaduk's. But the orbs were widened very strangely.

'Madho, my sweet child...' Yaduk cried worriedly, shaking his brother's frail body. Madho closed his eyes and did not respond. Yaduk grasped his brother's hands and turned them over. They were as cold as ice. A sudden madness gripped him. He tore open Madho's robes and on seeing his body, fell back with blinding shock. Madho's loins were swollen and his thin legs were covered with bluish veins!

Yaduk's mind went numb and his heart thudded so loudly that it made him go deaf. Madho opened his eyes for a fleeting moment. 'I have to.... go...*Pitr*...' he whispered brokenly. 'He is awake...and he is calling me!'

Yaduk stared blankly at the young face in his lap. With quivering lips and pleading eyes, Madho was begging to walk into the vile embrace of the mountain god!

Without a moment's hesitation, Yaduk picked up his stick and landed a massive blow on his brother's head. And, he continued hitting him until he had lost his consciousness.

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THE MOUNTAIN GOD

BY sundown, the villagers knew that the mountain god's appetite had not been appeased by the sacrifice of the three children. He was still awake and would take another sacrifice tonight. As night settled in, a familiar chill crept into the village and the villagers retreated wearily to their stone huts. Lachvi wore a deserted look and deathly silence prevailed, broken occasionally by a mooing yak or a bleating goat.

Yaduk's hut wore a deserted look too. He was not to be seen and Madho was inside, curled in blinding pain on a wooden cot. Yaduk had tied him to the cot, locked the hut and disappeared!

'*Pitr*...' Madho moaned, his head bursting with pain. It was dark inside the hut and he could see nothing. Surprisingly, his clothes were reeking of fish oil.

'My child...' whispered a voice from far away. Madho looked around

in surprise. He felt a sudden awakening inside him, as if something had come alive inside his body.

‘It is your soul, my child!’ the divine voice said. ‘I have awakened it...you can see it now.’

Madho realized that he could look and feel inside his body. Suddenly, he saw a knot flickering like a lamp in his body - it was his soul!

‘You can look with it...’ whispered the divine voice. ‘Can you see me?’

Madho realized that he could see with his soul. With a start, he saw the mountain god. His soul glowed with spellbinding radiance and pulled with an irresistible allure. ‘Yes, my lord...I can see you!’ he exclaimed, trembling with joy.

‘My child,’ the divine one said, ‘I want to take you to my home!’

‘Your home, my lord?’

‘Yes...let me show it to you!’

Madho looked with his soul and saw a world very far away. It had strange undulating oceans and thickly forested terrain.

‘This is Seabor, my home...’ the divine one sighed. ‘Rise, my child... for you have to travel to Seabor with me.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Madho replied devoutly. Divine energy flowed from the mountain god’s soul to his soul and then onwards to his arms and legs. The energy took away all his pain and gave him strength. He untied himself effortlessly and kicking the door of the hut open, walked out in the night.

The villagers saw Madho walk towards the high rocks in a daze. His face was radiant and his eyes were lit with devotion. Tears of sadness flowed down the wrinkled faces of the elders - Yaduk would be heartbroken to find his brother gone. Where was Yaduk anyway, they wondered with bewilderment?

Yaduk had been hiding in the forest since dusk and was waiting for Madho to walk past. He knew that, eventually, his brother would walk into the embrace of the mountain god. That’s why he had rubbed fish oil on Madho’s clothes and body, so that he could follow him easily to the evil one!

An axe by his side, Yaduk hid in the shrubs and waited. The silvery

moon climbed up the sky and the night wore on. Suddenly, the widow raven began wailing with sorrow. He shivered. The wails reminded him of the night when his father had walked into the mountains, leaving him weeping and his mother heartbroken.

Suddenly, the leaves rustled and his reverie broke. His heart thudding loudly, he looked in the direction of the sound. Lo, it was Madho! As he had foreseen, Madho had broken through the hut and was striding fast towards the high rocks.

Yaduk rose from his hiding place and began following his brother stealthily. His jaw was clenched with determination – he had to save Madho today. And, there was only one way to do that - he would have to slay the mountain god!

Madho began skipping over the boulders to climb the high rocks. Yaduk hurried behind but his brother was more nimble. He may have taken his eyes away for only a moment, when, suddenly, Madho vanished from sight. ‘Madho...’ he yelled, looking around wildly. Madho was nowhere to be seen. Panic-stricken, he darted from one spot to another, when he suddenly picked up a faint odor. It was the smell of fish oil! Sniffing deeply, he traced the foul smell to a cleft in the rock face.

‘Thud!’ his axe hit the cleft to widen it. ‘Oh!’ he exclaimed in surprise. There was a trail hidden behind the rocks. The smell of fish oil was emanating strongly from it, indicating that Madho had walked on it.

‘Madho...’ he yelled, stumbling blindly on the trail. It was dark and the rocks were cold and hard. He hit against them many times before he came out in an open clearing. ‘Madho...’ he cried, looking around in despair. All of a sudden, his heart lurched to a stop. Lo, an apparition was wavering in the middle of the clearing! It was the mountain god!

The blood drained out of his body and his head thudded in panic. He knew that Madho was somewhere near and he had to stop him. Suddenly, he spotted his brother’s frail body - he was caught in the deathly embrace of the mountain god and the evil one was devouring him like he had once devoured Kaali!

‘NO...’ Yaduk roared, charging forward with all his strength. ‘THUD...’ his axe hit the mountain god, its sound reverberating in

the mountains like the clap of a hundred thunders. Diverted, the evil one let go of Madho!

Madho was thrown to the ground. ‘Aaargh...’ he groaned, reeling from the impact. In a daze, he saw Yaduk raise his axe to attack the mountain god again. This time, the divine one reacted. He quickly pulled Yaduk into his deathly embrace!

‘*Pitr...*’ Madho croaked hoarsely, stretching out his hands to reach his brother. But, the mountain god had turned into a vortex and he was spinning haphazardly towards the cliff, taking his brother along with him!

Madho had the most horrible feeling that he was about to lose his brother. ‘Stop, my lord...’ he beseeched the divine one. To his shock, the vortex spun out of control and bounced off the cliff.

‘*Pitr...*’ he screamed, scrambling to the edge of the cliff. He saw the vortex hurtling down the rocks and before he could scream again, vanish from sight. The last glimpse he had of Yaduk was of him holding his axe high and trying to land another blow on the divine one!

-5-

YADUK

THE elders of Lachvi believed that Yaduk had died. They also believed that before he died, he killed the mountain god! For, all the *Nahlu* shrubs in the village dried up. And, all the sicknesses went away. Peace returned to Lachvi after generations.

Madho, however, was disconsolate. Surprisingly, he believed that Yaduk was still alive and somewhere with the mountain god! ‘*Pitr...pitr...* come back...’ he wailed, wandering aimlessly on the high rocks. But, there was no trace of Yaduk or the mountain god. The elders of the village tried to console him and the villagers took turns to watch over him and feeding him yak butter cakes. But, Madho would not be consoled.

‘The mountain god is generous and loving...’ he sobbed. ‘I know him well. He will return my *pitr...*’ But, Yaduk did not return.

Time passed on. The villagers learned to live without fear, which the elders declared, was the true bounty. At dawn, the cowherds took their herds

to pasture, humming rustic melodies that flowed hauntingly in the vales. At dusk, they returned safely to their homes and hearths.

On dark nights when the *moon-thrush* sang poignantly of its sorrows, the villagers gathered around fires to sing tales of Yaduk's bravery and sacrifice. Madho sat with them, and prayed and wept for his brother's return.

One day, Madho's prayers were heard. He was milking his goats, when all of a sudden he felt a familiar awakening. Startled, he looked at his soul. Lo, Yaduk was with the mountain god! 'Madho, run and tell everyone. I have reached the land of the mountain god!' he said excitedly.

'*Pitr...*' Madho gasped. 'Come back, *pitr*!'

'Yes...yes...' Yaduk replied. 'I will be back by sundown. Milk the goats properly!' And, then, his voice faded away.

Madho was bewildered. *That* his brother had traveled to the land of the mountain god did not surprise him at all. He knew that already and had told the villagers many times. What surprised him was that Yaduk was talking as if he had left just the same day. When, actually, more than three years had passed!

On another day, Madho felt the same awakening and he saw Yaduk through his soul again. '*Pitr*!' he cried in surprise.

'Madho...' Yaduk cried with uncontrollable happiness. 'Madho, the gods are giving me their powers!'

'Come back home, *pitr*...' Madho pleaded.

'I shall be back in a few days. We shall bring Gotri's new lamb in this world together!' Yaduk assured.

'But, Gotri died years back...' Madho wanted to cry out, but Yaduk was gone. His voice had faded away again! Madho was bewildered. *Pitr* was talking as if he had gone only for a few days. When, actually, more than ten years had passed!

Time flowed fast in Lachvi. Madho was an old man now. He wanted to meet his brother once before he died. '*My lord...*' he cried for the divine one from the bottom of his soul. The mountain god must have heard his cry, for, suddenly, he saw Yaduk!

'I am coming home...' Yaduk cried excitedly. 'I will be back by the

full moon night. The gods are sending a message for the king!’

‘*Pitr*...I am dying... come back...’ Madho urged weakly.

‘Madho?’ Yaduk asked worriedly, ‘What is the matter, my child?’

‘Come home, *pitr*...’ Madho wept, ‘I don’t want to die without meeting you...’

‘Shhh...Madho...don’t lose heart,’ Yaduk replied. ‘We shall celebrate the next full moon together!’

The full moon night came. Madho and the villagers waited by the high rocks. But, Yaduk did not come.

Many nights later, Madho lay on his deathbed, laboring to take his last breaths. His eyes were hauntingly sad. He knew that Yaduk was still alive somewhere and that sooner or later, would come to know of his death. He also knew that the moment his brother received the tidings, he would be devastated to death himself.

-6-

SEABOR

THE moment Yaduk hit the mountain god, a bolt of lightning crackled out of his axe. He was thrown back to the ground and just when he thought his bones would break, he heard Madho cry aloud!

‘Madho...’ he groaned, struggling to pull his senses together. Hazily he saw that his brother had also fallen on the ground. Where is the evil one, he looked around groggily?

Lo, the evil one was standing very near and swaying as if he had drunk a full cask of spirits! ‘Aha...’ Yaduk cried with satisfaction. ‘So, the snake is not invincible...I can make him dance!’

Surprisingly, the “snake” heard him and turned his heavily wrinkled face to look down at him. Yaduk had the strangest feeling that the mountain god could read his mind for he smiled at him with twinkling eyes!!

‘You vile...’ Yaduk cursed, staggering to his feet. He raised his axe to hit out again when the evil one reacted suddenly and pulled him into his embrace!

‘Let me go....’ he yelled, squirming to free himself. But, the mountain god had colossal power. Yaduk felt like he was swimming in an ocean of energy and his skin tingled as if he was being bitten by hundreds of ants. The energy dulled his senses to the rest of the world and suddenly, he could see only the mountain god. A vortex of energy suddenly surrounded them and before he could understand what was happening, they had fallen over the cliff and were hurtling down the mountain together!

Realizing that he was moments away from death, Yaduk decided to finish off the evil one first! ‘Here...take this...’ he flung his axe at his abductor. The mountain god did not even flinch. Rather, he smiled and pulled Yaduk closer.

A sudden darkness descended upon Yaduk. He found that he could not move anymore. Also, his ears buzzed as if attacked by a swarm of wild bees. ‘The snake has gobbled me up!’ he thought in alarm. Just when he felt that he would suffocate to death, he felt something awaken inside him. A flame lit up inside his body!

He looked at the flame with surprise. It was wavering like a festival lamp in the darkness of his body. ‘What’s this now?’ he thought, bewildered. With a start, he realized that it was his soul - the sick cowherds had often spoken of seeing their souls glowing inside their bodies!

‘Where are you hiding?’ he taunted, looking at his soul intently. The sick cowherds had also spoken of seeing the divine one through their souls!

Obviously, the divine one heard him. For, he suddenly laughed through the darkness. ‘No one has spoken to me like this before!’ he chuckled in a deep, throaty voice.

Yaduk could not help but feel bewildered. ‘Stop the hissing...and show yourself...’ he goaded again.

‘I am not hissing...’ the divine one protested. ‘And, you can easily see me now.’

The mountain god revealed himself and Yaduk was dazzled by his radiance. His soul was every bit as spellbinding and its glow as rapturous as the sick cowherds had mentioned. Yaduk felt drawn to him instantly. ‘No, this is a trick...’ he told himself sternly. ‘The snake will daze you...and then devour you!’

‘I am not a snake,’ the divine one clarified. ‘I am *Iisuu*.’

‘*Iisuu*?’

‘Yes. And I am carrying you to my home planet, Seabor!’

‘Is that where you took my father and the others?’ Yaduk retorted defiantly.

Iisuu did not answer. Rather, he pulled Yaduk deeper into his divine form. Yaduk had to submit helplessly - and the moment he did so, a crushing burden came to bear on his body. It was like the weight of a hundred mountains.

‘Aaargh....’ he groaned in pain. But, Iisuu did not relax his embrace and together, they hurtled through strange curtains of light and darkness. Just when Yaduk thought he would be crushed to death, the pressure came off. A strange cloud of rustling feathers surrounded him and cushioned him. ‘Where are we...up in the air or under the ground?’ he croaked.

‘We are traveling through.... *black holes*!’ Iisuu replied.

‘*Black holes*?’

‘Yes...there is a short cut to Seabor through them!’

Before Yaduk could understand what holes he was being taken through, the ordeal suddenly came to a stop and the heaviness melted away. He realized that he had arrived somewhere. ‘Where am I?’ he asked in a daze.

‘You are on Seabor...it is my home,’ Iisuu replied brightly. Yaduk still could not move. His soul was alive but his body felt like the dead. He began sobbing loudly.

‘No, my child,’ Iisuu cried, pouring divine energy into Yaduk’s wailing soul.

But, Yaduk was disconsolate. ‘I want to go back to my village...’ he wailed.

‘Here, speak to your brother, Madho,’ Iisuu said gently.

Yaduk suddenly saw Madho’s soul shining at a distance. He burst with happiness and stopped crying immediately. There was no way he was going to cry in front of his younger brother! ‘Madho, run and tell everyone...’ he cried, feigning excitement, ‘I have reached the lands of the mountain god.’

‘*Pitr...*’ Madho cried back. ‘Come back, *Pitr!*’

Yaduk sensed that Madho was milking the goats. ‘Yes...yes...’ he replied tremulously, ‘I will be back by sundown...milk the goats properly.’ Before he could say anything more, his brother’s soul faded away. ‘Madho...’ he wailed, beginning to sob again.

‘Please stop crying...’ Iisuu cried in anguish.

‘I am not feeling well,’ Yaduk sobbed, feeling sickened by at least a hundred fevers.

‘Oh, that...’ Iisuu exclaimed, ‘It’s because Goddess Myrhim is giving you a new body.’

‘What?’ Yaduk gasped with bewilderment. Suddenly, he saw another soul shining in the darkness. She was a goddess! Goddess Myrhim. Her soul glowed with radiance that was a thousand times more blinding than Iisuu’s and she was holding a divine scimitar.

‘Calm down, my child,’ she whispered, touching Yaduk’s soul with the divine scimitar. Myrhim’s touch was like a miracle. The darkness around his soul melted and suddenly, his senses returned.

‘I can move!’ Yaduk cried, thrashing his limbs with relief. He sat up to look around and saw that he was lying alone in a strange forest. Iisuu must have carried him here. ‘Where are you, my lord?’ he croaked in bewilderment.

‘I am here!’ Iisuu emerged from behind a clump of trees. Yaduk froze with shock. Iisuu was nothing like a snake. Rather, he was a very old four-limbed creature with a white, squat body. In his chest, burned a strange hearth of glowing coals and he had glowing eyes, nose, ears and a wide mouth. His skin was so heavily wrinkled that it hung from his arms and legs!

‘You look very different!’ Yaduk gasped in shock.

‘Yes, you look different too...’ Iisuu replied in a hoarse voice, and even as he said that, sparks crackled out of his eyes.

Yaduk looked at his own body and staggered with shock. Myrhim had changed his body completely. His skin was deeply wrinkled like Iisuu’s skin and in his chest burned a hearth of coals! ‘What has she done to me?’ he croaked in panic. He quickly felt his face with his hands - mercifully, she had

not turned him into an old man! His face still felt the same, although the skin was wrinkled.

Before Iisuu could reply, a horde of white squat-bodied creatures suddenly came out of the forest. They were rubbing their eyes as if they had just woken up and were using their limbs as they pleased - some were on four legs, others were hobbling on three and some were even skipping on one leg! 'Meet my people, the iljjocks of Seabor!' Iisuu declared with pride.

'Greetings, Yaduk!' the iljjocks cried in unison. They had white, squat bodies similar to Iisuu's, but their faces were different. For that matter, they had the faces of different animals - horse, dog, cat, monkey, rabbit, rat and so on!

A lesser lad would have fainted but Yaduk had the courage of a hundred men and he faced the iljjocks like an elder from his village. 'Greetings, O mountain gods!' he said somberly.

'You are a very brave human,' a horse-faced iljjock remarked admiringly. 'Unlike the others from your village.'

Yaduk realized that the iljjock was talking about the missing villagers of Lachvi. 'Are they here too?' he asked, beaming with sudden happiness. 'I want to meet my father immediately...and Kaali...Vishnu and everyone else too!'

Strangely, his request was met with silence. The horse-faced iljjock looked at the others in confusion. It was Iisuu who answered, 'They are all dead, my child. They died on the way to Seabor. You are the first one to have survived.'

'You are lying...' Yaduk retorted in disbelief.

'No, I am not...' Iisuu said grimly. He opened his arms wide and tried to embrace him.

'Go away...' Yaduk cried, pushing him away.

'No, wait. I want to show you the truth!'

'What truth?'

In response, Iisuu acted very strangely. He extended his hand and pinched Yaduk hard on his belly! Violent spasms wracked Yaduk's body and he collapsed on the ground. 'Aaargh...' he groaned, clutching his belly.

Blood was squirting out from where he had been pinched. Memories of Jugnu drenched in blood suddenly flashed through his mind. 'I have become a snakeling...' he wept, feeling sick and violated.

'No, you have not become anything!' Iisuu exclaimed in shock. He had read Yaduk's thoughts and was aghast.

'Aaargh...' Yaduk sobbed in agony.

'Jugnu is a filthy soul...you are so pure and fearless...how can you compare yourself to him?' Iisuu asked in disbelief. 'On purpose, I did not awaken Jugnu's soul and ask him to come to Seabor with me.'

The mountain god had found Jugnu filthy? No wonder, Jugnu did not fall sick despite sniffing the Nahlu, Yaduk reasoned between sobs.

'I thought of turning him into an animal...but, then I took pity on the animals!' Iisuu remarked wryly.

Yaduk stopped crying and glared back angrily. 'Stop the pretense, you filthy old man...how dare you attack me like this...give me a stick and I will show what I can do!' he yelled.

'Attack you?' Iisuu cried hoarsely, 'I was only trying to break you in... so that you can look into my soul!'

'Yes...yes...' the iljjocks agreed.

'God Iisuu was only breaking in your nodules,' the horse-faced iljjock said defensively. 'He had to do it.... because you have a new iljjock body.'

Yaduk stared at the iljjock blankly. 'What nodules?'

The iljjock pointed to Yaduk's belly and he looked down in alarm. Thick nodules were standing out stiffly from his wrinkled skin. They had squirted clear sap and not blood! 'What are these disgusting things?' he cried out.

'These are your soul nodules!' Iisuu replied.

'What?'

'They provide a direct pathway to your soul...look, I have similar ones too.'

Yaduk stared at Iisuu's belly. Indeed, similar nodules were sticking out of his skin too!

'When our nodules come in contact, they will provide a direct

connection between our souls. You can look into my soul and see what happened to your people yourself,' Iisuu explained. 'My mouth can lie to you but my soul cannot!'

Bewildered, Yaduk calmed down. He let Iisuu brush his belly nodules against his own and was amazed to discover that he could look into Iisuu's soul. Lo, in a waking dream, he saw glimpses of the villagers dying on the way to Seabor!

'Why, my lord?' he cried, choked with anger. 'Why did you let them die?'

'I was helpless,' Iisuu shrugged, 'The journey killed them.'

'But, *why* did you abduct them?' he cried in anguish. '*Why* have you abducted me?'

Iisuu faced Yaduk's distress with a calm face. 'It was all for a divine purpose!'

'What purpose?'

Iisuu hesitated for a moment and then said, 'It is a long story. Eventually, you will be told everything.'

'No, tell me *now*...why have you brought me here?' Yaduk demanded angrily.

Iisuu looked back stonily, as if unwilling to say even a word more.

'My lord, why don't you let *me* handle this?' the dog-faced iljjock butted in self-importantly.

The iljjocks tittered as if a buffoon had stepped in. Surprisingly, Iisuu let the buffoon take over! 'All right, Hatti...' he shrugged and sauntered away to pick berries from nearby trees.

'Hey...' Yaduk yelled after him, 'You haven't answered me...'

'Let him go...he is *too* big a god for all of us,' the dog-faced Hatti grinned sarcastically. 'He hasn't answered *any* of our questions to this day... no way he will ever answer yours!'

Bewildered, Yaduk looked around and saw that all the iljjocks were smiling at him with warmth and affection. Hadn't it been for the very alien environment, he might as well have been with his kin in a neighboring village!

‘I will explain everything to you...’ Hatti announced, taking out a small pouch of dry berries. Tossing a few in his mouth he asked, ‘The problem is...your people are splurging at our expense...’

‘What do you mean?’ Yaduk shot back. ‘We didn’t ask for the Nahlu. The mountain god...that old creature who is standing there and smirking... gave it to us to kill us!’

‘I am not talking about the Nahlu...why do you humans always think so small? Is it because your souls are sealed?’

The iljjocks nodded in agreement.

‘The carefree bliss has to end... you humans have to come out of your cocoons!’ Hatti declared.

‘What do you mean?’ Yaduk retorted.

‘Tucked away on your little planet...spending your entire lives feeding, defecating and breeding...just like the plants around you...don’t you think you were destined for better?’

‘Plants don’t defecate...’

‘I know. But, they *will*...if they realize the seriousness of the matter!’

The iljjocks tittered in amusement.

‘Do you know that there is a crazed buffoon on this planet who is trying to control the future?’ Hatti frowned.

Inadvertently, Yaduk stared at God Iisuu. He was picking berries calmly and did not look crazed at all.

‘I didn’t mean *him*...’ Hatti snorted. ‘There is another powerful god... a local demon, actually. His name is God Aakaa. Aakaa to trying to gain control over the future and we are fighting to stop him and if possible, beat him to it!’

‘What nonsense is this?’ Yaduk asked angrily. ‘What does it have to do with me?’

‘Everything. You will lead us from the front...we are told you fight very well!’ Hatti declared excitedly.

‘Yes...yes...’ the iljjocks nodded their heads in unison.

Yaduk stared at them in disbelief. The animals had gone mad! The *future* was not some yak or goat that he could whack with a stick. How could

he, for that matter, anyone gain control over the future?

‘It is very simple,’ Hatti insisted, reading his mind. ‘If we could get plenty of *naked human souls*...’

‘*Naked human souls?*’ Yaduk croaked, falling back.

‘Enough, Hatti...’ God Iisuu scolded sharply. ‘I wanted you to make him comfortable...but, you have frightened him now!’

‘Don’t believe Hatti’s nonsense, Yaduk,’ the horse-faced iljjock piped in, ‘we have brought you here for a very noble purpose. All we want to do is to win over the friendship and loyalty of your people!’

The iljjocks clapped loudly and Iisuu smiled faintly.

‘What friendship?’ Yaduk cried in disbelief. ‘You have killed so many of my people...’

‘We were only trying to bring one of you here...’ Hatti butted in again.

‘With whose consent?’ Yaduk exploded. ‘Why didn’t you all travel to Lachvi and talk to the elders instead?’

‘God Aakaa would have come charging behind us...he looks like a cross between a lizard and an eel...what a terrible sight would that have been!’ Hatti frowned.

‘I would have beaten him to death...you know my prowess, don’t you?’ Yaduk shot back.

‘We know! But, Aakaa breaks open souls like this...’ Hatti cracked a dry berry. ‘He would have enslaved you...roasted you...wrung you until you screamed...’

Yaduk was taken aback. ‘Is that how you treated my people?’ he asked, aghast.

‘No...not at all...’ Hatti clarified quickly. ‘You won’t believe how honorable our intentions are...we would rather have marital alliances with your people than....’

‘Marital what?’ Yaduk gaped.

‘Shut up, Hatti...’ the horse-faced iljjock scolded. ‘Marriage is a serious matter for humans.’

‘Marriage is a serious matter for us too!’ Hatti retorted.

‘Hey...what do you two mean?’ Yaduk looked from one to the other. ‘Who is getting married to whom?’

‘*You* are getting married...*to one of us!*’ Hatti stifled his laughter.

Yaduk baulked. ‘How can I get married to animals?’

‘We are not animals. We are iljjocks...you can think of us as a bunch of lads!’

‘How can I get married to *lads?*’ Yaduk asked, baffled.

‘Because, there are no maidens here...with the exception of Goddess Myrhim! And she is unfit to be married to anyone because of that scimitar of hers. Imagine going to sleep with a dog-face and waking up with a donkey-face!’ Hatti guffawed.

The iljjocks cackled loudly too!

Yaduk stared at the laughing animal faces in disbelief. He was sure that the talk about fighting with some demon called Aakaa was just a ruse! These people had captured him and made him travel half way across the universe simply because they had run out of marriage partners!

‘It is not what you are thinking!’ God Iisuu clarified, walking over. Obviously, he had had his share of amusement, for he was smiling faintly.

Something within Yaduk snapped. The evil one had made a spectacle of his life and was now watching and enjoying it! Lo, he picked up a stick and flung it at Iisuu with all his fury. ‘Thud!’ the stick hit Iisuu’s hunched back, making him yelp with pain.

There was a moment of shocked silence as the iljjocks tried to understand what had happened. Yaduk expected them to come charging at him. But, the lazy slobbs did not budge! Rather, they turned to Iisuu and pleaded. ‘Spare him, my lord...he is suffering from shock.’

God Iisuu grimaced. ‘All right...I have had enough of all this...’ he said to Yaduk’s chagrin. ‘One of you will have to give company to our earthly guest. Who will do that?’

‘I will, my lord...’ the horse-faced iljjock offered.

‘Good!’ Iisuu patted the iljjock fondly and sauntered away into the forest.

Yaduk saw him disappear with consternation. How could Iisuu leave

him alone just like that, he bristled with resentment. He was about to yell after him when the other iljjocks began departing too. 'Pikki will look after you...don't hit him or he will die!' they cackled, ambling away into the forest.

Yaduk saw them walk away and was alarmed by a sudden thought. Which one of them was fancying walking up the altar with him? The bear-faced, rabbit-faced or the goat-faced iljjock?

Frustrated with his situation, he sought to vent out his anger on the one who had chosen to remain behind with him. The horse-faced iljjock, or as the iljjocks had called him, Pikki iljjock!

-7-

PIKKI ILJJOCK

'SO, you are Pikki iljjock?' Yaduk scowled, giving the horse-faced iljjock a withering look.

'Yes,' the iljjock replied with a smile.

'Go away!' Yaduk snapped angrily. 'I don't like you one bit.'

'But, I like you very much,' Pikki replied affably.

'Why is that?' Yaduk asked suspiciously.

'I like all humans.'

'What do you mean?'

'We like humans on Seabor the same way you like yak butter cakes in Lachvi!'

'*I knew it...*you stayed behind so that you could eat me?' Yaduk cried, his face incredulous.

Pikki burst into peals of laughter. 'Ha...ha...' the loud, cackling sound echoed in the forest. 'No, I am not going to eat you!' he clarified.

'Why did you all ask Iisuu to spare me?'

'God Iisuu has a very foul temper...do not make the mistake of provoking him ever,' Pikki warned.

'I am not scared of him,' Yaduk spat angrily. 'I have hit him many times...and I will hit him again!'

Pikki was so tickled by the vision of Iisuu being thrashed that he burst out laughing. It was a harsh cackling sound and it irritated Yaduk. 'How can you laugh like that?' he asked in exasperation.

'I love laughing...that's why,' Pikki gasped. 'What about you? You don't like laughing?'

'No, I don't!' Yaduk snapped.

'Don't lie.'

'What do you mean?'

'You laughed like a buffoon when Gotri, your yak, kicked Jugnu!'

Yaduk's eyes bulged with surprise. 'How do you know?'

'I just read your soul with my divine powers...on Seabor, it's tradition to read each other's souls when we first meet.'

'You have divine powers?'

'All iljocks have divine powers!'

Yaduk looked at Pikki doubtfully.

'If you want you can read my soul and confirm the truth yourself!' Pikki offered, rubbing his belly nodules with his hand.

'Ugh...' Yaduk made a face.

'Aww...come on...'

'I don't want to look stupid...wiggling bellies with you!' Yaduk refused firmly, shielding his own belly with his hands.

'Ha...ha...' Pikki laughed. 'Humans are so vain!'

'What do you mean?'

'You are so concerned about your looks...it is because your souls are sealed!'

'Maybe...' Yaduk nodded.

'Who cares how your body looks? The soul is what matters. Look at Iisuu. He may have an ugly body...but he has such a beautiful soul.'

'He has a beautiful soul?' Yaduk flared up. 'He is just an evil snake!'

'Don't say that...' Pikki cried, aghast.

'He dazzled so many cowherds with his radiance...and lured them to

their deaths!’

‘The dazzling radiance is just a veneer,’ Pikki sighed. ‘Deep inside, God Iisuu’s soul is a wellspring of hope and love!’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Yaduk retorted bitterly.

‘You will...when you hear Iisuu’s long story.’

‘Why does everyone on Seabor have a long story?’

‘Ha...ha...’ Pikki cackled. ‘Only Iisuu and Myrhim have long stories...and the best part is...the rest of us *don’t* know what they are!’

‘They haven’t told you?’ Yaduk was bewildered.

‘No. Iisuu and Myrhim never tell us anything.’

‘The evil cow...he is hiding a lot behind that illusory radiance of his!’

‘What I *do* know is that Iisuu’s story is very tragic,’ Pikki confided, tears welling up in his eyes.

Yaduk could not make out if he was laughing or crying.

‘God Iisuu has suffered terribly. His soul has deep gashes that speak of his misery. It is a miracle that he is alive!’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’

‘You have to stop thinking that God Iisuu is evil.’

‘He killed my people...’ Yaduk retorted bitterly.

‘Nonsense. He was just trying to bring one of you to Seabor.’

‘For a very ridiculous reason...he wants us in marriage!’

‘Would you rather...he wrung and roasted your souls?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Hatti told you...God Aakaa wants to enslave and torture your race. Would you rather have that?’

‘No villager will agree to marry one of your people...at least, I won’t!’ Yaduk said firmly.

‘How prejudiced of you! Think big! Think beyond your little villages and your planet Earth. You know nothing about what’s happening in the rest of the universe!’

‘Why don’t you tell me?’

‘Why do you think God Iisuu is trying to marry you to us? To produce crossbred monsters?’

‘Maybe...how do I know?’ Yaduk retorted.

‘God Iisuu’s heart is bigger. *God Iisuu is planning to give you divine powers!* Can you believe that? *Divine powers?*’

‘What...as dowry?’ Yaduk was not impressed. ‘He picked the wrong person. He should have picked Jugnu...Jugnu would have jumped to any kind of dowry.’

‘Dowry?’ Pikki looked bewildered. ‘Divine powers *won’t* be given to you so that you can marry one of us. It will be the other way round. One of us will marry you so *that* you can attain divine powers! Your iljjock mate will give them you! Do you understand?’

Yaduk was truly bewildered. The iljjocks couldn’t possibly be thinking of giving him any powers. Why, the moment he got them, he would use them to whiz back home! Pikki was lying!

‘I am not lying! You can look into my soul,’ Pikki stepped forward and wiggled his belly invitingly.

Yaduk’s couldn’t help but smile and let him come near. Lo, the moment Pikki’s nodules touched his, he found himself looking at the iljjock’s soul!

‘My soul is very ordinary,’ Pikki said humbly, comparing himself to Iisuu and Myrhim.

‘It’s all right,’ Yaduk assured warmly, noting that the iljjock’s soul was very much brighter than his own! He saw many ethereal strings lying coiled inside it. ‘What are they?’

‘Soul strings...they store lasting memories that I will keep after death...everyone has them in their souls.’ Pikki explained.

‘I have them too?’ Yaduk asked in surprise.

‘Of course,’ Pikki chuckled. ‘That’s how I came to know about Gotri, your favorite yak.’

‘I see. Strange that I never noticed! ’

‘It’s because you don’t have a *divine string* lighting up your soul!’ Pikki chuckled. ‘Look carefully and you will see it lying with the other

strings in my soul!’

Yaduk spotted the *divine string* immediately. It was glowing with a blinding luminosity.

‘It is the source of my divine powers!’ Pikki revealed.

‘I see,’ Yaduk was stunned. ‘Why don’t I have it?’

‘I don’t know! But, you can get it easily...by mating an iljjock!’

‘You consider that easy?’

‘Ha...ha...God Iisuu says that *ghosts* of dead gods reside in those strings and feed us with divine powers.’

‘What dead gods?’ Yaduk baulked.

‘The original nature gods...they were God Iisuu’s ancestors!’

‘God Iisuu has the divine string *too*?’

‘He had hundreds of them!’

‘No wonder his face looks haunted and ghostly.’

‘Yaduk!’ Pikki admonished. ‘Read my strings...you will come to know everything about me.’

Yaduk read a few and was truly surprised. Pikki had a very honest and generous nature. Every word that he had said was true!

‘I think I am a little like your old chum, Vishnu!’ Pikki chuckled.

‘Oh yes!’ Yaduk agreed. Vishnu was a very dear childhood mate of his. He warmed up to Pikki instantly and continued reading the other strings.

Lo, Pikki knew almost everything about Earth and the humans. No wonder talking to him was as easy as talking to one of the lads! Yaduk was convinced that the iljjocks were truly a very good-natured people. He was not sure about that evil cow Iisuu, though!

‘I don’t believe this!’ Yaduk exclaimed, reading one of the strings, ‘Is that what God Iisuu told you?’

‘Told me what?’ Pikki asked in surprise.

‘That I will going back home soon!’ Yaduk swayed with happiness.

‘Of course...didn’t he tell you?’

‘No!’

‘He wants you to go back to Earth as soon as possible and win over the loyalty of entire human race for us. Once they are with us, we will travel to Earth, mate with everybody and distribute divine powers like...’

‘Yak butter cakes?’

‘Ha...ha....’ Pikki cackled loudly.

Yaduk suddenly had a strange vision. He had attained divine powers and had become God Yaduk! Lo, he was standing outside the village temple like a high priest and Pikki was distributing powers to the elders like the holy offering. The old men came walking on rickety legs and went back flying high over the rooftops!

‘So...you are raising an army to fight God Aakaa?’ he mused slowly.

‘We are raising...a what?’ Pikki asked, wide eyed.

‘An army...’ Yaduk replied firmly, exuding the air of someone who is well versed in such matters.

‘Are you sure?’ Pikki asked uncertainly.

‘I think so!’

‘Who told you that...God Iisuu?’

‘He hasn’t told me anything.’

‘Funny, he hasn’t told me anything too.’

‘Iisuu is a sharp fox I am telling you...’

‘But, you said he was an evil snake...’

‘It’s the same thing. No problem. We will build an army for you and flatten your enemies into dung cakes.’ Yaduk threw imaginary spears in the air.

Pikki eyes widened in alarm.

‘Quickly...tell me, does God Aakaa have an army too?’ Yaduk clenched his jaw.

‘Well, he has his people...they are called the seamones!’

‘They live around here...somewhere?’

‘In the polar region of Seabor...’

‘Aha...tell me more about them.’

‘It is actually a long story...’ Pikki shrugged.

Yaduk groaned. 'Forget it...tell me what powers am I going to get?'

'I really don't know,' Pikki shook his head.

'Don't lie.'

'I can't.'

'But, you must know something,' Yaduk insisted.

'Well, to have divine power means to have influence over the material things around you.' Pikki explained. 'On Seabor, we explain it in terms of *'divine sight'* and *'divine force'*. Divine sight is how far you can see with your soul and divine force is how much force you can exert with it. I have no idea how much power Iisuu is going to give you.'

Yaduk was stunned. 'How much power do you have?' he asked curiously.

'All iljjocks have divine sight that allows us to see the smallest particle to the ends of Seabor. And, I can exert divine force...well, up to that tree there!'

'Show me what you can do...' Yaduk said excitedly.

Pikki lifted a stick lying on the ground without touching it. The stick flew to the tree and fell down. 'That's how far I can lift...I wish I could lift it to the *Nors*...maybe fly myself!' he grinned.

Yaduk grinned too. 'How powerful is Iisuu?' he asked, his eyes wide with interest.

'God Iisuu? His divine sight extends to the ends of the universe!'

Having travelled away from Earth, Yaduk had realized that the universe was very vast and full of countless stars and planets. 'He can see that far off?' he asked in astonishment.

'Of course.'

'Can he see Earth from here?'

'As clearly as he can see you and me!'

'And, how much divine force can he exert?'

'He can move mountains, oceans, whatever!'

'I am sure!' Yaduk exclaimed. Iisuu was the mountain god and every cowherd of Lachvi knew what he could move or not move!

‘Goddess Myrhim is even more powerful,’ Pikki drawled.

‘How is that?’

‘She is an omnipresent goddess.’

‘Omnipresent?’

‘Yes, she has subjects in every niche of the universe.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She has power over every particle that exists in the universe - they are her subjects. She can move stars and constellations!’

Yaduk shook his head in astonishment.

‘Her scimitar carries phenomenal power!’ Pikki said gravely.

‘Strange!’ Yaduk murmured.

‘What is strange?’

‘That you all are so powerful...and you still want *my* people to fight your enemies and wrest control of the future!’

‘Oh, that...’ Pikki chuckled, sparks crackling out of his eyes. ‘You humans are not as ordinary as you look...’

‘How come?’

‘You have one divine power that no one in this universe has!’

‘What power is that?’ Yaduk enquired curiously.

‘The power to *chart the path to the future*... only you can do that!’

‘Are you sure?’ Yaduk wondered with bewilderment. He had never seen the lazy cowherds charting any path, let alone the one that led to the future!

‘Yes. When Myrhim created the humans, she gave you powerful imagination for this very purpose!’

Yaduk looked at Pikki in surprise, ‘Myrhim created the humans?’

‘Of course! She created you millions of years after she created the iljocks. She is the mother goddess who created all life in the universe.’

‘Really?’ Yaduk exclaimed. His ancestors had been worshipping the mother goddess for generations and he felt very comforted by the connection.

‘Humans were created the last...but they have turned out to be the

best,' Pikki smiled.

'I know some who are worse than dung,' Yaduk retorted.

'Ha...ha...I mean most humans. Myrhim gave you the best bodies and the wisest minds!'

'I wonder where Jugnu was when she was knocking in the minds!'

'Ha...ha...we didn't like what she gave to the animals, though!'

'What did she give them?'

'Our ancestral faces!' Pikki protested, 'My face...'

'Was given to the horses?' Yaduk guessed in a flash of inspiration.

'Yes, can you believe that?' Pikki cried, aghast. Yaduk saw the appalled expression on his face and began laughing.

'It is not funny,' Pikki protested sullenly. 'This has been the face of my ancestors for generations now. Myrhim should have created a new face for the horses.'

'What about the dogs?' Yaduk laughed. 'Were they given Hatti's ancestral face?'

'Yes!'

'Ha...ha...and the goats?'

'Jerro iljjock's...you are making fun of us, aren't you?'

'Yes...and that of myself too! Look at what she has done to me...'
Yaduk cried in despair. Lo, he was having trouble holding his body straight. Every now and then, his limbs slumped into slobbery masses and he had to pull them back into shape!

'That's because you don't have human bones anymore,' Pikki explained.

'Why...what happened to them?' Yaduk cried in shock.

'Myrhim changed them into flexible iljjock tissue...you can mold your limbs at will now. Here, let me teach you!'

Pikki guided Yaduk on how to give shape to his body. Yaduk soon learned to attain the look he wanted - that of a two-legged man from Lachvi! Lo, as soon as he did that, he realized that he was naked! 'Pikki,' he whispered urgently.

‘What?’

‘Can you give me a robe or something?’

‘Why?’

‘I need to cover my...’ he looked down and shuddered with shock. Lo, his manhood had been disfigured and his loins were marked with long scars. ‘Noooo....’ he wailed, slumping with despair and agony.

‘Yaduk...’ Pikki cried in alarm.

But, Yaduk would not be consoled. He convulsed with deep sobs. Pikki embraced him and said, ‘Calm down, my friend...soon you shall have divine powers!’

‘But, I don’t want any,’ he sobbed.

‘Shh...’ scolded Pikki, ‘You are ordained to save us all.’

‘No...I don’t want to save anyone...’ he wailed. ‘I just want to go home.’

‘Of course, you shall go home...Iisuu and Myrhim will send you back as soon as possible.’

‘I want to go immediately...’

‘No, not now...you are not ready!’

‘When will I be ready?’ he gasped, wiping away his tears.

‘Only when you have attained divine powers and we are in a position to travel behind you and distribute powers...that’s when you will be sent home! I told you that before!’

Yaduk stopped crying. He began imagining himself as the high priest again and began feeling better at once! ‘Jugnu and Puru will not get anything,’ he declared defiantly. ‘They are filthy rogues!’

‘Ha...Ha...come...we have to go....’ Pikki laughed, pulling Yaduk’s hand.

‘Go where?’ Yaduk smiled, feeling cheered by Pikki’s warmth.

‘To feed! I know you are strong, but I am sure even you need to feed...come, let’s find something to eat.’

‘Sure...it would be nice to have some hot broth,’ Yaduk replied, taking a few shaky steps forward.

‘We eat *kiks* on Seabor!’

‘*Kiks*...what are they?’

‘Active berries!’

‘What?’

‘You will soon find out...’ Pikki clasped Yaduk’s thin fingers with his own stubby ones and led him deeper into the forest.

Yaduk walked with his new iljock friend, lost in thought. Pikki, in all his honesty, had revealed a lot to him. Was he to believe everything just like that? He was not that naïve! He would have to keep an eye on everyone, especially on God Iisuu! For all he knew, he could end up with no divine powers! And, a pig for a wife and piglets for children!

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KIRLL FOREST

HAVING reminded himself to stay alert, Yaduk looked at his new surroundings with interest. ‘Where are we going?’ he asked Pikki inquisitively as they walked through the forest.

‘This part of the forest is called *Kirll*,’ Pikki replied, clutching his hand tightly. It was still night and dark all around.

Yaduk was reassured by Pikki’s protective grip and while the iljock hobbled nimbly on three feet, he was glad to walk on his two legs!

As they walked on the narrow trail, he looked at the forest curiously. The ground was undulating and the trees were loaded with glowing berries. The berries were so hot that wisps of smoke were curling out of them. The smoke hung thinly in the forest and had a familiar aroma. ‘*Nahlu!*’ he exclaimed, recognizing the heady scent. *Kirll* forest was full of the cursed *Nahlu* trees!

‘The *Nahlu* is not cursed...it is our fodder!’ someone exclaimed, emerging from behind a clump of trees.

‘God Iisuu!’ Yaduk exclaimed, recognizing him instantly. Iisuu’s body emitted a visible glow unlike the bodies of the other iljocks.

‘These are called *kiks*,’ Iisuu said, plucking a few berries from the

trees and popping a few in his mouth. 'They are active and give us energy for sustenance.'

'Open your mouth,' Pikki said, plucking more *kiks*. Yaduk opened his mouth instinctively, and Pikki tossed the *kiks* inside.

'No...' Yaduk coughed out the *kiks* quickly, 'They will make me sick.'

'No, they won't,' Iisuu assured. 'The *Nahlu* plants that grew in Lachvi were different...they were infected with germs!'

'Germs?' Yaduk repeated with bewilderment.

'Yes, I used germs to awaken the souls of the cowherds and make a divine connection to them. I wanted to bring them to Seabor but they all died on the way!'

Yaduk glared at Iisuu in shock. 'Have you no regret that they died?' he asked in disbelief.

'None at all,' Iisuu replied calmly. 'On Seabor, we do not fear or mourn death.'

Yaduk was taken aback. He was still fuming over Iisuu's words when Pikki handed him some *kiks* and drawled, 'Here...eat them...they are free from germs.'

He ate the *kiks* hesitantly. They were tasteless but bursting with energy. Pikki pulled his arm and said, 'Come, we have work to do!'

Feeling satiated, Yaduk followed Iisuu and Pikki to another part of the forest. They found the iljock horde over there. The iljocks were busy picking ripe *kiks* and storing them in wooden pails. Yaduk mingled with them and began picking *kiks* too.

The iljocks were very friendly and they jostled with each other to read his soul. 'Stop. Give him some peace!' the dog-faced iljock scolded sharply. Yaduk recalled his name - he was Hatti iljock!

'Hatti is very old and our leader!' Pikki whispered to him.

Hatti thrust a pail in Yaduk's hand and said gruffly, 'Help me fill this...and tell me about your village!'

Yaduk was happy to do as told. He began plucking ripe *kiks* and telling Hatti all about Lachvi. He beamed with joy as he spoke of his brother,

Madho. Lo, he heard Madho's voice suddenly. '*Pitr...*' the voice echoed faintly from his soul. He swung around in surprise and saw God Iisuu standing behind him!

'Speak to dear Madho!' Iisuu smiled.

Yaduk suddenly became aware that Iisuu's hand was on his nodules and that he was connected directly to Iisuu's soul! As a result, he was seeing with Iisuu's divine sight and he saw Madho right away. '*Pitr!*' Madho cried again.

'Madho!' he replied with uncontrollable happiness. 'Madho, the gods are giving me their powers!'

'Come home, *Pitr...*' Madho beseeched.

'I shall be back in a few days. We shall bring Gotri's new lamb in this world together!' Yaduk replied eagerly. But, Madho was gone. Just as he had come, he faded away. 'I have to go back!' Yaduk clutched Iisuu's arm.

'Don't be crazy...' Hatti scolded. 'You will die on the way back.'

'I didn't die while coming here,' Yaduk protested.

'It is a miracle that you survived,' Iisuu shrugged. 'Hatti is right...you will die on the way!'

'But, he is worried about his brother,' Pikki intervened. 'Maybe Goddess Myrhim can do something about it.'

Yaduk looked at Pikki with gratitude. He was turning out to be a valuable friend!

'It is not possible.' Iisuu shook his head gravely. 'But, we can ask Myrhim.'

'Myrhim won't meet us until later in the day,' Hatti informed. 'She had begun her penance when I left her abode!'

'We can take Yaduk around Seabor until then...' Pikki suggested.

'Yes...yes...' the iljjocks agreed, 'Let us show the ocean to him!'

'All right,' Iisuu nodded, 'Follow me...'

He led the way out of the forest and the rest followed him. Soon, they crossed the forest and came upon a vast water body.

'It is called the Iljjock Ocean!' Pikki squeezed Yaduk's hand. 'It

surrounds the *Kirll* forest.'

Yaduk was bewildered to see the surface of the ocean- it was not flat! At places, it dropped precipitously into deep chasms and at places, it rose to take the shape of rolling hills!

Iisuu moulded his forelimbs into long fins and slid into the water like a fish. Yaduk followed him with the other iljjocks. The water was unbelievably freezing but he could swim in it with ease. He realized that his heavily wrinkled skin was a shield- it protected him from everything, including the bitter cold! Wonderstruck, he looked upwards. Seabor's sky was one black fathomless expanse and the horizon was bathed with a wavering orange glow.

'The day dawns at Seabor!' Iisuu sighed, taking in a deep breath. He pointed to the horizon and said, 'Look over there...and you will see our suns rise!'

Yaduk did as told and his eyes widened in amazement. Three spinning discs rose one after another, showering piercing radiation on the lands and the oceans.

'We call them the *Nors*!' Iisuu informed in his deep voice.

'They don't look like suns...' Yaduk said hesitantly.

'You are right,' Iisuu chuckled, 'They are black holes...Seabor is situated between three black holes that emit radiation more powerful than any sun or star!'

'Black holes?' Yaduk repeated, looking at the three spinning discs with bewilderment. The rays emanating from them were sharp like arrows and they set the sky afire with myriad patches of wavering radiation. He noted that because of the piercing nature of the rays, he could see through the things around him.

'Ha...ha...' he chuckled to himself. Jugnu would be so scandalized to know that he now had the power to not only to see through his turban and robes, but also to find the things he had been stealing all his life!

'What is it?' Pikki asked. Obviously, he was not always reading other people's minds!

'Nothing,' Yaduk shrugged.

Iisuu smiled indulgently at Yaduk. He was always reading other people's minds and was pleased to note that Yaduk had stopped ranting about going back home!

The iljjocks floated lazily on the surface of the ocean to soak the healthy radiation. Now and then, they turned their bodies to get an even roast. Yaduk basked with them. As the day progressed, the ocean grew warmer and came to an explosive boil. Astonishingly, the surface of the ocean became flat!

'Look,' said Iisuu, pointing to the shore. The boiling waters had receded from the land to reveal the terrain that had given them the shape-hills and chasms! 'Seabor's waters are different from Earth's, they climb over the land during night,' he explained.

'Why is that?' Yaduk asked.

'Because Seabor's waters are super-cold...the substance that fills the oceans here, exists as a light gas on Earth!'

Yaduk stared blankly.

'This water that you see...is actually liquefied gas,' Iisuu filled his palm with boiling water. The water evaporated instantly.

'I see!' Yaduk nodded with wonder. 'Seabor is unique...and very beautiful, my lord!'

Iisuu nodded approvingly.

'When are we meeting Goddess Myrhim?' Yaduk asked, reminding himself not to be too friendly. The evil cow had probably forgotten that he had promised to take him to meet Myrhim!

'She will meet us at dusk!' Iisuu frowned.

Yaduk nodded and swam over to Pikki and Hatti's side. Together, they spent what seemed like hours gazing at the beautiful sky and roasting in the radiation.

'Soon it will be dusk,' Pikki sighed, gazing at the three glowering Nors. Two of them were still high up in the sky but the third one was about to set.

'Can we meet Goddess Myrhim now?' Yaduk asked drowsily.

'Yes!' Iisuu replied, swimming up to them.

‘Where does she live?’

‘On the ocean bed,’ Pikki replied. ‘God Iisuu will take us to her.’

Iisuu nodded. He moulded his limbs into long fins and dived underwater. Pikki caught Yaduk’s hand and urged him to do the same. The two exchanged a playful look, moulded their limbs into fins and dived expertly after Iisuu.

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GODDESS MYRHIM

YADUK discovered that the water below the ocean surface was very different too. As he dived deeper, he noticed that it was crystal clear and devoid of any vegetation or animal life.

‘We shall not speak as we go deeper,’ Pikki warned.

‘Why?’ Yaduk was surprised.

‘The water is super-conducting...voices take long to die down and pollute the ocean. It is forbidden to speak in the open oceans...it keeps them clean!’

Yaduk reminded himself to remain quiet. As they dived deeper, he picked up a faint hum. ‘Hmmm...hmmm...’ he strained to hear the noise. Indeed, countless voices could be heard echoing in the Iljjock Ocean!

Iisuu, Pikki and Yaduk alighted near a wooden dome shaped structure on the ocean floor. ‘Is this Goddess Myrhim’s hut?’ Yaduk enquired, following Iisuu into the wooden abode.

‘It is called a *beshel*!’ Pikki replied in a whisper.

‘Myrhim will be very pleased to see you...’ Iisuu remarked, swimming to an inner chamber. The three entered the chamber to find it brightly lit. The radiance was coming from the goddess herself - she was sitting on a tree stub rooted to the floor of the *beshel* and was in deep penance!

Yaduk had seen her soul before and this was the first time he was meeting her in person! He noticed that the goddess had a supple, wrinkled body like the iljjocks. The only difference was that she emitted a radiance

that was blinding. Even God Iisuu's aura paled in comparison!

Myrhim rose from her penance and walked to where Iisuu, Pikki and Yaduk were standing. 'Yaduk, my child!' she spoke in a tinkling voice.

'Yes, my goddess...' he stammered, overwhelmed by her presence. He could not put his finger on it exactly – but there was something very exhilarating about Iisuu and Myrhim's aura!

'Come, sit next to me,' she invited, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the *beshel*. Yaduk sat next to her and Iisuu sat down beside them. 'You are a very brave lad,' she said warmly. 'That's why you survived.'

'That's what I told him,' Pikki piped in, squatting on the floor.

Myrhim touched Yaduk's soul nodules lightly with her fingers. He shivered. 'Look into my soul,' she directed him.

Yaduk obeyed. The sights and the sounds of the *beshel* faded away as her soul came into view. She was carrying a divine scimitar from which flowed the power of a thousand suns. 'My goddess, you are very powerful!' he gasped.

'My scimitar is very powerful,' Myrhim smiled wryly. 'But, Iisuu thinks he can wield it better!'

'Ha...ha...' Iisuu laughed. It was a loud booming sound and it startled Yaduk and Pikki. Iisuu was always so composed and grim!

'The goddess is very humble,' Iisuu continued, 'But, she is the one who has the fortune to be the divine mother. You will be surprised to know that she created life on Earth with the power of that divine scimitar!'

'Pikki has told me about it,' Yaduk remarked, looking at Myrhim with reverence. 'We worship the mother goddess in my village.'

'I know you do,' she murmured with delight.

Yaduk felt deeply comforted by the goddess's touch and he knew why. Like Pikki's soul spoke of his honesty and Iisuu's soul exuded divine charisma, Myrhim's soul overflowed with maternal warmth and gave succor and comfort. 'Mother!' he was strangely moved to tears.

'Yes, my child!' the goddess patted him fondly, making him shiver again.

'Tell him how you created humans on Earth!' Iisuu urged.

‘Yes, tell me!’ Yaduk’s eyes lit up.

‘It is a long story...’ Myrhim sighed.

Pikki and Yaduk exchanged an amused look. Iisuu frowned at them and insisted, ‘The humans should know how Earth, of all the countless planets in the universe, came to host life. Or else, they will think it happened by chance!’

‘Is that so?’ Pikki nudged Yaduk, ‘Your village has more types of plants and animals than Seabor...do your people think it all happened by chance?’

‘I don’t know...’ Yaduk stammered. ‘The elders never open their mouths except to chew betel nuts!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Myrhim laughed. ‘Yaduk can look into my soul and see all that happened himself.... my mouth can lie, but my soul cannot!’

‘I want to see it too,’ Pikki piped in.

Myrhim nodded and touched his and Yaduk’s nodules lightly. The two peered into her soul and she smiled at their eagerness.

The goddess’s soul was packed with hundreds of glowing *divine strings* and the two did not know where to look. ‘Let me help you,’ she offered, unraveling the strings that contained memories of Earth.

The vision of a primordial Earth came into view and Yaduk and Pikki saw Myrhim descend on its surface when it was only a dull sphere of rock. Yaduk was surprised to see Earth as a round globe - he had always thought it to be flat and mountainous!

The goddess moved like a whirlwind on Earth’s rocky surface. ‘I want it to look like Seabor!’ she said suddenly, ‘Won’t you help me dig the oceans, my lord?’ It was not clear to whom she said that but, suddenly, lightning with the power of at least ten suns crackled in the atmosphere and oceans were ploughed out and filled with water!

Lo, Earth transformed from a dull brown orb into a striking blue watery world!

The goddess went about creating a wide variety of green plants with her divine scimitar. To create animal life, she released thousands of germs on in the warm oceans. The germs helped her create the first fishes. Yaduk saw

an exultant Myrhim watching the fish breed, when suddenly eerie and frightening lightning fell from the sky and the fishes died!

‘Oh,’ Yaduk exclaimed in shock, seeing the dead fishes float in the oceans. It had been a mass killing. Myrhim wept. Surprisingly, she looked very vulnerable and defeated. But, she still proceeded to create more creatures. They were also killed eerily.

Yaduk saw a distraught Myrhim begging for mercy for her children. She then went on a creating spree. She created larger creatures- amphibians and reptiles. Giant lizards roamed the Earth. Lo, the same eerie and frightening lightning fell from the sky and they were struck dead!

‘Who is killing them?’ he asked in shock. Whereas Iisuu and Pikki looked at him with a deathly expression on their faces, Myrhim trembled with fright.

Strangely, no one answered. Iisuu sighed, ‘Finish watching the rest of it. We have other work to do!’

Yaduk went back to watching the memories Myrhim was sharing. He saw her creating birds and small warm-blooded animals. Large-scale deaths abounded, but now they were largely because of the goddess herself - she was releasing new germs from her scimitar to make the creatures mutate, because of which many died and many transformed!

Monkeys and apes appeared in the forests on Earth. Over millions of years, Goddess Myrhim carried out hundreds of mutations to transform the creatures when finally, following a massive mutation, two legged humans walked on Earth!

The goddess looked up at the sky and smiled exultantly. The humans were perfect! They would breed to fill the Earth with their tribes and communities. ‘Be wise and make the God of Fate wise!’ she whispered to her human children before disappearing from Earth.

With that, Yaduk and Pikki lost the connection to the goddess’s soul. She had withdrawn her hands and sat on the floor of the *beshel*, beaming with pride! Clearly, she considered the creation of the humans as a big achievement!

‘Who is the God of Fate?’ Yaduk asked curiously.

‘It is a long story....’ Iisuu sighed with a strange sad look in his eyes.

Yaduk and Pikki rolled their eyes wryly.

‘Don’t be frivolous!’ Iisuu scolded, noticing their amusement.

‘Is it true that I will be given divine powers?’ Yaduk asked the mother goddess with eyes brimming with faith.

‘I told him that *only* humans had the power to chart the future,’ Pikki shrugged. ‘But, he wouldn’t believe me!’

‘That’s because I haven’t seen anyone charting *anything* in Lachvi... unless, Jugnu is doing it on the sly!’ Yaduk protested.

‘Ha...ha...’ Myrhim burst into laughter. ‘Pikki is right...the *humans* are the only ones who can determine the future. Even Iisuu and *I* do not have that divine power. But, we are talking of *dead humans* here and not the *living ones*!’

‘*Dead humans*?’ Yaduk repeated, bewildered.

‘After death, the souls of all humans become free and migrate to the *Nors*. Over there, they chart the future of the entire universe and the souls living in it!’

‘Holy heaven!’ Yaduk looked up in disbelief. The rays from the *Nors* had become muted and were barely reaching the bottom of the ocean.

‘Heaven and hell...both are up there in the *Nors*, my dear!’ Iisuu drawled drily.

‘But, the *Nors* are so far away from Earth,’ Yaduk blurted in confusion.

‘There are countless *Nors* in the universe,’ Myrhim explained. ‘The ones nearest to Earth, that’s where the human souls migrate to after death.’

‘But, it does not matter,’ Iisuu clarified. ‘All black holes in the universe are connected seamlessly by the divine continuum!’

‘The *what* continuum?’ Yaduk asked, bewildered.

‘It is a zero-dimensional state in which there are no restrictions of time or space!’ Iisuu elaborated.

Yaduk turned to Pikki for a simpler explanation. ‘Only Hatti can understand that kind of stuff!’ Pikki put up his hands in despair.

‘What Iisuu means is that...if you enter one black hole, you can come out of any other black hole in no time!’ Myrhim laughed in a tinkling voice.

‘That’s how I traveled to Seabor...’ Yaduk recalled. ‘By taking a short-cut through the *Nors*!’

‘Yes. I mentioned it to you,’ Iisuu smiled. ‘Travelling through space would have taken millions of years...through the *Nors*, it took us only a few moments!’

Yaduk looked up at the sky thoughtfully and muttered, ‘The lazy slobs...’

‘Lazy who?’ Pikki asked in surprise.

‘I am talking about my ancestors!’

‘What have they done?’

‘Nothing! That’s why my future is all messed up!’

‘You couldn’t be more right!’ Pikki snorted. ‘They do *nothing* except quarrel with each other!’

‘You mean...up there too?’

‘All the time...you won’t believe what the quarrels have led to!’

‘I will believe anything you say!’

‘The universe has become constipated!’

‘Don’t tell me...’

‘I am telling you...if you had divine powers, you would have felt it yourself!’

‘Felt what?’

‘The bloating of the universe... like it had eaten bad kiks and couldn’t let the wind out!’

‘The universe also eats kiks?’ Yaduk asked in disbelief.

‘Don’t be silly. But, it is expanding in all directions like...’

‘It is being pulled by horses gone wild?’

‘Exactly. Hatti says that any day now...the universe will burst like a bubble...poof...gone!’

‘Holy heavens! Why doesn’t Hatti do something about it?’

‘Like what?’

‘Pick up a stick...and thrash the slobs up there!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Myrhim laughed loudly. ‘Thrashing is not what the “slobs” need!’

‘What they need are *divine powers*!’ Iisuu smiled faintly. ‘Divine powers to fight back God Aakaa’s influence!’

‘God Aakaa?’ Yaduk recalling the local demon’s name, ‘What does he have to do with this?’

‘He is the one corrupting the human souls up there...in his quest to control the future!’ Iisuu remarked grimly.

‘How did he reach up there?’ Yaduk frowned, looking up at the *Nors*.

‘It’s a long story...’ Iisuu sighed heavily.

‘You should tell us...’ Pikki blurted worriedly, ‘How will we stop God Aakaa otherwise?’

‘Yaduk will stop him!’ the goddess said serenely.

‘How?’

‘By going back to Earth...and facilitating the distribution of divine powers to everyone living there!’ Iisuu remarked.

‘How will distributing on Earth help?’ Yaduk was bewildered, ‘The fight is going on in the *Nors*!’

‘Correct!’ Pikki agreed, ‘I think Yaduk should be sent to the *Nors*!’

‘What nonsense!’ Iisuu scolded, ‘He won’t survive for a moment over there...and even if does...there is no way iljjocks can mate to the souls of the dead and transfer divine powers!’

‘Correct!’ Myrhim nodded, ‘The only way to get divine powers up there...is to transfer divine powers to the living humans...and wait for them to die! After death, they will carry the divine powers with them to the *Nors*!’

‘Looks like a very devious...and a long drawn plan!’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘Not as long as you think!’ Myrhim smiled, ‘Hundreds of generations of your ancestors...from the time I created the first humans...are waiting up there!’

Yaduk’s eyes widened with amazement. ‘How old are you, my goddess?’ he asked curiously.

‘As old as the material universe!’ she replied in her tinkling voice.

Stunned, Yaduk stared at the goddess in wonder. She would have to be immortal to be as old as the universe!

‘I am still young!’ she chuckled. ‘Iisuu here is older than the universe!’

‘Really?’ he exclaimed with even more wonder. Although, that one could be older than the universe, sounded absurd to him!

The *Nors* had set and it was night now. The waters of the ocean were slowly becoming super cold. ‘Yaduk, do you realize...’ Iisuu remarked, ‘You are the first human to know the truth about us!’

‘Yes!’

‘When, every human should be knowing it?’

Yaduk nodded his head in agreement. All the villagers would be astonished to learn about the mother goddess and the fact that after death, they would be trundling to the *Nors*!

‘It is all my mistake!’ Myrhim whispered, her eyes downcast with guilt.

Yaduk stared at her in surprise. What mistake could the divine mother have made?

‘I sealed your souls to protect you,’ she explained tremulously. ‘If I had left your souls free, you would have known our truth from the beginning!’

Pikki nodded.

‘It is now time to break open the seals...’ she said urgently. ‘And awaken all human souls!’

‘Like you have awakened mine?’ Yaduk asked hesitantly.

‘Yes!’

Yaduk shook his head. ‘I don’t think the elders will agree to it,’

‘They will...’ Iisuu said thoughtfully. ‘If you to go back to Earth and tell all humans about Seabor...they could be convinced to open their souls to us fearlessly!’

Yaduk mused in silence.

‘Or else, they shall die like the others from your village...’ Myrhim rued tearfully.

Yaduk could not believe that the gods were entrusting him with such an important task. ‘Well, I can try...’ he said excitedly. ‘I will go back and try to talk everyone out of their fears. If they don’t listen to me, I will give them a sound thrashing! I am sure, after a few lusty blows, the villagers will agree to open their souls in whatever way you want!’

Iisuu smiled, ‘It won’t be that easy. And, we want all humans on Earth to agree!’

‘In that case...I shall meet the king and talk to him myself!’ Yaduk assured eagerly.

Iisuu was silent for a long moment and then said gravely, ‘Talk to Madho first, he is crying for you!’

Yaduk was taken by surprise. ‘Madho is crying for me?’ he asked, ‘But, why? I told him I will be back soon.’

Iisuu placed his hand on Yaduk’s belly and he saw Madho’s soul like a distant flame. ‘*Pitr!*’ Madho cried. He sounded frail.

‘I am coming home...’ Yaduk cried excitedly, ‘I will be back by the full moon night. The gods are sending a message for the king!’

‘*Pitr...*I am dying...come back...’ Madho replied weakly.

‘Madho?’ Yaduk asked worriedly, ‘What is the matter, my child?’

‘Come soon, *pitr...*’ he wept, ‘I do not want to die before meeting you!’

‘Shhh...Madho...don’t lose heart. We shall celebrate the next full moon together!’

Yaduk turned to Iisuu in anguish, ‘I have to go back to Lachvi at once. Madho is sick!’

‘He is not sick. He has grown old!’ Iisuu replied grimly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Time passes slowly on Seabor, dear Yaduk,’ Iisuu said in a sad voice. ‘For one day that passes here, a hundred years pass on Earth!’

Yaduk looked at Iisuu in disbelief. ‘How long have I been here, my lord?’ he asked hoarsely.

‘More than eighty years, my child!’

Yaduk staggered with shock. ‘Then I must leave at once!’ he cried.

‘You *cannot*,’ Myrhim said firmly. ‘Not until you have attained divine powers. You will die without them...and we cannot lose you!’

‘That’s what I thought...’ Iisuu nodded grimly.

‘Give me the powers, then...’ Yaduk cried, distraught with worry. ‘Madho is dying!’

‘There is only one way...’ Myrhim wrung her hands in despair. ‘You will have to mate an iljjock!’

‘Find me a mate then...’ Yaduk cried, flinging his arms wildly.

‘We will have to search among all the single iljjocks.’

Yaduk looked at the goddess with despair, ‘How many iljjocks are there?’

‘Hundreds...’ Pikki replied wryly.

‘What?’

‘But, we can call all of them here...’ Pikki suggested.

‘It is not so easy,’ Myrhim frowned. ‘Don’t forget...a human has never mated an iljjock before!’

Yaduk wept in despair, ‘What ever it is...do it fast. Madho awaits my return!’

‘Not anymore, my child,’ Iisuu murmured in a low voice. ‘He just died!’ The moments they had spent talking, months had passed in Lachvi. Madho had passed away, waiting for his brother to return.

Pikki thought that Yaduk would not be so affected after what they had told him. He was wrong.

Yaduk was devastated. He slumped into a heap on the floor of the *beshel* and as Madho had foreseen on his deathbed, wept disconsolately.

HATTI ILJJOCK

Time: Yaduk’s second day on Seabor (2nd century BC on Earth)

IT was very late in the night when Yaduk and Pikki left Myrhim's *beshel* and swam back to the *Kirll* forest.

Pikki lay down to sleep with the iljocks under the trees and Yaduk slumped next to him. He lay in a stupor, staring vacantly at the darkness. Slowly, the sky began changing its hue. A new day was dawning on Seabor and he had no desire to face it. He closed his eyes and sank into a dreamless slumber.

Yaduk woke up with a start sometime later. He felt as if he was floating on a bed of feathers and his ears were buzzing like he had been attacked by a swarm of bees. He looked around, startled. There were no bees around him and he was lying alone under a tree. 'Pikki...' he called out tremulously.

'Yaduk!' Pikki rushed quickly to his side. He had been picking *kiks* with the other iljocks. The others also gathered around with anxious faces. With a jolt, Yaduk remembered. Madho was dead!

'Aaargh....' he moaned in grief.

'Hold yourself...' Pikki cried in alarm.

Yaduk convulsed. It was like a huge boulder had been placed on his chest and was crushing him to death.

'Let me see...' Hatti squatted on the ground. Both he and Pikki massaged Yaduk's nodules with their fingers and helped him overcome his convulsions.

'Yaduk....' Pikki whispered, cupping his human friend's face gently with his stubby hands. A dam burst inside Yaduk and he broke into uncontrolled sobs. 'Madhoooo...' he wailed loudly.

'Shhh...' Pikki tried to calm him down. But, he would not be calmed and he continued wailing loudly.

'I think we should call God Iisuu,' Pikki said worriedly.

'Don't be silly,' Hatti frowned. He shook Yaduk roughly by his shoulders and scolded. 'Stop crying...what is this nonsense?'

'Hatti...' Pikki pleaded.

'Shut up!' Hatti snapped sharply. 'He knows that his brother is still alive!'

His body wracked with sobs, Yaduk replied brokenly, 'No...he is not...God Iisuu told me that he is dead!'

'His body is dead. But, his soul is still alive...you know that very well,' Hatti said irritably.

Yaduk looked at him dully and his sobs eased a bit.

'Souls are conserved in this universe which means that souls of all, iljock or human, are indestructible.' Hatti stated firmly.

'Oh no...' the iljocks grumbled. Hatti was very learned but also a big show off! He let go of no opportunity to display his knowledge.

'Have you ever seen a seedling?' Hatti asked gruffly.

'What?' Yaduk responded dully.

'Listen carefully. The soul is like a seedling and the body is like a seed cover.'

'Not a bad description!' Pikki nodded his head.

'Like a seedling grows inside a seed, the soul too matures inside the body,' Hatti continued. 'When the soul is fully mature, it discards the body. The body dies and the freed soul, in the human case, migrates to the *Nors*. Madho's body has died, but his soul is alive in the *Nors*!'

'Iisuu and Myrhim told you the same thing,' Pikki reminded. 'Don't you believe us?'

'I do...only that...' Yaduk whispered, looking up at the *Nors*. It was almost noon and the three orbs were shooting radiation with the power of a thousand suns.

Inadvertently, the iljocks followed his gaze and looked up. 'Hey...' someone warned quickly. At once, they all lowered their gaze.

'What is wrong?' Yaduk was startled.

Strangely, the iljocks were trembling with fright and tears were running down their eyes. 'Ugh...' Yaduk picked up a very foul odor. It was coming from the tears - they smelt like the rotten swamps. 'Stop...' he cried, feeling choked.

Pikki noticed Yaduk's distress and jumped to his side. 'No creature on Seabor looks directly at the *Nors* without shedding tears of fear...' he explained.

‘But, why?’

‘God Hoon lives in the *Nors*...’ Pikki blurted with a shiver. ‘We are scared to death of him!’

Yaduk stared at Pikki blankly.

‘Hoon is the God of Death. He is very evil and wields a scimitar that makes Myrhim’s look like an ornament!’

‘Really?’ Yaduk eyes widened with astonishment.

‘Yes. He is the *one* who looks after the souls of your dead in the *Nors*.’

Yaduk looked at the *Nors* in shock. ‘Madho’s soul is with *him* in the *Nors*?’

‘Yes!’

‘Pikki...’ Yaduk grasped the iljjock’s arm.

‘What?’

‘I also want to go to the *Nors*!’

The iljjock gaped. ‘You can’t.’

‘Please...’ Yaduk pleaded.

‘There’s only one-way to go there. Death. You will have to die!’

‘Don’t be silly!’

‘There is no other way, then.’ Pikki said, shaking his head.

‘Why?’

‘Divine continuum exists inside the *Nors*.’

‘So?’

‘Your body will perish!’

‘But, I passed through it when I travelled to Seabor.’

‘Then, God Iisuu held you in his divine embrace....’ Pikki shook his head.

‘God Iisuu can survive in the divine continuum?’

‘Yes!’

‘And, Goddess Myrhim?’

‘Of course.’

‘I shall ask them to take me to the *Nors*,’ Yaduk said fervently.

‘They will send you packing back to Earth instantly!’ Hatti cackled loudly.

‘Why is that?’

‘They fear God Hoon a thousand times more than any of us...’ Hatti guffawed.

Yaduk’s face fell and his eyes brimmed with tears, ‘I will talk to them...I am sure they will help me. Where are they...I want to talk to them right now!’

‘They are busy looking for your *mate*!’ Hatti informed wryly.

‘My mate?’ Yaduk spluttered in shock.

‘Yes, a mate that you can marry...don’t tell me that you are not aware of it?’

‘But, I *cannot* marry an iljjock!’ Yaduk cried in disbelief.

‘Why is that?’ Hatti asked sternly.

‘I will be exiled from my village!’

‘But, you agreed to mate an iljjock earlier....’ Pikki interrupted.

‘I was not in my senses...Madho was dying...’ Yaduk protested.

‘Yaduk, that’s cheating!’ Pikki warned.

‘No, it is not!’

‘How will you get divine powers, then?’

‘I don’t know. God Iisuu will have to find another way... please understand, I will be exiled by my people if I marry outside my tribe.’ Yaduk pleaded.

‘Nonsense!’ Hatti snapped irritably. ‘You will have to marry an iljjock!’

Yaduk glared at him and yelled, ‘Take me to God Iisuu...I want to talk to him now.’

The iljjocks looked at each other, startled.

Pikki jumped to Yaduk’s side and said, ‘Don’t be upset!’

‘Let him be...’ Hatti said angrily.

‘Hatti...’ Pikki retorted sharply. ‘Go away...you are not fit to be near any one of us!’

The other iljjocks agreed with Pikki. ‘Go away, Hatti!’ they warned him in unison.

Yaduk looked at them in surprise. Once more, they had protected him from one of their own kind. Rather, from their own leader! Taken aback by their support, he watched the dog-faced iljjock sulk away.

The iljjocks gathered around him supportively and declared, ‘If you don’t want to mate an iljjock...so be it!’

‘How will we give him divine powers, then?’ Pikki wondered worriedly.

‘God Iisuu has a huge tuft of golden hair. If he can pluck one and give it to Yaduk, it will give him sufficient divine powers!’ the goat-faced iljjock suggested.

‘Golden hair?’ Yaduk asked curiously. ‘But, Iisuu is bald!’

‘Bald? He has hundreds of hairs that feed his powers!’ the iljjock replied, ‘He needs to give you only one!’

‘Don’t be silly...’ Pikki shot him down. ‘The golden hair are not *kiks* that they can be plucked and shared just like that!’

Yaduk wondered in silence. So, the evil cow had *golden hair* that was the source of his powers! Pikki was right. He had to think big! Why not steal the hair and become God Yaduk? But then, he remembered seeing no hair on Iisuu’s body. He looked down at his own body and felt his backside furtively. Lo, there was no hair growing anywhere. Where was the cursed hair hiding?’

‘Don’t worry...’ Pikki assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder. ‘We will find a way to give you divine powers...let’s find God Iisuu!’

‘Sure...’ Yaduk smiled, relieved that Pikki had not bothered to read his mind. The iljjocks walked to another part of the forest and he walked with them, lost in his thoughts.

The iljjocks were truly a kind people. Only that cow was devious! But, he was determined now. Next time he met Iisuu, he would pull out all his hair. And, then what? He would persuade Myrhim to plant them on his

head!

Lo, once he became God Yaduk, he would soar to the *Nors* and surprise Madho! Oh, how happy his little brother would be to see him again!

The very thought made Yaduk tremble with hope. Only one thing was standing between him and his happiness now. Iisuu's hidden tuft of golden hair!

-11-

THE ILJJOCK BAY

YADUK made a decision as he and the iljjocks searched for Iisuu in the forest. There was no way he was entering the *Nors* having married into a family of pigs or goats! Madho would be so shocked and Jugnu would laugh his head off. Better, he attained divine powers by just pulling out Iisuu's golden hair!

'Where are we going?' he asked impatiently. They had walked into the interior of Kirll. The *Nahlu* trees were taller and denser here, and the *kiks* glowed in many radiant hues. Wisps of smoke were curling out of them and had covered the forest with a thin haze.

'The best *kiks* grow in this part of the forest,' Pikki replied, 'It is harvest time and we will find many iljjock hordes here.'

'But, I don't want to meet iljjocks...I want to meet God Iisuu,' Yaduk reminded him sharply.

'God Iisuu should be somewhere here,' Pikki reassured him.

Yaduk fidgeted restlessly. The aroma of *Nahlu* was overpowering and he couldn't help but compare. Back home, the forests were so cool. This place was like a smoldering oven!

'Look, Yaduk...' an iljjock pointed to the treetops. Lo, it was Hatti! Yaduk was glad to see that he was not sulking anymore and had come back to join the group. He looked where Hatti was pointing and saw yellowish-blue birds flying in the air.

'We call them *saykriles*...they help us harvest the *kiks* from the top of the trees.' Hatti explained.

Yaduk watched the *saykriles* pluck the *kiks* with their beaks and toss them in the air. The *iljjocks* ran around, using divine force to pull the *kiks* directly into the wooden pails they were carrying!

‘If the *kiks* fall on the ground and burst, they become poisonous,’ Pikki remarked.

Yaduk noticed that the birds were dropping plenty of *kiks* on the ground because of which a good number were going waste. ‘Why don’t you just climb the trees and pluck them yourself?’ he remarked.

‘Ha...ha...’ Hatti cackled.

‘Did I say something funny?’

‘No....but, I was reminded of the biggest dimwit on Seabor!’

‘Hatti...’ Pikki warned. ‘Don’t say another word.’

‘Why?’ Hatti retorted. ‘Because she wields a divine scimitar?’

‘Are you talking about Myrhim?’ Yaduk blurted in astonishment.

‘Don’t listen to him...he is mad!’ Pikki shook his head in despair.

Hatti laughed even more loudly. ‘Yaduk, you wanted to know why we don’t climb trees?’

‘Yes...’

‘Myrhim forgot to give us muscles!’

‘I see!’

‘The *iljjocks* were the first creatures she created,’ Pikki said defensively, ‘She could not have been perfect!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Hatti laughed heartily. ‘The most powerful goddess in this universe...and so daft...Iisuu should take away her scimitar!’

Yaduk suddenly remembered that he had come to meet Iisuu and Pikki and Hatti had diverted him with their nonsense. ‘GOD IISSU...’ he yelled loudly.

Yaduk’s voice boomed in *Kirll*, startling hundreds of *saykriles* to fly from the treetops. There was a riotous noise as they cackled loudly. The *iljjocks* ran helter-skelter, trying to calm them. ‘Hurr...hurr...’ they waved to the birds to calm down. Gradually, the birds took perch on their squat shoulders and peace was restored.

‘Hurr...hurr...’ they began pushing the *saykriles* back to the work of harvesting.

Yaduk was suddenly reminded of the herds back home. He was thinking of his yaks and goats, when he suddenly spotted Iisuu’s radiant face in the melee. ‘God Iisuu...’ he called out quickly.

‘What is it?’ Iisuu asked, ambling to him. A dozen *saykriles* had taken perch on his body and were slowly flying back to the treetops.

Yaduk looked him over from head to toe. He couldn’t spot a single hair!

‘What hair?’ Iisuu asked hoarsely.

Lo, the evil one had read his mind, Yaduk thought in consternation and quickly changed the topic. ‘I cannot marry without the consent of the elders of my village!’ he said firmly.

‘I know that,’ Iisuu replied calmly.

‘You do?’ Yaduk asked with surprise.

‘Yes, but....’

Yaduk was not listening. ‘I will be exiled from my village...’ he said agitatedly.

‘But, your village does not exist anymore!’ Iisuu said grimly.

‘What do you mean?’ Yaduk stared blankly at Iisuu.

‘It was washed away by flood years back!’

Yaduk slumped on the ground in shock. ‘My child,’ Iisuu sighed, bending to embrace him. But, Yaduk was oblivious to everything and stared vacantly at the space in front of him.

‘Pikki...’ Iisuu said sharply. ‘Take him to the bay...he needs grooming...don’t come back until he feels better!’

Pikki nodded worriedly.

‘Can we go too?’ the other iljjocks asked.

‘All right,’ Iisuu agreed hesitantly, ‘But come back soon...you have to finish the harvesting.’

‘Yes...yes...’ the iljjocks nodded.

‘Trust me...the souls of your people are alive and safe in the *Nors*...’

Iisuu assured Yaduk.

‘Oh yes...the *Nors*....’ Yaduk snapped out of the stupor and looked up at the sky. The three *Nors* were shining fiercely.

‘But, there is no way you can go up there...’ Iisuu remarked, reading his thoughts. Having said that, God Iisuu moved away from the horde, leaving Yaduk with them.

Pikki came to sit by Yaduk and held his hand. ‘Come to the bay with us,’ he said gently.

‘No,’ Yaduk sighed listlessly, ‘I am very tired!’

‘That’s because you have not passed waste for almost a day now,’ Pikki pointed to his nodules. They were badly swollen!

Yaduk looked at his swollen nodules with bewilderment. Of course, he had not passed waste. No one had told him how to do it!

‘We will have to go to the bay for that,’ Pikki said. ‘Let’s go...the others have already left.’

‘All right,’ Yaduk sighed, getting up unsteadily. He had hardly taken step forward when he heard a familiar rustling sound. Lo, his ears were buzzing again. ‘Aaargh...’ he groaned, holding his head with his hands.

‘What’s wrong?’ Pikki asked anxiously.

‘My ears...’ he gasped. Suddenly he heard a faint whisper, ‘*Pitr... pitr...*’ He looked around in shock and then flung his head to look up at the *Nors*. The radiance pouring out of the discs was blinding and for an infinitesimal moment, he thought he saw the shadows of Madho and the villagers!

‘Madho...I just saw him...he is up there...’ he croaked, his head pounding.

‘Shhh...’ Pikki calmed him. ‘Let’s go to the bay...you will feel better!’

Dazed by what he had seen, Yaduk walked with Pikki to the Iljock Bay. Lo, he was sure that he had seen Madho and that he was the one making his ears buzz! Madho’s soul did not seem to be at peace in the *Nors*, Yaduk thought with a sinking heart.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Pikki grasped his hand.

‘You don’t understand...he needs me...I have to go to the *Nors*...’
Yaduk whispered in anguish. ‘My village, all my people are up there!’

‘It cannot happen as long as you are alive.’

‘But Iisuu and Myrhim do it all the time!’

‘They are different from us.’

‘Why? Because, they have golden hair? Where is the hair growing anyway? I didn’t see a single one on Iisuu’s body!’

‘They are in his soul, that’s why...’ Pikki chuckled.

‘What? Who has hair growing in their souls?’

‘It is not what you are thinking...’ Pikki guffawed. ‘The golden hair is nothing but the *divine strings*! They are also known as “golden hair” because of their radiance. We saw so many glowing in Myrhim’s soul...remember?’

‘Oh, I see...’ Yaduk muttered in confusion.

‘It’s the same...I showed you *one* in my soul too,’ Pikki chuckled. ‘The *strings* are the source of all divine powers!’

‘Why hasn’t Iisuu given me one of those strings yet?’ Yaduk asked, baffled. ‘Unless the talk about giving me divine powers is all nonsense!’

‘No one can fool around with *divine strings* because of the divine ghosts living in them,’ Pikki shrugged. ‘Not even Iisuu and Myrhim! The safest way for you to get the strings is by mating an iljjock...and that too, you will get only *one* string!’

Yaduk glared at Pikki disbelievingly. ‘How did Iisuu and Myrhim get such a huge pile of the loot?’

‘They were born with it. You must have noticed...’

‘Noticed what?’

‘Iisuu and Myrhim *are very* different from the rest of us! So many of their powers defy the laws of this universe!’

‘Well, they do have an aura...’

‘The aura does not belong to this universe!’

Yaduk thought silently.

‘They came from a world very different from ours...’ Pikki sighed, ‘A world made from very different laws!’

‘Don’t spin tales...’

‘Iisuu and Myrhim come from the *bor*!’

‘The *bor*?’

‘The *bor* was the primordial world of the nature gods!’

‘Where is it...somewhere nearby?’

‘It no longer exists...it died to give birth to the material universe!’

Yaduk was astonished and confused.

‘The *bor* was the beginning of the creation. Then, the nature gods existed in their original, living forms,’ Pikki explained. ‘Later, they and the *bor* disintegrated to give birth to the universe!’

‘Is that how Iisuu is older than the universe?’ Yaduk exclaimed. ‘He was born in the *bor*...which pre-dates the universe?’

‘Yes. Iisuu, Myrhim, Aakaa and God Hoon were *all* born in the *bor*... they survived its death to come out alive in the new universe!’

Yaduk mused silently.

‘Iisuu suffered the trauma of seeing the *bor* dying with their own eyes. He does not want this universe to suffer the same fate and that’s why he is trying so hard to save it!’

Lo, how the evil cow had pulled wool over everyone’s eyes with his teary tales, Yaduk thought with disdain. Pikki and the iljocks were fools to have faith in him!

It was good that Pikki was not reading his mind, for he continued radiantly, ‘The *bor* was God Iisuu’s home...and what a home it was! All divine powers originated in the *bor* and what seem like miracles in this universe, were normal phenomena in the *bor*!’

‘Myrhim’s divine scimitar originated in the *bor*?’ Yaduk asked curiously.

‘Yes. It could not have originated in this universe. And, since you have been secretly thinking of pinching it...let me warn you...not even Iisuu can do that!’

Yaduk cringed with embarrassment but not one to give up, asked, ‘Why can’t Iisuu steal it? He is so powerful.’

‘Only omnipresent gods can handle such colossal power. The only one who can lift the scimitar is Myrhim herself...or God Hoon!’

Yaduk’s face fell.

‘Trust me...’ Pikki said gently. ‘We can never equal those who came from the *bor*. There’s no chance that you or I will ever become God Yaduk or God Pikki...or fly alive to the *Nors*. Forget it!’

A bubble burst inside Yaduk’s soul and he looked at the *Nors* with an aching heart. How could he forget that Madho was up there and crying for him? He remembered him as a boyish bundle of arms and legs. How did he look when he was grown-up?

Tears trickled down Yaduk’s eyes. He was sure his little Madho had grown up to become very sturdy and clever. No wonder he was defying god knows what laws of the universe and making his ears buzz! Yaduk was sure that one day, he would have Madho in his arms again. He would then become the first human to reach out to the dead in the *Nors*!

‘I *have* to find a way to fly to the *Nors*!’ he told himself fervently, ‘Even it means marrying and mating into a clan of pigs, bears or goats!’

Inadvertently, he looked at his disfigured manhood. Lo, he was not fit to mate anyone, human, animal or iljjock. Unless, of course, the iljjocks mated differently! Feeling shy, he decided to ask Pikki about it after they had reached the bay. Pikki was going to teach him how to pass waste, anyway. He might as well teach him how to mate!

THE Iljjock Bay was to the south of the *Kirll* forest. The water boiled constantly here and thick layers of seaweeds grew in the warmth. Every morning, the iljjocks flocked in hordes to this bay and groomed themselves.

‘Come,’ Pikki cried, jumping into the water. Yaduk followed him.

‘Awk...awk,’ Pikki called out, wading through the seaweeds. To Yaduk’s surprise, tiny creatures jumped out of the weeds to cling to Pikki’s body. They crawled to his belly and began suckling at his nodules!

Yaduk suddenly noticed that the bay was teeming with thousands of such tiny creatures.

‘This is a *dug*!’ Pikki said, lifting a small toad like creature. ‘It will suck out all the waste from your body.’ He tossed the *dug* towards Yaduk,

and Yaduk's eyes widened with surprise as the *dug* crawled to his belly and began suckling hard at his swollen nodules!

‘And, this is a *besring*!’ Pikki laughed, tossing a small eel like creature at Yaduk. ‘It will help you digest the *kiks* better.’

‘And, this is an *enccollie*!’ Pikki added, tossing a star shaped creature at Yaduk. ‘It will help improve your blood circulation and also regenerate your old body cells.’

Waves of relief washed over Yaduk's body as the *dug*, *besring* and *enccollie* suckled his nodules. He began feeling better instantly. As Pikki had said, the creatures removed the waste from his body, improved his circulation and regenerated his old body cells!

‘These creatures belong to your family now,’ Pikki chuckled.

‘My *family*?’

‘Yes. They will cling *only* to you...every iljjock has a family of creatures that help him run his body!’

Yaduk peered at his family with bewilderment. The *dug*, *besring* and *enccollie* peered back at him through tiny beaded eyes and continued suckling hard. ‘I can't believe that this is happening to me!’ he guffawed, shaking his head.

‘What?’ Pikki smiled.

‘My family is helping me...to pass waste!’

‘Well, Myrhim forgot to give us many organs when she created us!’

‘So Hatti was right....’

‘Yes. Long ago, when the goddess created my first ancestors, she did not give much thought while creating their bodies. It was when they had trouble digesting food and passing waste that she realized that she had overlooked a lot of functions!’

‘What happened then?’

‘She created the creatures- the *dugs*, *besrings* and *enccollies*- to help my ancestors survive!’

‘No one on Earth has such problems...not even the plants and animals,’ Yaduk remarked.

‘That's because she created you with a well-practiced hand,’ Hatti

smirked, wading up to them. He had heard them mention his name!

‘Hatti!’ said Pikki sharply. ‘Go away before you harm someone.’

Hatti scowled and waded away.

‘How can you tell him off like this?’ Yaduk asked in surprise.

‘He’s half mad, that’s why.’

‘But, he’s your leader.’

‘Iisuu made him the leader because...I don’t know why! Maybe because he is very learned...but that learning is slowly making him go mad!’

‘Why?’

‘He does not want to marry.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No, it is serious. The urge to mate has built up in his body and if he doesn’t find his soulmate soon, his will go mad with irritation!’

‘Soulmate?’

‘Yes...creatures on Seabor mate their *souls*! The souls have to match...you cannot just mate anyone!’

‘I see. How do I match my soul...I mean, find my mate?’

Pikki smiled. ‘You will know spontaneously. So will your mate! He should be stalking you by now!’

‘What?’ Yaduk’s eyes bulged in surprise. He remembered noticing Jerro, the goat-faced iljock staring at him strangely. He looked around furtively to see if Jerro was around. Lo, Jerro was very much in the bay and returned his glance with two very limpid eyes! ‘Eeekk...’ Yaduk gasped, looking away.

He could not believe that this plump goat was going to be his wife. Or husband! Pikki had turned to chat to another iljock and so he slunk nervously to a secluded part of the bay.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Hatti asked gruffly, swimming up to him.

‘What’s wrong with *you*?’ Yaduk shot back, ‘Why don’t you want to get married?’

‘Oh that...I value my freedom. To be married on this planet is to suffer bondage of the worst kind!’

‘Really?’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘He is talking nonsense...’ Pikki scolded, wading over.

‘Here comes the old faithful...’ Hatti taunted sarcastically.

‘An iljjock marriage is pure bliss!’ Pikki corrected, ‘Yaduk, don’t listen to him...he is just frustrated because God Iisuu won’t let him play around with the *divine string* that lies in his soul!’

‘What nonsense!’ Hatti denied vehemently.

‘How do you play with a *divine string*?’ Yaduk asked eagerly.

‘Yes, tell him...’ Pikki mocked. ‘Tell him about the mischief that’s on your mind!’

‘It is not mischief...’ Hatti protested.

‘Hatti wants to peek into the memories stored in the *divine string*...and invoke the ghost of the *bor*!’ Pikki blurted with a shiver. ‘And, the ghosts of dead gods too!’

‘What nonsense!’ Hatti denied, ‘I just want to know what happened in the *bor*...it will explain a lot of things that are going around here!’

‘Like what?’ Pikki mocked.

‘Like, why does God Iisuu behave like a lovelorn maniac at times?’

‘Lovelorn maniac?’ Yaduk giggled.

‘I am telling you...’ Hatti was in his element now, ‘He shared a powerful bond of love with someone very evil in the *bor*...the gashes in his soul are from that bond!’

‘Who told you that?’ Pikki exclaimed in disbelief.

‘Myrhim...who else?’

‘You gossip monger...’ Pikki spat in disgust. ‘What else did she tell you?’

‘If Iisuu was a bad case, God Hoon was even worse...’

‘Stop!’ Pikki shivered nervously.

But Hatti was unstoppable now. ‘I am told that God Hoon was so evil that they tried to snare him with a deep bond of love! Lo, he killed his own love interest...and became even more evil!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Yaduk burst out laughing. ‘This is hilarious...I also want

to know the blunders that happened in the *bor*!’

‘Shut up...Hatti...I want you to stop this right now!’ Pikki was shaking with fear.

‘I cannot...someone has to speak the truth!’ Hatti replied tersely.

‘What truth?’

‘That this universe is being run by a bunch of gods who are essentially love-crossed lunatics...and by a goddess who wields her scimitar like a novice!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Yaduk collapsed in the water of the bay.

‘Hatti...’ Pikki croaked in shock and disbelief, ‘Have you no fear?’

‘I am shaking with fear...but, I don’t care. I demand to know all the mysterious stories that Iisuu and Myrhim have been hiding! I want to know all that happened in the *bor*! Why did the *bor* die? Why did only a few gods escape? And, how come they have mammoth powers...and not the minds or the tempers to match?’

‘What’s the point? The tale of the *bor* is a series of tragic and twisted events...that are best forgotten in the present universe!’ Pikki shrugged. ‘Myrhim says that if you knew what happened...you will start seeing the corpses of dead gods in the stars and the planets!’

Stunned, the three sobered down and lapsed into poignant silence. Yaduk broke the calm, ‘Tragic or joyful...I think Hatti deserves to be told whatever he wants to know...he is the leader, after all!’

‘Exactly!’ Hatti nodded in self-support.

‘Oh, shut up. Let’s go,’ Pikki groaned, pulling Yaduk away. ‘Don’t let him poison your mind. I suggest you focus on the real purpose why you are here...and not on local issues that are age-old and related to our mutual bickering and conflicts!’

‘But...’

‘He is half-mad, I am telling you!’ Pikki yanked his arm again.

‘All right,’ Yaduk agreed laughingly. The creatures of his family were crawling all over his body and tickling him. ‘Hey...’ he yelled, falling over Hatti.

Surprisingly, Hatti began shrieking loudly. ‘Are you trying to kill

me?’ he screamed.

While Yaduk tried to regain his balance, other iljjocks waded over to see what the ruckus was about. ‘Hatti...’ they cried, aghast.

This time around, they supported Hatti. Yaduk watched with surprise as the iljjocks helped Hatti get out of the water and they all headed back to the forest in grim silence.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ Yaduk asked, bewildered.

‘You could have killed Hatti!’ Pikki wrung his hands in despair.

‘Nonsense...it was hardly anything.’

‘No, you don’t know. The iljjock blood does not clot easily...the smallest wound can make us bleed to death. Our blood was...not created with enough thought!’

Yaduk stared at Pikki in shock, realizing that there were strong reasons why Hatti was so critical of Goddess Myrhim!

‘The *enccollies* help us...but the clotting is still very slow.’ Pikki shrugged.

‘So you mean, I can die from a small wound?’ Yaduk asked in astonishment.

‘You can!’

‘This is ridiculous,’ Yaduk cried. ‘I used to get wounded almost every day in Lachvi.’

‘Really?’ Pikki asked in alarm.

‘And, I used to break the bones of others...every second day.’

‘Eeekk...’ Pikki cried with a scandalized face. ‘You can’t do that here. The biggest wrong you can do on Seabor...is to assault someone physically.’

‘What if you want to beat up someone?’

‘Only Iisuu can beat up...I mean punish someone.’

‘He beats you up?’

‘No, he wrings our souls,’ Pikki replied with a shudder. ‘It is worse than a thousand broken bones.’

Yaduk baulked.

‘You *haven’t* seen anything, yet,’ Pikki smiled wanly, reading his mind.

They waded out of the water to sit on the rocky shore. It was dusk now. The brightness of the *Nors* had dimmed. One had set, and the other two were just going down the horizon, illuminating the sky with wavering patches of purple radiation.

‘Pikki...’

‘Shh...listen to the creatures sing...they are settling down for the night.’

Yaduk listened curiously. The *dugs*, *besrings* and *enccollies* had crawled to their nests in the weeds and were humming themselves to sleep.

‘O wonder!’ Yaduk sighed, feeling very peaceful. Inadvertently, he gazed at the setting *Nors*. The fading radiance of the dusk was very poignant.

‘Look away,’ Pikki urged.

‘Don’t worry.’

‘Are all humans fearless like you?’

‘No, most are cowards...let us sleep here tonight, Pikki.’

‘No,’ Pikki cried in alarm. ‘We are not safe here...we should leave at once...there could be enemies around.’

‘You mean...the seamones?’

‘Yes...they can be very dangerous! The *iljjocks* are a kind people... but, the seamones...they are vile and horrible like their divine father, God Aakaa!’

‘Really?’ exclaimed Yaduk in surprise. The bay was so tranquil and the forests serene. And, as far as he could see, there was no one about. ‘I wish we could stay here for sometime.’

‘All right,’ Pikki smiled reluctantly, ‘But, only for a while...I can see you really like this place!’

‘Yes,’ Yaduk sighed, sprawling down on the rocks. He suddenly remembered his potential soulmate - the goat-faced Jerro who had been sending lustful glances his way – and cringed.

Pikki lay next to him and both gazed at the sky in silence. The *Nors* had set and the sky was pitch dark. The humming could be heard faintly - the

creatures were slowly falling asleep.

‘Where are the stars, Pikki?’ Yaduk asked, straining to see far in the darkness above him.

‘What stars?’

‘On Earth, we always see stars at night.’

‘Not over here.’

‘Why?’

‘The *Nors* are very powerful...they swallow anything coming from outer space, including the rays of light.’

‘Really?’

‘What else do you see on Earth?’ Pikki asked curiously.

‘Well, we see the moon...’

‘The moon?’

‘Yes, the moon...’ Yaduk was about to describe the lunar phases to Pikki when suddenly they heard a sharp rustling sound.

‘Shh...’ Pikki whispered in alarm.

Yaduk leapt up and listened intently. Someone was running towards them from the forest.

‘Hide,’ Yaduk whispered, pulling Pikki behind a tree. They watched with bated breaths as the intruder burst out in the open. Lo, it was only that old hag, Hatti!

‘Pikki...Yaduk...’ Hatti looked around searchingly.

Pikki breathed a sigh of relief and came out of hiding. ‘Hatti!’ he scolded. ‘You frightened us.’

‘God Iisuu is looking for you.’

‘We were just coming,’ said Pikki hurriedly.

‘My *samovar* is to be held tomorrow!’ Hatti informed resignedly. ‘God Iisuu has decided to kill my dream...and tie me down in marital bondage!’

For a moment, Pikki was stunned. But then, he burst with joy. ‘O wonder!’ he cried. ‘Let us hurry back.’

‘Yes, there is so much work to do,’ Hatti sighed, leading the way

back. Pikki and Yaduk followed him hurriedly.

‘What’s is a *samovar*?’ Yaduk asked, noticing that Hatti did not seem to be angry anymore.

‘It is a rite that Iisuu conducts to tame mad iljjocks like Hatti!’ Pikki chuckled.

‘What do you mean?’ Hatti scowled.

‘I mean...to find a mate for a great leader like Hatti!’

Hatti glared silently.

‘I am sure you will find happiness and your sanity tomorrow!’ Pikki patted him jovially.

‘Goddess Myrhim has decided to hold my *samovar* herself,’ Hatti stated smugly.

‘Why is that?’ Pikki asked in surprise, because normally, God Iisuu held the *samovars*.

‘It has to do with Yaduk’s soulmate....’

Yaduk halted in his tracks. The others halted with him. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked sharply, fearing that Jerro had openly declared his love or something!

‘Nothing!’ Hatti stammered.

‘No, tell him honestly,’ frowned Pikki.

‘Yes, tell me,’ urged Yaduk.

Hatti looked surprised by their bonding. ‘The goddess has decided that you will also find your soulmate tomorrow,’ he informed Yaduk. ‘Your *samovar* will be held right after mine!’

THE three found the other iljjocks in the interior of *Kirll*. ‘Come, Yaduk,’ Hatti said jovially, ‘There is a lot of work to be done!’

Yaduk was glad that Hatti had forgiven him. For that matter, he had begun liking Hatti very much. Outspoken and brazen, he had the mettle to be a strong leader!

Suddenly, he felt as if someone was watching him. He looked around and saw a shadow behind a tree. Lo, it was Jerro, his stalker! He was looking at him with eyes smoldering with longing. Jerro saw him looking and quickly

came out of hiding. And, walked away as if nothing had happened!

His heart beating furiously, Yaduk stared at him in consternation. Jerro was not as plump as he had thought. Rather, he was very graceful and his face was pleasantly attractive. 'I have been thinking only about myself and not about Jerro,' Yaduk thought with concern. 'How hard it must be for him to accept a human as a soulmate!'

'Pikki...' he whispered.

'Yes?' Pikki looked up in surprise. He was getting pails ready for picking kiks.

'How do I chat up a soulmate...I mean any iljjock?'

'Aha...' Pikki's eyes glinted mischievously. 'Who is it? Jerro... unbelievable!'

Yaduk cursed him for reading his mind.

'I must have a word with Jerro...' Pikki laughed.

'No...' Yaduk protested. 'Not yet...I need more time!'

'Why don't you pick *kiks* somewhere near him?' Pikki suggested. 'I am sure he will come over talk to you himself!'

'All right,' Yaduk nodded.

It was night but surprisingly, the harvesting activity was in full swing. The *saykriles* were plucking *kiks* frenziedly from the treetops and tossing them in the air. And, the iljjocks were running around, using divine force to push the *kiks* in wooden pails.

'Help me with this,' Pikki said, pointing to a full pail of *kiks*. Yaduk helped him place it on his head and lifted two pails himself.

'Follow me,' Pikki said, walking into the forest.

Yaduk followed him and soon they came upon an open clearing. 'We are filling Hatti's pit,' he clarified, emptying the pail of *kiks* slowly in an open pit. Yaduk also emptied his two pails in it and realized that there were scores of such pits in the clearing.

Pikki led him to an empty pit and said, 'This one is yours!'

'Oh!' Yaduk exclaimed, looking at the pit in surprise.

'Each one of us has a pit here!' an iljjock said in a husky voice.

Yaduk looked at him, startled. It was Jerro! He was standing under a tree and stalking him again. Flattered by the attention, Yaduk recalled how he had been a favorite of the belles in Lachvi!

‘Jerro...’ Pikki exclaimed, looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. ‘How you have grown!’

Jerro stared at Pikki, spellbound. Before he could say anything, someone yelled, ‘Hurry up, you all. We have to fill this before the night’s over...or Hatti will go hungry in his old age!’

‘Come...’ Pikki cried, pulling Yaduk back to the harvesting area.

‘Why will Hatti go hungry?’ Yaduk was bewildered.

‘This pit of *kiks* has to feed him for the rest of his life.’

‘I see.’

‘Iljjocks do not work after marriage,’ Pikki explained. ‘All the iljjocks that you see working here are single iljjocks!’

‘Really? Where are all the married iljjocks?’

‘Married iljjocks live in settlements on the ocean floor. You will see them tomorrow when we go there for Hatti’s *samovar*.’

Pikki and Yaduk went to the harvesting area to find the iljjocks gathered around Hatti. They had stopped picking *kiks* and were strangely, poking Hatti’s belly and making him cackle loudly. Laughter echoed loudly in the *Kirll* forest as all the iljjocks laughed together.

‘Why are they laughing like that?’ Yaduk was bewildered.

‘Hatti won’t get to laugh much after getting married,’ Pikki replied.

‘How dismal.’

‘What is dismal?’

‘Marriage. No work and no laughter...sounds like bondage to me... Hatti was right!’

Pikki grinned. ‘No, it is not bondage. Rather, it is a very blissful affair.’

‘I doubt it...what is bliss without hard work or laughter?’

‘You are right. But, we become busy with other things after marriage.’

‘Like what?’

‘Love...pure iljjock love! We spend our lives floating on a magical cloud of rapture.’ Pikki sighed wistfully.

‘Sounds like a sickness to me...’ Yaduk remarked, shaking his head.

Pikki looked stricken for a moment but then burst out laughing. Yaduk laughed with him.

‘But, there is one thing undeniably very good about marriage.’ Pikki chuckled.

‘What’s that?’

‘We get to join the iljjock *yoke*.’

‘Iljjock yoke?’

‘It is a divine connection that connects the souls of all the married iljjocks seamlessly...and allows them to share their powers, thoughts and everything else!’

‘Single iljjocks don’t get to join the yoke?’

‘No, single iljjocks chatter too much. And, the yoke has to be peaceful. Noise hinders the flow of power on the yoke!’

‘How much power does it have?’

‘Tremendous!’

‘Sufficient to fly to the Nors?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not! No one has tried it yet. You can try it when you join the yoke.’

Yaduk could not control his excitement. ‘I knew something would work out. I am destined to fly to the Nors and meet Madho! Will you help me, my friend?’

‘Sure!’

Yaduk looked up at sky and shivered. Madho’s cries were haunting him. He was longing for some sign from him that he was all right. Also, for some sign from Jerro that he was ready to mate! Lo, he could not wait to mate that goat, join the iljjock *yoke* and then, leap to the Nors!

‘Hey, you two...’ Hatti yelled, breaking his reverie. ‘Get back to work!’

‘All right,’ Yaduk and Pikki yelled back.

The two worked late into the night with the others. They finished filling Hatti’s pit and later, took out saws to make a wooden *beshel*. Hatti and his soulmate would live in this *beshel* after marriage. Using a sharp chisel, Yaduk carved beautiful motifs on the wooden walls of the *beshel* that everyone liked very much.

It was very late in the night that everybody decided to catch some sleep. Yaduk also lay down under a tree to rest. He gazed drowsily at the wisps of smoke curling out of the *kiks* and mulled over the events of the day. Despite the many surprises, he was actually looking forward to Hatti’s *samovar* and marriage!

-12-

THE SAMOVAR

Yaduk’s third day on Seabor (1st century BC on Earth)

THE iljjocks woke up early for Hatti iljjock’s *samovar*. They lifted the wooden *beshel* they had made for him and dived with it to the floor of the Iljjock Ocean.

Yaduk dived down the ocean with at least hundred iljjocks. It was still early in the morning and the radiation falling from the *Nors* was muted. Later in the day, the rays would grow sharper, piercing through almost every thing to give the creatures see-through vision.

‘O wonder!’ Yaduk sighed, gulping the super cold water. It smelt like the rain soaked mud at his village and was very refreshing. Only two days had passed and he was already feeling at home on Seabor. All because of the warmth of the iljjocks, he mused. The villagers of Lachvi would not have accepted a stranger as easily as the iljjocks had accepted him!

Pikki nudged him and smiled. This time, he had read his thoughts!

Yaduk smiled back and continued musing. The *Kirll* forests were now as familiar to him as the pine forests of Lachvi. He could tell the time of the day now by simply looking at the hues of the radiation wavering in the sky - orange in the morning, violet at noon and purple at dusk. And, when the water became super cold at night and climbed over the hills and chasms - he

found the oceans as chillingly beautiful as the moonlit peaks of snow covered mountains.

Pikki nudged him again and pointed downwards. Yaduk snapped out of his reverie and let out a loud gasp. Hundreds of iljjock dwellings dotted the ocean floor, glittering like a bed of stars!

The horde descended on the ocean floor and while some stayed behind to fix the new *beshel*, Hatti and the others moved to the ceremonial altar in the middle of the settlement.

The altar was made of wood and fixed firmly to the ocean floor. It was lit brightly. Yaduk saw no lamps and realized that the light was coming from Myrhim and Iisuu! They were sitting on tree stubs on the altar and lighting it up with their body radiance.

‘You can talk freely during the *samovar*,’ Pikki chirped excitedly. ‘We like the ocean to resonate with our *samovars*!’

Yaduk nodded distractedly. His mind was on his own *samovar*! He was thinking of telling Myrhim and Iisuu that he had already found Jerro, when the goddess suddenly said in her warm, tinkling voice, ‘Hatti, come forward. It is time to find you a soulmate.’

Hatti walked up to a vacant spot on the ocean floor and the iljjocks gathered around him joyfully. Lo, what followed was a riot. The single iljjocks piled over him and took turns to wiggle their bellies against his belly. ‘Hey...stop...’ Hatti growled, smacking them away.

‘What the hell are they doing?’ Yaduk looked with astonishment.

‘They are checking if their nodules crackle with Hatti’s or not,’ Pikki explained. ‘If they do, it means that their souls will match!’

‘Whack...’ Hatti slapped one naughty iljjock away. ‘God Iissuuuu...’ the iljjock wailed, rubbing his tingling back.

‘Ha...ha...’ Myrhim and Iisuu laughed loudly.

‘I am going in...’ Pikki cried with delight.

Lo, he dived in the melee and got a chance to give Hatti a hard rubdown. Hatti was very irritated and he smacked Pikki so hard that he went tumbling on the ocean floor.

‘Ha...ha...’ Pikki laughed, delighted that he did not turn out to be

Hatti's soulmate! Yaduk laughed and rolled on the ocean floor with him.

'Don't forget...you are next!' Pikki gasped.

'What? Am I going to be muzzled like that?' Yaduk asked in shock. Pikki did not get a chance to reply as the gathering erupted into loud cheers. Lo, sparks had leapt out of the nodules of a rabbit-faced iljjock who lay sprawled on Hatti's belly!

'We have found Hatti's soulmate,' Iisuu declared with a radiant smile. 'Miia iljjock!'

Hatti and Miia got up from the ocean bed and after engaging in a loving embrace, swam up the altar.

'Miia...unbelievable...' Pikki shook his head in astonishment. 'He is even older than Hatti.'

'I should have known!' Myrhim exclaimed with joy, receiving them on the altar. Miia was as wise as Hatti but very shy. No wonder they had not found each other before.

'Now they will getting married.' Pikki cried happily.

'Just like that?' Yaduk asked in surprise.

'What do you mean?'

'In Lachvi we get married with.... pomp and finery.'

'Here, we do it very simply. We just make our first *zol* crystals together.'

'What is that?'

'Look!'

Yaduk looked at the altar curiously. Hatti and Miia iljjock were sitting next to each other on tree stubs. Iisuu was bending over them.

'What is he doing?' asked Yaduk, craning his neck.

Iisuu heard him and beckoned, 'Come forward...you can marry Hatti and Miia.'

'What?' Yaduk stammered, taken aback.

'Step forward,' Myrhim said encouragingly.

Yaduk stepped on the altar hesitantly.

Iisuu pointed to the couple to be married and said, 'You see their

toes...press them together.'

Hatti and Miia smiled at him and put their toes forward. Encouraged by their smiles, he bent down and pressed their toes hard. Thick sap oozed out of their toes and as it ran down, mixed to harden into radiant crystals. The crystals glowed with the power of many suns!

'Hatti and Miia...you are married now,' Myrhim declared with joy.

'Well done!' Iisuu exclaimed, embracing the couple. 'Your *zol* crystals are flawless.'

'Yes, my lord,' Hatti said happily. He picked up a handful of crystals and handed them to Yaduk. 'This is for you. Keep them carefully for they are the most precious resource on Seabor!'

'Give me one...' Pikki said excitedly.

Yaduk opened his palm to reveal ten radiant crystals – the energy pouring out of them was making his skin tingle. Pikki took one crystal and peered at it. 'It is truly flawless...it means that they will have a successful marriage,' he declared.

'How can you tell?'

'The quality of the crystals tells us how perfectly matched their souls are. They will mate without a hitch.'

'It is time to connect you to the iljjock yoke,' Iisuu declared divinely.

'Yes, my lord,' Miia iljjock said softly. His rabbit-face was suffused with the glow of happiness.

Iisuu placed his toe over Hatti and Miia's toes and sparks of lightning flew from his toe to theirs.

'He is joining them to the iljjock yoke,' explained Pikki excitedly. 'Their souls will be linked seamlessly to the souls of all married iljjocks!'

Hatti and Miia swayed unsteadily, clutching to each other for support.

'They are reeling from the power of the yoke,' Pikki whispered.

'Wish I was the one reeling...'

'Shut up...'

'What's happening now?' Yaduk asked, peering at the altar.

'Hatti and Miia are mating!'

‘What...in front of everyone?’ Yaduk was appalled.

‘Why not? Look closely.’

Yaduk looked and saw Hatti and Miia locked in a passionate embrace. He was about to look away when he saw sparks crackling between their nodules.

‘They are swapping their *soul strings*,’ Pikki explained. ‘Hatti’s *strings* are flowing into Miia’s soul and Miia’s *strings* are flowing into Hatti’s. This is how we mate our souls!’

‘I see...’ Yaduk nodded in astonishment. Hatti and Miia had blissful smiles on their faces and seemed to be in a magical cloud of their own.

‘It is pure iljjock love...’ Pikki sighed.

‘But, they have just met!’

‘The love flows from God Iisuu’s soul.’

‘How come?’ Yaduk asked, bewildered.

‘Through the iljjock yoke, silly!’

Yaduk and Pikki exchanged a startled glance and burst out laughing. Yaduk laughed for another reason, too. He was very relieved to see that there was nothing about the mating act that would make him throw up when it was his turn! He wanted to be fair to Jerro and not disappoint him with his human prejudices.

‘You couldn’t be more wrong...’ Pikki snorted, reading his mind.

‘What do you mean?’ Yaduk asked wide-eyed.

‘What you are thinking happens in the privacy of the *beshels*. The water swirls outside when the fire of passion is let loose inside!’

Yaduk gaped and Pikki laughed loudly at seeing the traumatized expression on his face.

Hatti and Miia heard them and looked at them in a daze. ‘Have we disturbed them?’ Yaduk murmured.

‘I don’t think so. They have finished swapped the first memory string...they will swap the rest of the strings over their lives.’

‘I will swap mine in a day...and fly away to the Nors!’ Yaduk blurted, shaken by what Pikki had told him.

‘Shhh...God Iisuu will kill you if he hears that,’ Pikki scolded.

Hatti and Miia were smiling radiantly and mingling with the other iljjocks now. Strangely, they were all scratching the ocean floor with their toes.

‘What are they doing now?’ Yaduk asked curiously.

‘They are learning to make *boondis*!’

‘*Boondis*?’

‘Iljjock art... it is an expression of the supreme love that an iljjock has for his soulmate...look at the ocean floor carefully!’

Yaduk looked and was stunned. Furrows had been etched on the frozen floor and filled with the luminous *zol* crystals. Hundreds of married iljjock pairs, lost in a world of their own, were slowly etching these intricate designs, the glowing *boondis*. It was no wonder that the ocean floor glittered like a field of stars!

‘Hatti and Miia shall make *boondis* and live in divine rapture for the rest of their lives!’ Pikki sighed.

‘Is that why iljjocks don’t work after marriage?’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘Yes!’

‘What if someone doesn’t want to make *boondis*...they want to do something else?’

‘Everyone has to make *boondis*...’ Pikki replied harshly.

‘Why?’ Yaduk was appalled.

‘Because, when they do...pure love flows on the iljjock yoke! The love soothes the gashes in God Iisuu’s soul and keeps him alive!’

‘Aha, so this is the bondage that Hatti was talking about! God Iisuu has robbed you all of your freedom so that he can stay alive himself!’

‘Don’t listen to Hatti...he is mad!’ Pikki said tonelessly.

‘I don’t think so. Don’t you seek a better and freer life?’

‘Not really...’ Pikki shrugged nonchalantly, ‘The iljjocks have lived like this for ages!’

‘You are lying!’

‘We have unflinching faith in God Iisuu. He does everything for a

reason...a very good reason. If God Iisuu wants us to live this way, this is the way we will live!’ Pikki declared firmly.

Stunned, Yaduk looked into Pikki’s eyes and saw the purest devotion for God Iisuu. He could not help but be reminded of Madho. His brother had the same blind faith in him and the only time he chose to go against his judgment, he fell prey to sicknesses. Yaduk was confused. Maybe Iisuu was the epitome of goodness that the iljjocks thought him to be. Maybe not! He did not know what to make of God Iisuu now!

‘What are you two doing here?’ God Iisuu approached them suddenly.

Yaduk was startled by his sudden appearance and stared at him in confusion. Iisuu gave him an amused look and smiled. He had read his mind again, and Yaduk was deeply mortified.

‘We were just....’ Pikki stammered.

‘It is good that you ready to find your soulmate,’ Iisuu nodded to Yaduk.

‘But, Jerro...’ Yaduk began.

‘Jerro is not your soulmate. He has been stalking *Pikki* and not you!’ Iisuu replied calmly.

‘What?’ Yaduk and Pikki exclaimed together.

Yaduk was terribly disappointed. He could not believe that Jerro’s soulful glances were for Pikki and not him! He was sure that he had seen the goat-face looking directly at him. Maybe, he was just having a little fun at his expense! ‘The naughty cheat...’ Yaduk thought angrily. ‘How will I join the iljjock yoke now?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Iisuu assured. ‘We will find a soulmate for you!’

‘My lord, but...’ Yaduk blurted.

‘But what?’

‘I cannot spend my entire life swapping my grandfather’s memories and making the boring *boondis*. I need to work like a man...I mean...like an iljjock...no, like a man!’

Pikki chuckled. Surprisingly, Iisuu smiled too. ‘Don’t worry, Yaduk of Lachvi. As soon as you are married, you shall go back home to Earth and do the work of many men!’

‘There you go...’ Pikki exclaimed happily to Yaduk.

‘But, I don’t want to go back to Earth anymore!’ Yaduk said quickly.

‘What?’ Iisuu frowned darkly.

‘I want to go up to the *Nors*!’

‘Why?’

‘My people are up there. And, Madho has been giving me all sorts of signs...he is not happy up there...maybe he has also been forced to make *boondis* or something equally stupid...artistic, I mean...I don’t know!’

‘What nonsense...’ Iisuu became reticent and grim. ‘We cannot send you to the *Nors*,’ he declared finally.

‘But...’

‘You promised to go back to Earth and speak to your king about us!’ Iisuu reminded tersely.

‘But, that was when Madho was alive!’

Iisuu was in no mood to listen. ‘I am going to send you to Earth immediately!’

‘But, he has not joined the *yoke* yet...’ Pikki protested, ‘Without the support of the *yoke*, he will die!’

‘He will join the *yoke* before he leaves...’ Iisuu snapped angrily.

‘How, my lord?’ Pikki asked in a trembling voice.

‘He will be married before the day is over!’

-13-

TAANI ILJJOCK

GODDESS MYRHIM took the task of finding Yaduk’s soulmate upon herself. She got on the *yoke* and asked all *iljjocks*, single and married, to assemble for Yaduk’s *samovar*.

Yaduk was amazed by the power of the invisible *yoke*. What would it have been like to have it in Lachvi, he wondered. He could have caught Jugnu red-handed at his mischief. Also, he would have caught Madho when he went sniffing the *Nahlu*! Tears trickled down his wrinkled face and he realized that ages had passed since he had seen his brother and the rest of the

villagers.

‘No, my child,’ Iisuu held his hand reassuringly. ‘The sorrow in your soul shall soon be replaced by pure iljjock love!’

Yaduk felt like crying even more loudly.

‘Come, let us find a soulmate for you.’ Myrhim said gently.

The iljjocks were also very gentle with him. They did not spring on him like they had done to Hatti! Rather, they queued up and brushed their nodules against his fleetingly. The experience was not as pleasant as he had thought. Waves of sickness washed over him until he felt he could not stand it anymore. That it was high noon and the Nors were beating down blistering radiation didn’t help. Distraught, he did the forbidden - he began wailing loudly in the open oceans!

‘Shhh....’ Myrhim cried. Lo, but Yaduk was disconsolate. He continued wailing loudly.

‘Shield the area...quickly....’ Iisuu gesticulated wildly to Myrhim.

Lo, Myrhim waved her scimitar and created a protective haze around the area where they were all standing.

‘I am sure the seamones must have heard him...’ Iisuu bellowed angrily at the goddess. ‘I warned you this morning...you ignored me!’

‘But, the samovars have always resonated in the ocean...’ Myrhim wrung her hands.

‘Not *Yaduk’s* samovar!’ Iisuu beat his head. ‘Before night, they will be here...and I telling you...I will show no mercy...I will kill them all!’

Realizing that the goddess was facing fire because of him, Yaduk stopped wailing. ‘I am so sorry!’ he whispered to Hatti and Pikki.

‘The goddess deserved it!’ Hatti snorted.

‘Shut up.’ Pikki defended. ‘Don’t forget...you can also be careless!’

‘Of course, I can. But, I am not the one running this universe! Don’t forget they killed the *bor*...and, if they are not careful...they will destroy this universe!’

Lo, Hatti’s voice echoed in the area and was heard by all. The goddess almost burst into tears. ‘Calm down...’ Iisuu softened and embraced her. Surprisingly, no one bore any ill feeling towards Hatti for speaking so

brusquely. He was like a fresh current in an ocean stale with blind devotion. God Iisuu had made him the leader for a good reason!

Iisuu and Myrhim calmed down and turned their attention to Yaduk. 'I think he is sick from the soul,' Hatti told them wryly.

'Let me see...' Iisuu lifted Yaduk in his arms and looked at his soul with his divine sight. 'You are right. His soul has recoiled from direct contact with iljjock souls!'

'It is because his soul is human,' Myrhim declared anxiously. 'I was suspecting it... an iljjock cannot be a human's soulmate!'

Iisuu was startled. 'How will we give him divine powers, then?' he asked, aghast.

'We can't. Because, the goddess will never put her mind to use!' Hatti remarked drily.

'What do you mean?' Myrhim asked, bewildered.

'Why don't you just create a new soul? You know...put Yaduk by the side...and sculpt a matching soul. I don't know if you know...but, your scimitar has the power to do that!'

'Can you do that?' Iisuu asked Myrhim, surprised.

'Of course I can,' Myrhim nodded.

'Why didn't you say so?'

'It didn't occur to me!'

'What the...' Iisuu shook his head

'I will create a perfect soulmate for Yaduk!' Myrhim declared happily.

The iljjocks were delighted to, and animated chatter replaced the river of love flowing on the iljjock yoke!

'Is he going to be a *human*?' Miia asked excitedly.

'Is he going to take birth on *Seabor*?' someone wondered.

'Of course!' Miia remarked.

'Good...' Hatti butted in excitedly. 'He can help me invent an iljjock script!' Hatti had a keen interest in human scripts and his *boondi* was full of symbols and letters from the Hebrew, Brahmi and the Chinese scripts!

‘I *won’t* be making a human!’ Myrhim refuted on the yoke.

‘*Not* a human?’ the iljjocks repeated in unison.

‘*She* will be an iljjock. An iljjock with a *human* soul!’

There was a long moment of shocked silence and then, Hatti sputtered, ‘What did you say...’she’?’

‘I agree with the goddess,’ Iisuu declared on the yoke. ‘*She* will be a ‘she’!’

The iljjocks mused in bewilderment. Myrhim was the only ‘*she*’ on Seabor because only she could give birth to *new* souls. The rest of the creatures were ‘*he*’ who could *not* give birth to new souls. The young on Seabor were born *only* on the death of the old; whereby the dying creature passed his old soul to the newborn!

‘Yaduk’s soulmate will be a ‘she’ in accordance to his natural orientation!’ Iisuu declared on the yoke, throwing the iljjocks into a quandary.

‘How will this iljjock-human take birth?’ Miia asked, bewildered.

‘Yes...yes....’ the iljjocks cried in unison, ‘Who will give birth to her?’

Iisuu mused in grim silence and said, ‘One of you will give birth to her.’

‘But...’ Hatti protested.

‘Whoever dies next will give birth to her,’ Iisuu declared firmly.

There was silence on the yoke as the iljjocks wondered who was about to die next. ‘Who is it?’ they cried in distress on the yoke.

‘It is me...’ Taani whimpered. He was at the end of his life and pregnant with his baby.

‘Yes, it is Taani...’ his soulmate Farro cried in anguish.

‘Farro...’ Taani pleaded. ‘I don’t want to pass my soul to a strange child. I want to die peacefully.’

‘Shhh...’ Farro hushed. ‘God Iisuu will protect you and your child. Nothing will happen. You will die safely!’

‘Yes, you are right...’ Taani whispered tremulously.

Farro and Taani's words echoed on the yoke and calmed the iljjocks. They had complete faith in God Iisuu. He would not let Taani suffer, to the extent that he would take all the suffering on himself and let Taani die in peace!

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ELLI ILJJOCK

BY dusk, Taani was ready to give birth. He was lying on the floor of his *beshel* and groaning in pain.

'Help him...please...' his soulmate, Farro, sobbed. He was huddled in a corner of the *beshel*.

'Have faith, Farro...God Iisuu is on his way,' Hatti assured him.

'Are you fine?' Pikki asked Yaduk.

Yaduk was lying next to Taani and was in a daze. Lo, Myrhim had almost scattered his soul while sculpting a perfectly matched soul for Taani's baby! 'I cannot afford to make a mistake on this one...' she had smiled nervously before sizing up his soul!

'God Iissuu...' Farro wailed on the yoke.

'I am here....' Iisuu swam in hurriedly. Myrhim also came rushing behind him.

'What's wrong with Taani?' Farro wailed aloud. 'Why is he in so much pain?'

Iisuu and Myrhim rushed to Taani's side. The others, including Yaduk, moved to give them way.

Yaduk noticed that Taani's foot was swollen and his toe had fallen out. 'What's wrong with his foot?' he murmured.

'He is giving birth...' Pikki explained.

'Oh!'

'Taani's soul has to pass to his infant. The infant shall be born with Taani and Farro's memories and that of their ancestors!'

'Were you born the same way?' Yaduk exclaimed in astonishment.

'Yes, I carry the memories of my fathers and forefathers.'

‘Pikki?’ Yaduk said, struck by a sudden thought. ‘Will I die like an iljjock or a human?’

‘I don’t know...Hatti, what do you say?’

‘His soul is human and he will die as a human. He will go to the *Nors*.’

Yaduk nodded and watched Taani anxiously.

Taani seemed to be in great suffering and began groaning loudly. Farro felt his soulmate’s agony as his own and wept, ‘Why is he crying like this?’

‘Calm down, Farro!’ Iisuu scolded. He gripped the dying iljjock’s swollen foot and urged, ‘Push your soul to your infant, Taani.’

‘Aaargh...’ Taani groaned, convulsing violently.

‘Taani...’ Farro wailed and embraced his soulmate tightly.

‘Farro!’ Myrhim snapped, her voice sharp like a whiplash. ‘Keep away from Taani or he will die a *coon*!’

‘Aww...’ Farro yelped, moving away from his suffering soulmate.

Pikki was perplexed. ‘It is strange that Taani is suffering so much. It will be terrible if he becomes a *coon*,’ he whispered grimly.

‘What is a *coon*?’ Yaduk asked.

‘Shhh...you two,’ Hatti snapped.

‘An iljjock becomes a *coon* if his body dies before he has passed on his soul to his infant. The soul is left trapped in the body and it screams forever!’ Pikki explained in a whisper.

Yaduk’s eyes bulged in shock.

Taani was groaning with unbearable pain now and his groans were resonating on the *yoke*, causing distress to all the iljjocks.

‘He is not pushing his soul...’ Iisuu cried in alarm.

‘Taani, push your soul to the child...’ the iljjocks urged through the *yoke*.

‘His infant already *has* a human soul,’ Farro wept. ‘Where will poor Taani push his soul now?’

‘Farro...’ Iisuu scolded. ‘Don’t scare Taani.’

‘The infant will have both Taani’s iljock soul as well as her own human soul!’ Myrhim snapped sharply. ‘Taani only has to push!’

Farro was stunned. ‘You heard that, Taani,’ he cried eagerly. ‘Our child will have two souls...just push your soul and give birth!’

‘Yes, Taani!’ urged God Iisuu, cradling the dying iljock’s head in his lap. ‘You heard the goddess? Your child will have your soul and a beautiful human soul too...now push...I am holding you!’

Taani closed his eyes and clutched Iisuu tightly. ‘Aaaaagh...’ he wailed, trying to push his soul.

‘My sweet child...’ Iisuu pulled the dying iljock’s suffering into his own soul. ‘Push harder!’

Taani did as told but failed to push his soul. ‘The infant is pushing Taani’s soul back...’ Farro revealed, grasping his soulmate’s swollen foot.

‘She is your child, Taani...’ Iisuu urged. ‘Speak to her!’

Taani’s body convulsed as he gave one huge heave. Lo, his soul passed to his infant! A baby iljock began emerging from his foot and he began slipping towards death!

Taani iljock died. And, a baby iljock popped out of his foot to be born on Seabor!

The iljocks burst with joy. Taani had not died a *coon*! Farro was overjoyed too. He took the infant in his arms and declared, ‘She will be called Elli iljock, the child of Taani and Farro iljock!’

The baby iljock’s eyes were open. She had Taani’s ancestral doe-face and her skin was soft and wrinkled. She flailed her tiny arms and squealed, ‘Father, let me go!’

Like every iljock, Elli was born with her ancestors’ memories. She was fully aware of who she was and the world she belonged to. She squealed again, trying to free herself from her sire’s tight grasp.

‘Let me hold her,’ Iisuu smiled, taking the infant iljock from Farro.

‘God...Iisuu...’ Elli beamed.

‘Elli, my child,’ Myrhim smiled, taking her from Iisuu.

‘Goddess...Myrhim...’ she gurgled.

‘Yes,’ Myrhim laughed in a tinkling voice. ‘Yaduk, come and have a

look at your soulmate!’

Yaduk stepped forward and looked at the baby with awe. She was so tiny!

‘She will be grown in a day if she feeds properly at *Kirll*!’ Pikki chuckled, reading Yaduk’s mind.

‘Yaduk...’ the baby iljjock giggled.

Startled, Yaduk looked at her. She had big, beautiful eyes. Like twin pools of melted stars, he thought in a daze!

‘Weee...father...’ Elli squealed, wriggling out of Myrhim’s arms and jumping into Farro’s arms.

‘Ha...ha...’ Farro laughed joyfully, helping her with her first swim. ‘Run...I will chase you to *Kirll*!’

‘Yes, father...’ she cried, darting out of the *beshel*. She swam effortlessly in the ocean.

‘Elli, I am coming...’ Farro yelled, chasing the sprightly newborn.

Yaduk watched them disappear in the darkness with anxiety. ‘Should I go after her?’ he asked hesitantly. ‘She could lose her way!’

Myrhim smiled. Iisuu smiled too. It was Hatti who said, ‘Farro will see her safely to *Kirll* but after that, she will be on her own. She has Taani’s soul and needs no teaching!’

‘What about Farro?’ Yaduk asked with concern, ‘How will he live without his soulmate now?’

‘Oh, he will also give birth...and die!’ Hatti replied. ‘Soulmates die within a few days of each other!’

‘I see!’ Yaduk’s eyes widened with surprise.

‘So...now that you have a soulmate...are you going to forget me?’ Pikki slapped Yaduk playfully on his back.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Yaduk blushed furiously.

‘Ha...ha...’ the others laughed.

‘Let’s take rest,’ Iisuu declared

‘Yes!’ Myrhim agreed.

The two had hardly moved to the door when a loud whirring noise

startled them.

‘Ah, that must be the seamones!’ Hatti exclaimed brightly. ‘I was expecting them earlier!’

‘Yes...it is them,’ Iisuu snapped sharply. ‘Yaduk...hide...I don’t want them to get even a whiff of your presence on Seabor!’

‘Let’s hide over there...’ Pikki cried, pointing to a sunken pit in the corner of the *beshel*.

Yaduk and Pikki raced to the pit and jumped inside. *So, the enemies are finally here*, Yaduk flexed his arms. ‘Why are we hiding?’ he whispered to Pikki.

‘You are God Iisuu’s prize catch, that’s why! God Aakaa should not get to know about you?’

‘What will he do?’

‘He will kill you first and enquire later!’

‘He doesn’t know me then....’ Yaduk raised his head and looked outside the door. A number of brightly lit boats were descending on the ocean floor.

Hatti, Iisuu and Myrhim spotted them too and there was a flurry of activity as they put up a pretense inside the *beshel*. They began preparing Taani’s dead body for burial, all the while keeping an eye on the door for unwanted intruders.

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THE SEAMONES

YADUK was really looking forward to meeting the enemies. Come what may, he knew that he had the ability to thrash any kind of enemy. He kicked himself for not keeping a stick by his side; he always used to keep one when he was a cowherd. Next time he visited Kirll, he reminded himself, he would pick up a few thick sticks.

‘Why aren’t they here yet?’ he murmured impatiently, crouching in the pit with Pikki.

‘They may have come for a routine visit...the seamones visit us

frequently to barter their things for zol crystals!’ Pikki whispered.

‘Shut up...you two,’ Hatti scolded.

They shut up. In silence, they crouched in the pit and watched the spectacle outside. It was night and the ocean bed was lit by the glowing *boondis*. The seamones were moving in and out of various *beshels*, bartering their things.

Yaduk noticed that the seamones were of small built and that he could flatten ten of them in one go! Oh, how he would regale Madho with tales of his bravery when he got to the *Nors*. Also, tell him about his soulmate Elli! ‘Ah!’ he sighed, placing a hand on his chest. His heart had almost stopped when he had looked into her bewitching eyes. He was sure Myrhim had woven some magical strands in Elli’s soul – he simply could not get her eyes out of his mind!

His sweet reverie was broken by Iisuu’s sharp cry. He had spotted a seamone moving suspiciously near their *beshel*. ‘What is he up to?’ he muttered angrily

‘He is looking for someone!’ Hatti exclaimed.

‘Should we leave?’ Myrhim asked anxiously. ‘Iisuu and I can be spotted from far off.’ She was referring to their very noticeable body glows.

‘No,’ Iisuu replied tersely. ‘Let him come...I will wring him to death if tries anything!’

Shortly, the seamone glided over to their *beshel*. He looked inside and was shocked to see the stellar gathering inside. For a moment, he looked undecided whether to enter or leave. Finally, he decided to enter the *beshel*.

‘Greetings!’ he rasped, gliding inside. ‘Goddess Myrhim and God Iisuu, I see that you are here!’

‘Greetings, Blumone,’ Myrhim replied tonelessly.

‘Ugh...’ Yaduk almost choked from a foul stench. Lo, the seamone smelt like rotten dung! Covering his nose with his hand, he caught a glimpse of Blumone from his hiding place. A village buffoon would have looked better – the seamone was dressed in hideous long robes and his rat-face was partly covered with a lopsided turban!

‘Where did he get the robes from?’ Yaduk thought in astonishment,

noticing that the seamone had a burning cavity in his chest like the iljjocks. Only, instead of hind limbs, he had a long tail.

‘What brings you here, Blumone?’ Iisuu asked coldly.

‘There is a stranger on Seabor,’ Blumone surveyed the *beshel* with narrowed eyes.

Iisuu frowned, ‘A stranger?’

‘Yes. We heard the cry of a stranger!’ Blumone burped. He had poor digestion too!

‘That must be Taani crying...’ Hatti drawled. ‘He just died!’

‘I don’t think so,’ Blumone rasped scathingly. ‘We know Taani’s voice. This voice belonged to a stranger!’

Yaduk cringed, realizing that he should not have wailed out so loudly during his *samovar*. All creatures on Seabor had unique voices and his voice had traveled to the Seamone Ocean and alerted the seamones to his presence!

‘Go away, Blumone,’ Iisuu warned. ‘You will find nothing here.’

‘In that case, I would like to inform you,’ Blumone sneered, sparks flying out of his eyes. ‘God Aakaa knows that you have been trying to spirit humans to Seabor!’

Iisuu was taken aback and looked at the rat-faced seamone in surprise. His visits to Earth had been carried out very discreetly and had been spoken of only on the yoke. Not a word had escaped into the oceans. ‘How does Aakaa know?’ he frowned with displeasure.

‘Ha...ha...’ Blumone cackled gleefully, delighted to have upset Iisuu.

‘Looks like Aakaa’s powers over the souls of the dead humans are growing!’ Myrhim said scathingly.

‘You couldn’t be more right,’ Blumone burped loudly. ‘He wrung the souls of some dead villagers recently...they spoke of the *Nahlu* and the beautiful mountain god. The rapturous glow that they spoke of told us that he could only be God Iisuu!’

‘It was God Iisuu!’ Myrhim informed frostily.

‘So, you know about it?’ Blumone retorted accusingly.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Of course,’ Blumone bristled with resentment. ‘You have always sided with the iljjocks.’

‘I am your divine mother too,’ Myrhim replied impassively.

‘Yes, but, you not telling me anything about the stranger.’

‘Because, he is *not* a stranger!’

All people present in the *beshel*, including Yaduk, looked at the goddess in surprise.

Goddess Myrhim glowed to her full divine radiance and caught Blumone’s tail with her hand. Lo, the seamone suddenly found himself looking into the Goddess’s soul. She could lie from her mouth but not from her soul! ‘Look at who visited Seabor...’ she said softly in her tinkling voice.

Blumone looked and shrieked. Frightened out of his wits, he fled from the *beshel*. ‘Run...’ he yelled to the seamones outside. The seamones stared at him, bewildered. ‘RUN...’ he shrieked again. This time, the seamones scrambled to their boats and whizzed away.

‘What did you show him?’ Pikki asked curiously. ‘Who visited Seabor?’

‘Forget it. You will start crying!’ Myrhim frowned.

‘No, tell us,’ Yaduk urged, scrambling out of his hiding place.

‘*Hoon*, the God of Death!’ Myrhim whispered with a shiver. ‘I did not want to tell anyone...but he was here yesterday!’

There was a moment of shocked silence in the *beshel* and then Iisuu gasped, ‘*God Hoon came to Seabor yesterday?*’

‘Yes!’ Myrhim said in a low voice.

Pikki and Hatti trembled with fear.

‘How did I not feel his presence?’ Iisuu wondered, his face pale and shaken.

‘He was here only for a few moments.’ Myrhim wrung her hands anxiously.

‘Why was here?’ Iisuu asked in a deathly voice.

‘He came to see...Yaduk...’ Myrhim said hesitantly. ‘I saw him with

my omnipresent sight.'

Iisuu was very upset. 'Why didn't you tell me?' he asked in a trembling voice.

'Iisuu...' Myrhim whispered gently, embracing him. 'He was gone before I felt his presence.'

'He left without meeting me? How could he do that....', Iisuu whispered in a lost voice. He wandered outside the *beshel* and looked up at the sky with a fierce longing in his eyes.

Myrhim also seemed to be shaken and prepared to leave. 'Yaduk, you should stay here in the settlement for a few days...you won't be safe in *Kirll*. Hatti, I suggest you find an empty *beshel* for him....' she said tiredly on her way out.

'I agree,' Pikki nodded. 'We should stay *here* until the danger has passed over!'

'Don't worry,' Hatti assured the goddess. 'We won't let any harm come to Yaduk. We will find a safe *beshel* for him and guard him day and night!'

'Good...' Myrhim nodded with relief and glided gracefully out of the *beshel*. Hatti gave directions on the yoke and soon, the iljjocks were roaming all over the settlement and searching for a vacant *beshel*.

Yaduk was astonished by the warm and loving nature of the iljjocks. Despite the fact that he was indeed a stranger, they were wandering in the middle of the night, searching for a cozy *beshel* for him!

In comparison, Iisuu's behavior had become even more mystifying. Hoon was the evil God of Death, the devil! And, Iisuu was yearning for the devil like a child would yearn for a father!

And God Hoon? Why did he visit him yesterday? Had he caught Madho trying to buzz his ears? Or, maybe Madho was trying to jump down to Seabor just like he was arranging to fly to the Nors! Holy dung, Yaduk thought with consternation, what if Madho came down to Seabor *before* he got to the Nors?

Myrhim would have to give him an iljjock body and proper arrangements would have to be made for his stay! There was no way Madho

was going to sleep under a tree, roam naked or eat tasteless *kiks*! Proper yak milk broth and robes would have to be arranged for him! Lo, what if Jugnu smelt the broth and jumped down to Seabor too? He would go wild with delight to see so many talking animals and would have to be physically restrained from indulging in his old snake-worship!

Suddenly, he realized that Madho hadn't buzzed his ears for almost a day now. Worried, he began waiting for the *Nors* to rise. Lo, he would glare at them until he saw Madho's shadow in them and made him promise to stay away from Jugnu!

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MIIA ILJJOCK

THE iljlocks finally found an empty *beshel* for Yaduk. It stood in a small trough on the ocean floor and its owner had died a few days back. Yaduk entered the *beshel* and received the shock of his life. Lo, in the centre of the *beshel* stood the exact thing he wanted – a wooden cot!

'Unbelievable!' he exclaimed, slumping in the cot. He looked around the *beshel* and was jolted by bigger shocks. The room was cluttered with clay sculptures, copper vessels and gold jewelry – all things human and familiar to him.

'This is so pretty,' Pikki cried, picking up a gold necklace. He put it around his neck and asked excitedly. 'Can I keep this?'

'Leave it alone,' Hatti scolded. 'Human things can be taken only after marriage.'

'All right,' Pikki shrugged, putting down the necklace with disappointment.

'These are human things?' Yaduk asked with surprise.

'Of course,' Pikki replied.

'Where did you get them from?'

'We got them made,' Hatti replied.

'Who told you about them?' Yaduk asked, bewildered.

'God Iisuu,' replied Hatti. 'He keeps telling us about Earth and the

people who live on it!’

‘So, he told you about the utensils we use for cooking...our art...and our ornaments?’

‘Actually, Iisuu shares visions of Earth on the iljock yoke. Why do you think we can interact with you so easily? We know exactly what your world looks like...your lands, water and mountains...your towns...even your village Lachvi!’

‘Lachvi?’ asked Yaduk, with a catch in his throat.

‘Yes, I can show you a glimpse of Lachvi.’

‘But, Lachvi has been washed away,’ cried Yaduk in a trembling voice. ‘Iisuu told me himself.’

‘Oh,’ cried Hatti with shock. ‘I did not know that. What I have is an old memory of it.’

‘Show me...’ whispered Yaduk, his eyes wet with tears.

‘I want to see it too...’ Pikki cried.

‘Climb over me...both of you,’ Hatti drawled, lying down on the cot and wiggling his belly. Surprisingly, Yaduk did not find the wiggling stupid anymore. He and Pikki laughed hilariously as they jostled to climb over Hatti and fell off the cot by turns!

‘The nodules should have been placed on the hands...or legs...or somewhere more accessible,’ Hatti grumbled. ‘Trust that stupid goddess to stick them on the belly!’

‘The nodules provide inlets to our souls,’ Pikki reasoned. ‘And our souls are in the bellies!’

‘Then, she should have put the souls elsewhere!’ Hatti grumbled again.

Yaduk and Pikki suppressed their laughter out of respect for Myrhim. ‘She should seek your advice on everything!’ Pikki said with a straight face.

‘This universe will be far better off if she did that!’ Hatti exclaimed.

Finally, the three managed a position in which both Yaduk and Pikki could look clearly into Hatti’s soul.

Yaduk saw Lachvi in a waking dream and it brought a lump to his throat. The snow-capped mountains were as majestic as ever and the green

vales just as beautiful! And, the stone huts and the bleating herds were exactly as he remembered. Hatti shared a glimpse of the village temple too. The priest was ringing a bell loudly to the chant of prayers!

‘O wonder!’ Pikki exclaimed, ‘I want a bell like that!’

‘I am getting two made,’ Hatti winked conspiratorially.

‘Really?’ Pikki replied, his eyes throwing out sparks.

‘Who’s making them?’ Yaduk was bewildered. As far as he remembered, skilled blacksmiths from the plains had made the bell!

‘The seamones make everything for us,’ Hatti replied. ‘They take *zol* crystals in return.’

‘Tell me more about the seamones...and God Aakaa too!’ Yaduk wanted to know.

But, Pikki and Hatti were busy chattering about the bells! ‘How many *zol* crystals did they cost?’ Pikki asked eagerly.

‘A hundred flawless *zol* crystals!’

Yaduk listened to them with interest. The *zol* crystals were the coins of Seabor- that, he had understood by now!

‘Why are you getting two bells made?’ Pikki asked curiously.

‘One is for God Iisuu!’

‘God Iisuu wants an iron bell?’ Pikki gaped in astonishment.

‘Yes!’ Hatti’s dog-face crinkled with mirth. ‘He has a voracious appetite for human things.’

‘Really?’ Pikki couldn’t believe his ears.

‘Of course,’ Hatti rolled his eyes wickedly. ‘He spends almost half the day looking at Earth with his divine sight.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ Pikki giggled. ‘What does he watch?’

‘He reads their scrolls and listens to their melodies.’

‘O wonder! I knew that Myrhim was very interested in music...but God Iisuu too?’

‘Myrhim is getting ivory sculptures and terracotta murals made for her *beshel*!’

‘What will I get for these?’ Yaduk took out the *zol* crystals that Hatti

had given him earlier.

Hatti counted the *zol* crystals in Yaduk's palm. They were ten in number and flawless. 'Well,' he said looking around. 'Pick up any two things from this room!'

'I am taking this gold necklace for myself,' Pikki cried with delight. 'What about you?'

'I will take those bands,' Yaduk grinned, pointing to a pair of gold ornaments.

'Nice,' said Pikki, picking them up, 'Where do you wear them...on the nose?'

'No,' Yaduk laughed, slipping one of them on his arm. 'They are arm bands.'

'Put on the other one too!'

'No...' Yaduk hesitated, thinking of Elli. He wanted to keep one for her!

'Ha...ha...' Pikki laughed, reading his mind.

'They look grand,' Hatti drawled, 'I am going to get a pair made for myself and Miia!'

'Yaduk, how do you wear this?' Pikki cried, picking up a gem encrusted ornament.

'That's a crown,' Yaduk replied. 'A king wears it on his head.'

'Ha...ha...I am a king then,' laughed Pikki placing it on his head. 'The king of all the horses on Earth!'

'Ha...ha' Yaduk burst out laughing. Hatti joined in too and soon the three were laughing heartily. The revelry stopped when suddenly, Hatti's soulmate, Miia, stormed into the *beshel*!

'What's going on here?' Miia asked, entering the *beshel*. 'Hatti, why are you not on the yoke...I have looking for you for ages!'

Hatti looked at his soulmate sheepishly, 'We were gossiping...so I got off the yoke for a short while...didn't want the whole settlement to hear the juicy bits!'

'How irresponsible,' Miia scolded. 'Why did God Iisuu make you the leader anyway?'

‘He likes intelligent people...that’s why!’ Hatti retorted.

‘Hatti has the sharpest mind amongst the iljjocks,’ Pikki nodded supportively.

‘And, he has such strong opinions of his own,’ Yaduk added. ‘I think God Iisuu appreciates that.’

Hatti glowed in the praise heaped on him and made a face at Miia. Flustered, Miia remarked. ‘What were the juicy bits, anyway?’

‘Oh, we were discussing the human things lying around here,’ Hatti replied lamely.

Miia’s goat-face lit up with delight and he said, ‘I love seeing glimpses of Earth every morning!’

‘Every morning?’ asked Yaduk with surprise.

‘Oh, yes...every morning, when the *Nors* rise on Seabor, Iisuu looks at Earth with his divine sight. He shares glimpses on the iljjock yoke right away!’

‘Don’t lie,’ Hatti snorted.

‘What do you mean?’ Miia retorted.

‘He doesn’t share anything. I have hardly seen any glimpses since we got married!’

‘What do you expect? You are hardly on the yoke!’ Miia sniggered.

‘What did God Iisuu share today?’ Pikki asked eagerly.

‘I don’t remember. Things change so fast on Earth- the kingdoms, the people...they change each time we look at them!’ Miia babbled enthusiastically.

‘To think, Seabor hardly changes,’ Pikki sighed wryly. ‘Humans were created after us...and they have raced way ahead of us!’

‘That’s because they were given bigger brains!’ Hatti snorted.

‘Bigger *what*?’ Yaduk asked, bewildered.

‘Humans were given more powerful imagination,’ Hatti elaborated.

‘It is understandable,’ Pikki reasoned. ‘After all, they were created to chart the future after their deaths.’

‘Has everything changed very much on Earth?’ Yaduk asked

curiously.

‘Would you like to have a look?’ Miia smiled.

‘Yes,’ Yaduk replied hesitantly.

‘Pile on me then,’ Miia said, sprawling down on the floor of the *beshel*. ‘All of us won’t fit on the cot!’

Hatti, Pikki and Yaduk jostled with each other to pile on Miia’s belly.

‘What happened to your divine powers?’ Yaduk yelled at Hatti and Pikki. ‘You should be able to read Miia’s soul directly.’

‘Nodules upon nodules provide the best view into the soul,’ Pikki declared, struggling to stay on top of Miia.

‘Can you look clearly at Earth?’ Miia groaned, bearing the weight of three.

‘Yes!’ Pikki, Yaduk and Hatti grunted, looking at the vision Miia was sharing with them.

‘Yaduk, look at your home first,’ Miia suggested.

‘Where is it?’ Yaduk looked at the blue planet with bewilderment.

‘There!’ Miia said, teaching him to spot the Himalayan mountain range.

‘Oh!’ Yaduk gasped, looking at towering peaks and pine forests. Thankfully, they had not changed!

‘Where are the cowherds?’

‘Over there...’

Yaduk saw villages scattered on the mountain slopes. He looked closer and saw the people living in them. They were tending to herds as before. But, their clothes were different and they wore colorful turbans. Also, the deities in the temple had changed! The villagers now worshipped Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Most of them had started following the Hindu way of life!

‘Look to the west...’ Miia urged.

Yaduk looked to the west and saw empires and peoples that he did not recognize. The Roman Empire was spreading its influence everywhere in Europe. And Julius Caesar, the Roman general, was busy reforming the

calendar!

‘He is so clever!’ Hatti gushed in admiration.

‘Yes,’ Pikki nodded.

‘Yaduk, you should help us make a calendar for Seabor while you are here!’ Hatti urged.

‘I am not that clever!’ Yaduk protested, shaking his head.

‘Look at the roads they have made!’ Hatti cried as Miia shared a glimpse of a Roman city. ‘We must get the seamones to make similar roads in *Kirll*.’

Miia smiled and said, ‘Look to the east now...’

Yaduk looked and was surprised to see the empires and people there. The Han dynasty had established its rule in the east and people were writing on parchments!

‘What are they writing?’ Pikki asked curiously.

‘Accounts!’ Miia answered. ‘That’s what Iisuu told us!’

While Pikki looked bewildered, Hatti understood. ‘Oh!’ he gasped. ‘It is exactly what we need...we are giving far too many *zol* crystals to the seamones!’

Miia laughed and pushed the three away. ‘Enough for today...Hatti, let’s go...I know you don’t like it...but we have to finish our *boondis* and also swap the rest of our soul-strings!’

‘Oh, yes!’ Hatti replied, getting up to go. ‘I know what I am going to etch today...roads!’ He swam out of the *beshel* with Miia, mumbling loudly.

‘What’s he mumbling?’ Yaduk asked curiously, lying down on the cot.

‘Oh, that,’ Pikki replied, lying down next to him. ‘He is talking to the other iljjocks on the yoke.... probably discussing possible barter with the seamones!’

‘Seamones...seamones...’ Yaduk repeated irritably. ‘Why isn’t anybody telling me more about them? How will I ever vanquish them if I don’t know anything about them?’

‘All right...what do you want to know?’ Pikki shrugged.

‘Why can’t I meet them...like I am meeting all the iljocks?’

‘God Aakaa will wring your soul to death, that’s why!’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Don’t be silly. He is the divine father of the seamones...and a very horrible god!’

‘All the better...I am very good at dealing with horrible gods. Why, the first time I hit the mountain god, the mountains shook as if they would crumble...did you get to watch that scene?’

‘What?’ Pikki grunted. ‘I am so hungry!’ He tossed some *kiks* in his mouth, and gave the rest to Yaduk.

‘You were telling me about God Aakaa,’ Yaduk reminded, swallowing the tasteless berries.

‘He is God Iisuu’s divine soulmate!’

‘Iisuu has a soulmate too?’ Yaduk exclaimed. ‘They don’t live together?’

‘No, they can’t stand each other...God Aakaa lives with his people in the Seamone Ocean!’

‘Where is that?’

‘In the southern region of Seabor!’

‘I see...’

‘Aakaa is the complete opposite of Iisuu. Whereas Iisuu’s soul is a spring of hope and love, Aakaa’s soul is ravaged by hate and despair!’

‘But his people make so many things for you?’

‘That way the seamones are very industrious. They have tall *beshels* in which they have large work beds and they make all kinds of things!’

‘In exchange for *zol* crystals?’

‘Yes, they use *zol* crystals to power their underwater boats and tools.’

‘Underwater boats?’ remarked Yaduk with wonder. ‘I would like to see one in daylight.’

‘Sure!’ Pikki chuckled.

‘Why is everyone so frightened of Aakaa...and, what was that

Myrhim mentioned about him torturing dead human souls?’

‘It is a long story...’ Pikki sighed.

‘A story that Iisuu would not tell to anyone?’ Yaduk remarked sarcastically.

‘Well, Myrhim has spilled a few bits!’

‘What has she told you?’

‘Aakaa has a *mysterious* divine connection that goes straight up to the *Nors*!’

Yaduk looked bewildered.

‘He can connect directly to the human souls in the *Nors*, sitting right here on Seabor! Even Myrhim and Iisuu can’t do that!’ Pikki shrugged.

‘Can he reach Madho’s soul in the *Nors*?’ Yaduk asked suddenly.

‘It is better if he doesn’t!’ Pikki replied in alarm.

‘Why?’

‘He will wring him until he screams!’

Yaduk sat up with shock. ‘You don’t mean that!’

‘I do.’

‘What a lout!’

‘He is more of a freak, really. Aakaa was born with an unquenchable lust for divine powers. Myrhim says his lust pushed the *bor* to its death. And, it is pushing the universe to its death now!’

‘Big gods...big powers...oafish minds...catastrophic messes...Hatti is so right!’ Yaduk shook his head in despair. ‘So, how is he destroying the universe?’

‘We told you. He is the one corrupting the souls of your ancestors up in the *Nors*!’

‘But how?’

‘He has a direct connection to them...and he is using it fully...to cause a riot! The human souls in the *Nors* are not charting the path to the future properly...and the universe is bloating to its death!’

‘Wouldn’t he die too?’ Yaduk was bewildered. ‘Is that oaf suicidal?’

‘No! But, he is sure that God Hoon will do something to save the

universe at the last moment...until then, he just wants to control everybody's future... Myrhim's, Iisuu's and ours!'

'Is God Hoon *any* good at last moment saves?'

'Well, he tried to save the *bor*...and, we got a new universe instead!'

'What will we get when he tries to save this universe... *another universe*?' Yaduk was aghast.

'Maybe!'

'But, I *like* this universe!'

'I like it *too*!'

'Why doesn't someone stop this horrible Aakaa?' Yaduk threw his hands up in despair.

'Why do you think we want to give divine powers to the human souls up there?' Pikki remarked grimly.

'I know...to fight God Aakaa!'

'Yes. Also, to chart the future as we want it...and not as he wants it!' Pikki admitted honestly.

Yaduk stared at Pikki for a long thoughtful moment. 'So, Aakaa is one step ahead of us...he can influence those in the *Nors* on a daily basis... and we *still* have to connect to them!'

'Exactly. A lot is at stake...and you know who is leading this fight from our side!' Pikki said gravely.

'Who?'

'*You*!'

'Of course! I have to go back to Earth and convince everybody to attain divine powers. On death, their souls will migrate to the *Nors* and take the divine powers with them!'

'Exactly. Once they get up there, the empowered souls will fight back Aakaa's influence in every possible way!'

Yaduk eyes widened as the truth dawned on him. Destiny had pulled him from the mouth of death and had chosen him to be the savior of the universe. And, here he was, lying on a cot and eating *kiks*!

'Ha...ha...' Pikki chuckled, reading his thoughts. 'Anyway, I am

going to sleep...' he yawned loudly.

For the first time since landing on Seabor, Yaduk realized how much of precious time was going waste. Almost three hundred years had passed on Earth and he had not even begun the great task for which he had been brought here!

'I couldn't agree more...' Pikki chuckled drowsily, curling up in the cot. Within moments, he was fast asleep.

Yaduk stared at the iljock's sleeping face in a daze. Gradually, he began feeling drowsy too. Realizing that destiny or otherwise, there was not much he could really do in the middle of the night, he curled up and fell asleep too!

YADUK tossed and turned in his sleep as he drifted through a bad dream. Madho was lying in his lap and slowly choking to death. 'Madho....' he screamed, pulling his frail body tightly to his chest. He was freezing cold and he gasped, '*Pitr...*'

'Yes...' Yaduk wept.

'I want...to meet you....' he pleaded brokenly.

'Yes...yes....' Yaduk whispered, wiping his cold brow.

'We will meet...in the *bor...*' Madho whispered and then, the dream ended.

Yaduk woke up with a start and trembled like a leaf. There was no Madho anywhere and he was sleeping with Pikki at the bottom of the Iljock Ocean. 'Pikki!' he cried, embracing the iljock tightly.

'Yaduk...stop it...' Pikki mumbled in his sleep.

'Hold me, Pikki...'

Pikki woke up in alarm. 'What's wrong? Why are you shaking?' he gasped.

'I saw a terrible dream!'

'A dream?' Pikki was bewildered, as iljocks saw no dreams.

Both of them got up to sit on the cot. It was still night and the iljocks were all asleep. 'Let me get some *kiks...*' Pikki yawned and went outside the *beshel*.

Yadu lay down again and wondered about the strange dream. All of a sudden, his ears began buzzing with the maddening rustling sound. ‘Madho...’ he got up with a start and looked around in anguish. Surprisingly, the buzzing stopped!

He shivered as he remembered his Madho’s cold dying body. ‘We will meet...in the *bor*...’ Madho’s words rang loud and clear to him. Taking in deep gulps of the fresh ocean water, he wondered what his brother meant. ‘The *bor*? He must have meant the *Nors*!’ he concluded.

‘Of course...we will meet soon in the *Nors*!’ he yelled, sure that his brother was listening. Upset by the fact that Madho had chosen to appear in such a horrible dream, he added, ‘Next time, please be sitting in a orchard or somewhere...you can also play your flute...the cold, ghostly look was in very bad taste!’

‘Stop dreaming...’ Pikki swam in with Miia.

‘What?’ Yaduk stopped the one-sided mumbling.

He noticed that Pikki and Miia were very worried. ‘Here, eat something,’ Pikki gave a handful of *kiks* to him.

He tossed the *kiks* in his mouth. As usual, they were tasteless. Myrhim had killed his sense of taste completely while giving him his new body.

‘Goddess Myrhim has called everyone outside her *beshel*!’ Miia said anxiously.

‘What? In the middle of the night?’ Yaduk was surprised. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘No. Iisuu and Myrhim are fretting like crazy over God Aakaa!’

‘But why?’

‘Since Blumone had told them that Aakaa’s hold over the *Nors* is growing stronger...God Iisuu has had not had a moment of peace,’ Miia confided, his rabbit-face solemn.

‘What does Aakaa eat for strength?’ Yaduk frowned. ‘Iisuu should eat the same thing to become as strong as him.’

Pikki and Miia exchanged an amused glance. ‘Aakaa feeds on the souls of dead humans!’ Pikki snorted.

‘What?’ Yaduk gaped.

‘Well, not exactly. He draws his strength from them. The larger the number of souls in the *Nors*...the stronger he is!’

‘To counter him, God Iisuu is preparing to take birth on Earth!’ Miia informed quickly. ‘Hatti will tell us as soon as he is ready.’

‘What did you say?’ Yaduk was not sure that he had heard Miia right.

‘God Iisuu is getting ready to take birth as a human on Earth!’

Yaduk’s eyes bulged in disbelief.

‘Goddess Myrhim is helping him do it!’

There was a long moment of silence as Yaduk mused over what he had been told.

‘You doubt it?’ Miia frowned.

‘Of course not! If she can turn me into an iljjock, I am sure she can turn Iisuu into a human!’

‘She won’t turn him into a human,’ Pikki chuckled. ‘She will create a new human from a small shard of his soul!’

‘What do you mean? Iisuu will still be around on Seabor?’

‘Of course!’

‘But, Aakaa is feeding on the souls in the *Nors*,’ Yaduk scratched his head in confusion. ‘Why is Iisuu taking birth on Earth?’

Miia took a deep sigh and explained, ‘People are dying in large numbers on Earth and their souls are flooding the *Nors*. They are causing Aakaa’s strength to increase!’

‘Why are they dying in large numbers?’ Yaduk asked, alarmed.

‘Wars and diseases.’

‘Oh!’

‘God Iisuu will try to bring an end to the wars!’

‘How?’

‘By preaching the message of peace, hope and love,’ Miia said radiantly. ‘Iisuu will take birth as a holy saint!’

‘This is not the first time he is doing such a thing,’ Pikki remarked. ‘The last time he took birth, I think, it was somewhere near where you lived...in the mountains!’

‘Really?’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘He took birth as a prince somewhere in the mountains. He renounced his royal life and became the enlightened one!’

‘Myrhim showed us a glimpse of the holy one,’ Pikki remembered vividly. ‘His divine glow spread everywhere like the rays of the *Nors* and he attracted millions to himself. He healed so many with his teachings. Filled their souls with love and hope and scattered the feelings of hatred and conflict that cause wars!’

‘He was called *Buddha*, the enlightened one!’ Miia recalled.

‘Yes,’ Pikki nodded. ‘He was the great Buddha!’

‘I think I may have heard about him,’ Yaduk frowned hard. Once, his herds had wandered to a monastery in the remote mountains. The monks had spoken of their lord in the same words as Miia.

‘Lord Buddha was not the first one. A number of holy messiahs have taken birth from shards of Iisuu’s soul. They have preached the message of hope and love and their divine glow is such that it clings to the souls of humans!’

Hatti entered suddenly and interrupted the conversation. ‘Come on, let’s go!’ he said urgently. ‘God Iisuu is ready.’

Miia, Yaduk and Pikki got up and swam quickly out of the *beshel*. ‘Hurry!’ Hatti urged, leading the way to Myrhim’s dome roofed *beshel*.

‘Has Myrhim opened the portal to the divine continuum?’ Miia asked eagerly.

‘Yes,’ Hatti replied.

‘Let’s hurry, then. We cannot miss seeing God Iisuu take birth on Earth!’

GODDESS Myrhim’s wooden *beshel* glowed brightly in the darkness of the night. She and Iisuu were inside, getting ready to give birth to a holy saint on Earth.

All the iljocks had gathered around Myrhim’s *beshel*. They were shifting places, trying to make a formation that would channelize the power of the iljock yoke to the maximum. The yoke would support God Iisuu when

his soul was slashed to create the holy saint!

‘Hurry!’ Hatti snapped sharply to the gathering. Myrhim had created a haze of energy around the entire area with the power of her scimitar. It was like a protective shield that would allow nothing to flow out in the open ocean, including their voices.

Since Pikki and Yaduk were not on the yoke, they mingled with the single iljjocks. They were searching for familiar faces when suddenly Myrhim’s *beshel* lit up with a blinding radiance. ‘What the...’ Yaduk exclaimed, shielding his eyes with his hand. He saw a luminous vortex turning inside the *beshel*. Strangely, it could be seen transparently through the wooden walls of the *beshel*.

‘You are seeing a small shard of the divine continuum!’ Pikki explained in a dazed voice. ‘You don’t get to see it everyday.’

Yaduk looked closely at the vortex and recognized it. Lo, the mountain god had appeared in it in Lachvi!

‘This is what exists inside the *Nors* or black holes,’ Pikki informed. ‘It is free of all restrictions of space and time and Iisuu and Myrhim use it to travel from one end of the universe to the other quickly!’

‘I know...I traveled through this to Seabor!’

Pikki and Yaduk looked at the vortex, awestruck. It was spinning fast. Suddenly, Myrhim and Iisuu’s souls appeared inside the vortex. Lo, the goddess was holding the scimitar high over Iisuu’s soul!

Yaduk looked at Iisuu’s naked soul and got a shock of his life. Stripped of the radiance that masked it, it spoke of his true self. Lo, Iisuu was a reservoir of hope and love! He was an epitome of goodness and Yaduk regretted all the animosity and malice that he had ever borne towards him. Iisuu was indeed too big a god and he, but a trivial human!

He was so caught up staring at the vortex that they did not notice that there was sudden activity among the iljjocks. They were shifting their positions rapidly. ‘Hey...’ he yelled as he was almost knocked down by a pair of iljjocks.

‘They are making a new formation,’ Pikki cried, pulling Yaduk backwards.

‘Why?’

‘It will multiply the power of the iljjock yoke when they give support to God Iisuu!’

Yaduk looked at the iljjock pairs with amazement. They had made an egg shaped formation around the vortex and their bodies were swaying lightly even as their eyes were fixed on God Iisuu.

Suddenly, Myrhim let her scimitar fall on Iisuu’s soul and a shard broke away from it. ‘Aaaaagh...’ Iisuu moaned, the moan echoing in the ocean like a clap of thunder. He convulsed with pain and pulled on the yoke for support.

‘Aaargh...’ the iljjocks grunted, reeling from the impact of the blow.

Inside the vortex, the goddess picked the shard from Iisuu’s soul with the tip of her scimitar. The shard glowed with the power of a hundred *Nors*!

‘It will pull millions to itself!’ Hatti declared exultantly.

‘And its glow will cling to the souls it falls upon!’ Miia declared with reverence.

Yaduk and Pikki stared at the vortex with eyes wide with wonder. Iisuu’s soul had recovered from the deathly blow and was hovering near Myrhim’s soul. Suddenly, the vortex began spinning faster and glimpses of Earth became visible!

‘O wonder!’ Yaduk gasped, mesmerized to see his home planet. Clear blue skies, green trees and golden sand flashed in front of him and the iljjocks.

Myrhim was still holding the shard of Iisuu’s soul on the tip of her scimitar. She seemed to be looking at Earth with her divine sight and she soon came to stop over a city called Bethlehem.

Iisuu nodded and the goddess unleashed the full power of the divine scimitar. Lo, the shard disappeared from the tip of her scimitar and reappeared in the womb of a virgin maiden!

Yaduk was amazed to see the shard become the soul of a fetus inside the mother’s womb. Lo, within moments, the fetus grew to become a baby and the mother gave birth to it in an old barn. As expected, the baby glowed with Iisuu’s divine radiance!

‘O holy one!’ the iljjocks whispered with reverence.

Surrounded by adoring shepherds and lambs, the mother cuddled the sleeping baby in her lap and soothed his radiant brow tenderly. Just when Yaduk thought the baby would open his tiny eyes, the vortex vanished!

‘What happened...where did they all go?’ he cried in surprise.

‘Nowhere,’ Pikki chuckled. ‘Myrhim has shut the portals of the divine continuum!’

‘Oh!’

‘Come, let us go,’ Pikki said, looking around. The protective haze had disappeared and the iljjocks were going back to their *beshels*.

‘But, what about Iisuu and Myrhim?’

‘They are still inside the vortex. They will watch over the holy child for as long as he lives.’

‘That long...’

‘Yes, we shall not see them for at least a day.’

‘I see...’ Yaduk sighed, looking up at the sky. Patches of orange radiation were wavering near the horizon. It was the break of dawn. Another new day had begun on Seabor!

The married iljjocks decided to groom themselves on the ocean bed itself. They sprawled lazily outside their *beshels* and whistled to their families to swim over to them. Swarms of *besrings*, *dugs* and *enccollies* swam over from the Kirll bay and after finding their hosts, began suckling noisily at their nodules.

‘I would rather go to the bay,’ Yaduk declared.

‘Sure,’ Pikki nodded with a smile. Yaduk took the lead and Pikki followed him. Together, the two swam effortlessly to *Kirll* bay to get their bodies groomed.

-17-

THE BOR

Time: Yaduk’s fourth day on Seabor (1st century AD on Earth)

YADUK and Pikki arrived at the *Kirll* bay to find the horde of single iljjocks

frolicking there. There was a boisterous exchange of greetings following which they waded in the vegetation to find their creatures.

‘Phee...wee...’ Pikki whistled and the creatures of his family leapt out of their nests to cling to him.

Yaduk did the same and soon his *dug*, *besring* and *enccollie* had latched to the swollen nodules in his belly and were suckling vigorously. ‘Ah,’ he sighed, feeling light and relieved. He could not help but marvel at how well his old human body took care of itself!

Pikki swam away to chat garrulously with Jerro! Yaduk gave them an amused glance and then turned to float lazily on his back. The three *Nors* had ascended the sky and were showering powerful radiation. The water in the bay was boiling furiously, giving out loads of effervescent vapor with a very fresh and earthy smell. Yaduk took in deep invigorating breaths and gently patted the creatures clinging to his body. Suddenly, he remembered the terrible dream he had last night. ‘Madho, my child...how are you? Speak to me...’ he whispered, staring fiercely at the *Nors*.

‘Dreaming again?’ Pikki asked, interrupting his reverie.

‘Pikki, where did that vortex go?’ Yaduk asked urgently, wondering if he could enter it somehow and travel to the *Nors*.

‘Nowhere...I told you before,’ Pikki yawned. ‘It is present in a chamber in Myrhim’s *beshel* and normally remains closed. She opens it only when she or Iisuu have to travel far away.’

‘She opens the chamber?’

‘No, she opens the *vortex*...only she or Iisuu can open or close it...it is a divine act that you or I cannot do!’

‘Pikki, how did they go inside that vortex?’

‘Their souls migrated outside their bodies to enter the divine continuum.’

Yaduk mused in disbelief. After a moment’s silence he asked, ‘What happened to their bodies?’

‘They would have left them on the cots in Myrhim’s *beshel*.’

Stunned, Yaduk stammered, ‘Can you also migrate your soul outside your body?’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘But, you have divine powers.’

‘Not the same as Iisuu or Myrhim’s!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Iisuu and Myrhim do not belong to this universe. I do. They come from the *bor*! I told you before.’

Yaduk recalled that the *bor* gave birth to the universe and all divine powers! ‘The vortex...I guess it come from the *bor* too?’

‘The vortex is nothing but an infinitesimal vestige of the old *bor*. The *bor* was a globe of colossal energy packed in divine continuum!’

‘How colossal?’ Yaduk wondered, with eyes lit with interest.

‘Well, a fraction of the *bor* created the entire material universe!’

‘O wonder!’ Yaduk shook his head in astonishment. ‘I guess Iisuu’s *golden hair* came from the *bor* too!’

‘You are becoming clever!’ Pikki exclaimed. ‘All *divine strings*... Myrhim’s, Iisuu’s and the *one* that all iljjocks carry in their souls came from the *bor*!’

‘But, you don’t come from the *bor*...’

‘We got it from God Iisuu. When Myrhim created the first iljjocks from the shards of Iisuu’s soul, the replica of one divine string passed mysteriously to all of them. The replicas were loaded with as much power as the original one in his soul. Since then, the iljjocks have been passing the string down generations. My father gave me my divine string and his father gave it to him...and so on.’

‘Why did you get only *one*?’

‘Our souls are strong enough to bear the load of only *one* string. That one string gives us our divine powers, enables us to make the iljjock *yoke*, and the *zol* crystals!’

‘But, it can’t make you fly to the *Nors*?’

‘No. It can’t even make us go back to the *bor*...’ Pikki shrugged.

‘How can you go back to the *bor*? Isn’t it dead?’ Yaduk was stumped.

‘Yes, it is dead. But, its ghost still mysteriously lives in the divine

strings!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If you unravel the *divine strings*, you can go back to the past...you can actually see the *bor* as it existed!’

‘What?’ Yaduk gaped. He recalled that Madho had mentioned meeting in the *bor*! A sudden frenzy gripped him. ‘Pikki, I want to go back to the *bor*!’

‘Don’t even think about it...it is strictly forbidden to disturb the souls of the dead nature gods...God Hoon will know instantly if someone disturbs them!’

‘Has *no* iljjock ever traveled back to the past and seen the *bor*?’ Yaduk persisted.

‘No! The last time Hatti asked to see the *bor*...God Iisuu squeezed his soul so hard that he was unconscious for a few days!’

Startled, Yaduk decided not to pursue the matter anymore. He noticed that he and Pikki were alone in the bay. The other iljjocks had finished grooming and had left.

‘Let us leave if you are finished,’ Pikki murmured, looking around warily.

‘Sure!’

The two walked back to the Kirll forest and found the horde. Pikki had really hit it off with Jerro in the bay and he sought him out. Soon, they were laughing and flirting outrageously each other!

Yaduk lay down under a tree to sleep. He had hardly slept last night and he wanted Madho to come in his dreams again. Oh, how wonderful it would be if he could go back to the *bor* and somehow, defying all the laws of the universe, meet Madho again!

YADUK was woken up by muffled sounds of weeping. ‘What the...’ he groaned, opening his eyes drowsily. He saw that the iljjocks were sitting in a large gathering in an open clearing nearby. They had solemn expressions on their faces and some of them were sobbing. Startled, he rubbed his eyes open and looked carefully. Lo, God Iisuu was sitting in their midst!

Yaduk suddenly remembered that the last time he had seen Iisuu was when he was inside the vortex and was watching over the holy child on Earth. They had not been expecting to see him until later in the day.

‘My lord, what happened to the holy child?’ Hatti asked worriedly. He was sitting at God Iisuu’s feet and his face was deathly pale.

‘They killed him...’ Iisuu replied in a low voice. ‘Crucified him on a cross!’

Yaduk was aghast.

‘But, his radiance will cling to the human souls for thousands of years and fill them with hope and love...’ Iisuu declared sadly.

‘My lord...’ Pikki said in a choked voice. ‘Yaduk will surely tell his people about your efforts when he goes back to Earth!’

Lo, the entire gathering turned to look at Yaduk!

Startled, Yaduk scrambled up quickly and walked over to them. ‘I assure you, my lord, I will tell them everything,’ he said earnestly. ‘And, if you give me potent divine powers...I will knock sense into their evil souls!’

Iisuu smiled at Yaduk with love and pride. ‘I am sure you will do the needful...and very soon!’

Having said that, Iisuu got up and walked away slowly into the forest.

‘Why didn’t you wake me up earlier...’ Yaduk scolded Pikki.

‘I was busy!’ Pikki replied with a mischievous smile.

Yaduk looked at him, puzzled. Pikki was glowing like the *Nors* today! ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘It is my last day of work today,’ Pikki replied radiantly.

‘What do you mean?’

Pikki beamed, ‘Jerro and I are getting married tommorrow!’

Yaduk baulked. ‘What’s the hurry? You are going to be very bored after marriage anyway!’

Pikki cackled loudly. ‘We have come of age. The urge to mate is slowly building in our souls. If we don’t swap a soul string soon, we will become mad like Hatti!’

‘Hatti is not mad...’ Yaduk scolded, noticing that Pikki was eating constantly. Even now, his mouth was full of *kiks*. ‘Why are you eating so much?’ he asked curiously.

‘I want my first *zol* crystals to be flawless,’ Pikki replied, stuffing his mouth with more *kiks*.

‘I see. I will be so lonely after you get married...’ Yaduk sighed suddenly.

Pikki smiled and held Yaduk’s hand, ‘No iljock is ever lonely or unhappy.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, our soulmates fulfill and complete us.’

‘Of course,’ Yaduk muttered dully.

‘After I am married,’ Pikki said gently. ‘Your soulmate will give you company.’

‘I doubt it,’ Yaduk replied, remembering the baby iljock he had seen the night before.

‘She is grown up now,’ Pikki said with a smile. ‘Elli will take over from me and keep you company.’

‘I see,’ Yaduk said unsurely.

‘Now, help me finish filling my pit of *kiks*,’ Pikki said hurriedly. ‘Or I will go hungry when I am old!’

The two hurried to the harvesting area. The *saykriles* were tossing *kiks* from the treetops and the glowing berries were flying in hundreds in the air.

Picking *kiks* was hard work indeed. They had to be collected before they fell on the ground and became poisonous. Since Yaduk could not exert divine force yet, Pikki helped him fill his pail with *kiks*, which he carried dutifully to Pikki’s pit. He decided that he liked the frenetic activity of picking *kiks* much more than the lazy *boondi* making on the ocean floor!

‘Yaduk!’ someone called in a thin voice. He turned around in surprise. A young iljock was standing there and smiling widely at him. He had the most meltingly beautiful eyes. ‘Elli?’ he croaked, suddenly recognizing her. Lo, she had grown up to become such a beautiful doe-faced

maiden...iljock...no, *maiden!*’

‘*Elli!*’ Pikki exclaimed joyfully. ‘Come and help me gather *kiks*. I have hardly worked for the past few days and my pit is almost empty. This way, I won’t get married to Jerro tomorrow!’

Jerro was busy collecting *kiks* nearby and looked at Pikki in alarm. ‘Everybody...we have to help fill Pikki’s pit,’ he yelled to the horde.

Lo, The iljocks responded immediately. All of them started emptying their pails in Pikki’s pit. They would fill it up by dusk!

Yaduk also raced around throwing pails of *kiks* in Pikki’s pit. Elli ran by his side! He looked at her in a daze. She was nimble footed and was gathering *kiks* at great speed, occasionally breaking into peals of laughter. Every peal sent a strange shiver running down his soul!

‘It is because she is your soulmate!’ Pikki chuckled, noticing his wonderstruck face.

Elli heard them and smiled. She dropped her pail of *kiks* and even as Yaduk watched in astonishment, skipped to him and squeezed his hand tightly!

Yaduk felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck him! Some kind of invisible energy flowed between their souls and surrounded them in a magical haze. Astonishingly, he felt as if he had been waiting for this all his life!

The iljocks spent the rest of the day filling Pikki’s pit. Yaduk and Elli worked together. She filled the pails with her divine powers and he carried them to Pikki’s pit. By the end of the day, Yaduk was euphoric and walking around in a daze. All because of Elli! She was such a reservoir of happiness. Just being around her made him feel fulfilled and ecstatic!

‘This is pure iljock love...’ Pikki sighed wistfully. ‘It fills all the gaps in your soul and you need nothing more to live!’

While Yaduk was struggling to cope with the emotions raging in his soul, Elli was taking it in her stride. ‘The *Nors* are setting...it is time to finish the work...’ she yelled, pursing her rosebud lips. Myrhim had given her very pretty, waiflike features and she looked like an elf flitting amongst the squat-bodied iljocks. Looking at *Nors* fearlessly, she ran off to gather more *kiks*.

Yaduk watched her disappear in a daze. Finding unable to keep away from her for even a moment, he raced behind her. Pikki's pit was full now so they emptied the pails in their own pits.

'One more pail...' Elli giggled, looking at the horizon. The *Nors* had set and the sky was aglow with myriad patches of purple radiation.

'All right...' Yaduk laughed.

The *saykriles* tossed the last *kiks* of the day and cackling loudly, began settling down on the treetops. There was a frenzy of activity as, laughing raucously, the iljjocks raced to fill the last pail of the day. Yaduk laughed and ran with them, feeling rapturously lightheaded and happy.

By the time they finished, the sky had become dark. The chill of the ocean had crept in and had subdued the smoky aroma of the forest. The iljjocks covered their pits with leaves and began lying down on the ground to sleep. Yaduk also covered his pit and looked around for a spot to sleep. Pikki had run off with Jerro!

'You can sleep with me,' Elli said gaily, pulling him to an open grassy patch. A shiver of rapture ran through his being. He lay down on the patch with her. Oh, what a day it had been!

'Elli...' he sighed, wanting to talk to her. Lo, she had fallen asleep. She was still holding his hand, though!

He stared at her in a daze. She looked ethereal in the faint glow of the forest. An exquisite mix of the iljjock and the human, she was bewitchingly beautiful. Astonished that he could feel so wonderful about someone, he realized that had never felt more alive or complete!

The forest became silent as the iljjocks gradually fell asleep. Yaduk also began feeling drowsy. Far off in the bay, the creatures sang faintly. Lulled by their humming, he slipped into the most beautiful dream of his life.

Lo, he was back in Lachvi and racing down the mountains with Elli! They were chasing the herds, laughing raucously and rapturously.

YADUK had not the faintest idea when his dream turned from the wonderful to the terrible. The mountains disappeared and he found himself surrounded by fire. People were trapped in that fire! Yaduk peered anxiously. They seemed familiar. Lo, Surya, and Jugnu and Kaali were burning in the fire!

They were badly wounded and crying for help.

‘Surya...’ he yelled, lunging forward to reach them. He stumbled. Someone had caught his legs and was pulling him back. He looked down to free himself and froze with shock. It was Madho!

‘*Pitr...*’ he sobbed.

Yaduk looked at his dead brother in disbelief. A dam of emotions burst inside him and he bent to embrace Madho. ‘Madho...’ he wept, embracing his brother tightly. Lo, Madho was freezing cold and his body was covered with bruises.

‘*Pitr....*’ he whispered.

Yaduk wanted to ask Madho how he got hurt but his throat was so choked that he could not speak.

‘Aakaa...tortured...me...’ Madho gasped incoherently.

‘God Aakaa?’ Yaduk cried in shock.

‘God Hoon...’ Madho whispered. ‘He saved me...I told him I wanted to meet you once...only once!’

Bewildered, Yaduk tried to make sense of what his brother was saying, when suddenly, Madho slipped away from his grasp. ‘Come back here...’ he yelled.

‘I am going to the *bor...*’ Madho yelled back. ‘We will meet over there!’

Yaduk was about to run after him but like sand slipping from his fingers, the dream slipped away from him. ‘Madho...’ he screamed, waking up in cold sweat.

‘Yaduk?’ Elli touched him gently.

He stared at Elli’s face blankly. Suddenly, he realized that he had been dreaming. Shaking uncontrollably, he burst into tears.

‘Yaduk...’ Elli was aghast. ‘What is the matter?’

‘Madho...Surya...’ he sobbed. ‘I think they are all burning in hell!’

‘Where is *hell*?’

‘In the *bor...*or maybe in the *Nors...*how do I know?’

‘There is *no hell...*I am sure!’

‘Then they have become horrible ghosts...and they are haunting me...’

‘They have *not* become ghosts...I am sure of that too...’ Elli nodded thoughtfully.

Yaduk looked at the dark sky with anguished eyes. He had a sinking feeling that Madho and the villagers were burning in a fire somewhere. ‘Madho, speak to me...’ he urged fiercely. ‘In a proper manner...without the ghostly pretense!’

‘You have been dreaming,’ Elli said gently.

‘He was talking about Aakaa...and God Hoon...’ Yaduk murmured. Lo, the moment he mentioned God Hoon’s name, he heard a sharp rustling sound. ‘Elli, did you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’ she replied uneasily.

‘Like leaves rustling in the wind?’

‘No, I heard nothing.’

Yaduk shivered. ‘I knew it...it is all Jugnu’s fault. He has forced Madho and Surya to escape from the *Nors* with him...and now they are roaming all over the universe as evil spirits!’

Elli looked bewildered and thought for a long moment. ‘It is not possible for anyone to escape from the *Nors*,’ she said finally. ‘They cannot reach anyone outside and no one can reach them!’

‘But Hatti told me that God Aakaa can reach the souls in the *Nors*.’

‘I am talking about normal people like you and me,’ Elli shrugged.

‘But, Madho told me that he was going to the *bor*...’ Yaduk insisted. ‘How can he go there unless he has escaped from the *Nors*?’

‘It is just *not* possible!’ Elli said firmly.

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I have two souls...and *both* my souls are telling me that he has not escaped from the *Nors*!’

Yaduk felt very distraught. His face fell and his eyes dimmed with sadness. His sadness must have passed to Elli, for she became crestfallen as well! She put her hands around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

Lo, the sudden intimacy sent shivers running down his body. Her touch was no ordinary touch as invisible energy flowed from her to him, surrounding them in a magical haze. His distress evaporated and he looked at her in a daze.

‘On the other hand, maybe he *is* in the *bor*...’ she said softly.

‘What?’ he was startled.

‘We should put nothing beyond the *bor*! The *bor* had a very wicked nature...you know!’

Yaduk was bewildered. Elli was talking as if the *bor* was a *living* being!

‘Of *course* it was!’ she exclaimed. ‘It had a living heart and divine moods. Joy, sorrow, fear and all emotions that we feel today originated in the *bor*!’

‘How will we know if Madho has gone back to the past...into the *bor*?’

‘By going into the *bor* ourselves!’ she giggled, her pretty face lit up with delight.

Yaduk stared at her in surprise. She seemed to have a very daring nature! He would have to keep an eye on her lest she got into worse trouble than Madho. ‘We cannot go into the *bor*,’ he said firmly.

‘Why?’

‘We cannot disturb the souls of the dead gods!’

‘What if the *bor* itself wants them to be disturbed?’ Elli’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

‘What do you mean?’

‘No one can go back to the *bor*...unless the *bor* wants them back!’

‘But, the *bor* is *dead*.’

‘Yes. But, its *ghost* lives in the *divine strings*. From where do you think all the divine powers are coming from? The *ghost* of the *bor* is supplying them!’

‘Iisuu...Myrhim...God Hoon will muzzle us to death!’ he repeated what Pikki had told him.

‘They won’t...not if they come to know that it was the wish of the *bor*.’

‘You sound very confident.’

‘Yes. Hatti and Pikki will also have to be very confident, though.’

‘Why is that?’ he asked warily.

‘We need their help to go back to the *bor*!’ she giggled, springing to her feet.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To fetch them...we are going to have the time of our lives tonight!’

Lo, before he could react, she had bolted off. ‘Hatti and Pikki will never agree to disturb the ghost of the *bor*!’ he yelled after her with certainty.

MOMENTS later, Yaduk was shocked to see Hatti and Pikki walking in, nodding their heads in agreement. Elli’s enthusiasm was infectious and the confidence that she oozed because of two souls, overpowering!

Yaduk stared at her awe-struck, and he would have continued doing the same had not Pikki jumped to his side elatedly. ‘Madho’s soul is calling us to the *bor*...is it true?’

‘Yes...’ he replied hesitantly, ‘But, I saw him in a dream...and dreams are not always true!’

The three iljjocks, including Elli looked at him thoughtfully. ‘There is only way to find out if it is true,’ Elli ventured finally. ‘We will have to go back to the *bor*!’

Hatti’s face lit up like a *Nor*. ‘Visit the *bor*?’ he trembled with excitement. ‘The purpose of my life will be fulfilled...oh, how I have begged Iisuu to show me the *bor*!’

‘But, God Iisuu...’ Pikki began, doubt written on his face.

‘I don’t care...’ Hatti interrupted. ‘Are you coming or not?’

‘He is coming...’ Elli spoke for him. ‘We cannot lose this opportunity.’

‘All right...’ Pikki agreed grudgingly. ‘But, are you sure Yaduk’s soul can take it?’

‘Of course,’ Yaduk replied firmly. ‘Anyway, I want to fulfill Madho’s

dying wish.'

'But, Madho is not dead!' Pikki protested.

'I know...but, my mind will never be at peace until I fulfill his wish!'

'What about you, Elli?' Hatti asked grimly.

'A miracle is waiting to happen...I can feel it with both my souls. Let's not think too much...let's go back to the *bor*!'

'Good!' Hatti beamed. Having said that, he suddenly embraced Yaduk and planted a fierce kiss on his face! 'You don't know what difference you have made to this suffocating planet!' he said earnestly.

'He has lost his mind,' Pikki drawled to a stunned Yaduk.

Hatti's excitement was palpable. 'We will need pool all our powers to go back to the *bor*...sit down everyone...no, climb over me...wait, sit down first!' he rattled off incoherently.

Lo, confusion prevailed as they tumbled over each other to make their nodules touch, followed by their toes and then, their nodules again. Finally, they worked out a crisscrossed formation by which they were all connected to each other, but they could not tell whose nodules were touching whose toes!

Yaduk was sure that Pikki's toes were poking into his nodules and Elli was sitting on his legs! She smiled radiantly and squeezed his hand. Oh, she was holding his hand too. His heart skipped many beats and he felt very excited and happy!

Hatti was in his element and showing off his limited knowledge of the *bor*. His eyes sizzled with sparks as he babbled endlessly. 'The *divine strings* work in mysterious ways. They are like 'interpreters' mediating between this universe and the primordial *bor*. Because of them, we will be able to see the *bor* exactly as the gods who lived in the past saw it!'

The others noticed that Hatti was carrying a pail in his hand. 'Are you taking that to the *bor*!' Pikki asked incredulously.

Hatti hid the pail sheepishly.

'But, why?' Elli exclaimed.

'To bring back stuff that I may fancy....'

Yaduk laughed and Elli and Pikki held their heads in disbelief.

'All right...let's do it!' Elli declared suddenly. Hatti and Pikki

nodded, and the three iljjocks unraveled the *divine strings* lying in their souls simultaneously.

Yaduk inhaled deeply. Before he could exhale, he felt as if a mountain had fallen on him! ‘Uhh...uhh...’ he gasped, holding off the massive pressure crushing his soul. Just when he thought his soul would scatter, he felt an invisible cloud of feathers appear from nowhere and cushion him. The pressure ebbed away.

‘Are you all right?’ Pikki asked, his eyes glowing like embers.

‘Yes...’ he grimaced.

‘Good. Because, we are in the *bor* right now!’

‘Really?’ He saw blinding brightness in all directions and felt as if he was suspended in empty space with the others. ‘Have we migrated out of our bodies or something?’ he asked excitedly.

‘No,’ Pikki chuckled. ‘We are still sitting in *Kirll*. But, because of the mysterious nature of the *divine strings*, we are seeing the *bor* in a waking dream!’

Suddenly, waves of energy hit them like the scorching winds, making them shiver with exhilaration. ‘The *bor* was a globe of colossal energy,’ Hatti reminded exultantly, ‘If we had entered the real one, we would have just vaporized!’

‘Look!’ Elli cried, pointing to a cloud of bubbles.

Yaduk realized that a huge sea of bubbles had come up to surround them! ‘Is this air or water?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘Neither. These are *boids*...or primordial space!’ Hatti exclaimed with delight. ‘When the *bor* died, the *boids* split three dimensionally to form *space* in the new universe!’

‘Amazing!’ Yaduk shook his head. He tried to catch the boids but they dodged him nimbly.

‘They are living!’ Elli laughed gaily.

‘Living?’ Yaduk’s eyes widened with astonishment.

‘The *bor* was like a living thing...I told you! And, we are seeing its *ghost*...otherwise, why would the “past” behave as if it was the “present”!’

A flock of *boids* swarmed to Elli and nuzzled her like a herd of lamb.

‘Hey...’ she giggled, patting them gently. They ran off and she ran behind them. ‘Come...’ she pulled Yaduk’s hand.

‘Wait...’ he cried, stumbling after her. She ran off like a gazelle and Yaduk and the *boids* raced behind her. Soon, they were all tumbling and laughing together – Elli, Yaduk and the living *boids*!

The massive sea of *boids* was dreamlike. And, Yaduk and Elli rolled in it with exhilaration and joy!

‘Hold me...’ she laughed, putting her legs around him. Lo, his heart lurched. She squeezed him tightly and his insides melted! He gazed at her in a daze and she returned his gaze fiercely. A rapturous haze surrounded them, and unable to hold back anymore, he bent his head to feel her rosebud lips with his own. They were about to drown in each other’s embrace when someone pulled their feet and yanked them away!

‘That must be Madho...’ Yaduk gasped suddenly.

‘Madho?’ Elli exclaimed, looking around.

Lo, it was not Madho! Rather, long and dark tendrils had appeared from nowhere and were wriggling in and out of their legs!

‘Hey!’ Yaduk exclaimed, pulling his legs back.

‘It is all right!’ Elli chuckled. ‘They are the secrets of the *bor*. They are living too!’

‘Living *boids* and now living *secrets*...’ Yaduk cried, peering at the swathes of tendrils that had come out from nowhere and were now wriggling all over his body!’

‘What are they doing?’ Elli cried as the tendrils tightened their hold around her and Yaduk.

‘They are tying us...’ Yaduk replied, gasping and laughing at the same time.

‘But, why?’

‘I don’t know...’ Yaduk held Elli’s hand tightly.

Lo, the next moment, the tendrils tossed them across the *bor*! ‘Whee...’ they screamed, flying through the sea of *boids* and crash landing on an unsuspecting Pikki and Hatti!

‘Aaargh...’ Pikki groaned, shocked out of his life.

‘Are you trying to kill me?’ Hatti croaked.

‘The naughty *secrets* did it...’ Yaduk gasped, his eyes streaming with tears of laughter. ‘I can’t believe that this strange world gave birth to the universe!’

‘But, it did...’ Hatti gasped with exhilaration. His eyes were crackling fiercely. ‘The secrets that you just saw...were the primordial form of the *forces* that exist in the present universe. When the *bor* died, the secrets disintegrated to form the attractive and the repulsive forces!’

‘But the *bor* is so small...and the universe is so massive!’ Elli wondered.

‘The *bor* appears small because of the divine continuum...but, only an iota of the *bor* went in making the universe!’ Hatti showed-off.

‘I think my back is broken....’ Pikki croaked suddenly.

‘But, there is *nothing* in your back that can break...’ Elli laughed.

‘Shut up...’ Pikki stamped his foot. ‘Take me close to the Holy Knot...it will heal me...or I will end up leaving as a *coon* from here!’

Yaduk suddenly realized that they had landed inside a brightly lit cavern.

‘Is that the Holy Knot?’ Elli asked, pointing to tall flames leaping at the back of the cavern. A huge vortex of energy was turning in a pit over there.

‘Yes. It was the source of energy in the *bor*,’ Hatti nodded. ‘The energy was infinitely more intense than anything found in the present universe and was called ‘*zol*’. The *zol* crystals got their name from here!’

Yaduk took Pikki nearer to the flames and felt exhilarated by the sheer power surging out of them. Pikki felt better at once. ‘Kalh...kalh...’ they heard a faint sound coming out of the Holy Knot.

‘It is the heart of the *bor*...can you hear it beating?’ Pikki said excitedly.

‘What is this?’ Elli asked, fingering glowing embers piled near the walls of the cavern.

‘They are the carcasses of dead gods...’ Hatti gushed. ‘This is the primordial matter that gave birth to planets and stars later on. Look, I have

filled my pail with them...'

The others glared at the pail in his hand in disbelief. It was full of the glowing embers! 'Have you no shame...you *thief*?' Pikki spat with disgust.

'None at all...' Hatti replied nonchalantly.

'Ugh...' Elli shuddered as something very vile slithered by her feet.

'That must be my good pal Evil...' Hatti chuckled. 'Evil killed the gods with the divine venom or *Orgis*. The venom was very potent...and guess who ran off with the leftovers after the *bor*'s death?'

They all stared at Hatti, the gossipmonger, with bewilderment. It was amazing, all the juicy tit-bits that he knew!

'God Aakaa...who else?' Hatti whispered conspiratorially. 'He carries loads of divine venom in his soul and I think that his mysterious connection to the *Nors* is because of that venom...it is my humble opinion!'

'It is quite possible...' Pikki nodded. 'I really wish God Iisuu will tell us about all the events that happened here!'

'Iisuu will tell us nothing!' Hatti snorted. 'I will have to figure out everything myself!'

'Elli?' Yaduk looked around, noticing that she was no longer holding his hand.

Lo, Elli had skipped to a corner and was picking what looked like flowers! The walls of the cavern were thickly covered with flowers of many types!

'These are not normal flowers. They are the moods of the *bor*!' Hatti explained. 'They bloomed on the walls and this is how the gods who lived in the *bor* saw them...as flowers!'

'What *mood* are you picking, Elli?' Pikki asked eagerly.

'Joy...' she cried, holding up a tiny bunch. Yaduk took a whiff. The smell flooded his soul with the purest joy!

'Smell this....' Pikki plucked another type. 'It is a blossom of sorrow!'

Thin and straggly, the blooms of sorrow were like the dark moss on grim winter rocks and they oozed a heavy, dank spoor. Yaduk took a whiff and his soul was flooded with grief. 'I feel like weeping!'

‘Even the emotions that we feel originated in the *bor*!’ Hatti exclaimed.

‘I want to pluck some for Jerro...’ Pikki said, bending over the blooms.

‘Let me take some for Miia...’ Hatti shrugged. ‘Or, he will nag me to death!’

Well, that was the last they knew of the *bor*! For, someone wrenched their souls hard and they all passed out!

When they woke up, they found they were lying in the Kirll forest and God Iisuu was towering over them like a mountain of fury. Such was his rage that the ground was shaking and far off, the oceans of Seabor were rumbling.

Lo, Pikki and Hatti took one look and almost passed out again.

‘My lord...we were only obeying the *bor*...’ Elli croaked and was immediately silenced by a cruel wring on the soul.

‘You have disturbed the souls of the dead...’ Iisuu snarled, lightning crackling out of his eyes.

‘No, we didn’t...’ Hatti croaked. ‘The *bor* would have thrown us out...’

Iisuu wrung Hatti’s soul and he writhed with pain. ‘Hatti...’ Yaduk cried in an agonized whisper. ‘It’s all my fault...punish me...let them go!’

Iisuu gripped Yaduk’s soul in rage and was about to wring it when Myrhim came rushing in. ‘Stop!’ she shrieked. ‘Iisuu, what are you doing?’

‘I will not spare them!’ Iisuu thundered and the forests shook with his rage

‘Calm down, God Iisuu!’ Myrhim directed, rising to her full divine power. ‘What has happened has happened...it will not happen again, I assure you!’

‘Explain this to them properly...because if it happens again...I will go inside the *bor* and kill them!’ Iisuu thundered and stormed away.

All four of them looked at the goddess with gratitude in their eyes. Three of them have been saved from becoming coons and the fourth had been saved from trundling to the *Nors*!

‘Don’t ever do this again!’ Myrhim warned, her face ashen. ‘I can

stop Iisuu...but I cannot stop God Hoon! He will know if you touch even one *boid* in the *bor*!’

All four nodded and the goddess began walking away. ‘And, don’t talk about this to anyone....’ she whispered warningly. ‘The others will be encouraged to do the same!’

‘**AARGH...**’ Pikki groaned, holding his aching body. ‘I don’t think I will ever feel the same again!’

Yaduk was in a similar state. His whole body was aching and he felt drained. Surprisingly, Elli was fine and was feeding *kiks* to Hatti, who was in the worst state of all. Hatti’s limbs had become to numb to all sensation and he was lying limply on the ground. But, he seemed to in a highly exuberant mood and was cackling intermittently.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Pikki snapped irritably. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Did you hear what she said?’ Hatti broke into a peal of laughter. ‘God Hoon will know even if you touch one *boid*...we touched so many... did Hoon come to know?’

Pikki and Elli were not amused. But, Hatti was right. ‘How did God Hoon *not* know?’ Elli wondered aloud.

‘Time has stood still in the *bor*...maybe that’s why!’ Pikki reasoned.

Yaduk listened with interest. But, Hatti was still cackling to himself. ‘Iisuu shook the forest and the ocean like an *ogre*...and she doesn’t want us to tell anyone! Is that possible?’

‘Shut up!’ Pikki said irritably.

Elli gave *kiks* to Pikki and Yaduk too. ‘How come you are walking around?’ Yaduk asked in surprise.

‘I have two souls...he wrung only one!’

‘Good for you...’Yaduk remarked and then, blinded by a sudden radiance, fell back.

Lo, Hatti had overturned the pail of stolen embers on the ground! The embers had transformed into fireballs and were burning with blinding radiance. ‘They will burn like this for millions of years...’ Hatti rubbed his hands with delight.

‘Where are the flowers I picked?’ Elli suddenly remembered. Lo, they had turned into ethereal discs! She placed them on Hatti’s pile of fireballs.

‘It looks like a holy shrine!’ Yaduk cried with reverence.

‘Yes, it does...’ Pikki agreed, awe-struck. He noticed that Hatti was fully healed. ‘Is that what healed you?’

‘Yes,’ Hatti nodded. ‘I like the title *holy shrine*...from now on, it will be called the *holy shrine*!’

Pikki placed his hands on the *holy shrine* and all his pain vanished. Energy surged through his body to heal and invigorate him. He sprang to his feet energetically and his face reflected wonder. ‘Your turn...’ he said to Yaduk. ‘I must find Jerro...he must be so worried!’

‘And, I must find Miia...’ Hatti groaned, getting up too.

The two left hurriedly to find their soulmates and win over their admiration by telling them about their path-breaking exploits, although in whispers!

Yaduk and Elli were left behind.

Sighing deeply, Yaduk placed his hands on the *holy shrine*. His heart was heavy. Madho’s lead had turned to naught and his friends had suffered so much. Suddenly, his head swam. Lo, to his utter shock, he found himself transported back in the *bor* again! There were *boids* everywhere. ‘No...’ he groaned in panic, looking around for a way to get out of the forbidden place.

‘*Pitr...*’ someone whispered in a deep voice.

He swerved towards the voice. Lo, the boids parted to reveal a man’s soul!

‘Madho...’ he cried, almost collapsing from shock.

‘Yes...’ Madho whispered, tears flowing down his face. He came forward and embraced him fiercely.

‘Madhoo...’ Yaduk wept, convulsing with happiness. Strangely, he felt as if he was holding his brother’s living body in his arms. Madho had the same old brown eyes. Yaduk’s hands roved over his brother’s face and body in disbelief.

Madho smiled happily and his eyes were peaceful. Yaduk was about to plant a kiss on his forehead like he used to do, when suddenly, the *bor*

faded away and he found himself back in *Kirll*. His hands were on still on the *holy shrine* and Elli was holding him tightly.

‘A miracle has happened...I saw Madho....’ he blurted in a daze.

‘I know...’ she said softly. ‘I am your soulmate...I felt everything!’

‘His soul is at peace now!’ Yaduk whispered.

Elli nodded and the two got up to walk back to the harvesting area. It was still night and there was time to catch some sleep.

Later, Yaduk lay under the tree, staring at the pitch-dark sky. For the first time since coming to Seabor, he felt no anguish. His heart and soul were both peaceful.

He couldn’t help but be terribly proud of Madho and Elli. One had decided to override the laws of the universe and call him to the *bor*. The other had defied age-old restrictions and had taken him there!

Just before falling asleep, another thought struck him. Madho had met him in the *bor* because he wanted him to give up the idea of flying to the *Nors*! Obviously, he wanted him to go back to Earth and carry out the grand plan that God Iisuu was working so hard upon!

-18-

THE HOLY SHRINE

Time: Yaduk’s fifth day on Seabor (2nd century AD on Earth)

THE next morning, Hatti, in his capacity as the leader, decided to ignore Goddess Myrhim’s warning. He decided to give a discourse on his visit to the *bor* to the entire iljjock horde!

His conviction was reinforced by a small miracle that had happened at the *holy shrine*. The holy fire was intact but Elli’s flowers had disappeared! Real vegetation and flowers had come to grow around the shrine, with fragrances that evoked joy and sorrow!

Early in the morning, when a faint orange glow was just breaking over the horizon, the iljjock horde gathered awe-struck around the *shrine*. They basked in the divine glow emanating from the holy fire and listened to Hatti iljjock with respect.

‘My entire life I have wondered about the *bor*. The universe came

from the *bor* but from where did the *bor* come from? To understand the origin of creation is the key to understanding creation itself!’ Hatti began.

‘Now that I have seen the ghost of the *bor* with my own eyes...I would like to theorize about its origin. Of course, it is only *my* opinion...but it can be accepted as our collective opinion...as none of you *really* has an opinion!’ he suggested pompously.

The horde bore his insult in silence. On any other day they would have kicked him away but today, they wanted to listen to what he had to say.

‘I reckon that...in the beginning...there was “nothing”! Not even, *time*! Creation began from a vast ocean of nothingness. A state of perfect balance existed in the ocean as all parameters existed in pairs of opposites and cancelled each another. Except, for one parameter...infinity!’

‘Infinity manifested itself as latent energy. This latent energy wound up as a tight knot in the ocean of nothingness, because of which, the state of balance tended to degenerate into a state of imbalance. But, the change of state did not happen! Because, there was *nothing*, not even *time*, that could enable the change of state!’

‘Therefore, the energy developed a “will” of its own and lo, *consciousness* suddenly took birth! Primitive consciousness floated in the ocean of nothingness, allowing the energy to spurt out from the knot. Time began ticking forward and as more energy spurted out from the knot, a field of energy came into existence. Lo, the *bor* was born!’

‘The knot of energy...you are talking about the Holy Knot, are you not?’ Miia asked in astonishment.

‘Yes!’ Hatti replied radiantly

‘How were the nature gods born?’ Pikki asked. ‘God Hoon was one of them, I know!’

‘Well, the ocean of nothingness split to yield many parameters in equal halves of opposites. Matter and antimatter, order and disorder and positive and negative charge appeared in their primordial forms. They emerged as conscious and living blobs and they were the gods who inhabited the *bor*. I still haven’t worked out how God Hoon and the other nature gods took birth!’

‘Amazing... what you have worked out, though!’ Goddess Myrhim

remarked in a soft, tinkling voice.

The iljjocks looked at her in surprise. Lo, she and God Iisuu had come to stand near the *holy shrine*!

‘Eeeek...’ Hatti shrieked, making a move to flee.

‘Stay right in your place...’ Iisuu said sharply.

The iljjocks trembled in fear. A few of them were about to slip away quietly when they noticed that God Iisuu did not appear to be angry any more. For that matter, he had a resigned expression on his face!

‘Iisuu, look...’ Myrhim gasped, kneeling before the holy fire.

Iisuu looked at Hatti with an agonized expression. ‘You *stole* this from the *bor*...I can’t believe that you took birth from *my* soul.’

‘If I had known...I would have pinched *more*!’ Hatti chuckled unabashedly.

‘Known *what*?’

‘That the *bor* was in a very generous mood...I could steal *only* because the *bor* allowed it...is it not, God Iisuu?’ Hatti asked eagerly.

Iisuu nodded grudgingly. ‘The *bor* was more mischievous than all of you combined...do you know that?’

The iljjocks looked at his face in a daze – his eyes were moist and reflected a deep love for the *bor*.

‘Smell this...it will make your day!’ Myrhim offered a flower to Iisuu. She had plucked it from the thickets that had taken root around the *shrine*.

Iisuu smelled it and his face lit up like the *Nors*! ‘O sweet joy...’ he sighed, sniffing the flower a few more times.

He sat down near the holy fire and beckoned Hatti to sit near him. ‘Don’t get me wrong...’ he said hesitantly. ‘But, there are ghosts in the *bor* that can create havoc in this universe. I don’t want you to disturb the *bor* ever again...ask me or the goddess what you want to know...we will tell you!’

The iljjocks were stunned to hear God Iisuu talk so pleasantly to them. Old barriers were breaking and for the first time ever, he had expressed willingness to talk on the forbidden topic of the *bor*.

Hatti was so shocked that he was dumfounded. Miia grabbed the

chance, ‘My lord, did the *bor* have a real heart?’

‘Yes! It was a thudding pool of consciousness *just* beneath the Holy Knot and it gave birth to the omnipresent gods of nature!’ Iisuu replied.

‘You mean Time, Mystery and Hoon?’ Hatti found his voice.

‘Yes!’ Myrhim nodded. ‘The mighty God of Time, Goddess Mystery and God Hoon were the three omnipresent nature gods who had subjects in every niche of the *bor*!’

The iljjocks noticed that Iisuu became withdrawn and silent the moment he heard the names. ‘Tell us about Evil?’ Yaduk changed the topic.

‘Evil was God Hoon’s slave,’ Myrhim replied. ‘Together, they brought about the season of death. The *bor* followed a cycle of two seasons... the season of life and the season of death!’

‘Let me explain it properly...’ Hatti had to show-off his brilliance. ‘The birth of the *bor* had disturbed the balance in the ocean of nothingness. So, a reverse potential came into play to annihilate the positive energy with a negative one and to restore the state of absolute nothingness. Evil was that reverse potential!’

‘But, the annihilation did not happen in one go. Rather, it happened over many cycles, which were the *seasons* of the *bor*!’ Myrhim added with a smile.

‘So, the *bor* was doomed to die after a certain number of seasons?’ Miia asked.

‘Yes. But, as the *bor* approached its last season of life, a miracle happened!’

‘What was that miracle?’ the iljjocks asked in unison.

‘Iisuu will tell you...’

‘*Consciousness* combined with *order* to yield primitive intelligence!’ Iisuu obliged. ‘Until then, the gods had been following only their instincts. Once they became intelligent, they began crossing their inborn instincts!’

‘A lot of drama played out in the last season...’ Myrhim chuckled. ‘Time, Mystery and Hoon were ordained to follow a certain sequence for the complete annihilation of the *bor*. Once they become intelligent, they disrupted that sequence to create glitches. They even killed Evil! But, Evil

reappeared in the form of a number of slaves of death. Right up to the end, they were fighting against the slaves with their newfound intelligence. God Iisuu was there when it all happened!’

‘Yes, I was there....’ Iisuu said in a choked voice. ‘Eventually, the *bor* died...all the gods died. The God of Time and Goddess Mystery also sacrificed their lives. They had only one wish...creation must go on...life must go on. Even, if it was to be in a new universe made from their lifeless divine forms!’

‘The remnants of their souls still live in the *divine strings* and give us our divine powers!’ Myrhim sighed sadly. ‘Even in death, they are sustaining us...and pushing us to ensure that the universe does not suffer the same fate as the *bor*!’

‘Their sacrifices should not be vain!’ Iisuu stressed. ‘We have to work together to ensure a benign future for the universe...and under no circumstances, disturb the *ghosts* who are feeding us with the divine powers!’

Grief clouded Iisuu and Myrhim’s eyes and they fell silent. With a sigh, they looked at Hatti, the mischievous leader, to see if he had got the message they were trying to convey!

Well, Hatti had got the message loud and clear! He realized that disturbing the *divine strings* could result in major catastrophes and in future, he decided to broach the topic only with the consent of Iisuu and Myrhim.

Yaduk also realized that there was a huge responsibility on his shoulders. He was destined to introduce all that he had learned to the human race and get them also involved in protecting the future of the universe!

Yaduk felt God Iisuu’s agony as his own. Like Iisuu, he had also lost his home and kin. He looked up at the sky wistfully. Was the divine continuum in the *Nors* same as that in the *bor* - replete with flocks of *boids*? Lo, Madho’s soul must be floating like an angel amongst the *boids*!

Divine energy flooded his soul, leaving him stunned. Lo, the ghost of the *bor* was so powerful that even a fleeting memory had its effect! He remembered what Hatti had told him – Iisuu carried hundreds of *divine strings* in his soul that gave him his mammoth divine powers!

‘Pikki, how many *divine strings* do you think my soul can hold?’ he asked curiously.

‘One...maybe none...’ Pikki chuckled. ‘We will know when you swap strings with Elli!’

‘What do you mean *none*?’ Yaduk was alarmed.

‘The seamones cannot hold even one *divine string*...their souls are so frail.’

Yaduk was truly surprised. ‘Not even one *divine string*? Where do they get their divine powers from?’

‘They don’t have any divine powers!’

‘What? I don’t believe you!’

‘No, really! The seamones don’t have *any* divine powers.’

‘They don’t have a seamone yoke?’

‘Of course not!’

‘How strange.’

‘Yes, and they are very bitter and resentful about it!’

‘*Stop talking about us!*’ a voice rasped sharply from behind.

They turned around in surprise. Lo, a seamone had come to stand behind them. Yaduk recognized him instantly. He was Blumone, the one who had come searching for him a day earlier!

Hatti and the iljocks were shocked to see Blumone in *Kirll*, which was strictly iljock territory, and they glowered at him angrily.

‘So, I was right,’ Blumone rasped scathingly. ‘There *is* a human stranger on Seabor!’

‘Blumone!’ God Iisuu said in an irritated tone. ‘You should not have come here.’

‘I have come to meet the human...and I can see that he is right here!’ Blumone sneered, looking at Yaduk with contempt.

There was silence. The iljocks began shifting positions – they were making a formation to crush the soul of the vile seamone!

‘Attacking me won’t help!’ Blumone observed, narrowing his eyes.

‘Get out of here...’ Iisuu warned. ‘There is no human here!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Blumone cackled. ‘You take us for fools? God Aakaa knows for sure that this human Yaduk is on Seabor. He may be looking at

him with his divine sight even as we speak! ’

Blumone’s declaration had the desired effect. Lo, God Iisuu started in alarm! The seamone cackled vilely on seeing the reaction and the sound of his laughter startled everyone.

‘How did Aakaa come to about Yaduk?’ Iisuu glowered. ‘What else does he know?’

‘He knows everything that is going on here,’ Blumone burped loudly. ‘Except for one small detail....’

‘What detail?’ Myrhim asked coldly.

‘That there is a conspiracy afoot to mate the human to an iljock. I wonder how will he react when he hears that?’

‘Get out of here!’ Iisuu roared with flaming eyes. Lo, his rage was like a force of nature and the trees and the ground shook violently!

Panicking, Blumone glided backwards. But, it was too late! Iisuu tossed him out of Kirll like a leaf blown by wind! He fell smack on the ocean and scrambled hurriedly to find his boat. Before Iisuu could grip his soul and wring the life out of him, he jumped in the boat and chugged away.

‘How does Aakaa know about Yaduk?’ Iisuu thundered to his horde, ‘I told you, not a word should escape in the oceans!’

The iljocks trembled in fear.

‘It is not their fault,’ Myrhim defended them in a low voice. ‘No one has uttered a word in the open oceans. We would have heard it first!’

‘Then, how did Aakaa come to know?’ Iisuu cried in anguish.

Myrhim looked at the *Nors* and thought for a moment. ‘Aakaa has a direct divine connection to the *Nors*. I have a feeling that he has discovered the souls of Yaduk’s dead kin up there!’

Iisuu looked at the goddess in disbelief.

‘Knowing Aakaa,’ Myrhim added. ‘He has probably wrung out the information from them!’

BLUMONE ran away scared from the iljjock settlement. But, the moment he chugged into the open ocean, he cackled with fiendish joy. He knew that he had valuable information for God Aakaa and would earn a big reward for it!

‘Whoa...’ he howled, speeding his boat fast towards the Seamone Ocean. The boat was made of metal and could travel underwater and in air. It was powered by *zol* crystals and was therefore, called a *zolboat* by the seamones!

The *zol* crystals were invaluable to the seamones. They were natural sources of electricity and powered their boats and tools. Since they did not have divine powers, the seamones sought solace in the power provided by the *zol* crystals!

Fortunately, the producers of *zol* crystals – the iljjocks – were a good-natured people and gave crystals generously. Of late, though, they had become very demanding and had been asking for all sorts of strange human objects to be made in return!

God Iisuu was to blame for this change. He had an exasperating habit of sharing glimpses of human settlements on the iljjock yoke. The iljjocks were easily enamored with human things and hankered for them shamelessly. Since they could not make anything except silly *boondis*, they relied on the seamones to make whatever caught their fancy – in return for plenty of *zol* crystals, of course!

Making human objects was frustrating. The seamones were not connected to the yoke and they could not see what the iljjocks had seen. Days were spent in trying to understand what a wooden cot or a copper pot looked like. Pottery and jewelry were the most difficult to craft and could be done by only those with sharp minds. Robes and turbans were so tricky that the few seamones who tried to make them had gone mad with despair.

Blumone was the owner of a tattered silk robe and turban and he wore it with pride. He had recently learnt to make metal ‘combs’ and had earned loads of *zol* crystals bartering them to the iljjocks. He had been told that the humans used the toothed objects to groom their hair. Since the iljjocks had no hair, they used them happily to clean their mouths or scratch their itches.

‘Faster...faster...’ Blumone rasped impatiently, tossing more *zol* crystals in the fuel chamber of the boat.

The *zolboat* sailed through the Seamone Ocean. Blumone was

travelling all the way to the South Pole to find God Aakaa and inform him that he was right – the human Yaduk was very much on Seabor!

Blumone's *zolboat* whizzed out of the ocean to soar in the air. He looked back with glee at the *Kirll* forest. From above, the forest appeared as a thin and green strip circling the equator. He was sure that the iljjocks had been hiding the human in that forest for days. Aakaa would be very shocked to know this and, he was sure, very pleased with his efforts. It was possible that he would give him the biggest reward for any seamone- a drop of *Orgis*!

Orgis was the divine venom. God Aakaa had pinched loads of it from the *bor* and had carried it in his soul when he came to the new universe. *Orgis* cooled his tortured soul and allowed him to remain sane!

Aakaa's brood- the seamones- had taken birth with the same tortured souls but with no *Orgis* in them. Thus, they were desperate to get even a tiny drop of *Orgis* from him. Once received, the drop resided in their souls forever and was passed from one generation to another, providing relief to an entire lineage.

'O sweet *Orgis*...' Blumone sighed, his body trembling with longing. Only *Orgis* could cool his despair-ridden soul and give him sweet relief.

The *zolboat* flew over the oceanic seamone settlements. Blumone glanced downwards. The settlements were islands of metal and glinted dully in the fading radiation of the dusk. As a people, the seamones were far more industrious than the iljjocks. Their *beshels* were made of metal and multi storied – they towered all the way up from the ocean bed to the sky and in them flourished vibrant seamone industry.

Despite their considerable progress, the seamones dwelled in deep despair. They had been denied their birthright. Aakaa should have passed his *divine strings* to them like Iisuu had passed his to the iljjocks. But, he had passed nothing except despair!

They blamed Myrhim for their misfortune. She had given them souls so weak that they could not carry even a single *divine string*! If only she had given them souls strong enough, they would have not been cursed to a life of bitter jealousy when it came to the four-footed iljjocks.

Their counterparts had it easy because of their divine powers. They could harvest *kiks* with very less effort and travel speedily across the oceans using the power of the yoke. In comparison, the seamones had to labor hard

to do anything. For moving around Seabor, they had to rely on *zolboats* powered by *zol* crystals, which were again, produced by the *iljjocks*!

Blumone flew his *zolboat* further south. Aakaa lived in isolation on the South Pole and was a fearsome and cruel father. He had killed many seamones for no reason. No seamone entered Aakaa's abode unless he was sure that he would come out alive!

This day, Blumone was sure he was going to come out alive! He was sure that Aakaa, who was fiercely jealous of his soulmate Iisuu, would be very interested to know what Iisuu had been hiding from him! Shivering with fear and excitement, he looked forward to his very first meeting with the formidable God Aakaa.

GOD AAKAA was born in the *bor* with God Iisuu. They were divine soulmates but the opposite of each other. Whereas Iisuu's soul was full of hope, Aakaa's soul was full of despair. Iisuu followed the path of love and Aakaa reveled in hatred.

It was a miracle that the two survived the dying *bor* and came out alive in the new material universe. Later, Myrhim helped them to migrate to the planet Seabor and give birth to their broods, the *iljjocks* and the seamones. As time passed on, the *iljjocks* settled around the equatorial Krill forest and the seamones settled in the southern Seamone Ocean.

Aakaa did not build himself a *beshel*. Rather, he dug a burrow on the ocean bed. The burrow was a labyrinthine maze of underground chambers and very much like his old lair in the *bor*! A halo surrounded the burrow, the radiance being emitted by the *Orgis* that Aakaa carried in his soul! Many seamones could be seen basking in the radiance, trying to cool their tortured souls. No one dared to enter the burrow, lest they did not come out of it alive!

Even now, as his *zolboat* dived down to the burrow, Blumone longed to feel the soothing radiance of *Orgis*. 'O wonder,' he sighed with relief, as his *zolboat* entered the halo. 'If this is the effect outside the burrow, what would it be inside?' he thought deliriously.

Blumone leapt out of the *zolboat* and swam inside God Aakaa's hallowed abode. He was not disappointed. The glow inside was more potent than the radiance of the three *Nors* shining in the sky. Waves of rapture shook his soul, making him shiver with delight!

Confident that he would be rewarded with his very own drop of *Orgis*

for the information he had brought, he glided into an inner chamber and called, 'God Aakaa!'

No one answered. Etched on the walls were eerie images made from *zol* crystals. 'My lord!' he yelled loudly.

'Quiet!' a seamone rasped, entering the chamber hurriedly. He was Aakaa's slave. Impressed by the human practice of slavery, Aakaa had taken many slaves recently.

'Eeeeeee...eeeeee...' horrifying shrieks echoed in the chamber suddenly, startling Blumone. He gulped and looked at the slave with fright.

'God Aakaa is in the chamber of *coons*!' the slave informed him.

The chamber of *coons* was an underground cavern where dead bodies were stacked; Aakaa had killed these seamones in a fit of rage. The victims had died before passing on their souls to their young and had become *coons*, or corpses with souls still trapped inside!

The deathly cries echoed in the chamber again. This time, Blumone was not frightened. He recognized the cries - they did not belong to seamone *coons*. Rather, they belonged to the human souls in the *Nors*!

'Is he wringing the human souls?' Blumone asked with glee.

'Yes!' the slave nodded, 'He likes to hear them loud!'

The slave was very talkative and Blumone decided to take full advantage of it. 'How does Aakaa make them scream in normal voices?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, he is adept at crisscrossing divine connections,' the slave whispered. 'Somehow, the voice boxes of the *coons* lying in the chamber vibrate when the human souls scream in the *Nors*!'

'What?' Blumone cried, aghast. 'But, the souls of the *coons* are screaming themselves!'

'That is what everyone thinks! Aakaa cannot tolerate their screams and he has silenced them with drops of *Orgis*!'

'The dead have been given drops of *Orgis*?' Blumone cried in disbelief, 'When the living have been denied?'

'Yes,' the slave nodded bitterly. Since he had become Aakaa's slave, he had come to know of many shocking things.

Blumone's rat-face twisted with hatred. He remembered how his

fathers had begged Aakaa for *Orgis* and had not got any. The shrieks echoed again and this time, clear voices could be heard. They were coming from the mouths of the seamone *coons* but belonged to the human souls in the *Nors*.

‘Shhh...let me hear them,’ Blumone rasped eagerly, ‘I want to hear what they are crying about.’

‘I hear them the whole day!’ the slave cackled with glee.

Blumone sat down on a wooden stub and strained to listen to the wailing voices of the human souls. This was not the first time that he had eavesdropped on such voices. Why, only yesterday, when he was loitering outside the burrow, he had overheard a voice tell Aakaa that the human Yaduk was safe with the mountain god. He had gone to the iljjock settlement to check if it was true and he had discovered to his utter shock that indeed, Yaduk was alive and present on Seabor!

A terrifying wail shook the chamber and Blumone cackled with delight. Titillated to the core of his soul, he exclaimed, ‘Bless God Aakaa!’

‘You mean...bless Goddess Myrhim!’ the slave corrected him, tossing some *kiks* in his mouth.

‘Myrhim?’ Blumone asked with surprise.

‘Aakaa’s mysterious connection to the *Nors*...happened because of one of Goddess Myrhim’s lesser known mistakes!’

Blumone gaped. ‘What mistake?’

‘While creating the humans, she accidentally knocked tiny shards of Aakaa’s soul in their souls. Lo, the moment human souls migrated to the divine continuum in the *Nors* after death, a connection formed instantly between them and God Aakaa!’

Blumone’s eyes bulged in disbelief. ‘How do you know?’ he asked incredulously.

‘God Aakaa told me himself!’

‘What else did he tell you?’

‘One fine day...Aakaa heard strange voices coming from the *Nors*. He almost fainted with shock when he discovered that he was a divine father to the humans!’

‘Divine father to the humans...how disgusting!’ Blumone spat, sparks of jealousy crackling out of his eyes.

‘Well, he is connected to their souls like he is connected to ours. In a way, he is their father too!’

‘What did he do...cuddle them?’ Blumone asked bitterly. This information would spread like wildfire in the seamone community.

‘God Aakaa never cuddles...he only wrings! In this case, he was too stunned to do anything!’

‘Why?’

‘He saw that the humans were engaged in doing the most important task in the universe...they were charting the future!’

‘So?’

‘He realized that he could control the future through them...and almost fainted!’

‘Why?’

‘The joy wrecked havoc his deathly soul!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Blumone snickered.

‘Likewise, Iisuu almost fainted with despair when he learned about Aakaa’s new divine connection!’ the slave guffawed.

‘That is when they clashed bitterly,’ Blumone guessed. ‘And have been clashing ever since!’

‘Presently, God Aakaa is desperately trying to subjugate the human souls in the *Nors*!’

‘And God Iisuu is trying to stop him by all possible means!’

‘Correct. I reckon God Aakaa will win in the end!’

The two had become so engrossed in their conversation that they did not notice that the screams had stopped and another slave had entered the room. ‘God Aakaa will meet you now...’ he said urgently.

‘Oh!’ Blumone leapt from his resting stub. So, Aakaa had finished his hideous session. The slave pointed to an adjoining chamber and Blumone rushed into it eagerly.

‘My lord...’ he whispered meekly, looking around for the terrifying divine creature.

Aakaa was lying on a wooden cot. He was roasting in the radiation of the *Nors* pouring down the rooftop windows of the burrow. He had a lithe

seamone body and he radiated a divine glow like Iisuu and Myrhim. His family – an *enccollie*, a *besring* and a large *dug* - were suckling his nodules noisily.

Blumone glided to him hurriedly and kissed his tail. ‘My lord, I have seen Yaduk... the human!’ he stammered fearfully.

Aakaa gave Blumone a venomous look and growled, ‘What?’

Blumone gulped nervously. Aakaa face was the truly frightening and his stench very foul. But, the *Orgis* in his soul made the ambience very rapturous! He took in deep breaths of the stench and said, ‘The human Yaduk is on Seabor...Iisuu and Myrhim have been hiding him.’

Aakaa was clearly stunned. Obviously, he had not bothered to check himself. ‘How long has he been here?’ he growled in anger.

‘Three days, my lord!’ Blumone babbled excitedly. ‘He has his own *beshel* in the settlement...and has an iljjock soulmate too!’

‘Nonsense...’ Aakaa growled. ‘An iljjock cannot be a human’s soulmate!’

‘My lord,’ Blumone whispered in a low voice. ‘You don’t know what is going on over there!’

‘What is going on?’ Aakaa growled in a vile voice, giving the seamone a last chance to answer before he wrung his soul to death.

‘Myrhim has created a “unique” soulmate for him...’ Blumone blurted and then told Aakaa all that he had seen and heard in the iljjock settlement. Yaduk’s soulmate was an iljjock with a human soul!

Blumone had just finished his tale when a tall seamone entered the chamber. He was Triar Seamone, the leader of the seamones. He was of noble lineage and had come to apprise Aakaa of important issues.

‘Are you aware that a human is on Seabor?’ Aakaa asked him sarcastically.

Surprisingly, the Triar was not shocked. ‘Yes, my lord,’ he murmured calmly, ‘His name is Yaduk.’

God Aakaa trembled with rage. Blumone took one look at him and almost fled. He was sure both, he and the Triar, were about to be killed!

Surprisingly, the Triar showed no fear and stood unshaken.

‘Are you aware that he also has a soulmate?’

‘Yes. Her name is Elli iljjock.’ The Triar remarked calmly.

Blumone looked at the Triar in shock. So, he had been spying on the iljjocks too! ‘Correct,’ Blumone intervened excitedly. ‘Elli has two souls – one iljjock and one human!’

God Aakaa got up from his cot and to Blumone’s consternation, began gliding around him in circles. He bowed his head and waited for Aakaa to wring his soul. But, Aakaa did no such thing. Rather, he stopped by Triar Seamone and snarled, ‘Have you seen this human Yaduk yourself?’

The Triar looked at Aakaa with narrowed eyes. He was in a very dangerous mood and had to be placated very quickly, ‘Yes, my lord!’

‘Who was he with?’

‘God Iisuu.’

Aakaa drew in his breath sharply. ‘What was they talking about?’

‘Iisuu was telling the human that he has to go back to Earth as soon as possible.’

‘Go back to Earth?’ Aakaa growled bemusedly, ‘Why?’

‘Exactly, my lord,’ the Triar remarked. ‘Nothing can be achieved by going back to Earth when the humans who matter...are the ones up in the Nors!’

Aakaa stared at the Triar and burst into laughter. The laughter echoed in the chamber eerily and Blumone cackled along nervously. ‘My dear Triar, you have absolutely no idea of what’s going on in Iisuu’s head!’ Aakaa guffawed.

‘What is going on?’ the Triar asked with bewilderment.

Aakaa stopped laughing and became thoughtful. Tossing a few *kiks* in his mouth he growled slowly, ‘Iisuu can fool you. But, he cannot fool me!’

The Triar and Blumone were not surprised to see Aakaa think calmly. He usually gathered his wits, which were formidable, whenever he sensed danger!

Aakaa paced in the room lost in deep thought. Just when the other two occupants thought that perhaps, he had forgotten about their presence, he turned to them and growled in a disturbed voice, ‘I think Iisuu is planning something very big!’

The Triar and Blumone stared in bewilderment.

‘Iisuu is planning to make a *human yoke*!’ Aakaa growled softly.

There was a long moment of shocked silence in the room as its occupants, including Aakaa himself, took in the import of the statement!

‘*The human yoke?*’ Triar Seamone exploded in disbelief. ‘How can the humans make a yoke when the seamones don’t have one yet?’

‘It is very simple,’ Blumone shivered. ‘They only need to have *divine strings* in their souls. The iljjocks will give them those by mating with them!’

‘Nonsense!’ Triar Seamone gasped, aghast.

‘I don’t think so,’ Blumone retorted scathingly. ‘Why do think Iisuu has brought a human to Seabor and is mating him to one of his iljjocks? So that he can be given a *divine string* and the task of making the human yoke can begin. And, while we stand arguing here...the human will go back to Earth and complete it!’

Lo, Blumone’s words had a cataclysmic effect. Aakaa lost his cool and the chamber filled with a very foul spoor of despair and anger. Smoldering with fierce rage, he growled, ‘Imagine the scenario...countless human souls connected seamlessly to each other ...Iisuu will rule over them like he rules over the iljjocks!’

The Triar trembled in alarm. ‘But, why is Iisuu making a yoke on Earth?’ he asked, flabbergasted, ‘Living humans are of no use to anyone!’

‘Fool...’ Aakaa growled irritably. ‘How long do humans take to die? Only *one* Seabor day! Within a day of the making of the yoke, their souls would have migrated to the *Nors* and carried the yoke with them. Iisuu will end up controlling the souls in the *Nors* like he controls the iljjocks here on Seabor!’

‘He will end up controlling the future too!’ Blumone cried, aghast.

‘But, this cannot happen...’ the Triar rasped angrily. ‘He will be stealing your dream from you, my lord!’

‘He has always stolen my dreams from me,’ Aakaa muttered in a low voice, his eyes blazing with hatred and jealousy.

‘What are we to do now?’ the Triar wondered in despair.

Aakaa paced in the chamber, murmuring distractedly to himself. Triar Seamone and Blumone exchanged distressed glances. If Iisuu ever succeeded in carrying out his grand plan- Aakaa would not only lose his cherished

dream, he would lose his sanity too!

‘Aaargh....’ Aakaa groaned hoarsely, slumping on the cot. His soul was on fire from the despair raging in it. Had it not been for the *Orgis* he was carrying, he would have fallen ill. Clutching his head with his hands, he growled, ‘I won’t be defeated...I will *kill* that human before that!’

‘Yes!’ Blumone cried, his eyes glinting vilely. ‘Let us kill Yaduk immediately!’

‘NO...’ Triar Seamone, the leader of seamones, refuted angrily. He was so angry that he raised his tail and gave Blumone a mighty whack!

‘Eeeek...’ Blumone shrieked, jumping away, ‘Why not?’

‘Because, Iisuu will destroy us all with a tiny flick of his wrist!’ the Triar yelled.

For one moment, Triar Seamone thought Blumone had hit him back. Because, his soul was wrung so hard that his eyes popped out! But, it was not Blumone. It was God Aakaa. He had wrung his soul from where he was sitting!

‘You are scared of Iisuu’s wrath...eh?’ Aakaa snarled, livid with hatred. ‘What about my wrath?’

‘Mercy...’ the Triar moaned in agony.

‘Coward...’ Aakaa growled, and let go of the old seamone.

The Triar collapsed on the floor and gasped with relief.

‘I am going to kill the human,’ Aakaa growled menacingly. ‘You want to stop me?’

‘No, my lord...’ the Triar gasped. He was almost at the end of his life and the only thing he aspired for now was a safe death. He did not want to end up as a *coon* by facing the wrath of either, Iisuu or Aakaa!

‘Good!’ Aakaa muttered. He lay down on his cot and closed his eyes.

Triar Seamone and Blumone stood in their places in silence. They knew what Aakaa was doing- he was looking for Yaduk with his divine sight!

‘So, this is Yaduk!’ Aakaa growled suddenly. He had found him in the *Kirll* forest. He was about to give Yaduk’s soul a tiny wring when suddenly he became aware that he was not alone – he was with other iljjocks. So, he just read his soul surreptitiously. The human’s soul was full of memories of his village.

‘I see another human roaming in *Kirll!*’ Aakaa said suddenly in surprise.

‘What?’ Blumone cried in astonishment, ‘Another human?’

‘That must be Elli iljjock,’ the Triar said haltingly. ‘She has two souls one of which is human.’

‘How strange!’ Aakaa mused, his eyes glinting dully, ‘Let’s have a look at her two souls!’

Lo, Aakaa took one look at Elli iljjock’s twin souls and began howling with eerie laughter!

‘What is it, my lord?’ Blumone asked eagerly. Triar Seamone also looked with interest.

‘You won’t believe this,’ Aakaa gasped, doubling over with laughter.

Blumone and the Triar stared, bewildered.

‘Well...well...Iisuu is so desperate to get a human mated to an iljjock...’he gasped between peals of laughter, ‘He has made Myrhim give Elli...almost perfect souls!’

‘You are right,’ Blumone cackled in agreement. ‘I heard the Iisuu say that she has perfect souls!’

‘Did he say that?’ Aakaa asked, writhing in the cot with laughter. ‘They are so perfect...that she is a universal soulmate!’

Blumone stopped laughing and looked at Aakaa, puzzled.

Triar Seamone frowned in confusion. ‘What do you mean...universal soulmate?’

Aakaa also stopped laughing and got up to toss a few *kiks* in his mouth. Calming down, he said in a measured voice, ‘Myrhim has created Elli’s souls in such a way that in no circumstance, she will fail to mate Yaduk. But, in doing so, she has made Elli compatible with everyone, human, iljjock and seamone!’

‘What?’ Blumone gasped in disbelief. ‘She can mate a seamone too?’

‘Yes, did you not hear what I just said?’

‘How is that possible?’ asked the old Triar. ‘Our souls are too weak to hold even one *divine string*.’

‘Ha...ha...’ Aakaa snickered with glee, ‘Myrhim has reduced the power of the *divine string* in Elli’s soul to fit Yaduk’s human soul. I reckon it

will fit a seamone's soul too!'

Blumone could not believe what he was hearing. Trembling with a sudden rush of excitement he blurted, 'Does this mean that Elli can be my soulmate and give me the *divine string*?'

The Triar looked horrified and he thundered, 'No...God Iisuu will kill us all!'

'Whack...' a sharp slap landed on the Triar's face, making him cry with agony. Lo, God Aakaa stood glowering over him, his face twisted with disgust. 'Coward,' he spat in anger. 'I will kill you before Iisuu even gets to you!'

'No!' the Triar collapsed on the floor again.

Aakaa left him and paced angrily in the room. Blumone chuckled with glee. He could not believe that Aakaa was supporting him over the great Triar Seamone, descendent of the noblest lineage of seamones.

'Capture Elli iljjock and bring her here!' Aakaa growled suddenly to Blumone, 'It is the only way.'

A long moment of shocked silence followed Aakaa's declaration.

The Triar forced himself to get up from the floor and looked panic-stricken. What was Aakaa saying? Capture an iljjock? Iisuu and Myrhim would know instantly and unleash their fury on the seamones.

Blumone, however, was thinking on another track. He was thinking about the prospect of attaining divine powers by mating Elli iljjock. Trembling with excitement, he crept near Aakaa and whispered, 'Should I go and get her, my lord?'

'Whack!' Aakaa struck him with his tail and flung him out of the room. 'OUT...and do not come back without her,' he bellowed after him.

'But Elli is betrothed to the human, my lord!' the Triar murmured nervously.

'Not anymore!' Aakaa sneered back. 'She is betrothed to all the seamones now!'

'All the seamones?' asked the Triar in a horrified whisper. 'What do you mean?'

'Instead of giving the divine string to the human,' Aakaa growled. 'She will give the string to all the seamones. Iisuu will not make the human

yoke! Rather, *I* will make the seamone yoke first!’

‘O wonder!’ Blumone clapped his hands with glee. He had not gone yet and was eavesdropping outside the chamber. Lest he got whacked again, he scampered quickly out of the burrow, leapt into his *zolboat* and sped to the *Kirll* forest to capture Elli iljock!

Triar Seamone exited from the burrow too. It was late in the night. He glided into his *zolboat* and chugged back home. Revolted by Aakaa’s vile plan, he just wanted to lie somewhere and despair in peace.

YADUK had spent the day telling the iljocks about his sojourn in the *bor*. Elli had been at the *holy shrine*, assisting all those who had queued to smell the joy and sorrow blooms.

By dusk, they were exhausted and they lay down under a tree to rest. While she fell asleep immediately, he was strangely restless. Myrhim’s conviction that Aakaa could be wringing the souls of his dead kin was bothering him to no end. Only Madho could have told Aakaa about his whereabouts on Seabor and he was very worried about him.

‘His soul is at peace now...’ Elli placed her hand lightly on his chest and smiled reassuringly.

Yaduk nodded, but not even her radiant smile could alleviate his fears.

‘Why don’t you ask God Iisuu in the morning?’ she suggested. ‘He comes to *Kirll* everyday to watch the *Nors* rise!’

‘All right...’ Yaduk agreed, closing his eyes. The nights on Seabor were short and he knew he would not get much sleep tonight.

Was Madho’s soul in God Aakaa’s captivity by any chance? He knew that only when he had learned the truth would he get any peace.

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Time: Yaduk’s sixth day on Seabor (3rd century AD on Earth)

THE BUZZING EARS

GOD IISUU arrived in *Kirll* before dawn the next day. The iljocks were fast asleep under the *Nahlu* trees and Yaduk was tossing restlessly. From the corner of his eye, he saw Iisuu’s halo wavering in the trees and he sat up in

surprise. God Iisuu was heading somewhere deep in the forest.

Yaduk got up quickly and ran behind him. He chased him to the top of a nearby hillock. The first rays of the *Nors* fell on this hillock and God Iisuu sat in penance over here, looking at the entire universe with his divine sight.

Iisuu sat down on a flat rock and closed his eyes. Yaduk was reminded of the holy sages who lived in the remote mountains of Lachvi. There, the morning breeze carried the sweet scent of pine. Here, the breeze carried the smoky aroma of the *Nahlu*.

Yaduk was wondering how to approach God Iisuu when the divine one looked in his direction and beckoned him with a radiant smile. ‘My lord, will you show me what’s happening on Earth right now?’ Yaduk went up to sit next to him.

‘Yes, my child,’ Iisuu replied with a laugh. He touched Yaduk’s nodules lightly with his palm and let Yaduk look at Earth through his divine sight.

Yaduk looked at his home in the Himalayan ranges. The mountains were as before, pristine and majestic. But, the villages were bigger and many cowherds had become farmers! In the plains, trade had increased both to the east and west. The Buddhist, Christian and Hindu scriptures had spread everywhere in the world!

‘The human creativity never ceases to amaze me. I learn new things every day,’ Iisuu said radiantly. ‘I was reading the verses of the *Bhagwad Gita* a little while ago!’

‘Writing has spread like fire on Earth,’ Yaduk shrugged. ‘Hatti has been after me to learn a script...but, it is beyond me!’

Iisuu smiled and showed him more glimpses of Earth. The Roman Empire had declined in the west and the Han dynasty has collapsed in the east. Wars and diseases were causing mass deaths everywhere. Disturbed, Yaduk pushed Iisuu’s hand away, breaking the connection.

‘Are you all right?’ Iisuu asked with concern.

‘No, I am not,’ Yaduk blurted. ‘My ears buzz and I hear strange rustling sounds.’

Iisuu rolled his eyes and mused over Yaduk’s problem. Suddenly he laughed loudly. ‘Myrhim may have made mistakes while creating your new

body. She is not perfect, you know.'

'I think it is something else,' Yaduk protested.

Iisuu looked at Yaduk perceptively. He read Yaduk's mind but still wanted him to say it aloud.

'I think God Aakaa may have taken my brother captive...he is here on Seabor and is calling for help!' Yaduk blurted with a shiver.

'It is not possible!' Iisuu replied after a moment's thought. 'The divine continuum inside the *Nors* is completely disassociated from the universe outside. No one can escape the *Nors* and come to Seabor!'

Yaduk was not convinced and he shook his head disbelievingly. 'But...Madho's soul escaped and came to the *bor*...I saw it there myself!'

'I cannot comment on what happened in the *bor* because the *bor* has mysterious ways. But your brother's soul is in God Hoon's care and no one can take him captive. Aakaa does reach out to the souls the *Nors*, but only for fleeting moments. He is too scared to be caught by God Hoon,' Iisuu said firmly.

'I see,' Yaduk frowned. Disappointed, he dropped the discussion. He was about to leave when he saw Goddess Myrhim striding towards them.

'Iisuu...' Myrhim said worriedly, 'You are sitting here...when there is mayhem everywhere!'

'What mayhem?' Iisuu asked, bewildered.

'Haven't you looked at Earth today?' Myrhim asked irritably.

'I was looking at it with Yaduk just now!'

'So many diseases...so many wars...so many people dying,' Myrhim wrung her hands in despair. 'It is not normal.'

'What do you mean?'

'Something is wrong.'

'What is wrong?'

'How do I know?' Myrhim snapped.

'What do you want me to do?' Iisuu sighed.

'Go to Earth immediately and fix the problem whatever it is.'

'I will go...but not immediately,' Iisuu said firmly. 'Not until Yaduk has been given divine powers. Why don't you go?'

‘I can’t go,’ Myrhim replied. ‘Aakaa is becoming dangerous by the day...I have to keep watch over him!’

‘What has he done now?’

‘Iisuu, you need to look at Seabor more than you look at Earth!’ the goddess scolded.

Iisuu looked at Seabor with his divine sight and was taken aback. ‘What is this scoundrel doing here in *Kirll*?’ he muttered angrily.

‘Who is it?’ Yaduk asked curiously. He had been listening to their conversation with interest.

‘Blumone is hiding behind the trees over there!’ Myrhim said gravely.

‘What?’ Yaduk exclaimed, looking around warily.

‘He is plucking kiks!’ Iisuu exclaimed, keeping his sight fixed on the annoying seamone.

‘Let him be,’ Myrhim advised.

‘No,’ Iisuu said heatedly, ‘Yaduk, run and tell all the iljjocks that he is around and they have to be careful!’

‘Yaduk, you need to be most careful,’ Myrhim warned. ‘Aakaa may have sent him to keep a watch on you.’

‘I will break his bones if he comes near me,’ Yaduk retorted.

‘He doesn’t have any,’ the goddess replied. ‘Reminds me...I have to create pigs and bats today!’

‘Pigs and bats?’ Yaduk exclaimed. ‘Here on Seabor?’

‘Yes,’ the goddess smiled. ‘We breed earthly animals!’

‘Where?’ Yaduk wondered in astonishment.

‘At the oceanic Harappa farms! They are full of earthly trees and animals. I created these farms to keep the seamones busy and out of trouble!’

‘Ha!’ Iisuu said scornfully. ‘Seamones can never keep out of trouble...one of these days, I should come with you and have a good look at these farms!’

‘You should...but you won’t,’ Myrhim complained. ‘Because you spend all your free time ogling at Earth!’

‘But, it is you who tells me to do it!’ Iisuu protested.

‘I tell you to study wars and diseases...not read poems and scrolls!’

Myrhim scolded, walking away in a huff.

‘Who studies wars and diseases?’ Iisuu scowled and then catching Yaduk’s eye, said sternly. ‘You run along and warn everybody about Blumone...and take care of yourself...beat the daylights out of any seamone that comes near you or Elli!’

‘But I have been told I cannot hit anyone...’

‘I am telling you now...you can beat the life out of any seamone who poses a danger to you!’

Having said that, Iisuu closed his eyes and got back to ogling at Earth! And, Yaduk scampered away to spend another wonderful day with Elli and the iljjocks!

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SARAMONE

THE Harappa farms were located on the bed of the Seamone Ocean, on the outskirts of the seamone settlement. God Aakaa had named the farms ‘Harappa’ after he had shockingly wiped out a human settlement of the same name on Earth!

The mishap occurred in the early days when Aakaa was becoming aware of his growing powers over earthly creatures. It so happened that one fine morning, Aakaa woke up to animal voices- thousand of grunts, moos, neighs and roars. Shocked, he realized that the voices were coming from the *Nors*.

‘Has God Hoon let the souls of animals in the *Nors* today?’ he wondered with bewilderment.

Hoon, the evil God of Death, decided who came in and went out of the *Nors*. Thousands of souls of dead creatures migrated into the *Nors* from Earth. Hoon decided who to keep and who to return. The souls of animals were invariably returned to Earth for rebirth.

‘Animals souls in the *Nors*?’ a seamone present in the chamber asked in surprise. He was Saramone. Saramone was the cleverest seamone at that time and had earned the rare privilege of being Aakaa’s companion.

Aakaa looked at him in confusion. As far as he knew, he had a divine connection to the humans and not the animals. Unless, of course, Myrhim had

been playing the fool with her scimitar!

‘Why don’t you look inside the *Nors* and find out,’ Saramone suggested.

‘Hoon will catch me...and wring me to death!’ Aakaa growled.

‘No, he won’t,’ Saramone grinned slyly. ‘Not if you looked from the chamber I have made for you!’

‘What chamber?’

‘Come with me,’ Saramone rasped excitedly. He took Aakaa to an underground chamber that he had been building over the past few days.

Aakaa entered the chamber to find the walls glowing eerily. Saramone had stacked the bodies of *coons* against the walls! These were seamones that Aakaa had killed and later, had been given drops of *Orgis*. This, to silence their screaming souls!

‘I have discovered that *Orgis* acts as a shield against divine sight!’ Saramone whispered with glee. ‘No one...not Iisuu or Myrhim...not even God Hoon can look inside this chamber and see what you are doing!’

‘Really?’ Aakaa exclaimed in disbelief.

From that day onwards, the chamber of *coons* had become Aakaa’s hideout. He did all his covert activities in there, including prying on the human souls at the *Nors*!

That day, he looked inside the *Nors* with Saramone. Countless of human souls were suspended in the divine continuum. They were chattering noisily to each other and to God Hoon, who was having a tough time trying to get them in some kind of order so that they served the purpose for which they had been created- to chart the course of the future intelligently!

Hoon had placed the human souls in a spiral formation. In the centre was a kernel and spiraling around it, were many fringes. Souls placed in the kernel had a dominant role in determining the course of future. Souls placed in the fringes contributed in decreasing order of their placement from the kernel.

‘Eeeek....’ Aakaa cried with fright, catching a glimpse of God Hoon’s formidable soul.

Hoon had punished Aakaa cruelly the last time he had caught him spying. He had ripped out all the *divine strings* from Aakaa’s soul, making

him lose all the divine powers he had got from the *bor*. Since then, Aakaa had been left with only the paltry connection to the souls in the *Nors* and the little divine sight and force that came with it!

‘What is God Hoon doing?’ Saramone asked, twisting his tail tightly around Aakaa’s tail. The seamones had their soul nodules in their tails and Saramone had latched to Aakaa’s soul to look inside the *Nors*!

‘He is sorting out the new arrivals in the *Nors*!’ Aakaa growled. ‘It is his favorite pastime!’

Saramone watched God Hoon curiously. He was surrounded by souls of humans who had just died on Earth and had migrated to the divine continuum in the *Nors*. Lo, the human souls were narrating the story of their lives to him and he appeared to be listening to their achievements with uncharacteristic patience and interest!

The shrillest was a group of architects from a settlement called Harappa. ‘We built a novel drainage system with bricks for our city!’ they declared proudly to God Hoon.

Hoon looked at what they had designed and was clearly impressed. He picked them up with his divine scimitar and placed them right in the kernel. The architects of Harappa would now lead everybody in charting the path to the future!

‘Puny junk!’ Aakaa spat, furious that the frail humans and not he, the mighty God Aakaa, were in charge of determining the future. He was about to reach out to the architects and wring their souls, when he heard the moos and the bleats again!

Lo, he suddenly saw souls of millions of horses, goats, cows, rabbits, rats, butterflies, insects, and what not. His divine sight clouded over as he saw countless germs too! ‘What the...’ he growled, bewildered.

‘My lord...’ Saramone gasped. ‘I think you have developed a connection to the animals living on Earth!’

‘I think Myrhim is being spiteful,’ Aakaa growled angrily.

‘Why do you say so?’

‘Who else can connect me to the animals like this? That foolish goddess...someone needs to take that scimitar away from her!’

Saramone frowned and thought hard. He was not the inventor of the *zolboat* and the most intelligent seamone for nothing. ‘I don’t think it is

Myrhim's doing,' he declared finally.

'Why is that?' Aakaa growled.

'Why will she give you access to her tools?'

'What tools?'

'The germs are her tools!' Saramone said brightly, 'She used germs to create the creatures on Earth. She will never give you access to them willingly!'

'But, I *do* have access to them now...and I am going to wring them hard!' Saramone stared wide-eyed as Aakaa wrung the souls of hundreds of germs on Earth. 'They are so boring...they don't squeal like the human souls!' Aakaa complained.

'My lord, I know what has happened!' Saramone rasped excitedly, his eyes crackling with sparks.

'What has happened?'

'Your powers have grown!'

'They have?' Aakaa asked in surprise.

'You get your powers from the souls in the *Nors*. The greater their numbers...greater are your powers. I reckon that the number of souls in the *Nors* has increased to a point whereby you have developed a faint connection to the creatures living on Earth!'

'Really?' exclaimed Aakaa in shock, 'Can I connect to the humans living on Earth too?'

'Maybe in the future...when you grow more powerful! Presently, though, you can exert your influence on the animals...sitting right here on Seabor!'

'Let me try!' Aakaa exclaimed. He tried exerting force on the souls of the animals. His influence was too weak to do anything to the larger animals but he found that he could play around with the tiny ones, particularly the germs that Myrhim had left behind!

Saramone was looking at Earth for the first time and he looked at the animals with amazement. Lo, they resembled the *iljocks* and *seamones* so closely! He was shocked to see the squirrels - Myrhim had given his ancestral face to the squirrels!

Suddenly, Saramone saw the germs. They were present everywhere

on Earth - in land, water and air. He looked at them as closely as he could.

‘Enough!’ Aakaa growled impatiently, pulling his tail away.

‘But, I was looking at their life-codes,’ Saramone complained. He was aware that Myrhim used life-codes to create creatures!

‘Germs are of no use to me,’ Aakaa snapped in irritation. ‘I am only interested in humans!’

‘That’s because you are not thinking,’ Saramone snapped back.

Had it been someone else, Aakaa would have wrung him to death. Not Saramone. Saramone was very useful and Aakaa valued him very much. ‘What do you mean?’ he frowned.

‘These germs can boost your powers like anything!’ Saramone said slowly.

‘Really? They look useless to me!’

‘They won’t be useless if we make them mutate!’

‘Mutate into what?’

‘Into germs of terrible diseases,’ Saramone rasped excitedly. ‘Large populations will die and their souls will throng the *Nors*, greatly boosting your powers!’

Aakaa was thunderstruck. He looked at Saramone for a long moment and then cackled with fiendish delight, ‘O wonder! I can see it...one fine day, I am going to get up and find that I control the entire human population living on Earth!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Saramone laughed. ‘Let us try mutating the germs right away,’ he urged, his eyes crackling with feverish excitement.

‘Oh yes,’ Aakaa replied exultantly, ‘Let’s do it!’

Harappa was the first place on Earth where Aakaa tried his new influence. It was one of largest settlements on Earth on that day. Saramone stood by his side, his tail placed firmly on his tail. Aakaa reached out to the germs in Harappa and by using divine force, made the harmless ones mutate into germs of leprosy and tuberculosis!

The settlement was wiped away as thousands died. Indeed, the *Nors* were flooded with wailing human souls. They had divine energy and that energy flowed transparently into Aakaa’s soul, jolting him with a sudden burst of power.

Aakaa became so delirious with joy that he rewarded Saramone by giving him what he had given to no living seamone to that day - a drop of *Orgis*!

Oh, how *Orgis* transformed Saramone's life. The divine venom soothed his tortured soul and he felt at peace. This drop of *Orgis* would be passed down for generations, freeing them from despair and misery.

Because of the calm releases into his soul, Saramone became even cleverer. He convinced Myrhim to create earthly animals on Seabor. So that the seamones could amuse themselves and be at peace, he told her. When, his intention was to design new strains of germs and spread havoc on Earth!

Myrhim agreed and created the Harappa farms on the floor of the Seamone Ocean. It was a wonder, actually - the flora and fauna was earthly, but adapted to the oceans of Seabor. Tall banyan, mango, fir and spruce trees grew on the ocean bed through which swam flocks of deer, zebras, rabbits, rats, birds and butterflies! Clinging to them were thousands of germs that Myrhim had used while creating!

Saramone began working on the germs immediately with a close coterie. Scores of germ beds were built in the farm to breed virulent strains of germs. The seamones worked on the germ beds night and day, and almost everyday, Saramone carried a small vial of new killer germs to Aakaa!

Aakaa exerted divine force on the germs on Earth and changed their life codes to match that of the killer germs. Lo, a slew of epidemics spread on Earth. With every epidemic, thousands died and their souls flooded the *Nors*. Aakaa began receiving dizzying boosts of power almost everyday!

Tremendously pleased with Saramone's effort, Aakaa made him the leader of the seamones and gave him the title of "Triar"! Saramone came to be called the Triar Seamone and his lineage came to be accepted as a noble lineage.

Soon, Saramone died and his soul passed on to his infant. The infant was given no name. For, he was of noble lineage and the new Triar. He and his descendants would simply be called Triar Seamone.

THE present Triar Seamone felt like a pale shadow of his great ancestor Saramone. Aakaa had kicked and derided him and he was sure that he was the first in his noble lineage to have been treated like this. He lay moping on a cot in the ocean-bed Harappa farms, wishing fervently that God Aakaa

would stop obsessing over the humans and focus on being a good divine father to the seamones!

‘That cannot happen, dear child!’ a faint voice echoed from his soul. It was the voice of his ancestors including the worthy Saramone!

As the seamones did not have a yoke for support, the soul strings that they inherited from their ancestors remained active in their souls and often spoke to them to give them support and guidance!

‘I want to be a good leader, O fathers!’ he cried to his ancestors.

‘Nonsense!’ shot down the fathers, ‘You have to be good only to Aakaa.’

‘Aakaa makes me feel sick!’

‘The *Orgis* has gone to your head!’ the fathers yelled.

The Triar mused sullenly. Indeed, the *Orgis* that Saramone had earned kept him peaceful. He did not easily give in to feelings of despair like the other seamones. Only when humans were discussed, did he become spiteful and angry.

‘You worry about the humans too much,’ the fathers said.

‘They make me sick too...’ the Triar moaned. The humans and their culture had corrupted Seabor completely. From the metallic *beshels* and *zolboats* built by the seamones, to the pots and pans used by the *iljjocks*, everything seemed to be inspired by the humans. Even the cot he was lying upon was a human object!

‘Do something so that they make Aakaa sick!’ the fathers muttered wryly.

‘Ha!’ the Triar retorted scornfully. God Aakaa was neck deep into the human way of life. Slaves had to be positioned in his burrow after he wrung the soul of a human king and discovered his opulent and debauched way of life. The Triar had expressed his disapproval on making his people work as slaves. Aakaa had responded by giving his soul a very hard and painful wring.

‘Forget it!’ his fathers sighed. ‘Why don’t you groom yourself...it will be good for you.’

‘Phwee...’ the Triar whistled to his creatures. He had slept the night at the farm and it was now early morning.

A *besring*, *enccollie* and a *dug* leapt from a bush to latch onto his nodules. They suckled vigorously and he felt the heaviness in his body ease. A little while later, feeling lighter and refreshed, he went for a long swim around the farm.

A rich variety of foliage, animals and fishes lived on the ocean floor. ‘Ugh!’ he spat, repulsed by them all. The creatures were all earthlings. Deer, cows, rabbits, bears, monkeys, lions and even bats and rats had adapted to the underwater farm. They were used for testing new germs, to be given to Aakaa for replication on Earth.

Aakaa had always considered Myrhim as gullible and foolish. And, his ancestor Saramone had proved this belief by persuading her to create this farm of earthly germs and creatures. For days now, the seamones had been breeding germs on this farm and Myrhim had not picked up anything wrong. She saw their activities with her omnipresent sight, but she never understood them for what they were. She thought that the seamones were amusing themselves with the earthly creatures like the iljjocks amused themselves with jewelry, pots and pans!

Triar seamone chuckled as he swam by a flock of stags and hinds. It was a wonder that so many seamones were working on the germ beds in these farms and Myrhim and Iisuu were completely oblivious to it!

‘But, Blumone’s act will not go unnoticed!’ his fathers warned worriedly.

‘I know!’ the Triar fumed. ‘But, it is God Aakaa’s idea to abduct Elli iljjock...he wants to make the seamone yoke!’

‘Aakaa is inviting doom...act with wisdom, dear child!’ the fathers urged.

Even the vilest of seamones spoke wisely after death. So, the Triar mused deeply on what his fathers had said. It was true. Aakaa had a long history of inviting doom. Myrhim had almost killed him once for mauling a baby iljjock. God Hoon, the evil god of death, had punished him very severely on various occasions! Aakaa dwelled in unbearable suffering for days after such incidents and the entire seamone community bore the brunt of the suffering.

What would happen if Myrhim or Hoon came to know that Blumone was on his way to capture an iljjock with the intent of forcefully mating her?

Triar Seamone shivered with fear. It would be the end of all seamones!

‘Farrmone...Jerrmone...Melimone...’he summoned the seamones working on the farm.

‘Yes, Triar?’ they replied in surprise.

‘Run and stop Blumone immediately,’ he directed them urgently, ‘You will find him near *Kirll*.’

‘Stop him...how?’ they asked, bewildered.

‘Beat him up...do whatever you want!’ he snapped. ‘But bring him here!’

The seamones looked at the Triar in shock and disbelief. ‘Blumone will die a *coon*!’ they stammered.

‘Do as I say immediately,’ he thundered angrily. ‘Or we will all die as *coons*!’

The seamones exchanged worried glances. They had to obey the Triar - he and his noble lineage had always protected the seamones. Abandoning their chores, they jumped into a *zolboat* and headed towards the *Kirll* forest. They were determined to stop Blumone from whatever he was doing and haul him to the Triar.

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BLUMONE

Time: Yaduk’s seventh day on Seabor (4th century AD)

THIS morning Yaduk woke up feeling very happy. The *Nors* were up in the sky and shooting radiation fiercely. Suddenly, he remembered the reason behind his happiness- his soulmate Elli! Oh, what a day they had spent together yesterday.

They had laughed so loudly while running behind the *saykriles* to gather kiks. And, giggled so naughtily when splashing in the boiling waters of the bay. And, sighed so dreamily when looking into each other’s eyes. The magical haze surrounding them had been so intense that it had surprised all the others!

Elli was unusually creative because of her twin souls. The motifs that she carved on Pikki and Jerro’s *beshel* were so exquisite that the entire iljjock community had been spellbound. Yaduk had helped her make the motifs and

was so smitten by her that he could not bear to look at anything else but her!

Even now, he longed for a glimpse of her stunningly beautiful doe-face. 'Elli!' he called, looking around for her. Surprisingly, she was not with the other iljjocks.

'Pikki...Jerro...' he called, 'Have you seen Elli?'

Pikki and Jerro were almost inseparable now. They were to be married later in the day and were chomping kiks to produce brilliant zol crystals.

'No,' Pikki replied, coming over. His mouth was stuffed with kiks.

'I haven't seen Elli since morning,' Jerro piped in. 'Where is she?'

'I don't know,' Yaduk replied uneasily.

'She must have gone for grooming with the other iljjocks,' Pikki said reassuringly. 'Let us go the bay...I am sure we will find her there!'

Yaduk nodded and the three began walking slowly towards the bay. While Pikki and Elli continued gulping kiks, Yaduk looked anxiously at all the iljjocks they passed. Elli was nowhere to be seen and he longed fervently to get a glimpse of her.

Pikki noticed his anguish and teased him, 'What's wrong with you, Yaduk?'

'I really don't know,' Yaduk sighed, his eyes searching desperately for Elli.

'I know...it is called pure iljjock love!' Jerro laughed loudly.

'That's not possible,' Yaduk muttered.

'Why?'

'Because, I am a human!'

'All right...pure human love, then!' Jerro chuckled, nudging Pikki.

'I agree,' Pikki guffawed.

Yaduk smiled at them and admitted shyly, 'I don't know what it is... but when Elli looks at me...'

'Your heart comes to a standstill?' Pikki grinned.

Yaduk grinned back and continued, 'And when she speaks to me....'

'She tweaks all the strings in your soul?' Jerro grinned knowingly.

'When she touches me I feel like....' Yaduk sighed with a dazed

expression on his face.

‘Squeezing her toe hard?’

‘What? Why would I do that?’

‘To produce brilliant zol crystals!’ Jerro sighed wistfully.

‘Are you mad?’ Yaduk retorted. ‘I only feel like....’

‘You feel like...kissing her?’ Jerro said slowly, reading Yaduk’s mind.

‘Ugh...only Hatti does that...its disgusting!’ Pikki cried.

‘No, it isn’t...’ Yaduk protested.

The argument stopped as they had reached the bay and they had to look for Elli. ‘She is not here...’ Yaduk whispered, his face ashen with worry.

‘What?’ Pikki cried in surprise. ‘Where is she, then?’

‘Pikki, I am feeling uneasy,’ Yaduk blurted suddenly.

‘What do you mean?’ Pikki asked in alarm.

‘It is like Elli is pulling my soul,’ Yaduk replied, bewildered. ‘Can that happen?’

‘Of course,’ Jerro replied. ‘Being her soulmate, you will feel her distress immediately!’

Yaduk turned numb, ‘Elli is in trouble then!’

Pikki stared at him blankly for a moment and then yelled loudly to the iljjocks in the bay, ‘Everybody...come out and search for Elli!’

The iljjocks stopped splashing and looked at Pikki in alarm. ‘What’s wrong?’ they asked in unison.

‘Elli iljjock is in trouble...’ Pikki yelled. ‘Spread out and search for her...she should be here somewhere.’

Without a moment’s hesitation, all the iljjocks came out of the water and spread in the *Kirll* forest to look for her. Yaduk wandered, his anxiety increasing with every passing moment. ‘Elli...Elli...’ he yelled, running between the trees.

‘Pikki!’ Jerro cried suddenly, ‘Come here....’ He had climbed to the top of the hillock and he could see as far as the shore. A *zolboat* was bobbing in the shallows!

Pikki raced to the spot where Jerro was standing. ‘It is Blumone’s

zolboat!’ he cried in shock. ‘What’s he doing here?’

‘Have you found Elli?’ Yaduk yelled, running up the hillock. He had also heard Jerro’s cry.

‘No. But, Blumone is somewhere near!’ Jerro replied, pointing to the shore.

Yaduk’s eyes widened with shock the moment he saw the *zolboat* bobbing in the water. ‘Elli is in that boat...and she is calling me!’ he cried, leaping down the hillock.

Pikki and Jerro leapt behind Yaduk. They were joined by scores of other iljjocks on the way down. Soon, a huge horde of iljjocks was hurtling down to the shore.

‘Aaaggh...’ a voice groaned in pain as the iljjocks ran over a pile of dry leaves. The horde stopped and looked at the pile with surprise. Yaduk leapt forward and brushed away the leaves quickly. Lo, it was Blumone!

He was lying on the ground, his hands and tail tied together. He was groaning loudly because he had been thrashed and was bruised all over. ‘Blumone, what are you doing here?’ Pikki asked sharply.

Blumone grunted in reply.

‘Where’s Elli?’ Yaduk asked angrily.

‘I don’t...know,’ Blumone replied haltingly.

The iljjocks glared at the seamone angrily. Blumone was clearly lying. Before anyone could say anything else, Yaduk picked up a fallen branch and brought it smashing down on the seamone’s head!

The iljjocks stepped back in alarm. ‘Stop, Yaduk!’ Pikki cried, aghast. ‘You cannot hit him like this.’

‘I know where Elli is!’ Yaduk yelled. ‘He was trying to harm her!’

‘Nooooo...’ Blumone moaned,

Yaduk threw away the stick and bolted down to the *zolboat* to find Elli, unaware that God Iisuu had also arrived on the scene!

‘Blumone what are you doing here?’ God Iisuu asked sharply.

The iljjocks turned in surprise to find God Iisuu standing behind them. Elli had tugged at his soul for help. Startled, he had come rushing to *Kirll*.

‘I think I am dying,’ Blumone wailed, clutching his head with his

hands. He was in a trauma. Not in his wildest thoughts, had he imagined that he would be beaten up like this. ‘That human tried to kill me with a stick...’ he shrieked hysterically.

‘Why have you come here?’ Iisuu repeated, his face dark and forbidding.

Blumone trembled violently. He was aware that Iisuu had the power to pry open his soul and force the truth out of him. ‘I came to capture Elli iljjock!’ he whispered fearfully.

A wave of shock ran through the iljjocks.

‘What do you mean...capture?’ Iisuu asked, his eyes crackling with rage.

‘Elli is betrothed to me...’ the seamone rasped. ‘God Aakaa has declared that she shall be my soulmate.’ Before he could explain any further, Elli staggered out of the *zolboat*.

Yaduk had found her tied to a *crank* inside. He had untied her and was now helping her walk steadily.

‘Elli, my child!’ Iisuu cried hoarsely, shocked to see her bruised all over.

‘My lord,’ Elli gasped. ‘Blumone captured me when I was sleeping. He carried me to his *zolboat*...but, three seamones came out from nowhere... they hit Blumone and threw him in the forest before fleeing!’

The iljjocks were dumbfounded and their eyes bulged with shock. The seamones had taken to abducting iljjocks and beating other seamones? What was Seabor coming to?

Iisuu gazed at Elli’s bruises and his body began trembling with rage. Such was the power of his rage that the ground quaked and the water on the shore swirled stormily.

Blumone screamed, ‘Forgive me, my lord...’ He feared that the moment of his death was near.

His premonition was right. God Iisuu turned into a mountain of fury. Bolts of lightning crackled from his eyes and within moments, Blumone was burnt to death.

The iljjocks quaked with fright to see the seamone’s charred corpse. The body lay dead, but the eyes still glinted dully. Blumone’s soul was

trapped inside his body. He was now a *coon*.

‘Dump him in his *zolboat* and send him back to Aakaa!’ Iisuu spat out with rage.

‘Yes!’ Pikki croaked, shivering violently. Using divine force, he lifted Blumone’s corpse and dumped it in the *zolboat*. Unaware of how the cranks worked, he pulled all of them. The *zolboat* started with a jerk and zigzagged wildly to disappear in the ocean.

God Iisuu’s face wore a very grim look. ‘I want Elli and Yaduk to be married today,’ he declared harshly, ‘Right after Pikki’s marriage to Jerro!’

‘But, we have not filled our pits yet,’ Elli protested.

‘All right’ he retorted. ‘You have the day to fill them up...I will conduct both the marriages tomorrow morning!’

Having said that, Iisuu left. The iljjocks gathered around Elli to have a look at her bruises. ‘They are not fatal...Yaduk should be able to heal them!’ Jerro remarked with relief.

‘I can heal Elli?’ Yaduk asked, bewildered.

‘Yes, you can...because you are her soulmate,’ Pikki nodded.

‘Elli knows...she will tell you,’ Jerro added.

Assured that Elli will be taken care of, the iljjocks began leaving. Soon, Elli and Yaduk were left alone.

‘Tell me quickly...’ Yaduk expected Elli to ask him to pick herbs from the forest. Instead, she leaned back on a tree and sighed, ‘Do you still find wiggling bellies silly?’

‘No, not at all! I am quite used to it now...why?’

‘Because, only your nodules can heal me!’

‘Sure!’ Yaduk went up to her and put his arms around her.

He was not prepared for what happened next. Lo, the moment their nodules brushed fleetingly, he was hit by a wave of rapture so intense that he almost fainted!

Elli was affected just as powerfully. Her eyes became hazy and her face lit up with a dazed glow.

He stole a shy glance at her loins. Lo, her nodules were moist and standing erect! The sight of them made heat creep up his legs and he felt a powerful longing to be very intimate with her. How, he was still not clear!

Elli caressed his engorged nodules, making him tremble with wild rapture. Just when he thought his knees would give in, she stood on tiptoe and brushed his lips lightly with hers! 'Is this the kiss you wanted?' she asked unsurely.

'Yes!' he replied hoarsely, his eyes molten with desire. Her lips were so scorching that he was surprised that he was not on fire!

Elli saw him shudder and let go of all her inhibitions. She pulled him hard upon her elfin body and let their nodules grind fiercely. Showers of sparks flew out of them, jolting them with waves of blinding rapture.

What happened next became a lasting memory for both of them, to be stored in their soul strings. They began gyrating rhythmically. Each gyration made them climb higher up the mountain of passion. Soon, the passion became so heightened that they thought they would explode. And, explode they did – by breaking into powerful spasms that released the pent up passion in magical waves of rapture.

Later, when they had come out of the magical haze, Yaduk was taken aback to see thick sap sticking to his and Elli's loins. The nodules had squirted it out! He began wiping it away when she stopped him. 'This is what will heal me,' she said huskily. 'Rub it on my bruises!'

Astonished, Yaduk rubbed the sap on Elli's skin vigorously. He could not bear to see the smallest bruise on her body now!

AAKAA was sleeping in his burrow when a scream pierced his soul. 'Who is that?' he growled angrily. It was Blumone! Now that he was now a *coon*, his soul was screaming. It was a scream that only his divine father, God Aakaa, could hear!

'Blast the fool...' Aakaa thundered, as the screams became more piercing and louder, 'Is someone here?'

'My lord?' a slave whispered, gliding unobtrusively into the room.

'Iisuu has killed that fool...' Aakaa groaned, clutching his head with his hands, 'Tell someone to bring his dead body here so that I can shut him up.'

The slave left hurriedly to dispatch the message when he heard a commotion outside. Triar seamone, the leader of seamones, had arrived. Shockingly, he was carrying Blumone's *coon*! The seamones had found

Blumone 's *zolboat* coursing wildly in the Seamone Ocean and had intercepted it to retrieve his dead body.

Triar seamone chuckled to himself as he carried Blumone's corpse to Aakaa. He had managed to stop the fool successfully. He entered Aakaa's chamber and dumped the dead body on the floor in front of him. The body was wasted but the eyes glittered eerily. Blumone's soul was screaming to be free.

'Quiet!' Aakaa yelled, holding his head in despair. He quickly transferred a drop of *Orgis* from his soul to Blumone's soul and the screams died down.

'To think he was scheming to make us all *coons*!' the Triar muttered covertly to his fathers. 'When he cannot take the screams of one *coon*?'

'Take him away!' Aakaa growled, kicking the corpse. His slaves picked the corpse hurriedly carried him to the chamber of *coons*.

Aakaa gave the Triar a withering glance and growled, 'Do you know what a human king would do if one of his soldiers was killed like this?'

'No, my lord,' the Triar replied, bewildered.

'He would declare war!' Aakaa scowled angrily.

'But, Blumone's dead!'

'What do you mean?'

'How can we go to war against a dead seamone?'

'Not against Blumone you old fool!' Aakaa exploded with rage, 'I am talking about a war against Iisuu and his retarded brood!'

'War against God Iisuu?' the Triar gasped in disbelief.

'Yes, it is time I killed a few of his people.'

'But, we could all die as *coons*,' the Triar panicked.

'I don't care!' Aakaa growled derisively.

'But...'

'But, what?' Enraged, Aakaa gave the Triar's soul one hard and cruel wring!

'Mercy, my lord...' the Triar pleaded, writhing with excruciating pain.

Aakaa let go of him and began pacing around the chamber restlessly.

The Triar slumped on the ground and gasped.

‘I want you to start make weapons immediately,’ Aakaa declared suddenly. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ the Triar groaned. ‘But, all my people are working on the germ beds...to spread diseases on Earth!’

‘Forget the diseases,’ Aakaa retorted angrily. ‘I have decided to make the seamone yoke first. And, for that you will have to...’

‘Capture Elli iljjock?’ asked the Triar, horrified.

‘Yes,’ Aakaa growled harshly. ‘I want you to capture Elli iljjock and bring her here!’

Having made his wish known, the cruel divine father that he was, Aakaa kicked the Triar out of his chamber.

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THE MARRIAGE

Time: Yaduk’s eighth day on Seabor (5th century AD)

YADUK decided that Elli would be a proper wife of his. She would be married to him in accordance to the traditions of his village, Lachvi!

To ensure the same, Yaduk decided to approach God Iisuu. He rose before dawn and went straight to the hillock where Iisuu could be found everyday. He found him sitting on a rock, surrounded by a halo of radiance.

Iisuu was waiting for the first rays of the *Nors* to fall on him. His eyes were closed and myriad expressions were flitting on his face. Yaduk guessed that he was probably looking at Earth!

Indeed, that was what he was doing! ‘Yaduk...come and look,’ he pulled his hand. ‘Look at what the Mayans have built!’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Yaduk replied, placing Iisuu’s hand on his nodules so that he could look at Earth through Iisuu’s divine sight.

Yaduk saw a congested town full of limestone platforms, carved altars, step pyramids and lavishly decorated palaces. ‘It is magnificent!’ he remarked admiringly.

‘The Mayans have studied the stars to build that!’

Yaduk shook his head in disbelief. ‘They are just too clever for me!’

he exclaimed.

‘Ha...ha...you are speaking like an iljjock now!’

Inadvertently, Yaduk looked at his home- the Himalayan mountain range. They stood rugged and unchanging, even though the world around them was changing rapidly.

Down in the plains, the Guptas ruled a massive empire. Yaduk saw large towns and even larger armies, equipped with thousands of horses, spears and bows and arrows. Traders and merchants abounded, carrying wares that he did not recognize. The royal court was gilded with gold and the nobles wore ostentatious ornaments and clothes!

‘Writing has become prolific and the humans are rapidly building their knowledge because of that,’ Iisuu observed. ‘The curious ones are looking at the sun and moon with instruments. There is tremendous progress in the fields of literature, art and science. I was reading the poet Kalidasa’s delightful compositions when you came!’

‘I am sure the cowherds are still the same!’ Yaduk shrugged, removing Iisuu’s hand from his nodules.

‘Well, the social fabric has changed a lot since your time,’ Iisuu replied with a smile, ‘Now, tell me what brings you here?’

Yaduk hesitated for a moment and then said quickly, ‘May I get married to Elli in front of the holy fire?’

‘Of course,’ Iisuu agreed without hesitation, ‘Is there anything else?’

‘Never mind.’

‘What is it?’

‘I want to make an offering of yak milk broth to the holy fire...but there are no yaks on Seabor.’

‘There are...on Harappa farms. You will get the broth.’

‘You are very kind!’ Yaduk cried happily.

‘Now go and complete the other preparations...I can see there’s a lot going on in your head.’

Yaduk left Iisuu and ran back to the harvesting area. Dawn was breaking now and the horizon was lit with an orange haze. The *saykriles* sleeping on the treetops were slowly coming awake. Below the trees, the iljjocks were still asleep.

Elli was also sleeping under a tree. Yaduk looked at her and smiled with wonder. Branches of glowing berries had bent over her, making her looking like an angel sleeping in a cradle of lights. ‘Get up, Elli...you have to make your bridal robes!’ he cried, nudging her gently.

‘What robes?’ she opened her eyes drowsily.

‘Come with me!’ he replied, pulling her to an open clearing where he had piled glowing *Nahlu* husk. Using a needle, he began weaving a robe from it and urged Elli to do the same. Elli began weaving eagerly. As her hands flew to weave the husk, she noticed that Yaduk was rubbing his ears frequently.

‘What is wrong with your ears?’ she asked hesitantly.

‘Nothing,’ Yaduk replied. His ears buzzed intermittently but he was no longer bothered about them. God Iisuu had assured him that Madho was at peace in the *Nors*. Elli had also assured him the same.

‘Hey!’ she cried suddenly. ‘Everyone is leaving for Pikki and Jerro’s marriage!’

‘Let’s go too,’ Yaduk replied, picking up the unfinished robes.

They swam with the other iljjocks to the bottom of the Iljjock Ocean for Pikki’s marriage. The iljjocks carried a new wooden *beshel* for them. Yaduk had already been given a *beshel* in the iljjock settlement and would occupy the same one after his marriage to Elli.

The horde alighted on the ocean bed and while a few iljjocks became occupied with erecting the *beshel*, the others proceeded to the ceremonial altar in the middle of the settlement.

Myrhim and Iisuu were seated in the altar, their presence radiant and exhilarating. Gathered around them were all the single and married iljjocks.

‘Come forward, Pikki and Jerro,’ Myrhim said in her warm and tinkling voice.

Pikki and Jerro ascended the altar and put their toes forward. Iisuu went up to them and squeezed the toes hard. Lightning crackled between their toes and thick sap oozed out to harden into small luminescent crystals. The crystals were flawless and glowed with the power of a hundred gems!

‘Pikki and Jerro,’ Myrhim cried with joy. ‘Your souls are perfectly matched!’

‘You are married to each other now!’ Iisuu declared. He then proceeded to join them to the iljjock yoke.

‘Welcome to the yoke, Pikki and Jerro....’ the married iljjocks cried on the yoke.

Pikki and Jerro heard the voices through their souls. They looked eagerly into their souls and saw the souls of hundreds of iljjocks shining like lamps. Shining brightest was the soul of God Iisuu - it pulled with a force of attraction more than that of a thousand *Nors*!

Pure iljjock love flowed on the yoke and it flooded Pikki and Jerro’s souls to make them sway with rapture and fulfillment. Their toes entwined, they proceeded to swim to their *beshel* to begin their newly married life.

It was now Yaduk and Elli’s turn to get married!

Yaduk and Elli ascended the nuptial altar, dressed in their bridal robes. The iljjocks tittered with delight to see them dressed like this!

‘Bring the offering,’ Myrhim said radiantly, gesturing to a pair of iljjocks.

The iljjocks carried in a sealed pot of steaming yak milk broth. A thin spout would allow the broth to be served at the bottom of the ocean!

‘It smells great!’ Yaduk sniffed with delight, wanting to taste the delicious broth. But, then he remembered that he could not taste anymore.

‘Open your mouth...’ Myrhim frowned, reading his thoughts. Lo, she touched his mouth with her divine scimitar and he got his sense of taste back!

‘I burnt your taste buds by mistake...’ she explained, ‘I have revived them!’

‘O wonder!’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘But, your ears are all right,’ she remarked, bewildered, ‘Why do you say that they buzz?’

Yaduk was about to explain the weird buzzing sound that he heard often, when Iisuu intervened, ‘It is time to get married, Yaduk!’

The iljjocks followed Iisuu’s directions and lit a fire with dry *Nahlu* sticks and zol crystals on the ocean floor. Iisuu looked at Earth with his divine sight and read hymns directly from a scroll in a priest’s hand, marrying Yaduk and Elli in accordance to human rituals!

Myrhim was very eager to serve the yak milk broth that she had

prepared with so much care.

‘Give us taste buds too!’ the iljjocks urged. ‘How will we know if it is made properly or not?’

Myrhim gave them all taste buds happily. Lo, while the iljjocks slurped the yak milk broth greedily and reveled in the new sensation of taste, Yaduk and Elli proceeded to unite in accordance to the iljjock rituals!

Yaduk staggered as lightning crackled between his toe and Elli’s. An avalanche of divine power flooded his soul and he would have collapsed had it not been for Iisuu holding him steady. Flawless *zol* crystals rolled out of his and Elli’s toes, taking with them the power that had flooded their souls.

‘Yaduk and Elli, you are married now!’ Iisuu declared with tears of joy.

‘Swap the *divine string* immediately, Elli!’ Myrhim urged.

‘Yes, my goddess!’ Elli said obediently.

Yaduk and Elli embraced. Their nodules touched and they staggered from the bolts of lightning that crackled between them.

‘Can you see the *divine string*, Yaduk?’ Iisuu asked anxiously.

‘Yes,’ Yaduk replied, looking into Elli’s soul. He recognized the *divine string* instantly. It was the only one glowing blindingly and lighting up the other strings in Elli’s soul.

‘Pick that string...it will give you divine powers...’ Myrhim urged.

Elli had already taught Yaduk how to pick strings using divine force. The moment he applied force on the glowing string, it duplicated. One string stayed with her and the other flowed to his soul!

Lo, Yaduk was hit by an avalanche of power. He was about to pass out from the impact, when Iisuu supported him. Gradually, the energy subsided and he discovered that his world had changed. To his disbelief, he could see and feel all air, water and land particles on Seabor. Further, for particles up to a certain distance, he could not only see them, but could also move them like his own body parts!

‘My lord, I have attained divine sight!’ he cried in awe. ‘And, I can also exert divine force!’

‘Good!’ Iisuu nodded with relief. ‘Now, transfer a string to Elli’s soul...to complete the swap!’

Elli picked a string that carried Yaduk's childhood memories – that of his village, herds and kin. It duplicated and as one of them flowed into her soul, she saw towering mountains, green forests, and yaks and goats. Also, glimpses of Madho, Jugnu and the rest!

Now that Yaduk also had a *divine string* in his soul, Iisuu proceeded to connect the newly married pair to the iljjock yoke.

'Welcome...Yaduk...Yaduk...Elli...Elli...' the voices of hundreds of iljjocks echoed in their souls. Yaduk realized that he was linked to all of them transparently and was astounded by the massive power flowing on the yoke - it was the pooled energy of all the iljjock souls!

'We are on the iljjock yoke!' Elli murmured in a daze.

Hatti, Pikki, Jerro and the others were standing around them and weeping with delight. Glowing radiantly, Elli and Yaduk swam out of the altar to join them. They embraced all the iljjocks by turns.

Later, they retreated to their *beshel* on the ocean floor to begin their lives as a newly married iljjock pair!

TO settle down in their new lives, Yaduk and Elli became busy doing small chores that the iljjock pairs did everyday.

Yaduk *dug* a pit in a corner of their *beshel* for storing the pile of *kiks* they had brought with them from *Kirll* forest. The *kiks* would last them for some ten days and then they would have to swim back to *Kirll* to get another pile from their pits.

Elli became busy sorting the *zol* crystals they had produced together. They would barter these crystals with the seamones for things that they wanted. Elli fancied getting colorful bead necklaces made for herself - she had seen the women from Yaduk's village wearing them!

It was high noon and the iljjocks were out on the ocean floor, etching their *boondis* lazily. Elli swam out of her *beshel* and began looking around for a spot on the frozen ocean floor to begin her *boondi*.

Soon, Yaduk also finished his chores and joined Elli outside the *beshel*. Just being near her made him feel fulfilled and happy. He felt an overwhelming urge to embrace her. Since, they were outside and it was prohibited to speak in the open ocean, he decided to call her through the yoke.

‘Elli!’ he whispered longingly.

Elli looked at him with surprise. ‘Yes!’ she smiled. ‘It is time to begin our *boondis*!’

‘Shut up...you two,’ the iljjocks scolded irritably. Unless it was truly something important, no one spoke on the yoke and disturbed the others.

Yaduk shut his mouth but did not take his eyes off Elli. He was a human and longed for physical closeness along with the soul connect! Elli was doing something on the ground and he went over and nudged her playfully.

Elli looked up and gave him a beautiful smile. Ah, he sighed loudly even as his heart melted like a lump of yak butter.

‘Shhh...’ Elli warned him, rising quickly. She stumbled and their toes came into contact. Lo, lightning crackled out of them and at the same time, a sudden tide of power flooded their souls. Yaduk realized that the power was bursting out of the divine strings. The bursts built into an avalanche, and just when the pressure became unbearable, spurted out in the form of *zol* crystals from their toes!

Elli was delighted to see the huge pile of glowing crystals they had produced and clapped her hands happily. The iljjocks turned to glare at them in anger, but when they saw the sheer radiance of crystals, gaped in awe. Elli began etching furrows on the ocean floor eagerly and pushing the crystals in them. Yaduk joined her and soon, their *boondis* began taking shape!

Surprisingly, as their *boondis* grew, the love that they had for each other also grew. It flowed into the yoke and in turn, more love flowed back to them from the iljjocks. Soon, it built into a magical crescendo that made them feel as if they were swimming in an ocean of rapturous love and joy.

Yaduk allowed himself to be lost in that magical ocean. Wanting to remain in this state of joy forever, he now understood why the iljjocks could not tolerate the slightest disturbance on the yoke!

The rest of the day was spent in a daze. He etched his *boondi* and late in the evening, when the ocean floor was lit with a poignant purple glow, he retired to the *beshel* with Elli. Lying down in the cot, he tried to remember what he had made in the *boondi*. Elli had made strange lines on the ocean floor.

‘What were those lines?’ he asked curiously.

‘Oh, I drew the mountains that I saw around your village,’ she beamed. ‘What did you make?’

Yaduk frowned as he struggled to remember what he had made.

‘I think you made pictures of the *bor*,’ Elli suggested.

‘Oh, yes,’ he replied, remembering that he had etched the *bor*. ‘I want to look at it again,’ he murmured, making a move to get up.

‘No, not now,’ Elli cried, pulling him back. ‘We have to swap the next lot of our soul strings or they will get entangled.’

‘Oh!’ he exclaimed and lay down again.

Like a true iljjock pair, they entwined their toes and fell asleep. As they slept, the next lot of strings was swapped by their souls!

‘O wonder!’ Elli sighed in her sleep as she saw more of Lachvi. She saw maidens wearing colorful robes and singing poignant folk songs.

Yaduk learned more about the iljjock formations. There were more than a thousand formations to channel the energy flowing on the iljjock yoke and he had to learn all of them. He was just about to grasp how to make an attack formation, when a familiar buzzing sound startled him!

‘Madho?’ he cried in his sleep, remembering his dead brother all of a sudden. No one answered and the rustle grew louder. He cried out loudly again. But, he did not get an answer.

Lo, his cries echoed shrilly on the iljjock yoke, waking up the iljjocks. They were also swapping their soul strings in sleep, and when they woke up with a start, the strings snapped. They screamed with searing pain.

‘Yaduk, stop!’ Elli cried in agony as her string snapped too.

‘YADUK!’ the iljjocks yelled with rage.

Yaduk woke up, startled.

‘Yaduk, what have you done?’ Elli cried in fear. She looked outside their *beshel* anxiously.

As she had anticipated, the iljjocks were gathering outside their *beshel*. Driven insane with pain and rage, they were instinctively making a formation to crush Yaduk’s soul to bits.

‘No!’ she yelled, rushing outside the *beshel*. She flailed her arms wildly to scatter the iljjocks.

‘Elli, stop!’ Yaduk yelled, rushing after her.

‘No!’ Elli yelled, ‘Go back!’

But, it was too late. The iljjocks saw him and attacked him with their collective divine power. Lo, a crushing force came to act on his soul, making him convulse with unbearable pain.

‘Aaaaagh....’ Yaduk groaned with excruciating pain. He heard Elli scream and that made it worse. He thought he was just about to die, when he heard God Iisuu thunder, ‘STOP...you fools. What are you doing?’

Startled, the iljjocks broke the formation and scattered. The crushing force vanished but Yaduk passed out. When he came back to his senses, God Iisuu was standing over him!

‘He ruptured our strings...’ the iljjocks shrieked on the yoke. ‘We could have died and become *coons*...he is not fit to be on the yoke!’

Iisuu looked at Yaduk sternly and asked, ‘Why did you cry loudly on the yoke?’

Yaduk looked back at him helplessly. He knew he could not talk about the weird buzzing in his ears without making a fool of himself. ‘I don’t know...’ he murmured weakly.

‘Why don’t you tell him the truth?’ Elli blurted, glaring at God Iisuu.

Iisuu was surprised. And, the iljjocks were shocked. No iljjock looked at God Iisuu in that way. Elli iljjock, of course, was half-human!

‘My lord, it is something that Yaduk heard...’ Elli said strongly. ‘I heard it too!’

‘Well, what did you hear?’ Iisuu asked tersely.

Yaduk searched his memory for the sound. He knew that he could retrieve his memories from the strings in his soul by using divine force. Lo, the moment he retrieved the memory, an eerie rustling sound echoed over the yoke. And, this time around, the others heard it too!

Iisuu heard the sound and froze with shock. He staggered as if a thousand blows had hit him in the face. ‘I want to hear that again...’ he croaked in a low whisper.

Yaduk retrieved the memory again and Iisuu and the iljjocks heard the weird sound again. ‘I have to find Myrhim...’ Iisuu whispered, his face deathly pale.

He left the gathering speedily but did not have to go far. Myrhim had

come rushing out of her *beshel*!

Goddess Myrhim's face was as deathly pale as Iisuu's. She normally ignored the chatter she heard on the yoke. But, the moment she heard the deathly rustling, she left what she was doing and hurried outside her *beshel* to find out what was going on. She found Iisuu and the iljjocks and it took her a moment to understand what had happened.

'Yaduk, we have to talk...' she said urgently, pulling him inside his *beshel*.

God Iisuu followed them quickly. Elli, Pikki and Hatti also followed them inside the *beshel*. The other iljjocks waited outside and listened anxiously on the yoke.

'Let me hear that sound again...' the goddess whispered inside the *beshel*.

Bewildered, Yaduk retrieved the memory again even as Iisuu and Myrhim peered into his soul with their divine sight. After listening to the strange sound, the two exchanged a shocked glance.

'For how long have you been hearing this sound?' the goddess asked with astonishment.

'I don't remember. Yes...I heard it first when I was travelling from Earth to Seabor!'

Iisuu stared at Yaduk with shock. Myrhim glared at Iisuu. 'I heard nothing!' he protested to her.

Myrhim seemed to be deeply flustered by Yaduk's revelation. She pulled Iisuu aside and they began arguing in whispers.

Meanwhile, the iljjocks looked at Yaduk and Elli's wounds. 'This is serious!' Pikki cried, aghast to see the bleeding wounds on their fragile bodies.

Yaduk smiled. Pikki was not angry with him anymore and neither were the iljjocks. They had come out of the angry spell and were chattering worriedly on the yoke. 'Use your divine powers to force the wounds close, Elli and Yaduk!' they advised through the yoke.

Yaduk and Elli did exactly as advised. They managed to close small wounds, but a few large ones remained open.

'I don't want to become a *coon*!' Elli wept in despair.

Agonized to see her so distraught, Yaduk was about to shout for Iisuu, when he heard the familiar rustling in his ears. Elli heard it too and her eyes flew wide open. ‘Shhh...’ she whispered to Yaduk, motioning him to keep completely quiet.

Lo, a thousand rustling feathers seemed to caress their wounded bodies and the energy of a hundred *Nors* seemed to flow through them without burning them. The energy healed them completely and they looked at each other in disbelief!

‘It is a miracle!’ Pikki croaked, his mouth open with shock.

He was not the only one in the room to be flabbergasted. Iisuu and Myrhim stood stupefied, as if hit by a hundred scimitars.

‘Do you know that was?’ Iisuu croaked in a trembling voice finally.

Yaduk shook his head, not wanting to mention Madho’s name at all. Myrhim and Iisuu read his mind and shook their heads. ‘No!’ the goddess exclaimed. ‘That sound does not belong to a human!’

‘To whom does it belong to, then?’ Elli asked, bewildered.

‘There is only one who we know by that sound,’ Myrhim whispered, ‘Hoon, the God of Death!’

‘It is true, then!’ God Iisuu cried with uncontrollable joy. ‘Yaduk has been hearing God Hoon all along!’

‘God Hoon?’ Pikki and Hatti gasped with shock.

Iisuu’s voice had echoed on the yoke and all the iljjocks who were standing outside had heard him. They huddled together, shedding tears of fear, which they did instinctively whenever they heard Hoon’s evil name!

Myrhim was strangely flustered. She trembled with happiness and anxiety by turns. Surprisingly, she patted Yaduk with pride!

Yaduk was confused and disappointed. He was always hoped that Madho would turn out to be the one buzzing his ears. But, it had turned out to be God Hoon. God Hoon? Why?

Elli shared Yaduk’s confusion and held his hand in worried silence.

‘No wonder you survived while others from your village died,’ Iisuu cried suddenly, ‘It was not a miracle! God Hoon protected you!’

‘God Hoon has been merciful to our Yaduk!’ Myrhim agreed, beaming with pride.

Yaduk looked at Iisuu and Myrhim with bewilderment. Iisuu was almost weeping with joy!

‘God Hoon matters everything to them!’ Pikki muttered in a whisper.

‘Why is that?’ Yaduk whispered back, puzzled.

‘Maybe, because...his scimitar carries the most power in this universe!’ Hatti chuckled.

‘But, Iisuu is weeping...’ Yaduk remarked unsurely.

‘He has a deep emotional bond with him running back to the old *bor*!’ Pikki whispered.

‘I see...’

The iljjocks heard their talk through the yoke and broke into an excited chatter. ‘Yaduk is truly blessed!’ some of them remarked.

‘Yes...yes...’ the others agreed.

Yaduk smiled, overwhelmed to receive the love and admiration of the iljjocks. His thought flew to the one responsible for it- Hoon, the evil God of Death!

He tried to recall all the instances when he had felt God Hoon’s presence. When Iisuu had carried him to Seabor and when Hatti had taken him on a dreamlike sojourn to the *bor*, he had felt a killing pressure on his soul. Just when he had thought he would die, the pressure had eased and he had felt as if someone had been saved him from death. That someone, he realized, had been Hoon, the God of Death himself!

Yaduk recalled Madho had told him. That God Hoon had saved him from Aakaa’s torture and had fulfilled his dying wish of meeting his brother once! It was no wonder that Hoon had not reacted when they had entered the *bor*, or when they had touched the *boids*, or when Hatti had stolen the embers! The entire visit to the *bor* had taken place under Hoon’s strict watch!

Although, Yaduk had not seen God Hoon, he knew him instinctively by now. Hoon was the one watching him with thousand eyes. He was watching him even now. Like a father, like a true god! He was sure that Hoon was the one who rode the dark storm clouds over Lachvi. For generations, the cowherds of Lachvi had worshipped him. He worshipped him now!

Enlightened, Yaduk looked up at the sky. Dark storm clouds were

looming up there too! ‘My lord,’ he whispered fervently, searching for a glimpse of the almighty Hoon in the swirling clouds. He saw nothing. He folded his hands in prayer and whispered, ‘My lord, show yourself for I want to see you!’

Lo, as if in response, the skies erupted. Massive thunder and lightning crackled over the Iljock Ocean. The iljocks screamed and huddled together, creating a small pandemonium.

Iisuu and Myrhim rushed out of the *beshel* and looked up in disbelief. The goddess fell on the cold ocean floor and raised her arms in obeisance. Iisuu raised his arms too. Both divine creatures glowed with their full radiance in reverence to the one that was almighty - Hoon, the God of Death!

The storm abated as quickly as it had started. The ocean became quiet and peaceful again. While the iljocks scampered to the safety of their *beshels*, Iisuu and Myrhim walked back slowly to Yaduk’s *beshel*.

They were exultant and expected everyone inside the *beshel* to be the same. Pikki, Elli and Hatti were suitably thunderstruck but Yaduk looked strangely disappointed.

‘I asked him to show himself!’ he blurted without hesitation. ‘He ignored my request!’

‘What?’ Myrhim gasped, her mouth open wide with shock. ‘You summoned the almighty Hoon to Seabor?’

‘No...yes,’ Yaduk replied, unsure of the implications of what he had done. ‘I just wanted to have a look at him!’

‘You did nothing wrong,’ Elli said supportively. ‘For that matter, even I would like to have a look at him!’

‘NO!’ the iljocks growled through the yoke. ‘He is evil and we don’t want to see him!’ They had retreated to their *beshels* but were listening intently to everything that was being said through the yoke.

‘Yes, he is evil. And, he is the harbinger of death.’ God Iisuu declared grimly. ‘But, evil is not to be feared. Death is not to be feared. Because, both have a purpose in the cycle of creation!’

‘How could evil ever have a purpose?’ Hatti asked, bewildered.

‘Well, it did have a purpose in the old *bor*...’ Myrhim answered, ‘It drove God Hoon to kill the gods when they ravaged the *bor*. It also drove him to kill Time and Mystery and help create this universe!’

‘What about now...is evil still relevant?’

‘Why not?’ Iisuu replied, ‘Only an evil God Hoon could have stripped Aakaa of his *divine strings*...’

The iljjocks tittered.

‘But, I must say...God Hoon seems to have mellowed down now!’ Myrhim remarked. ‘Because of his deep involvement with the human souls in the *Nors*...he is no longer as volatile and deathly as he was back in the *bor*. He has taken to acting with more restraint and wisdom now!’

‘You are right...’ Iisuu agreed. ‘He would never have saved Yaduk. He would have just killed the root of the problem...Aakaa and the seamones!’

‘No!’ Myrhim shivered. She was the divine mother and she loved her unfortunate children as much as her more fortunate ones.

‘The devil has become a savior now!’ Iisuu shrugged.

‘Do you still want to see God Hoon, Yaduk?’ Myrhim smiled.

Yaduk nodded his head vigorously.

‘All of you should have the same courage...’ Iisuu spoke on the yoke. ‘There is no need to fear God Hoon anymore!’

Silence prevailed on the yoke.

‘Do you know why Hoon has been so merciful to Yaduk?’ Iisuu persisted. ‘The lad is fearless, that’s why. He had no fear in his heart when I abducted him from Earth!’

‘And, the one divine mood that God Hoon abhors, is fear. He hated it in the *bor* and he hates it even now!’ Myrhim nodded.

‘I agree!’ Hatti, the leader, declared, ‘It is high time we overcame our age-old fears!’

Lo, what times had come upon Seabor! Winds of change were blowing slowly but steadily!

‘But, how will we see God Hoon?’ Elli asked. ‘He is gone!’

‘You can see him through the *divine strings*!’ Myrhim’s face lit up with joy.

Silence prevailed on the yoke again. What was the goddess talking about? Had they not agreed only yesterday that they would never disturb the *divine strings* again?

‘But, God Hoon has given us a sign!’ Myrhim exclaimed.

‘What sign?’ Iisuu asked. Even he was bewildered.

‘That he is involved now! And, when God Hoon gets involved...no gods, dead or otherwise, may cross the line! Such is the power of his scimitar! Iisuu, how can you forget? Was almighty God Hoon not the original protector of the *bor*...all powerful and invincible?’

‘What are you are implying?’ Iisuu asked in a stricken whisper.

‘I am implying...that perhaps, all of us can visit the *bor* and meet all the dead gods ...just once!’

Iisuu’s face turned deathly pale and his eyes changed their hue. A storm had come to rage in his soul and it was not clear what had caused it. For the first time in known history, God Iisuu got off the yoke! As if he wanted to be alone. Completely alone!

Goddess Myrhim put a hand on his shoulder and said, ‘I never thought I would say this...but, God Iisuu, I think your penance may now be over! The time has come for you to go back to the *bor* and meet...’

Lo! Iisuu convulsed as if she had hit him with her scimitar. ‘I have waited for so long...I know that he is waiting too...’ he whispered in a tortured voice and then to the distress of everyone present, broke down weeping!

The iljjocks knew instinctively that God Iisuu was talking about the love that he had lost, the deathly god who had given him the gashes in his soul. They also knew that they could offer him no succor and only watch silently in anguish.

‘Calm down, God Iisuu...’Myrhim said gently. ‘I will take you back to the *bor*...but, only after a while. God Hoon will show no mercy if I make a mistake on this one!’

‘What do you mean?’ Iisuu gathered himself with great effort.

‘To show you the gods that you wish to see...I will have to load another divine string in Yaduk’s soul!’

‘Another string?’ Hatti exclaimed. ‘You mean Yaduk’s soul will carry the load of two strings? Is it strong enough?’

‘No, it is not!’ Elli cried worriedly, ‘He will die!’

‘He won’t!’ Myrhim smiled faintly, ‘He has Hoon, the God of Death

on his side!’

‘No, seriously...’ Elli persisted. ‘His soul will not be able to take the load of two divine strings!’

‘His soul may scatter from the additional load,’ Pikki agreed.

Goddess Myrhim looked at the worried faces in front of her and smiled, ‘Trust your mother...I will reduce the power of the second string suitably!’

‘You can trust me too...’ Iisuu intervened. ‘Yaduk’s soul is linked seamlessly to the iljjock yoke. The load of two strings will be shared by all the iljjocks and me!’

‘Yes, my lord!’ the iljjocks nodded in agreement. Their faith in God Iisuu was more than any fear they might have!

There was a small pandemonium as the iljjocks came out of their *beshels* to gather on the ocean floor. Under Hatti’s guidance, they shifted places to make a suitable formation. The formation would pool the power of the yoke and support Yaduk’s soul when Myrhim loaded it with another divine string.

Meanwhile, the goddess sat down in a corner of Yaduk’s *beshel* and looked bemusedly at the strings that lay in her soul. She wanted to find a string that not only had memories of the desired gods but was also less in power!

Myrhim had made many mistakes in the past and she could not afford to make one now. The slightest mistake on her part, she knew, would shock Yaduk into certain death and God Hoon out of his unusually good mood!

-24-

TIME, MYSTERY AND HOON

FINALLY, Goddess Myrhim found a *divine string* that was perfect. It contained the memories of all the gods that the iljjocks may want to see.

‘Are we ready?’ she asked, looking around the *beshel* nervously.

Yaduk was sitting on his cot. Elli was sitting next to him, her hand in his hand, and her toe entwined with his toe. God Iisuu was standing next to them. He was still pale and very restless. He had joined the yoke again but his state of anxiety was very worrying.

‘Are you ready, Hatti?’ Iisuu asked anxiously through the yoke. Hatti had gone outside and was busy making a formation that would provide support.

‘Yes, my lord,’ he replied through the yoke, motioning to the others to brace themselves. ‘The yoke is ready to take the impact!’

‘Are you ready, Yaduk?’ Myrhim asked nervously.

‘Yes,’ he replied. Elli grasped his hand tightly. She would play an important role if Yaduk’s soul sank for some reason.

Goddess Myrhim took in a deep breath. Using her divine scimitar, she picked the chosen *divine string* from her soul, reduced its power and placed it carefully in Yaduk’s soul.

‘Mercy...’ Yaduk gasped, falling back. An avalanche of power hit him and he thought he would pass out when the yoke kicked in.

‘Now!’ Hatti grunted and the iljjocks sucked the power flooding Yaduk’s soul into their own souls, giving him instant relief.

Yaduk stopped swaying wildly. The haze in front of his eyes cleared and he found that he was in the *bor*! Elli, Pikki, Hatti and all the iljjocks were by his side and they were all seeing the *bor* in a waking dream. Blinded temporarily by the stupendous energy packed in the divine continuum, they knew what to expect. When their eyes had adjusted to the brightness, they would see flocks of *boids* and swathes of secrets, all behaving like living creatures!

Surprisingly, the brightness did not lessen. And, no boids or secrets could be seen. ‘We are standing at the edge of the *bor*...’ Myrhim informed them. She and Iisuu had come to stand next to them. Iisuu was looking around with anguished eyes as if searching desperately for someone.

‘Over there...’ Myrhim whispered, pointing far into the dark ocean that surrounded the *bor*. They all followed her gaze and saw someone hovering over there!

Lo, he was a god. And, what a god he was! The radiance emanating from his soul was so powerful that countless *Nors* would have been put to shade.

The moment Iisuu saw him, he convulsed with a longing so fierce that his eyes began throwing out fire. ‘God Isas!’ he whispered in a choked voice.

The iljjocks were deeply troubled to see God Iisuu in such a state.

Hatti was about to ask Iisuu to calm down when the strange god rumbled brokenly, 'Iisuu...oh, dear Iisuu...'

Lo, God Iisuu could hold back no more! Tears flowing down his face, he began running towards the strange god!

'Iisuu...stop...' Myrhim screamed. But, it was too late. God Iisuu was gone. He had jumped into the dark ocean and was hurtling fast towards the strange God Isas!

'Iisuu...come to me...' God Isas whispered, opening his arms wide. He was holding a smoldering pot in one of his hands.

'I am going after him...' Hatti shrieked in panic.

'Stand back...' the goddess said a deathly whisper. 'You are seeing Isas, the mighty God of Orgis...and that's a pot of divine venom he's holding! It will spread to purge the *bor!*'

'Eeeek...' the iljjocks screeched, jumping out of their skins. 'God Iisuu...stop...' they screamed shrilly.

But, Iisuu was beyond all hearing now. He had raced into the strange god's arms and they were locked in a passionate embrace.

'This is madness...' Hatti cried, taking off in the dark ocean.

'We are coming too...' the iljjocks cried in unison.

'No...wait...' the goddess caught Hatti's arm. 'The slaves of death should appear now!

'But, God Iisuu...'

'Nothing will happen to him...this occurred in the past...'

Lo, she had hardly uttered the words when the iljjocks suddenly saw a massive birdlike god flying in!

'You are seeing the God of Fate...' Myrhim whispered in a stricken voice. 'He was the most powerful and incorruptible slave of death...he portended the path to the future and ensured that it always pointed to the death of the *bor!*'

The iljjocks looked at the God of Fate in awe. His soul was shadowed and glistened like the hood of a beaded snake. He was oozing such a powerful spoor of evil that they almost fainted!

'Who is that?' Elli asked, pointing to a goddess riding on top of the God of Fate.

‘She is Goddess Shol...’ Myrhim whispered. ‘Another powerful slave of death! God Hoon managed to corrupt her soul when she was born...in the end, however, she turned completely evil!’

Lo, Fate and Shol were hurtling fast towards God Isas and the pot of *Orgis*!

‘*Let go of my beautiful Isas...he is mine...*’ Shol screeched vilely to Iisuu.

‘*Go away!*’ Iisuu thundered back, shielding the mighty Isas with his form, ‘*I will not let you come near...you evil goddess...*’

‘*Don’t worry...I am only yours...*’ Isas rumbled, nudging Iisuu playfully. The two burst out laughing and they laughed so heartily that it was difficult to believe that they were facing the terrifying slaves of death!

‘They were always like that...laughing and loving each other at the slightest pretext...’ Myrhim whispered in a choked voice. ‘It was a miracle bond of love...between the deathly God of *Orgis* and our very own God Iisuu!’

The iljocks looked with fear and wonder at the divine spectacle. Just when they thought they would see what happened to Fate and Shol, there was a massive explosion. ‘Booommm...’ the pot of divine venom exploded massively, throwing the iljocks back in the *bor*! An unconscious Iisuu was also thrown back with them!

The iljocks fell on a massive mesh of *boids* and tendrils. Screams and wails could be heard coming from the mesh. Lo, it was full of nests in which lived countless gods! Their souls were glowing luminously in the dark mesh and looked very similar to their own!

‘They were Iisuu’s children in the old *bor*...’ Myrhim informed them. ‘Climb into their nests...everybody...quick!’

‘Why...what’s happening?’ Hatti shrieked in panic.

Suddenly the gods started convulsing and screaming shrilly. Even as the iljocks watched petrified, a wave of lightning ran through them and blew out their souls like wicks of lamps! Lo, all the gods had died!

‘Look!’ Pikki shrieked, pointing to the edge of the *bor*. The divine venom was spreading fast and eating up the body of the *bor*. The explosion had mysteriously purged the souls of the gods and the *Orgis* would now purge their carcasses and the body of the *bor*!

‘Eeeek....’ the iljocks shrieked, scrambling to jump into nests. Hatti and Yaduk dragged Iisuu into a nest first and then jumped in it themselves.

In shock, they watched the venom eat away the energy of the *bor*. Soon, only the mesh of tendrils remained, floating in the dark ocean like a broken tree!

‘Look...’ Myrhim pointed to the far end of the mesh. ‘The universe is taking birth over there!’

The iljocks looked and reeled with shock. Lo, not one, but three gods were hovering over there! Instinctively, they knew that they were seeing the three omnipresent gods of the *bor* – Time, Mystery and Hoon!

The iljocks looked at the God of Time and gasped. His visage was exquisite and his divine eyes were meltingly beautiful- they pulled with a strange mystical allure. One of them even had a mild squint – this eye showed him the path to the future!

‘He was the most powerful god of the *bor*. A more perfect divine being could not exist!’ Myrhim sighed with reverence.

The iljocks looked at Goddess Mystery and gasped again. Mystery was the epitome of maternal beauty, warm and loving. The intrigue that she harbored in her soul made her look indescribably bewitching.

‘Mother...O sweet mother!’ Myrhim cried, catching a glimpse of Mystery’s visage. ‘Your children are here...’

But, Mystery was engaged in looking worriedly at Time and he was looking back at her grimly. Together, they looked supremely divine!

‘Why is God Hoon so upset?’ Elli asked hesitantly. Lo, the devil was standing near Time and Mystery and his scimitar was crackling with deathly power. His visage looked harsh and unrelenting.

Yaduk looked at God Hoon and gasped. Hoon’s soul was like a flawless crystal, scintillating and brilliant. And, his features were rugged and striking. He did not have the perfect beauty of Time, but he had a divine charisma that was overpowering.

‘I know...he is going to kill the other two!’ Hatti guessed.

‘What?’ Yaduk exclaimed. He could not believe that Hoon, who had been so merciful to him, could kill someone so beautiful and divine.

‘They are acting only to preserve what has remained of the

creation...' Myrhim whispered. 'Listen to their last words...'

Spellbound, the iljocks listened the divine voices of Time, Mystery and Hoon.

'God Isas's sacrifice shall not be in vain...' Time murmured in his silvery voice. *'The God of Orgis sacrificed himself...so that the little zol that is we have kept hidden could give birth to a new universe!'*

The iljocks noticed that Time was holding a small of *zol* at the tip of his arrow. Lo, Time, Mystery and Hoon had stolen the *zol* from the Holy Knot and kept it hidden so that they could stall the complete purge of the *bor*!

'I don't need a new universe...' Hoon thundered, his rugged features haggard and strained.

'I do...' Mystery sighed. *'My children will be born again...'*

'Yes!' Time asserted. *'Raise your scimitar, Hoon...and scatter my arrow! With the God of Time gone, the new universe shall be timeless!'*

Hoon stared at Time's radiant visage in disbelief.

'Hurry, Hoon!' Time urged, *'The pot of zol is slipping away from me!'*

'Hurry!' Mystery whispered urgently.

The devil seemed to be left with no choice. He shuddered and flung the scimitar with all his force. The scimitar hit Time's naked arrow and delivered a massive blow. Time wobbled. But, his arrow did not scatter. It was too strong!

Hoon flung the scimitar again. Nothing happened. Time's arrow or soul would not be scattered easily!

'Let me weaken you...' Mystery whispered. She entwined herself around Time's arrow in such way that long, hidden cracks showed in his arrow.

Hoon raised his scimitar again and shuddered to see Mystery's soul below it. Suddenly, the iljocks saw a very thick bond running from his soul to the goddess's soul!

'It was the original bond of love!' Myrhim sighed. *'It was so powerful...that when they twirled around the bor together, they healed all its wounds!'*

'Hoon and Mystery were in love?' Elli whispered.

‘Yes...very deeply...’ Myrhim sighed.

The devil looked at his love fiercely, but did not falter. He had kept the evil in his soul alive for a reason. Lo! Bracing himself for a fatal impact, he flung his scimitar at the cracks and delivered a massive blow to Time’s arrow.

Lo! The divine souls of Time and Mystery scattered along with the *zol* pot in one massive divine explosion.

Mystery’s soul scattered to rupture the divine continuum. The mesh of tendrils which happened to be her divine form, split thrice, and with every split, Time’s arrow broke countless times.

She died in severe agony. ‘Aaargh...’ she groaned, when the bond of love between her and Hoon ruptured to bleed like a thousand cut veins. She wanted to cry out to him but then her divine form split three times, in length, breadth and height, to scatter her soul completely.

Time died moments after the *zol* pot burst. He felt the mesh split and then, his arrow scatter. He died in eternal peace, knowing that, as long his arrow remained scattered, the force of death would not return. He also knew that his arrow would remain scattered forever!

Hoon watched Mystery and Time die in massive shock. When the bond between him and Mystery ruptured, he felt as if a thousand scimitars had hit his soul. He felt his soul sink and vaguely, he felt Time’s arrow breaking into countless arrowlets. After that, he felt no more.

Frozen with shock, the *iljocks* saw the remains of the *bor* change into divine dust. The *zol* from the exploding pot, the broken mesh, the dead *boids* and the carcasses of the gods - all disintegrated into molten dust.

‘Hold your hands...’ Myrhim yelled, clutching Iisuu who was still unconscious.

They all held their hands and watched the molten dust swirl around them to form a dense and hot divine soup. There was another massive inflation and the soup swelled to a size many thousand times bigger!

A strange, new world began forming. The broken mesh and the *boids* separated to form a contiguous expanse of three-dimensional space. The rest of the divine soup cooled down to coagulate into particles of many divine colors and flavors. A new world of particles suspended in three-dimensional space gradually took shape!

Even as the iljjocks watched dumbfounded, one type of particles bonded with a strong force to coagulate into a range of positive charged particles, small and big. Similarly, others coagulated into a range of negatively charged particles, big and small!

As the soup grew cooler, the negative particles clung with a weak force to the positive particles to produce atoms. A point came when the divine soup had cooled down so much that bigger particles stopped forming.

Lo! A new universe now floated in place of the *bor*. The material universe had taken birth!

‘Let’s go now...’ Myrhim whispered, ending the waking dream.

‘Uhh...no....’ the iljjocks groaned, wanting to see more. But, the vision of the new universe faded away and they found themselves back on the floor of the Iljjock Ocean, standing outside Yaduk’s *beshel*!

Inside the *beshel*, Myrhim flew into a state of panic. God Iisuu was still unconscious!

‘How could he share a bond of love with the God of Orgis?’ Hatti asked incredulously. ‘Couldn’t he find someone else less deathly?’

‘Shhh...’ Elli whispered. Iisuu was slowly coming to consciousness!

‘Aaargh...’ Iisuu groaned, opening his eyes.

‘Iisuu...wake up Iisuu...’ Myrhim cried happily, tears flowing down her eyes, ‘Look at what’s happened to your soul...it is a miracle!’

Iisuu looked and gaped with astonishment. Lo, the gashes in his soul had been filled with shards of Isas, the God of Orgis’s soul! His love was no longer dead or lost...it was alive and safe in his own soul now!

‘The *bor* works...in mysterious ways...’ he croaked in a choked voice, ‘I know God Hoon is involved somehow!’

‘I agree!’ Myrhim looked up at the sky tremulously. ‘He is fully involved now!’

The iljjocks sighed with relief. And, they looked at Iisuu with even more adoration. They had always known about his pain. Now, they understood it. They had also known that the river of love flowing on the yoke had kept him alive. Now, they knew why.

THE iljjocks spent the rest of the night recovering from the eventful visit to the *bor*. An epoch had come to an end on Seabor! Their world, which had not

changed for ages, had changed so massively in the past few days!

The biggest change had happened to God Iisuu – his old bitterness was gone and he was beaming with love and joy! Amazingly, he no longer needed the support of the yoke to live!

This development was not without its implications. Lo, for the first time since they had been created, the squat-bodied creatures tasted the sweetness of freedom! With shock, they realized that they were no longer required to make *boondis* or stay hitched to the yoke all day! They could spend their lives as they pleased now!

The *yoke* had also changed! It was no longer the same. Elli was sitting next to Yaduk in their *beshel* and holding her head strangely. ‘My head...it is swimming,’ she moaned. ‘What’s happened to the yoke?’

‘Yes, something is wrong with the yoke!’ the iljjocks agreed. They were all swaying unsteadily on the ocean floor.

God Iisuu laughed loudly to see them like this. ‘Nothing is wrong with the yoke...it has become unstable because of the power flowing from the second divine string. It will be all right soon!’

Indeed, within moments, the yoke stabilized. And, the iljjocks discovered that their divine powers had multiplied!

‘Holy heavens...I can see as far as the *Nors* now!’ Hatti exclaimed in amazement. Earlier, he could see only on Seabor with his divine sight.

‘We can see up to the *Nors* too!’ the other iljjocks agreed.

‘I can exert divine force...as far as the *Kirll* bay!’ Pikki exclaimed. Earlier, he could exert force only up to nearby trees.

‘Wonderful!’ Iisuu declared joyfully.

A small pandemonium broke out on the ocean floor as the iljjocks ran around happily.

‘Shhh....’warned Myrhim.

No one listened to her. Loud cries and laughter echoed on the ocean floor as they all tried out their new divine powers.

Elli and Yaduk were testing how fast they could whiz in the ocean. She was whizzing in the ocean like an arrow gone wild and he was trying to catch up with her. Finally, when he had caught her, they rolled on the ocean floor, screaming with laughter and exhilaration. Excitement gave way to

passion and they locked their lips in a scorching kiss. The bonds of love that they had seen in the *bor* had made them long fiercely for each other!

Yaduk felt the blood pounding in his loins as he carried Elli to a *beshel*. Luckily, it was vacant and there was a cot inside. They fell on the cot and engaged in a fierce and passionate embrace. He clasped her aroused nodules and stroked them hard. Elli groaned and sliding down to his own arousals, suckled them with her mouth. The water was freezing cold and her mouth, scorching hot. Lo, a volcano of passion erupted inside him and he gasped for breath, ‘Elli...’

Elli was on fire herself! She straddled her legs around him and he convulsed. Trembling with soulful longing, the two began gyrating rhythmically. Each gyration made the passion mount. The release was explosive – heavy sparks crackled out of their nodules even as powerful spasms shook their souls with blinding rapture.

They would have fallen asleep in a magical haze hadn’t it been for the radiance lighting up the room. ‘Hey!’ Yaduk exclaimed, shielding his eyes.

Elli gasped with surprise. ‘Look!’ she cried, pointing to their feet. A huge pile of zol crystals lay near their toes, glowing with stupendous brilliance. ‘We must show them to God Iisuu!’ she said excitedly.

They gathered the crystals and swam out of the *beshel*. God Iisuu was sitting outside his *beshel*, surrounded by a crowd. Many iljjock pairs had produced equally radiant crystals and were showing them to him!

‘Brilliant!’ Iisuu patted Yaduk on the back on seeing his crystals. ‘Do you know what this means?’

‘I can buy plenty of things for Elli and myself!’ Yaduk replied promptly.

‘Of course,’ Iisuu chuckled. ‘But, it also means something else....’

‘What is that?’

‘You can go back to Earth safely now!’

‘Go back to Earth?’ Yaduk murmured distractedly.

‘Yes!’ Iisuu nodded. ‘You have sufficient divine power to carry out the journey. As soon as you finish swapping your strings with Elli, we will send you back!’

‘How many days have passed since I came, my lord’ Yaduk asked in

a daze.

‘Eight days!’ Hatti replied. ‘And, the ninth day is going to start soon. So, I suggest we all catch some sleep!’

‘Yes, let’s sleep now!’ the iljjocks agreed tiredly.

God Iisuu nodded and the iljjocks began dispersing.

‘Eight days!’ Yaduk wondered in a daze. Eight hundred years had passed on Earth!

‘Let’s go!’ Elli pulled his hand. They swam back to their *beshel* and slumped in their cot. Elli pushed *kiks* in their mouths and then, rolled over to fall asleep.

Yaduk gazed silently at the sky. It was dark and empty. No stars twinkled over Seabor and he no longer missed seeing them. His past life was gone and Seabor was his home now.

‘Go to sleep....’ Elli whispered drowsily.

He turned to look at her. Oh, how fulfilled she made him feel. He could not bear to be parted from her or to spend a moment without her.

It was decided, then. As ordained, he would go back to Earth. And, Elli would have to accompany him!

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NEW DIVINE POWERS

Time: Yaduk’s ninth day on Seabor (6th century AD)

THE day dawned brightly on Seabor. The *Nors* rose as blistering fireballs in the sky and set the ocean to a violent boil. The water boiled noisily to load the air with fresh vapor. But, the noise did not pollute the ocean. For, it was material sound and the ocean kept no memory of it. The ocean kept memory only of the sparks that flew from the mouths of the creatures living in it! And, plenty of sparks were flying out now. For, the iljjocks had thrown all caution to the wind and were freely using their newly attained powers!

‘Ha...Ha...’ laughter rang out loudly as many of them moved the clouds around and created beautiful patterns in the sky.

‘Haw...Haw...’ Yaduk, Pikki and Hatti guffawed, as they tried to work out a new formation that would allow them to leap to the *Nors*. That,

they would not survive the leap, was beyond their immediate consideration!

‘He...He...’ Elli giggled as she tried to lift a pile of *kiks* straight from the *Kirll* forest to her *beshel* on the ocean floor. She managed to lift them but dropped quite a few on the way!

Yaduk swam to her side and tried to help her. He dropped more on the way, making her roll with delight on the wooden floor of their *beshel*!

‘Shhh....’ Iisuu thundered loudly on the yoke, scolding everyone for being so irresponsible. It would take years for the noise to die in the oceans!

The iljjocks calmed down. Hiccupping loudly, they returned to their early morning routine of grooming.

Yaduk and Elli sat down to eat the fresh *kiks* they had lifted from *Kirll*. They pushed the *kiks* in each other’s mouths and reveled in the soulful warmth of their companionship.

Yaduk gazed at Elli with wonder. Each moment that he spent with her, he felt gloriously alive. For each moment that he spent apart, he became listless and despondent. If he had to go to Earth alone, even for a short while, he knew he would just die!

‘Elli,’ he said hesitantly. ‘I think we should go slow with the swapping...what do you say?’

‘Why?’ she was shocked, ‘Rather, we should go faster!’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, hurt. ‘Do you want me to go back to Earth as soon as possible?’

‘Of course not! But, if you had to leave for some reason, without having swapped all the soul strings, I will die as a *coon*!’

‘I see,’ he nodded dully. Elli was an iljjock. She was not scared of death. She was scared of becoming a *coon*! He shivered as he remembered what Pikki had told him about the screaming souls of *coons*.

‘Let’s finish the swapping as soon as possible,’ she insisted, ‘And, then we can consider what you are thinking...’

Yaduk looked at her in surprise. Of course, she knew every thought that went in his head! ‘Will you come to Earth with me?’ he stammered, his heart in his mouth.

‘I cannot say...I don’t think it will be easy...’ she replied. ‘Let us decide when the time comes.’

‘Sure!’ Yaduk agreed.

‘Come...let’s go!’ she said eagerly.

‘Where?’

‘Outside...I am dying to make a *boondi* of the *bor*!’

The two swam out of their *beshel* to find the ocean floor crowded. Almost all the iljjocks were busy etching their impressions of the *bor*, but with a difference. They were doing it of their own free will!

Yaduk and Elli also became busy with etching their *boondis* and the day passed in a rapturous haze.

Soon, it was dusk. The *Nors* began setting, bathing the sky and the ocean with wavering hues of red and purple. Soon, the water would cool down and start climbing the lands- the surface of the ocean would become undulating and would glimmer with an ethereal icy sheen!

The iljjocks began retiring to their *beshels* for the night. Yaduk and Elli also went back to their *beshel* and lay down on their cot with their toes entwined. Within moments, they were asleep and swapping the next lot of soul strings.

Yaduk picked strings that would tell him more about strategic iljjock formations and Elli picked strings that would tell her more about the animals and plants on Earth!

‘There are thousands of plants and animals on Earth...I am sure you have not seen them before!’ Yaduk whispered to her in his sleep.

‘But, I have seen them all!’ she replied surprisingly.

‘Really?’ he exclaimed aloud, opening his eyes.

Elli opened her eyes too. ‘Yes. I have seen them on Seabor...at the Harappa farms!’ she murmured drowsily.

‘Oh, yes!’

‘I will take you there tomorrow. The seamones breed the earthly animals there!’

‘No, I don’t want to go,’ he yawned. ‘A seamone may try to harm you again!’

‘Not a chance!’ she retorted. ‘They must be very scared of our new divine powers now!’

‘Do they even know about them?’ he wondered drowsily.

‘I am sure they do. The oceans hide nothing!’ Elli muttered, and then rolled over to fall asleep again.

Elli iljjack could not be more right. The oceans truly hid nothing!

For almost a day now, the seamones, led by their Triar, had been hiding outside the iljjack settlement. With eyes bulging out of their sockets and with souls burning with jealousy, they had watched the iljjacks put on an impressive display of their newly attained divine powers!

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TRIAR SEAMONE

TRIAR SEAMONE had learned of trouble brewing early last night. He and his coterie had been trying out weapons made by the metal smiths in the seamone settlement.

Actually, God Aakaa had taken Blumone’s death very bitterly. He had ordered the Triar to prepare for a bloody battle with the iljjacks. Since then, the seamones had been working day and night to make weapons- spears, bows and arrows! The designs had been lifted from the humans but with a slight change - the seamone weapons were powered by *zol* crystals!

To see if the weapons would go as far as the Iljjack Ocean, the Triar and his coterie had gone up to the rooftop of the tallest *beshel* and had started shooting from there. The *beshel* stood on the ocean floor and towered up to the sky. They had hardly shot a few spears when informers came rushing to them.

‘The iljjacks have gone mad!’ they howled in panic, ‘They are screaming in the middle of the night, my lord!’

‘Maybe they are dying from a human disease,’ the Triar guffawed.

‘Ha...ha...’ his coterie laughed with him. ‘We will be saved the effort of killing them!’

‘The human Yaduk...’ the informers gasped, oozing a very foul spoor of despair and anxiety.

‘What about him?’ the Triar asked sharply.

‘The human woke up the sleeping iljjacks...the iljjacks almost killed him...but, then something happened...Iisuu and Myrhim came out...and suddenly...’

‘Suddenly what?’

‘God Hoon...’ the informers whispered with fright.

Triar seamone and his coterie froze with shock and fear.

‘Thunder and lightning crackled...God Hoon came to Seabor!’

‘Nonsense!’

‘The human called him, my lord! We heard God Iisuu say that Hoon has been protecting the human...or else he would have died by now!’

‘How is that possible?’ the Triar was truly flabbergasted. Tears of fright were flowing down the eyes of the informers, spreading a cold and dank odor around them.

‘It makes sense!’ the voice of his fathers echoed from his soul. ‘The human could not have survived for so long without divine help!’

‘Do you really think God Hoon has helped him?’ he asked his fathers in surprise.

‘No, that seems too far-fetched. God Hoon helps no one!’

‘Exactly. Why would he bother with a puny human?’

‘Well, you are the leader of the seamones...find out yourself!’

‘Let’s visit the iljjocks right away,’ the Triar rasped to the informers, jumping into a zolboat parked on the terrace.

‘Yes, my lord,’ they rasped, jumping into their *zolboats*.

‘On second thought,’ the fathers mused, ‘If Iisuu is the one who said it...it just might be true...God Hoon may have protected the human after all!’

The Triar ignored the frightening comment and sped towards the Iljjock Ocean. His coterie sped behind him. A short while later, they were walking in the iljjock settlement, pretending to have come for *zol* crystals!

The Triar was shocked to see the iljjocks swaying wildly, their limbs out of their control. ‘Have they really gone mad?’ he frowned, his squirrel face puzzled. His coterie was so taken aback that they did not know what to say.

‘Hey...you...’ the Triar yelled to an iljjock swaying wildly past them. It was Jerro iljjock!

‘Come tomorrow,’ Jerro waved dizzily.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘Oh that...Myrhim has loaded the yoke with another *divine string*!’ Jerro hiccupped.

Stunned with Jerro’s reply, the Triar stopped in his tracks. ‘Why would she do that?’ he bristled with resentment.

‘God Iisuu told her to do it!’ Jerro smiled. ‘She gave Yaduk another *divine string*...you are jealous, aren’t you?’

The Triar ignored the iljjock’s impudence and asked curiously, ‘Was the human’s soul strong enough?’

‘Myrhim reduced the power of the string...don’t worry it all worked out fine!’ Jerro muttered, wandering away to find Pikki.

The Triar glared at the departing iljjock with fury. ‘How can Myrhim be so unfair?’ he growled angrily.

‘How can she give them another *divine string* when she has given us none?’ his coterie was livid too, ‘God Aakaa is right. It is time we killed them all in war!’

The Triar was still so shocked that he looked at his companions distractedly. ‘Leave me alone,’ he rasped in a low voice. ‘Go back...’

‘But...’

‘Leave me alone, I say,’ he growled menacingly. ‘I have something on my mind!’

The seamones obeyed their leader and departed in their *zolboats*. Triar Seamone wandered alone in the iljjock settlement.

‘What do you have on your mind?’ the voice of his fathers echoed from his soul.

‘I don’t know,’ he yelled, irritated by the noise the iljjocks were making. Lo, they had so much power now that they were moving the water in the ocean and the clouds in the sky!

He burned with rage like never before. He was the only seamone with a drop of *Orgis* in his soul but not even that could cool the despair raging in it now. ‘We are cursed from birth,’ he recalled Aakaa’s often-repeated words. ‘They would rather not have us at all!’

‘That’s not true,’ his fathers warned. ‘Be wise, dear child. You must persuade Aakaa to give *Orgis* to all seamones. Once your souls are strong, Myrhim will also give you the *divine strings*!’

‘Wrong!’ he retorted angrily, ‘She will never give us anything. If she wanted to, she could have given us a seamone yoke easily!’

‘She is scared that Aakaa will misuse the powers of the yoke...forget it!’

‘Shut up!’ he fumed with blinding rage. Oh, what a fool he had been to think that he could change the destiny and lives of his people. The truth was that they mattered to no one, not even their own fathers!

‘Forgive me, Blumone!’ the Triar wept tears of regret, ‘I should not have stopped you. I should have let you abduct Elli iljock and take the *divine string* from her forcibly!’

Having said that, he wiped his tears and suddenly began looking inside all the iljock *beshels*.

‘Where are you doing?’ his fathers panicked.

‘Quiet!’ he hollered back.

But, the fathers knew. He was searching for Elli iljock!

‘NO!’ the ancestors thundered, which included the legendary Saramone. ‘Iisuu will know the moment you touch Elli...he will punish you exactly as he punished Blumone. He will scorch you to death...you will end up a *coon*...do you understand? Our noble lineage will end in doom!’

The Triar decided to listen to his fathers for the one last time! It was almost dawn now and the iljjocks would wake up any moment. Staying for a moment longer could be fatal to him. He decided to wait outside the iljock settlement, and at least see who Elli iljock was?

Oh, he recognized the doe-faced Elli the moment he saw her. Unlike the other iljjocks, she exuded a divine glow, although very muted. But, it was obvious that she had been created to be different.

‘So, it is true. Myrhim has made her very special,’ he murmured to himself. ‘I should have carried her off last night!’

‘Don’t even think of it!’ his ancestors seethed.

The Triar spent the whole day in despair and doubt. At dusk, when the setting *Nors* bathed the sky with vibrant hues, he succumbed to hatred and jealousy.

Late in the night, when the water of the ocean had climbed over the land to become chillingly beautiful, he crept quietly to Elli’s *beshel*. While

the other seamones wandered in the iljock settlement pretending to collect *zol* crystals, the Triar stood outside her *beshel* like a deathly shadow. He looked inside. She was sleeping with her human soulmate and the two were surprisingly murmuring in their sleep!

He heard Elli murmur drowsily. ‘Yes. I have seen them on Seabor...at the Harappa farms.’

‘Oh, yes!’ Yaduk exclaimed.

‘I will take you there tomorrow. The seamones breed the earthly animals there.’

‘No, I don’t want to go,’ he yawned. ‘A seamone may try to harm you again!’

‘Not a chance,’ she retorted. ‘They must be very scared of our new divine powers now!’

‘Do they even know about them?’ he wondered drowsily.

‘I am sure they do. The oceans hide nothing!’ Elli said and then fell asleep.

The Triar looked at her nodules and thought of forcibly taking the divine string from her soul but then reminded himself to be patient. He had to be very careful. ‘So, they are going to the Harappa farms tomorrow!’ he murmured with glee. ‘It will so easy to capture her over there!’

‘Don’t even try!’ his fathers scolded.

‘Shut up,’ he snapped angrily and swam to his *zolboat*. His coterie was waiting for him.

‘Tell everybody to vacate the Harappa farms immediately!’ he instructed the others when inside the *zolboat*. ‘No seamone will go there until I give a sign!’

Bewildered, the seamones nodded silently. They jumped in their *zolboats* and sped away to carry out the instructions of their leader.

‘At least, take God Aakaa’s help!’ his fathers cried in despair.

‘Why?’

‘You are taking on the mighty iljocks!’

‘Mighty iljocks...ha!’ the Triar spat scornfully. ‘My weapons will make bigger holes in their bodies than the humans have in theirs!’

‘The humans have holes in their bodies?’ the fathers were

bewildered.

‘Plenty!’

‘What about God Iisuu? Can your weapons make holes in his body too?’

The vision of an angry God Iisuu flashed in front of him. Lo, he lost his nerve and not arguing any further, turned his *zolboat* to head towards God Aakaa’s abode.

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HARAPPA FARMS

Day: Yaduk’s tenth day on Seabor (7th century AD on Earth)

YADUK and Elli got up early in the morning to visit the Harappa farms. ‘Follow me,’ she said, swimming towards the Seamone Ocean.

‘Is is far off?’ he asked, talking directly to her soul. He was instinctively mindful of not speaking in the open ocean now.

She gave him a naughty glance and replied, ‘Yes, but we can swim fast using the power of the iljjock yoke.’

‘No!’ he warned, ‘The iljjocks will kill me if I disturb them again!’

‘No, they won’t,’ she smiled wickedly. ‘Not if they want to be punished by God Hoon!’

‘Ha...ha...’ he laughed. Mischievous to the core of her two souls, Elli was going to exploit their “Hoon” connection fully! Suddenly, he was reminded that his ears had not buzzed for almost a day. What was God Hoon doing, he wondered looking up at the sky. A few clouds stared back at him and gave no sign.

They sucked power from the yoke and whizzed through the ocean. ‘Where are you two going?’ Iisuu spotted them immediately with his divine sight.

‘To the Harappa farms, my lord,’ Elli replied.

‘Stop!’ he scolded sternly, ‘Not after Blumone tried to capture you.... come back at once!’

‘We shall be back by noon,’ Elli protested.

‘Let’s go back,’ Yaduk urged uneasily, ‘I don’t want to risk any

seamone coming near you!’

‘There’s no need to fear!’ Myrhim intervened indulgently. After the Blumone incident, the goddess listened attentively to the chatter on the yoke. ‘Yaduk should see the Harappa farms. He will be delighted to see the animals, birds and fishes!’

‘No,’ Yaduk refused firmly. ‘I do not want to see any animals, birds or fishes. I just want Elli to be safe!’

‘But, I want to see them!’ Elli raced ahead.

Yaduk saw her disappearing with a deep foreboding. He had had the same terrible feeling when Madho had disappeared to walk in the embrace of the mountain god.

‘Stop, Elli!’ he yelled, racing behind her.

‘It is all right, Yaduk,’ Iisuu sighed reluctantly. ‘We cannot live in fear...I will be watching you constantly. And, don’t forget...God Hoon is watching all of us!’

‘Iisuu is right,’ Myrhim assured in her tinkling voice. ‘Have a look at the farms and come back by dusk.’

‘All right,’ Yaduk hurried behind Elli. ‘Slow down,’ he cried, trying to catch up with her.

‘The Seamone Ocean begins from here,’ Elli said, whizzing through the water. ‘And, there lie the Harappa farms!’ she pointed downwards.

Yaduk looked down and was surprised to see a vast expanse of greenery growing on the undulating ocean floor. The trees seemed earthly- he could already make out tall banyan trees!

‘Come,’ she dived down excitedly. Before he could dive after her, she had darted into a forested clump and disappeared from sight.

‘Elli!’ he called anxiously, alighting close to the banyan trees. ‘O wonder!’ he cried in surprise as flocks of parrots, canaries and hens swam by. Herds of sheep and goats could also be seen nibbling on tender underwater shrubs.

‘Yaduk!’ Elli squealed loudly from somewhere.

‘Where are you hiding?’ he yelled, swimming into deeper forest. Lo, Elli was sitting on a rock, surrounded by a cloud of colorful butterflies!

‘This place is beyond my dreams,’ she beamed with delight. ‘My soul

is singing with joy!’

‘I am not surprised!’ he replied, relieved to find her. ‘One of your souls is human!’

‘The seamones breed the animals here...to amuse themselves!’ she spoke aloud.

‘I see. Are we allowed to talk openly here?’

‘Yes. The trees will absorb our voices.’

Yaduk looked around. The forest seemed familiar and inviting. The chirping of the birds and the bleating of the goats- he listened to them with profound joy.

Feeling at home and very happy, he swam to the goats and the sheep to look them over. ‘Awk...awk...’ he caressed them gently.

‘Mehhh...’ the goats bleated weakly.

‘Elli,’ he said suddenly. ‘These goats are sick!’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know. I am a cowherd...these goats and sheep are sick...’ he grasped a hen wading past him. ‘And, this bird is sick too!’

‘Really?’ she lifted a goat kid and stroked it gently. It had festering boils all over its body. He quickly prepared a paste from herbs growing nearby and rubbed it on the boils. ‘That should make it feel better!’

‘Let us spend some time here,’ Elli suggested, letting the goat kid skip away.

‘What about the swapping of soul strings?’

‘We can do it here.’

‘All right,’ he agreed reluctantly. ‘The animals need tending too!’

She chose an open clearing for etching a *boondi*. And, he made a temporary shelter with broken branches and flew *kiks* from *Kirll*.

Exhausted with all the hard work, they slumped in the shelter to resume the swapping. Lightning crackled between their toes *zol* crystals rolled out in heaps. ‘O wonder!’ he exclaimed. The crystals were unusually bright and flawless.

‘It is because the ocean bed is lower here. The lower the bed, the better the crystals.’ Elli explained.

For the rest of the day, they made their *boondi* in a haze of rapturous iljock love. In between, he took off to tend to the goats, deer and sheep. Elli kept to his side, asking about the various trees and animals. He could not answer all her questions because there were so many of them that he had never seen before!

‘This is a cocoa tree!’ she said, pointing to a tree with pods growing on the trunk.

Yaduk looked at the tree blankly. ‘Maybe they grow in other places on Earth,’ he shrugged, swimming through bamboos that whispered when waves passed through them!

‘Look!’ she cried, pointing to nests hidden in the undergrowth. They were nests of *enccollies*, *dugs* and *besrings*!

‘Great,’ he exclaimed. ‘This is exactly what I need...grooming!’

The two coaxed the *besrings*, *dugs* and *enccollies* to groom them. After a little cajoling, the creatures crept out of the nests and suckled their nodules, making them feel lighter and relieved.

Elli wished to spend the night at Harappa farms.

‘No!’ God Iisuu refused outright, speaking through the yoke. ‘Are you mad...this is a seamone farm!’

‘There is no one here,’ she protested. ‘We are completely alone!’

‘NO!’

‘It is all right,’ Myrhim intervened, having looked at every niche of the farm with her omnipresent sight. ‘There is no seamone near...and Yaduk is healing the creatures!’

‘Only one night!’ Elli pleaded, ‘I am liking it so much here...we are planning to swap plenty of soul strings tonight!’

‘All right,’ Iisuu agreed reluctantly.

Yaduk and Elli spent the night in soulful bliss. They slept inside the temporary shelter with their toes entwined, swapping soul strings. Iisuu and Myrhim kept a constant watch over them, ready to unleash divine force if any seamone tried to venture close to the farms!

The night passed. Not a single seamone ventured close to the farms and they slept undisturbed. And, because they slept deeply, they ended up swapping plenty of soul strings!

‘Why are the seamones keeping away?’ God Iisuu wondered with bewilderment.

‘They are scared!’ Myrhim replied. ‘I don’t think we should worry too much about them.’

‘In that case, let us stay here for a few more days,’ Elli pleaded. ‘Why don’t you say something too?’ she glared at Yaduk.

‘My lord, we will finish the swapping faster if we stay here for a few days,’ Yaduk ventured hesitantly.

‘Which will be very good,’ Myrhim said encouragingly. ‘The faster you finish swapping, the better it will be for all of us. Iisuu, I think you should agree now!’

‘Do I have a choice?’ Iisuu frowned, but then decided to give in. ‘Finish the swapping fast and come back soon,’ he instructed them through the yoke. ‘The goddess and I will be watching you!’

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GOD AAKAA

Day: Yaduk’s eleventh day on Seabor (8th century AD on Earth)

TRIAR SEAMONE, the leader of seamones, hadn’t slept or eaten for a day now. He had been sitting in the outer chamber of God Aakaa’s burrow, waiting to meet him!

‘When will he meet me?’ he snapped for the hundredth time to the slave loitering morosely around him.

‘I cannot tell,’ the slave shook his head. ‘He spends a lot of time in the chamber of *coons* these days!’

‘Doing what?’

‘Playing around with the germs you give to him. One of them has turned out to be quite deadly!’

‘Which one?’ He recalled that he had grown a new strain of germs on rat fleas a few days back. ‘Did he use the “rat flea” germ?’ he asked with glee, ‘Was it very deadly?’

The slave looked at him undecidedly. Aakaa had instructed them to keep his mouth shut regarding all that happened in the burrow. But, the Triar

was the only seamone who carried a drop of *Orgis* in his soul!

The slave grinned vilely and wrapped his tail around the Triar's tail to make a direct connection to his soul.

'What are you doing?' the Triar snapped sharply.

The slave trembled, feeling the direct glow of *Orgis*. It soothed his tortured soul and made him shiver with rapture. 'My lord, I am calming myself so that I can give you the insider tidings!'

The Triar glared at the impudent creature and swallowed his anger. He was eager to know the tidings!

The slaves blabbered. 'Aakaa has used your "rat" germ to spread plague on Earth. Villages and cities have been wiped out. The *Nors* have been flooded with the souls of the dead!'

'Really?' Triar Seamone gasped, very pleased to hear that his hard work had borne results. His ancestors, that included the legendary Saramone, were even more pleased.

'This is great news, dear child,' their excited voices echoed loudly from his soul. 'You must abandon your plan to abduct Elli immediately!'

'Why is that?' the Triar retorted irritably.

'Because, you can demand *Orgis* for all seamones from God Aakaa now!'

'How is that?'

'God Aakaa must be very pleased. And, the last time he was very pleased, he gave Saramone a drop of *Orgis*...it is the drop that you carry in your soul and is comforting this wicked slave right now!'

'Nonsense!' the slave snorted derisively, hearing the voices of the ancestors.

'Quiet!' the Triar pulled his tail away. 'Those were my revered fathers!'

'Saramone was fortunate!' the slave declared bitterly. 'Aakaa will not give *Orgis* to anyone now.'

'Why do you say that?'

'The *Orgis* is what protects him from Iisuu, Myrhim and even God Hoon. Now that his fondness for the humans is growing, he needs every drop of *Orgis* that he has!'

‘Fondness for the humans?’

‘Yes. He spends all his time wringing their souls. His mind is full of them- what they eat, how they dress, how they curse...he called me Attila the Hun, the other day!’

‘What kind of a curse is that?’

‘It is a human plunderer’s name...those are the types he hangs out with now...killers, murderers and thieves!’

‘Disgusting!’ the Triar exclaimed. That their divine father, Aakaa, was hanging around with human scum was intolerable.

His fathers panicked. ‘Take the *Orgis* from him before he runs away to become the divine father of the humans!’ they shrieked.

The Triar came to a decision. His eyes glinting with determination, he ordered the slave tersely, ‘Call everybody here. When God Aakaa comes out, we will all plead for *Orgis*. I don’t care if he goes to Earth and becomes the divine father of humans, rats, cows or pigs. As long as he gives *Orgis* to us first!’

WELL, if God Aakaa had a choice, he would have travelled to Earth immediately and declared himself as the divine father of the humans. Alas! Myrhim had barred his access to the vortex of divine continuum and he had no choice but to be holed in his burrow at Seabor!

It was true. He had thrown all caution to the winds and was spending most of his time going after the human souls in the *Nors*, wringing and torturing them as much as he pleased.

His biggest titillation, these days, was to watch the souls of the dead crowd around God Hoon and rattle him with tales of their suffering. Even now, he was sitting in the eerie chamber of *coons*, enjoying the spoils of a smallpox epidemic that he had caused by tweaking the germs on Earth!

‘Ha...ha...’ he cackled with fiendish glee as thousands of souls flooded the *Nors* and Hoon struggled to find them places.

Human souls were suspended in the divine continuum in a spiral formation. There was a kernel at the centre and spiraling away from it were many fringes. Hoon placed the souls of the most imaginative humans in the kernel. The rest found places in the fringes in decreasing order of their powers of imagination.

Aakaa kept his sight fixed firmly on the kernel for that was where all major decisions regarding the future were made. The souls placed there were chattering loudly to each other, trying to select the best path to the future democratically. 'Hoon has given them too much liberty!' he growled disparagingly.

Things had progressed a lot from the times of Harappa when Hoon had plonked the souls of the architects of the underground drainage system in the kernel. After them, the souls of great kings and queens, peasants, farmers, architects, priests, porcelain makers and warriors had found place. Of late, the souls of great mathematicians, architects, poets, musicians and artists had been prominent places in the kernel!

Aakaa was fascinated by the souls of warriors the most. He wanted a find someone who had the gall to take over the kernel forcibly on his behalf!

He found Aryabhatta, Euclid and Pythagoras chatting about some geometrical alignments. 'Nonsense!' he left them in a hurry. Just when he thought he would spot no one interesting, he spotted the soul of Alexander the Great!

Alexander was chatting to Chanakya, his contemporary. Both were discussing tactical workarounds to paths that were inevitable in the future!

'Ah, what a catch!' he growled softly, fixing his divine sight on them. Oh, like a predator leaping at its prey, he caught their souls and wrung them hard. The two groaned loudly and Alexander yelled, 'God Hoon!'

Lo, Aakaa dropped them like hot coals and broke his connection to the *Nors*. Frightened out of his wits, he raced out of the chamber of *coons*.

He entered his chamber to find the Triar waiting for him. 'Go away!' he growled irritably, slumping on his cot. There was a sudden flurry of activity as his family leapt to suckle his nodules and slaves rushed to give him a platter of *kiks*.

The Triar did not go away. Rather, more seamones entered the chamber! Aakaa realized that hundreds of seamones had gathered outside his burrow. 'What's going on here?' he growled angrily.

'I have some terrible news for you, my lord,' the Triar said gravely.

'What is it?'

'The iljjocks have attained more divine powers.'

'How come?'

Triar Seamone described in detail about how Myrhim had loaded another divine string in Yaduk's soul and granted the iljocks more divine powers. 'The iljocks can crush our settlements with a simple formation now!' he concluded worriedly.

Aakaa fumed and fretted in silence for a while. Then turning to the Triar he scowled, 'I don't care. Get out of here!'

Stunned, the Triar rasped, 'They can kill all of us in a moment!'

'So, what do you want me to do?' Aakaa growled in irritation, 'Fight with Myrhim and Iisuu?'

The Triar trembled. This was the moment he had been waiting for! 'No, you don't have to fight anyone. But, you can make us stronger!'

Aakaa looked at him with narrowed eyes. 'What do you mean?'

'You can give *Orgis* to all of us!'

Aakaa looked at him for one stunned moment and then, burst into loud laughter. 'Get out of here before I kill you...' he snarled vilely. 'You are of no use to me anyway!'

'No use to you?' the Triar repeated dully. 'What do you mean?'

'The humans will give me everything!'

The Triar glared in silence.

'What can you give me?' Aakaa continued his rant. 'Despair and defeat? You are born losers and I am tired of you. So, just get out!'

A collective gasp of disbelief escaped the seamones standing outside. They had heard their divine father's cruel words and stood numb with shock and humiliation.

Alas! God Aakaa had not finished. 'Don't fret over what will happen to your cursed souls...I will stack your *coons* in my chamber. I need plenty of them, anyway!'

Feeling faint, the Triar staggered out of the burrow and joined the hundreds of seamones standing outside. All of them were oozing the foul scent of despair, making the water stink. Their faces reflected an agony of rejection so sharp, it seemed that they had begun hating their own existence.

'Go back to your homes...' their leader croaked brokenly to them.

Without uttering another word, the seamones climbed into their *zolboats* and left the cursed place.

The Triar also climbed into his *zolboat*. He pulled on the cranks listlessly and was about to head to the Harappa farms, when he suddenly remembered that Yaduk and Elli were present there. Lo, he had forgotten to tell God Aakaa that he was planning to take Elli iljjock captive!

‘Aaaaagh...’ he groaned in frustration.

‘Stop hurting yourself, dear child...’ his fathers whispered tremulously.

‘Shut up!’ he exploded in rage. ‘You destroyed me today!’

‘You did the right thing!’

‘NO!’ he yelled, ‘You made me talk about *Orgis*...when I should have discussed Elli iljjock!’

‘It is good you talked to him straight. At least, you know for sure now that Aakaa has no intention of giving *Orgis* to the seamones, ever!’

‘Yes, God Aakaa made his intentions very clear...and, I am going to do something about it immediately!’

‘Don’t do something foolish!’ his fathers panicked, but their voices were lost.

The Triar was not listening to anyone anymore.

TRIAR SEAMONE sped to the same tall *beshel* where he had been testing weapons a few days back. The *beshel* was made of tall columns of glistening steel and soared from the ocean floor to the sky; the process of smelting iron and making steel had been copied from the humans but had been improved upon by the use of *zol* crystals.

The Triar flew to the rooftop of the *beshel* and jumped off the *zolboat*. He glided down a ramp to enter a large hall.

This hall was the biggest community hall in Seabor. The seamones used this hall for holding their marriages. The ceremonial altar in the middle was similar to that of the iljjocks. But, the marriages were different - instead of toes, tails crackled together. Also, no *zol* crystals rolled out of the tails, as the seamones had no divine powers!

The Triar went up the altar. God Aakaa had conducted the ceremonies on this altar in the past. He wondered if he would do it anymore. He remembered his hateful words and burned with shame.

‘Calm down, dear child,’ his fathers consoled him. ‘Aakaa will surely

come!’

‘I don’t think so,’ he replied bitterly. ‘The humans are giving him all that he needs now!’

‘Well, there’s not much you can do about it.’

‘Wrong,’ he sneered. ‘There is plenty I can do...’

‘What?’ the fathers cried in alarm.

‘Suumone...Mayymone...Akkimone...’he cried sharply to the seamones who had just entered the hall.

‘Yes,’ they glided to him.

‘Call everyone inside...quickly.’

‘Yes, Triar,’ they nodded and went outside to call all the seamones. They had no yoke, so sending a message was an onerous activity that involved shining *zol* crystals in the ocean. The crystals were a source of raw electricity and Aakaa had once ridiculed that if the humans had been given the crystals, they would have built talking tools in a day!

Moments after the summons went out, seamones began trickling in the hall and slowly, the hall filled up.

‘Humans...humans...humans...’ the Triar roared, livid with hatred.

‘My lord,’ Akkimone, a member of the Triar’s close coterie rasped angrily, ‘Allow me to shoot all the spears and arrows that we have made!’

‘Shoot where?’

‘At Earth...at the Nors...wherever the humans are!’

‘Shut up, you fool,’ the Triar yelled, ‘The spears won’t even cross Seabor!’

‘But, we have to do something,’ the seamones cried angrily. They looked at their fuming leader expectantly.

‘Yes, we have to wipe out the human race...before they wipe us out!’ the Triar said fiercely, his eyes crackling with sparks of rage.

‘Yes...yes...’ the seamones cried in glee. ‘But, how will do that?’

‘By breeding a killer germ so deadly that it will wipe out humans from the face of Earth,’ their leader declared, his eyes glinting with determination.

The seamones looked at Triar, stunned. ‘It will take us a few days...

but we can breed such a killer germ,' they cried eagerly.

'Good,' their leader nodded. 'Leave, and start working on the germ beds immediately!'

The seamones began filing out of the hall, eager to begin their task with fervor. The Triar did not follow them out. Rather, he went up to the airy terrace on the rooftop. It was late in the night and the sky was dark. The rugged skyline of the settlement was behind; in front, stretched the vast expanse of the Seamone Ocean. The water was still warm and smelt of fresh vapor.

'Don't act in haste,' his fathers warned. 'You are inviting doom by targeting the humans!'

'I don't care!' he muttered. He turned to leave the rooftop when he suddenly spotted birds flying towards him. Screwing his eyes, he looked closely. They were the trained pigeons that he reared at the Harappa farms!

The pigeons alighted on his shoulder. They were holding something in their claws. 'What have you brought for me?' he muttered, opening their claws. They were clutching *zol* crystals!

He looked at the crystals in awe. They were unusually bright. He touched them gently with his tail. Lo, a wave of rapture ran through his body. The crystals belonged to Elli iljock!

'It means Aakaa was right!' his fathers cried. 'Elli can be a soulmate to a seamone!'

'Elli can be my soulmate?' he trembled with excitement.

'Of course!'

'She can give me the *divine string*?'

'Why not?'

'And, to the other seamones too?'

'Well, yes!'

'I don't believe this...it means that we can finally make the seamone yoke?'

'Iisuu will kill you first!' the fathers retorted.

'Yes, he will...' the Triar mused slowly. 'But, on the other hand, he may spare us!'

'What do you mean?'

‘He has spared God Aakaa many times in the past!’

‘You are not Aakaa, dear child,’ the fathers cried in despair.

But, their dear child was not listening to them anymore. He was so fired by the idea of having a seamone yoke that he was trembling wildly with excitement. ‘I cannot let go of this opportunity!’ he muttered to himself repeatedly.

Without wasting a moment more, he jumped in his *zolboat* and began racing to the Harappa farms.

‘NO!’ the fathers cried in panic.

‘Don’t stop me!’ he pulled on the cranks to make the *beshel* go faster.

‘No, wait...do it wisely and tactfully!’

‘What do you mean?’ he grumbled after a moment’s pause.

‘Divert the enemy first!’

‘What enemy?’

‘Myrhim and Iisuu!’ the fathers cried. ‘Send them away from Seabor first!’

‘What do you mean?’ he cried in bewilderment.

‘First create a crisis on Earth with your germs...they will go running to save the humans. You can capture Elli in their absence!’

Stunned, the Triar stopped his *zolboat*. He was almost halfway to the Harappa farms, but the wise words struck a chord with him.

‘If you have to do it, do it wisely!’ his fathers urged.

‘A killer germ...that’s what I need,’ he muttered. ‘It will create the havoc that I need on Earth!’

‘There is one more small problem,’ the fathers said hesitantly.

‘What?’

‘Elli has already mated the human. If she mates anyone else now, she will die a *coon*!’

‘We will dump her in the chamber of *coons*...’ the Triar replied harshly. ‘Iisuu will never hear her screams!’

‘Don’t forget...God Hoon protected Yaduk...’ the fathers persisted. ‘What if Hoon loses his cool?’

The Triar mused for a long, anxious moment. Finally, he said with a

determined face, 'It is a chance I will take. If we ever get caught, God Hoon will blame Aakaa and not us!'

'It is possible,' the fathers agreed. 'Aakaa will be heavily involved in spreading the disease on Earth, anyway!'

'I need to get the killer germ desperately,' the Triar said tersely.

'You are right. Just make sure that it so deadly that Iisuu and Myrhim have no choice but to travel to Earth to save the humans!'

The Triar nodded. He sped back home pondering in silence about the number of days it would take him to send Iisuu and Myrhim to Earth. Little did he know that worried by the plague and smallpox scourges killing large populations, God Iisuu had already left for Earth!

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GOD IISUU

Yaduk's 12th day on Seabor (9th century AD on Earth)

MYRHIM and Iisuu had watched thousands of humans die helplessly and before the situation spiraled out of control, they decided to intervene in the matter directly. Myrhim opened the vortex of divine continuum and Iisuu's soul migrated into it. He bypassed billions of stars and planets to travel to Earth almost instantly.

Iisuu's soul appeared like a bluish apparition on a city called Constantinople on Earth. He carried an iota of the divine continuum with him. It would allow his soul to move freely on Earth and travel back to Seabor.

The plague epidemic had begun in this city a few days back. It had spread to the east and west and wiped out huge populations. Iisuu wanted to find out what had started the epidemic. Well, a few days on Seabor were a few hundred years on Earth. He wondered if he would be able to find anything now!

The diseases were still rampant. Iisuu looked at the humans in Constantinople with his divine sight. He grimaced to see a small shard from Aakaa's soul lodged in every human soul. This shard was the cause of all the greed, hatred and wars. He reached out to all souls and revived the glow of love emitted by all the holy saints who had taken birth from the shards of his

soul. The ailing felt a sudden divine succor that they could not explain!

He noted with great satisfaction that, despite all the disease and violence, the human society was progressing. Monks, scholars, popes, poets, musicians, writers and artists were enriching the human culture with their works and promoting belief in what was good and beautiful. Some humans were even beginning to explore the path of science, using their intelligence to cure the diseases afflicting them!

‘But, what is causing the outbreaks?’ he wondered, looking deep inside the ailing human bodies. Lo, Myrhim’s germs gone wayward and were causing fatal sicknesses!

He left Earth instantly and traveled back to Seabor. ‘It’s your damned germs!’ he thundered at Myrhim, having picked up a few colorful expletives during his sojourn to Earth!

‘My germs?’ Myrhim asked in surprise.

‘Yes. Do something. Vanquish them all.’

‘I cannot!’

‘But, why?’ Iisuu cried angrily.

‘They are an integral part of Earth’s environment.’

‘The disease germs as well?’

‘Well, the disease germs can be eliminated...but for that, I will have to go to Earth. You know that I cannot leave Seabor.’

‘Why can’t you leave Seabor?’ Iisuu asked, startled. She could roam the entire universe because she was omnipresent. She did not even need the divine continuum to do that!

Myrhim wrung her hands nervously, ‘Aakaa may do something foolish behind my back!’

‘But, we cannot let the humans die like this,’ Iisuu yelled angrily. ‘The future of this universe is at stake!’

‘If Aakaa dies...’ the Goddess retorted. ‘There will no future left!’

‘Is Aakaa dying?’ Iisuu was bewildered.

‘Hoon will kill him this time!’

‘I agree. But, how does that affect the future?’

‘I have not forgotten how the *bor* died!’ Myrhim chided sharply.

‘Aakaa is carrying the divine venom that purged the *bor*. If Aakaa dies, the *Orgis* will spill out of his soul and put the universe irreversibly on the path to death!’

Iisuu’s face turned ashen. How could he forget the tragic death of the *bor* when he had seen it with his own eyes, he thought in a daze. ‘Nothing like that should ever happen again. Not a drop of *Orgis* should be allowed to spill in the open!’ he cried hoarsely.

Myrhim nodded anxiously.

‘But, what about the germs on Earth?’ Iisuu cried in exasperation, ‘The humans will be wiped out!’

‘Nothing like that will happen,’ the goddess assured.

Iisuu looked at her doubtfully.

‘I have given the humans a very powerful immune system. They will slowly become resistant to the germs.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Recent epidemics have given them tremendous resistance. I don’t foresee another one happening for a long time now!’

‘Good!’ Iisuu cried with relief. Assured that the situation was under control, he left Myrhim’s *beshel*. It was early in the morning and the *Nors* were shining brightly. He went back to his own *beshel* and after eating a platter of *kiks*, shared memories of his recent visit to Earth on the iljjock yoke.

The iljjocks were enthralled to see exquisite porcelain pottery. They also listened to haunting melodies and poignant poems. Inspired, they decided to etch memorable *boondis* for the rest of the day.

Yaduk and Elli were still at the Harappa farms. They also saw visions of Earth but they were in no mood to etch *boondis* that day. They just wanted to explore the earthly plants and animals in a magical haze of love!

Elli discovered an old tree with a massive hollow and decided to make it their hideout. Her creativity knew no bounds as she flew down some tools and went about chiseling the bark to make the hollow comfortable to live in. She also made a small hearth from *zol* crystals and roasted a mixture of *kiks* and cocoa butter on it!

‘They taste delicious together!’ Yaduk remarked, hugging her tightly.

He decided to make a few clothes for himself and Elli. He flew down a pile of Nahlu husk from *Kirll* and wove it with yak hair and bird feathers to make colorful robes for himself and Elli.

‘They are beautiful!’ Elli planted a sweet kiss on his lips.

Yaduk felt his insides melt like the cocoa butter and began pulling her into the tree hideout for more. Elli laughed and pulled away. ‘We haven’t seen the whole farm yet...let’s have a look before God Iisuu starts screaming on the yoke for us to go back!’

‘All right...let’s go...’ he laughed, leading the way. They swam gracefully over grasslands, spotting rare creatures like giraffes and ostriches that even Yaduk had not seen before.

After a while, Elli was the one who couldn’t keep away! She dived and turned on her back to look at him with soulful longing. He met her look with equal fervor. They gazed at each other for a long magical moment and then, embraced fiercely. A tide of passion overwhelmed them as they whizzed randomly between schools of fish. From there on, the ocean became a blur. Lost in each other, they glided as one, flipping, turning and finally shuddering with powerful spasms.

Later at night, just before drifting to sleep, Yaduk talked to Iisuu through the iljjock yoke and confirmed that they were fine and would continue their stay at the farms until they were finished with the swapping.

Iisuu was very pleased with their progress. ‘Are there really no seamones around?’ he asked, bewildered.

‘No, my lord!’ Elli replied.

‘Strange!’ Hatti murmured.

‘The animals here are very sick,’ Elli shared.

‘We cure them everyday...but they fall sick again,’ Yaduk added.

‘I will tell Myrhim to have a look,’ Iisuu assured. ‘But, first I want you two back!’

‘Yes...’ Pikki said. ‘Yaduk has to spend time with us...before he goes back to Earth!’

‘Yes, please...’ the iljjocks yawned on the yoke.

‘Now, everybody go to sleep!’ God Iisuu scolded.

One by one, the iljjocks fell asleep and the yoke became silent. Yaduk

and Elli also fell asleep, feeling both happy and sad. Happy to spend another day together at the Harappa farms, and sad at the thought that there would be serious talk of him leaving when they finished swapping all their soul strings!

Another day had ended for the iljjocks. They slept in peace, unaware that the day had not ended for the seamones yet. Down south in the Seamone Ocean, they were working day and night in their tall *beshels*.

They were working hard to crossbreed germs and produce the deadliest earthly germ ever. Every day, when the first rays of the *Nors* fell on Seabor, the Triar collected germs from all the germ beds and took them to God Aakaa to look at!

‘It is the same old strain!’ Aakaa would growl, throwing the germs back at the Triar. ‘I need new strains to break the resilience of the humans!’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the Triar would sigh in despair. He would speed away from Aakaa’s burrow, waiting for the day he would have a strain so deadly that it would cause complete devastation on Earth!

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THE BLACK PLAGUE

Yaduk’s 17th day on Seabor (14th century AD on Earth)

FINALLY, the day arrived when the seamones were confident that they had bred a strain of germs powerful enough to wipe out the entire human race.

‘Aakaa will be so pleased!’ Triar Seamone raced with the vial of the germs to Aakaa’s burrow.

He entered Aakaa’s chamber to find him sleeping on a wooden recliner. The place reeked of a very foul stench but the Triar still took in deep whiffs. Because, riding on the stench came the rapturous scent of *Orgis*!

‘Wake up, my lord,’ he rasped, delirious from the glow of the divine venom.

‘What is it?’ Aakaa growled, opening his eyes.

Triar Seamone waited while Aakaa’s slaves gave him *kiks* to eat in golden goblets and hold on, golden robes to wear! ‘What the...’ he nearly exclaimed.

‘The human kings live like this!’ the slaves giggled.

The Triar was not amused. Rather, he was disgusted. The robes and the goblets were grotesque. How could Aakaa grovel to the humans like this? Burning with jealousy, he said bitterly. ‘My lord, have your *kiks* later...I have something important to say!’

Aakaa was surprised at the Triar’s audacity. He would killed him for this had he not read his soul already.

‘I have a germ that will wipe out the humans!’ the Triar declared excitedly.

‘But, I don’t want humans to be wiped out,’ Aakaa retorted sharply.

‘Neither do Myrhim and Iisuu!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They will scramble to Earth to save the humans. And, while they are busy saving them, I shall abduct Elli iljock!’

Aakaa stared open mouthed at the Triar and growled, ‘Brilliant...give the germ to me!’

The Triar handed the vial to Aakaa. Aakaa took one look at the life code of the germs and nodded his head. He got up from the recliner and cackled loudly, ‘I can already see the *Nors* flooding with human souls!’

‘Yes, my lord,’ the Triar cried with relief. He could not believe that they finally produced a germ that had been up to Aakaa’s expectations.

‘Follow me...’ Aakaa growled, gliding to the chamber of *coons*.

Stunned, the Triar glided behind Aakaa. He could not believe he had been asked into the dreaded but hallowed chamber. The only seamone to do that in the past was Saramone, his worthy ancestor!

Giddy with exhilaration, he followed Aakaa into the chamber of *coons* only to stagger with shock. The place was decidedly macabre with dead *coons* stacked all around. There were so many faces he recognized - Haanimone, Oomnismone and Blumone- they stared eerily at him with a dull glint in their eyes. The *Orgis* in their souls made their bodies glow. It also created a miraculous shield that isolated the chamber from the rest of the universe. Not even Myrhim or for that matter God Hoon, who had omnipresent sights could see what Aakaa was doing inside!

Aakaa sat down on a rickety wooden rest and invited the Triar to twist his tail around his tail. The Triar gulped and did exactly as told. His face

horribly malevolent, Aakaa declared exultantly, 'The humans shall face my scourge again!'

Even as the Triar watched thunderstruck, Aakaa tweaked the life codes of harmless germs on Earth to match the deadly strain bred by the seamones.

Lo, disease spread on Earth like wildfire. It was plague, but like never before. Men, women and children had swollen lymph nodes the size of eggs; the infections being unbelievably virulent and showing no signs of abating. Hundreds of millions died in Europe and Asia. Entire cities and villages were wiped out and corpses rotted in piles on the streets. The humans called it the Black Death and all those who came under its shadow did not survive.

Cackling with horrendous glee, Aakaa looked at the *Nors* to see the state of affairs. Complete chaos reigned over there. Calamities had happened before, but never like this. A distraught Hoon was struggling to cope with the thousands of human souls migrating to the *Nors*. He listened hard to their tales of suffering to determine what had caused such a massive pandemic to happen, but to no avail. He even looked at Earth with his omnipresent sight but could see no abnormal event or trigger!

Aakaa roared with laughter so loud that the chamber of *coons* shook. 'You know what...' he gasped to the Triar. 'Once, I got a chance to rule the future in the old *bor*.... but even that was nothing compared to this!'

The Triar knew that he had managed to deliver a massive blow to humanity and although he hadn't said it yet, Aakaa was finally proud of him! He was so thrilled that he thought he would pass out. But, he forced himself to remain sane. Because, the great task for which this massive charade of death had been organized, was still left to be done- Elli iljjock had to be captured!

'My lord,' he reminded Aakaa in a trembling voice. 'It is time to capture Elli iljjock...I must leave now!'

'No, wait,' Aakaa stopped him. He looked at the iljjock settlement with his divine sight and growled tersely, 'Iisuu and Myrhim haven't left for Earth yet!'

GOD IISUU had been lulled into complacency by Myrhim's assurances. She had assured him repeatedly that the humans had a very robust immune system. Also, that there was no germ that the human immune system could

not overpower!

He was repeatedly looking at Earth and trying hard to listen to the *organum* music being sung in a monastery. But, his attention was being diverted to the rat fleas spreading plague in the cities and villages.

Iisuu kept telling himself that the situation would get better. But, time passed and there was no respite. It was when he saw entire villages being wiped out that he panicked and rushed to Goddess Myrhim's *beshel*.

He found Myrhim in a very agitated state. She had also been watching Earth with her divine sight. 'I don't know what's happening,' she cried in an agonized whisper to him.

'You should have gone and killed the germs!' he said angrily.

'It will slow down...' she assured.

'If it doesn't...you are leaving!' Iisuu thundered.

Numbly, Iisuu and Myrhim watched the disease spread and almost half of the human population die. Seemingly, their natural immunity was failing. The plague germs were mutating faster than their immune system could kill them!

'Do something, my goddess,' Iisuu burst with rage. 'Before, it becomes too late!'

Myrhim flew in a state of panic. The situation on Earth had truly spiraled out of control – the humans were on the brink of extinction!

'But, Aakaa...' she stammered, wringing her hands.

Iisuu caught hold of her hands and looked intently into her eyes, 'If you are worried about God Hoon killing Aakaa behind your back...I will keep an eye on Hoon through the divine continuum. I won't let him get to Aakaa. Is that all right?'

'All right,' the goddess agreed.

'Now, just leave,' Iisuu said firmly.

Goddess Myrhim did not waste a moment more. In a flash, she migrated into the divine continuum and was gone. Iisuu also migrated into the vortex. It was linked seamlessly to the divine continuum in the *Nors*. From there, he could watch Hoon as well as Myrhim! Alas, he did not know that instead of them, he should have been watching Aakaa!

Aakaa came to know the moment Myrhim's soul left Seabor. He also

came to know the moment she arrived on Earth. Because, the moment she appeared on the blue planet, she began killing germs by the millions with her divine scimitar.

‘Run!’ Aakaa said sharply to the Triar. ‘Myrhim is busy on Earth and Iisuu has entered the isolation of the divine continuum...run and get Elli iljjock now!’

Without saying another word, the Triar rushed to the *zolboat* tied outside the burrow. This *zolboat* was covered and had a door that could be locked by sliding a bolt! Two seamones were waiting inside the *zolboat*. They started the boat the moment they saw him coming and in no time, they were all speeding to the Harappa farms.

‘Finally, the moment has arrived,’ the Triar rubbed his hands with glee. ‘The seamones will soon have a yoke!’

‘Be careful,’ his voluble fathers warned. ‘Don’t leave any clues!’

The Triar warned his companions immediately, ‘Keep your mouths shut...not a single word should escape into the oceans!’

SOON, the Triar and his companions were standing near the hideout where Elli and Yaduk were sleeping and spying on them.

‘What are they doing inside a tree?’ one of them whispered in bewilderment.

‘Humans!’ snorted the other.

‘Shut up,’ the Triar warned angrily. He stared at Elli iljjock. Her glow made him shiver with longing.

‘Should we get her?’ the seamones asked.

‘NO!’ the Triar whacked their tails with his tail. He wanted no skirmish. Elli would have to come to them on her own!

At the Triar’s bidding, the seamones pushed their *zolboat* near to the sleeping iljjocks. They camouflaged it with branches and leaves and threw the door open. Then, they pulled some sheep and goats inside. Once the animals were tied them to the cranks, they poked their bodies with dry twigs. The sheep and goats bleated loudly.

The seamones hid amongst the bleating animals and lay in wait for Elli to walk into the trap they had set up!

THE iljocks were fully aware of the crisis on Earth. They had heard Iisuu and Myrhim through the yoke, and knew that the goddess had left for Earth and that Iisuu had migrated into the vortex of divine continuum.

Iisuu's soul was now cut off from the yoke and the iljocks were waiting for him to join back and tell them all that was happening on Earth. Until then, distraught with worry, they chattered loudly on the yoke.

The boisterous chatter woke up Yaduk and Elli, who were sleeping in their tree hideout on the Harappa farms. Yaduk heard Hatti say something about germs having gone wayward when suddenly he heard loud bleating. Elli heard it too and woke up rubbing her eyes. 'It is coming from there...' she said, pointing to the foliage nearby.

He swam towards the foliage and she followed behind. They saw the animals tied to strange metallic rods. 'Who has done this?' he wondered, looking around bewildered.

'Oh, poor creatures!' she cried and began untying them. He helped her and soon, all the animals had scampered away. To their surprise, the moment the last goat swam away, a door shut on them, locking them inside what looked like an enclosure!

Three seamones suddenly shook off branches to reveal their faces and Yaduk and Elli realized with shock that the enclosure was actually was a *zolboat*! The seamones pulled the rods and they realized that they were actually, cranks!

'Hey!' Yaduk leapt forward. 'Let us go...' But, the *zolboat* had sputtered to a start and was already racing at a very high speed in the ocean. He rushed to the door and began banging it to force it open.

'Let us out...' Elli hit a seamone.

'No!' the seamone pushed her away.

Yaduk realized that he had to do something very quickly. He picked a broken branch lying on the floor and began hitting the seamones wildly. 'Stop this thing now or I will kill you all...' he yelled, landing massive blows on their heads.

'Aaargh...aaargh...' the seamones shrieked, collapsing with pain and shock.

'We have to stop the *zolboat*,' Elli cried urgently.

Yaduk lunged at the cranks. Not knowing how they worked, he pulled

them all.

‘God Iisuu...help...help...’ Elli screamed on the yoke, even as the *zolboat* veered wildly in the ocean.

‘Elli...Elli....’ many iljjocks cried in surprise, shocked to hear Elli calling for help.

‘Elli?’ Hatti cried in alarm. ‘What is the matter?’

‘The seamones are taking us forcibly somewhere in a *zolboat*...’ Elli replied in a trembling voice.

‘What?’ Hatti gasped in shock. ‘Wait...where are you right now?’

‘Somewhere in the Seamone Ocean!’

‘Don’t worry,’ Hatti said urgently. ‘We are coming after you...but, stop that *zolboat* immediately!’

‘I am trying!’ Yaduk yelled, pulling the cranks wildly. He yanked a crank so hard that it broke.

‘What are you doing?’ shrieked one of the seamones. He tried to pull Yaduk away from the controls, ‘You will kill us all!’

Yaduk whacked that seamone so hard that he collapsed again. Elli tried pulling the cranks but to no avail. The *zolboat* continued speeding and soon the seamone settlement came into view. Tall structures could be seen rising from the ocean bed to the sky.

‘We are in trouble!’ Elli whispered, looking outside. At least a hundred seamone *zolboats* had surrounded them!

‘Yaduk...Elli...where are you?’ the desperate voices of the iljjocks came through the iljjock yoke. ‘We have reached the seamone settlement!’

Lo, using their divine powers, hundreds of iljjocks had hurtled through the oceans to reach the settlement within moments!

‘We don’t know,’ Elli replied, ‘There are tall *beshels* all around us.’

‘We can also see them...’ Pikki cried in panic, ‘In which *beshel* are you right now?’

‘We are still in the *zolboat*...’ Yaduk replied, looking around. The seamone settlement was a forest of tall structures.

‘Look for some sign...some mark!’

Before Yaduk could reply, their *zolboat* flew into the air. It glided

into the top storey of an open structure and huge planks closed behind them!

‘Where are we?’ Elli trembled.

‘Don’t worry,’ Yaduk gasped, throwing his body against the door of the *zolboat*. Lo, it flew open. The water gushed out and air came rushing in.

‘Come!’ he cried, pulling Elli behind him to make a quick escape. The moment they stepped out, they staggered with shock. There was a sea of seamones outside, gathered in what seemed like a very large hall.

Yaduk and Elli stared stupefied at the crowd and the crowd stared back at them vilely. He was about to push her back into the *zolboat* and face the crowd alone, when one of the wounded seamones lying in the *zolboat* got up.

‘Triar Seamone!’ the crowd cried in shock when they saw their wounded leader.

The Triar staggered out. ‘Hurry!’ he rasped to the crowd of seamones. ‘We have very less time. The *iljocks* are somewhere outside!’

Yaduk picked up the broken crank and began looking for a way to escape, when he noticed that the seamones were making spiral queues around what seemed like a ceremonial altar.

‘Have the *coons* been brought in?’ the Triar asked urgently.

‘Yes, my lord,’ the seamones replied, pointing to the glowing dead bodies ringing the hall. They had been brought in from the chamber of *coons* to make a shield. The isolation of the hall was complete.

Whereas Yaduk looked at the dead bodies with bewilderment, Elli was aghast. ‘We have been cutoff from the yoke!’ she whispered in panic.

‘What?’ Yaduk cried in shock.

‘The *iljocks* won’t find us here!’ she cried. ‘We have to get out of here fast!’

Elli’s distress made Yaduk’s soul sink. He had an ominous feeling that something very terrible was about to happen.

‘NOW!’ he yelled, and both he and Elli used all the divine force they had on the air particles in the room. Lo, the air in the room swirled violently, throwing the seamones against each other. ‘Aaargh...aaargh...’ the seamones shrieked with pain.

‘That way...’ Elli cried, pointing to an open door.

Yaduk caught her hand and ran towards it when a seamone entering the hall from outside blocked their way.

‘God Aakaa!’ Elli recognized with shock.

‘Aakaa?’ Yaduk exclaimed, looking at the tall seamone from head to tail.

God Aakaa was truly a vile divine being. His body glowed with incandescence like Iisuu’s but that glow was the so deathly that Yaduk felt cold shivers run down his body. But, he ignored his uneasiness and was about to push Aakaa over, when suddenly, he almost fainted from a sharp pain in his soul!

Lo, Aakaa was assaulting his soul! ‘Stop!’ Yaduk wanted to cry out, but he could not. Strangely, he could not move any part of his body anymore. The torment soon became unbearable and to his horror, he realized that Aakaa was assaulting Elli too!

Yaduk and Elli were tossed like wicks in wind. Yaduk tried to retrieve control his body but at least ten seamones caught hold him and Elli. He threw them off and just when he was about to pick up the broken crank, he saw Elli do the most horrific thing.

To his shock and all those in the hall, Elli looked down at her belly with fire spewing out of her eyes and burned her nodules!

‘ELLI!’ Yaduk shrieked, horrified to see the blood gush from her body. He leapt towards her so that he could stop the flow of the blood when at least twenty seamones pulled him back and did something that froze his body again.

‘Bring her to me!’ Aakaa growled menacingly.

‘NO!’ Yaduk tried to yell, but could not. From a distance, he saw a group of seamones circle Elli.

‘You will never get to my soul!’ she snarled hoarsely to them, and then, bleeding heavily, collapsed on the floor.

Yaduk saw the seamones pick up Elli and take her to Aakaa. He did something that stopped the bleeding but made her toe glow eerily. The seamones then tied her to a column on the altar and her toe was made to stick out in the open.

‘HELP...someone!’ he screamed in panic. The seamones were making the horrific queues again. But, no one was listening. He had been cut

off from the yoke.

Aakaa stood on the altar and growled, 'For ages, Myrhim has denied you. She did not give you the *divine string* to make the seamone yoke. But, now you have Elli iljjock... pull the string out of her toe and make the seamone yoke!'

Triar seamone was the first one to ravage Elli's soul. He wound his tail around Elli's toe and a small flash of lightning crackled. He connected to her soul and found the divine string easily. The string duplicated. 'Give me my string, Elli iljjock!' he rasped in a trembling voice.

'No!' Elli's soul grunted, resisting.

Oh, the Triar pulled the string forcibly into his soul. A physical assault would have been more bearable. Here, Elli's soul was taking a beating and she groaned with horrific suffering!

Yaduk felt Elli's pain like his own. As each seamone filed by Elli and wrenched a copy of the string, Yaduk felt as if it was being wrenched from his soul. 'ELLI!' he groaned, trying to reach out to her and alleviate her suffering. But, she was beyond all soothing.

She was in a state of extreme shock and devastation and she was slowly slipping towards her death. Once dead, Elli would wake up screaming as a *coon*.

Yaduk's soul hung on fiercely to Elli's soul, not letting go of her even for a moment. He believed that as long as he was holding her, she would not die. Revoltingly, while he and Elli were drowning in an ocean of suffering, the seamones were crying tears of joy!

The seamones were joyful because for the first time in many generations, they were talking to each other through their souls! Wonder of wonders, the seamone yoke had come into place!

IISUU was in the vortex of divine continuum and was intently watching the goddess on Earth. Myrhim had killed the germs of plague in millions. Soon, the infection subsided and humans stopped dying from the disease. The epidemic ended and the exodus of souls to the *Nors* lessened.

Iisuu looked at the Nors to see how Hoon was taking it. He was looking at Earth intently and looked pleased by Myrhim's intervention and the fact that she had the situation under her control!

Assured that Hoon posed no danger and that the goddess would be back in Seabor shortly, Iisuu came out of the vortex. All of a sudden, he was startled by sharp cries of distress on the iljock yoke. 'What is going on?' he asked anxiously, even as his soul entered his body.

'God Iisuu!' the iljocks wept. Strangely, the voices seemed to be coming from far away.

Iisuu rushed out of his *beshel*. The settlement was empty! 'Where are you?' he gasped in shock.

'In the seamone settlement...we are searching for Elli and Yaduk!'

'Elli and Yaduk?' Iisuu's face turned ashen, 'Where are they?'

'The seamones have captured them!'

Iisuu staggered with shock. He said in a deathly voice, 'Hold on, I am coming!'

Within moments, he had crossed the oceans to reach the seamone settlement. The iljocks gathered around him, showing him the structures they had brought down by using divine force. They had found them to be empty.

'The seamones are hiding somewhere...and they have Elli and Yaduk!'

Iisuu looked at entire Seabor with his divine sight and he saw nothing. His soul sank with despair. Aakaa was probably using *Orgis* as a shield!

'They are in one of these *beshels*!' Pikki wept uncontrollably.

Seething with rage, God Iisuu unleashed his massive divine powers and the *beshels* around them began crumbling down. Soon, only a few structures remained. Iisuu was about to flatten them when he suddenly became aware that Myrhim had returned to Seabor.

Myrhim needed no telling. And, she immediately spotted where Aakaa and the seamones were hiding because of the newly formed seamone yoke!

The power from the yoke was leaking infinitesimally through the thin shield of *Orgis*- the goddess picked it easily with her omnipresent sight and rushed immediately to the seamone settlement to tell Iisuu!

'The seamones now have a yoke!' she told Iisuu, her face ashen with shock. 'And Yaduk and Elli are in that *beshel* over there!' she said, pointing to a tall structure still standing at the far end of the settlement.

YADUK woke up to consciousness to find that he was lying next to Elli. ‘Elli!’ he croaked aloud, trying to get up. But, his limbs were still frozen. In a flash, he recalled their ordeal and almost fainted. Elli’s soul had been ravaged so badly that it had scattered. His soul had also scattered with hers. Surprisingly, his soul was healed now. And, Elli’s soul had healed too! Only, she was not responding.

‘The human has woken up!’ a harsh voice exclaimed. Yaduk looked up to see who it was and saw that it was the Triar, the leader of the seamones. He suddenly realized that he was lying on the altar with Elli and they were surrounded by at least a dozen seamones! God Aakaa was standing in front of Elli!

‘Elli!’ Yaduk cried in alarm, trying to get up again.

‘We should leave before God Iisuu finds us,’ the Triar said anxiously.

‘NO!’ Aakaa refused. ‘I want to see Iisuu’s defeated face when he sees these two!’

‘He will kill us...’ whispered one seamone, edging towards the door.

‘Don’t move!’ Aakaa growled. ‘Or, you will end up a *coon* like Elli iljjock here!’

The seamone stopped and retorted, ‘She is not a *coon* yet. The human would have writhed from her screams otherwise!’

Aakaa swung his head to look at Yaduk’s peaceful face. Clearly, Elli wasn’t screaming. But, Elli’s body was like the dead!

‘How can that be?’ Aakaa looked into Elli’s soul with his divine sight. ‘Strange!’ he murmured.

‘What do you see?’ the Triar asked curiously.

‘She had two souls, one iljjock and the other human...’ Aakaa mused. ‘The two souls have fused strangely!’

Before he could say anymore, the *beshel* next to theirs came crashing down.

The seamones panicked and ran towards the door. There was a stampede as they tried to rush out to find their *zolboats*. God Aakaa and the Triar did not move. They were waiting to see Iisuu’s agonized face!

Yaduk’s face was peaceful, but his soul was in turmoil. Elli’s soul

was not responding and he was very worried. Mustering all his strength, he tried to revive her soul. But, to no avail. He tried again. Just when he thought his own soul would scatter again from the effort, he heard a familiar rustling sound in his ears.

‘God Hoon!’ he whispered in shock.

The rustling grew louder. Lo, how could he have forgotten his protector, the almighty Hoon, he thought with remorse. He should have cried out to him when the seamones were abducting him and Elli!

‘Elli... my lord...save her...’ he beseeched from the core of his soul. He had never prayed like this before. And, never before had his prayers been answered like this. Divine energy flowed to his body and his body revived! He suddenly thrashed his arms and legs, startling all those present in the hall!

God Aakaa stared at him in disbelief. He was about to wring him to senselessness again when, suddenly, the hall caved in. The walls crumbled and water gushed in. Aakaa and the Triar looked out in surprise. They had crashed to the ocean bed and Iisuu, Myrhim, and hundreds of iljjocks were standing outside!

‘Iisuu!’ Aakaa cried with fiendish joy. ‘You took so long in coming... I have been waiting for you!’

God Iisuu did not reply. He had a tormented expression in his eyes and he was desperate to see Yaduk and Elli. He saw them lying on the altar and his face turned pale and deathly.

‘I have made the seamone yoke!’ Aakaa cackled insanely with laughter. ‘Myrhim wouldn’t give the divine string to the seamones...so they snatched it forcefully from Elli’s soul!’

Iisuu exploded with sudden rage. He caught Aakaa’s tail in a deathly grip and began crushing his soul with his formidable divine powers.

‘Aaargh....’ Aakaa groaned with excruciating pain.

‘NO!’ Myrhim shrieked, trying to pull the two apart. ‘Elli and Yaduk need your attention first!’

Hatti, Pikki and the iljjocks rushed to Elli and Yaduk’s side. They found Yaduk weeping and holding Elli tightly against his chest.

‘Pikki...’ Yaduk moaned in a lost voice. ‘Why isn’t Elli getting up?’

‘I don’t know...’ Pikki whispered, tears streaming down his eyes.

‘Let me see...’ He looked at Elli’s wounds and shuddered.

‘I called God Hoon....’ Yaduk sobbed.

‘You called God Hoon?’ Hatti asked urgently.

‘Yes...he helped me to get up...but he didn’t help Elli...’

‘Call him again!’ Pikki urged, ‘Only he can save Elli!’

‘God...Hoonnn....’ Yaduk wailed heartrendingly, ‘Take my life if you will...but save my Elli...’

Lo, Yaduk’s prayer pierced the heavens and suddenly, Seabor quaked! A thousand thunders rumbled in the sky and huge waves rose to swirl in the oceans. The *Nors* shot flares as if spewing out Hoon’s deathly rage.

‘*God Hoon!*’ Myrhim whispered in shock.

‘God Hoon?’ Aakaa wrested himself free from Iisuu’s hold.

‘God Hooonnn...’ Iisuu wailed, looking up at the sky. ‘*Punish Aakaa, my lord!*’ he beseeched from the core of his soul, ‘*And, punish his vile brood too!*’

Hoon did not listen to Yaduk’s prayer. Elli showed no signs of revival. But, he did listen to Iisuu’s appeal!

Myrhim said later that it was Hoon’s evil scimitar that fell on the souls of seamones. Because, the ill gotten *divine strings* were gouged out of their souls in one searing flash, maiming them forever. It would now be excruciatingly painful for them to live, as well as to die. The seamones lost the yoke faster than they got it!

Iisuu and Myrhim rushed to tend to Yaduk and Elli. Myrhim scooped Elli’s inert body in her arms and flooded her soul with maternal warmth. ‘My sweet child, I am here now...you will be fine...’ she wept, touching Elli’s face with her own.

Iisuu picked Yaduk and said in a choked voice, ‘You have been very brave, my child!’

Yaduk nodded tiredly and closing his eyes, sank into a deep sleep.

Time: Yaduk's 19th day on Seabor (16th century AD on Earth)

IT was a bright morning on Seabor today. The smoky aroma of the *kiks* blended with the fresh vapor from the oceans to spread an invigorating smell. But, the effect was lost on both- the seamones and the iljjocks.

The seamones had suffered unimaginable loss. Their souls had been wounded and their tall settlements flattened. Cursed was the day when the Triar decided to abduct Elli iljjock and attain divine powers.

The iljjocks also dwelled in deep despair. Elli was still critical and Yaduk was unconscious. They were lying inertly on two cots inside Myrhim's *beshel*.

Myrhim had opened the portal to the divine continuum, hoping for a miracle. 'Only Hoon can grant her a peaceful death!' she whispered, her face ashen with worry.

If Elli became a *coon*, she would be the first iljjock to become a *coon*. The iljjocks prayed for the birth of her child and her safe death.

God Iisuu was fraught with worry. 'If Elli becomes a *coon*,' he cried in alarm, 'Her screams will destroy the yoke!'

Hatti and Pikki were sitting with him inside Myrhim's *beshel* and they nodded at his statement. The iljjocks could not tolerate the slightest disturbance on the yoke. Elli's piercing screams would drive them all to madness and violence.

'Sending you to Earth was a ploy,' Pikki said angrily to Myrhim. 'They just wanted to capture Elli!'

'I know,' Myrhim replied grimly. 'But, it is good that I went!'

'Why do you say that?' Iisuu asked. Since Myrhim's return, he had had not a chance to talk to her about her trip to Earth.

Myrhim shared the details of her earthly visit with Iisuu. Iisuu's eyes widened with disbelief.

'What is it, my lord?' Jerro asked curiously.

'You won't believe this...the diseases on Earth were being spread by Aakaa!'

'How did he do that?' Hatti asked, puzzled.

Iisuu shared what Myrhim had shown him on the yoke. The iljjocks saw a faint divine connection running between Aakaa and the animals on

Earth. They also saw him use divine force to change the life codes of the germs on Earth!

‘I discovered this when I was killing the germs with my scimitar,’ Myrhim remarked. ‘The moment I touched them, I saw a divine connection running from them to Seabor...and when I looked carefully, I saw it running to Aakaa’s soul!’

‘Did you kill all the germs?’ Jerro asked worriedly.

‘I cannot. Germs are integral to Earth’s environment!’

‘That means Aakaa can continue manipulating them to spread epidemics on Earth!’

‘No, he cannot!’ Myrhim said firmly. ‘I have done something to weaken Aakaa!’

‘What did you do?’ Iisuu frowned.

‘Yes...tell us...’ the iljjocks cried, listening to the conversation through the yoke.

‘I created *humans knights* to fight Aakaa’s influence!’

‘Human knights?’ Pikki cried in surprise. ‘What are they?’

‘They are humans with two souls...like Elli!’

‘Two souls?’ Iisuu exclaimed, flabbergasted.

‘One human soul and one iljjock soul,’ Myrhim explained. ‘When I created Elli, I realized that the presence of two souls gives me the flexibility to create special traits. Elli was created to be a universal soulmate. The humans knights have been created to fight back Aakaa’s influence!’

‘They will fight the germs on Earth?’ Pikki asked eagerly.

‘No, they won’t fight anyone when they are on Earth. But, after death, when their souls migrate to the *Nors*, they will slash Aakaa’s connection to the souls in the *Nors* and lessen his powers!’

‘O wonder!’ Iisuu exclaimed.

‘Show us a human knight. Do they look different from other humans?’ Jerro urged.

‘They look the same,’ Myrhim replied.

‘But, they behave differently,’ Iisuu said with a knowing smile. ‘They are very gifted individuals who stand out amongst millions!’

‘You knew about them?’ Hatti asked with surprise.

Iisuu smiled. ‘No, I was not aware of the specifics. But, I did notice unnaturally gifted humans!’

‘Iisuu is right in calling them gifted,’ Myrhim remarked. ‘I did not foresee this...but the combination of a human and an iljjock soul leads to an explosion of imagination! They are all so delightfully creative, that I create a few everyday now!’

‘Everyday?’ exclaimed Pikki, startled.

‘Yes. I created two last night...and, I must say I felt the same joy that I felt when I first became a mother!’

The iljjocks looked at Myrhim with surprise. ‘Can we see them?’ Pikki asked with wonder.

‘Iisuu will show them to you on the yoke!’

Iisuu smiled. He was aware of the two knights Myrhim was talking about. He looked at them fleetingly with his divine sight and shared the vision with all the iljjocks through the yoke!

The first knight was a lissome, bearded man making a sketch!

‘He is making the design of a flying machine...’ Iisuu exclaimed, his chest swelling with pride. ‘My Leonardo is a painter, architect, engineer, scientist, philosopher and what not!’

‘O wonder!’ the iljjocks cried, looking the twin-souled human with awe.

The second knight was a sculptor. He was chiseling marble with great finesse. ‘My Michelangelo is no less!’ Iisuu said with moist eyes. The sculptor was making the likeness of the holy child who had taken birth from a shard of Iisuu’s soul.

The iljjocks were astounded. They wanted to see more, when suddenly they heard a groan on the yoke. Yaduk had come awake!

Those inside the *beshel* moved quickly to his side. ‘Yaduk...’ they whispered gently.

Yaduk stirred.

‘How are you, my dear child?’ Iisuu asked in a choked voice.

Yaduk opened his eyes and he saw Iisuu’s glowing body hazily. He also saw Myrhim. He could not see the others clearly, but he could feel their

presence on the yoke. The yoke was very silent. Surprisingly, Elli was not on the yoke. His soul sank. 'Where is she?' he croaked hoarsely.

'Elli is safe,' Iisuu replied. 'Don't worry!'

'Where is she?' he cried again, moving his arms disjointedly. 'Why can't I see her on the yoke?'

'Shhh...I am taking you to her!' Iisuu hushed in a worried voice. He picked up Yaduk and carried him near the vortex of divine continuum.

Yaduk saw Elli's body lying lifelessly on the cold floor near the vortex. 'What is she doing here?' he asked in a trembling voice.

'She is waiting for God Hoon to give her a safe death,' Iisuu replied.

'But, she is not ready to die, not yet!' he replied in alarm.

'How do you know?'

'God Hoon healed her soul and saved her from death...' he climbed down from Iisuu's arms. 'Why would he save her if she had to die?'

Stunned, Iisuu watched Yaduk stagger to Elli's inert body. He picked her up and began carrying her back to the cot.

'What are you doing?' Myrhim asked in shock. 'She could end up a *coon*!'

'She will not become a *coon*!' he whispered, fighting back his tears.

Lo, Yaduk carried his soulmate's body to the ceremonial altar on the ocean floor and laid her gently on it. He slumped by her and declared on the yoke, 'I have faith in God Hoon. He will surely bring her to life!'

The iljocks gathered around the altar and looked gravely. Elli was in an unknown frozen state because of the extreme shock she had suffered and no one knew how to bring her out of it. All they knew was that it was important for her to die peacefully.

Tears flowed down Yaduk's eyes as he saw his soulmate's wasted body. Was it only a day before that they were racing and laughing at the Harappa farms? 'Elli...' he caressed her brow longingly, 'Wake up!'

'Yaduk,' Iisuu explained gently. 'All Elli would want now is for her soul to pass on safely to her child!'

But, Yaduk was not listening. He touched Elli's toe with his own toe. It was cold. 'Elli...' he cried brokenly, 'Wake up...I cannot take this anymore! Remember...we have to go back to Earth together. I am telling

you...and all the big gods here and above...I am not going back without you....’

‘Yaduk!’ Myrhim scolded sternly. She was put him to sleep with a gentle tap of her scimitar, when suddenly, they all heard loud rustle.

Startled, the iljjocks trembled. They knew it was God Hoon! Instinctively, they felt fear, but they did not care. Because, only his divine intervention could heal Elli now!

Yaduk heard the rustle too. ‘Help me, father...for I have lost...’ he wept, his body wracked with sobs.

Oh, God Hoon showed his mercy! A tiny flash of lightning crackled between Yaduk and Elli’s toes, and all of a sudden, her soul came out of its state of shock and let out a faint sigh!

The iljjocks did not hear anything because Elli was no longer connected to the yoke. But, Myrhim heard the sigh! Iisuu heard it too! Yaduk heard it before them because he was her soulmate! ‘Elli!’ he wept, scooping her limp body in his arms and holding her tightly against his chest, ‘I knew you would come back!’

That’s when the iljjocks realized that Elli’s soul had revived and they were thunderstruck.

‘It is a miracle!’ Iisuu wept tears of joy.

‘Yes!’ Myrhim exclaimed, shaking her head in disbelief. She gazed at the *Nors* in astonishment and sighed, ‘It is unbelievable...but almighty Hoon, the evil devil, is behaving like a divine father!’

The iljjocks gathered around Yaduk and Elli, delirious with joy. Throwing all caution to the winds, they chattered loudly in the open ocean. Everybody wanted to talk to Elli, which they did through Iisuu’s soul. Although her soul had revived, she was surprisingly, still isolated from the yoke. Also, her body was still unresponsive.

‘She will heal slowly!’ Iisuu assured.

Myrhim nodded and looked at the poignant scene with joy. The clouds of despair seemed to be lifting from her children. All because of God Hoon’s mercy! She looked at her less fortunate children - the seamones- with her divine sight. Had Hoon been merciful to them too?

Lo, Aakaa was nowhere to be seen in his burrow! As usual, he was probably hiding in the cursed chamber of *coons*! Myrhim could not help but

feel worried. What was he doing there now?

AAKAA was hiding because he was expecting God Hoon's scimitar to fall on his soul next. The last time Hoon had punished him, he had cruelly ripped out all the *divine strings* from his soul.

Aakaa looked at himself in self-pity. What was left in his soul to take anyway? Lumps of *Orgis* that were of no use to anyone except the despair-ridden seamones! He was surprised that Hoon had not killed him right away.

Suddenly, Aakaa started laughing loudly. It occurred to him why Hoon had not killed him yet! The *Orgis* in his soul had the power to purge the universe and that power was greater than all powers combined. Obviously, Hoon did not want the venom to spill out of his soul and put the universe on the path to death like the old *bor*!

Cackling loudly, Aakaa came out of hiding. He entered his chamber to find the damned Triar curled on the floor and moaning with suffering. A large number of seamones were outside his burrow and were moaning loudly too.

'My lord,' the Triar wailed loudly. 'We are doomed now!'

'He should have just killed you all!' Aakaa muttered under his breath.

The Triar clung to Aakaa's tail and begged, 'Save us, my lord!'

'Get off!' Aakaa growled, flinging him away. He looked for his slaves. They were outside with the others and groaning with agony.

'Rosamone just died, my lord...' Rosamone had been the oldest seamone.

'He was about to die anyway,' Aakaa snapped irritably.

'He died, screaming with pain,' the Triar whispered with a shiver. 'And....'

'And, what?'

'His child was born screaming in pain!'

'Why?'

'The child is born with a wounded soul!' the seamones wailed outside.

Even Aakaa was shocked. Apparently, Hoon had wounded the souls

of the seamones so deeply that he had given them eternal wounds. ‘What do you want me to do?’ he growled angrily.

‘Give the child a drop of *Orgis*...we cannot see our children suffer....’ the Triar begged, tears streaming down his face.

‘NO!’ Aakaa refused firmly. ‘The *Orgis* is mine and I will not give it to anyone...it is what is keeping me safe and alive. Now get out of here and let me rest in peace!’

The Triar glared with hatred and disbelief at Aakaa.

‘GET OUT...’ Aakaa thundered, his eyes throwing out a shower of sparks.

His shoulders drooping from despair, the Triar seamone turned to leave Aakaa’s chamber.

‘Where are you going?’ Aakaa yelled suddenly. ‘I have something for you to do!’

‘NO!’ the seamones roared from outside. ‘We will die as coons...but we will not do anything for you, ever!’

‘What do you mean?’ Aakaa growled angrily

‘A drop of *Orgis* for Rosamone’s child first...’ they chanted angrily.

‘All right...all right....’ Aakaa gave in grudgingly. ‘Bring the child here!’

The baby seamone was brought inside the chamber. He was screaming with pain. And, because he had not been eating, he was tiny and gaunt. Aakaa transferred a drop of *Orgis* into his soul and the baby stopped crying.

‘Feed him *kiks*...quickly...’ the Triar wept with relief. ‘Rosamone’s soul will now be in peace!’

‘Yes!’ the seamones replied tearfully and took the baby away.

The Triar kissed Aakaa’s tail in deep gratitude and asked in a choked voice, ‘What do want us to do, my lord?’

Aakaa paced the room excitedly. ‘I looked into the human’s soul carefully when he was in my grasp!’ he grinned vilely.

The Triar looked at him blankly.

‘The pathways to his soul were opened before he was brought to Seabor...guess how were they opened?’

The Triar shook his head.

‘He was infected with a germ!’

‘A germ?’

‘Yes!’ Aakaa growled. ‘I saw the germs...but I could not see their life codes!’

There was a moment of silence as the Triar wondered what Aakaa was getting at! ‘What do you want us to do, my lord?’ he asked slowly.

‘I want you breed a germ that opens the pathways to the human soul!’ Aakaa growled exultantly.

‘But, why do you want to open the human souls? Haven’t we faced enough?’

‘You ask too many questions!’ Aakaa growled and in a fit of anger, wrung the Triar’s soul.

Lo, the Triar almost died from excruciating agony. ‘Mercy!’ he gasped weakly.

Aakaa let go of the Triar and began oozing a very foul and frightening odor. ‘I want to open the human souls so that I can connect to them directly!’

‘But why?’ the Triar gasped.

‘Because, I deserve to make the human yoke and not Iisuu!’ he declared grandly.

‘You deserve it?’

‘Yes I deserve it. Don’t forget the humans carry a shard of my soul... and not Iisuu’s!’

The Triar trembled with jealousy and hatred. How could Aakaa make the yoke with the humans, when he had failed so miserably in making one with them? Forcing himself to be calm, he croaked, ‘We will help you make the human yoke. But, we want something in return!’

‘What is that?’

‘*Orgis* for our children!’

‘Hmmm...I will see!’ Aakaa scoffed gruffly. ‘It depends on how soon you can give me the germ that opens human souls!’

‘It will take at least ten days. There are thousands of germs on the Harappa farm...we will have to search for the right one to breed!’

‘Nonsense. Iisuu would have finished making the human yoke by then. I want it in two days!’

‘The *beshels* and the germ beds have been destroyed,’ the seamones protested. ‘We will have to build them back first!’

‘Five days!’ Aakaa said dismissively. ‘Until then, I shall amuse myself. The *Nors* are teeming with strange two-souled humans!’

Having said that, Aakaa went down to the chamber of *coons*. And, Triar Seamone hobbled outside. Oozing a very foul scent of despair he spoke sharply, ‘Half of you will work on the germ beds. The other half will build weapons of war!’

‘Weapons of war?’ the seamones asked in surprise. ‘To fight whom?’

‘To fight the iljocks!’ their leader replied bitterly. ‘We shall give them wounds bigger than they have given to us!’

MYRHIM and Iisuu were waiting for Elli to heal completely. Her soul had revived but she was still isolated from the yoke. Also, she still could not move her body and lay lifelessly in her *beshel*.

The iljocks tried to bring her back on the yoke by making formations, but to no avail. Iisuu and Myrhim did not dare to touch her soul, lest she suffered a reversal.

Meanwhile, Iisuu was increasingly getting worried about what the seamones might do next.

‘I don’t think they won’t cause any trouble now!’ Myrhim remarked.

‘Don’t be crazy!’ Iisuu exploded, ‘Rather, they will become more daring now!’

‘How’s that?’

‘Aakaa has realized that he can get away with anything. He is going to be very dangerous now!’

‘You are right!’ Myrhim frowned in consternation.

‘Time is running out to make the human yoke...’ Iisuu paced agitatedly, ‘I think we must send Yaduk to Earth immediately!’

Yaduk heard Iisuu’s words through the yoke and was aghast. ‘I won’t go anywhere until Elli recovers!’ he declared heatedly.

‘Yaduk!’ Iisuu cried in anger.

‘He is right,’ Myrhim intervened. ‘He cannot leave Elli like this. He can go only after she has healed and has passed her soul to her child!’

‘But, Elli is showing no signs of healing!’ Iisuu cried in exasperation.

‘I don’t care!’ Yaduk declared firmly.

‘What?’

‘Do you know what your problem is?’ Yaduk ranted. ‘You have no faith!’

‘Faith in whom?’ Iisuu was bewildered.

‘Faith in God Hoon!’

‘A little faith is good, my child...’ Myrhim said hesitantly. ‘Too much faith can disappoint...we learned that in the old *bor!*’

‘Well, I have complete faith in him...and, I am sure he will never disappoint me!’ Yaduk stated resolutely.

Iisuu and Myrhim looked at him with tears in their eyes, silently begging God Hoon to stand true to the faith that this brave child of theirs had reposed in him!

Yaduk was aware of their skepticism but as far he was concerned, Elli was improving. All she needed was love and care. He was sure in a day or two, she would get up and prance around as spiritedly as before.

ALL of Yaduk’s breaths were for Elli now. ‘Why aren’t you giving her new nodules?’ he complained to Myrhim.

‘Her soul is very fragile right now!’ Myrhim explained, ‘If she sinks again, we won’t be able to handle it!’

‘What about God Hoon? Will he be able to handle it?’ Yaduk asked earnestly.

‘Yaduk!’ the goddess exclaimed with a start.

‘What?’

‘I know you have no fear...but, I still don’t like hearing frightening names!’ the goddess complained.

‘Well, someone has to give Elli new nodules!’ Yaduk replied wickedly.

Myrhim stared at Yaduk for a long moment. The lad was not only fearless but also very determined. His brown eyes flickered unwaveringly.

Grudgingly, she gave Elli new nodules!

‘There you are...’ she touched Elli’s belly gently with her scimitar.

Not surprisingly, the nodules were unresponsive like the rest of Elli’s body. ‘She is just not healing!’ Myrhim shrugged in despair.

Yaduk did not despair. He rubbed nut oil on Elli’s limp nodules and massaged them, as they would do in his village Lachvi. ‘Can you feel my fingers, Elli?’ he asked her gently.

‘No...’ Elli sighed faintly.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, taking her in his arms.

‘Is it day or night?’

‘It is noon!’ he replied, a lone tear falling from his eye. He stroked Elli’s brow gently and told her about all that was happening. ‘Do you know...Farro’s child is exactly like him!’ he exclaimed. ‘He is making a calendar with Hatti!’

‘Really?’

‘And...’

‘Where are we, Yaduk?’

‘In our *beshel*!’

‘Am I wearing something?’

‘Why? Can you feel something?’ he whispered, his heart in his mouth.

‘No. But, I want to wear the clothes you made for me at...’ Elli’s voice trailed off.

‘I will make new ones for you...prettier than before...what color do you want?’

‘Yellow.’

‘Good!’

He carried her to the bay and immersed her body in the warm water. ‘Can you feel the water!’ he asked. His voice was cheerful but his eyes were sad and anxious.

‘No!’ she replied irritably.

Yaduk’s face fell.

‘Forgive me...’ she sighed.

‘No,’ he replied, fighting back his tears. ‘It is you who has to forgive me!’

‘For what?’ she asked weakly.

‘For all the suffering.’

‘But...’

‘I could not save you...’ he cried, clenching his fists.

There was a poignant moment of silence between them, and then she whispered, ‘You are saving me even now!’

Yaduk carried her back to their *beshel* and lay her down on the cot. Fighting back tears, he dressed her lifeless body in fine robes.

‘Yaduk...’ Elli grunted suddenly.

‘Yes?’

‘I am feeling suffocated!’

‘What?’

‘Call...God Iisuu...’ she gasped.

‘Yes!’ Yaduk panicked and yelled for Iisuu through the yoke.

Iisuu came rushing and asked anxiously, ‘What is wrong?’

‘She is feeling suffocated...’ Yaduk cried, trembling with anxiety.

‘Let me see...’ Myrhim cried. She had also come rushing. Realizing that she could no longer avoid probing Elli’s soul, she touched it gently with her scimitar.

Elli felt Myrhim’s soothing touch and whispered, ‘My goddess...’

‘Yes, my child,’ Myrhim replied in her warm, tinkling voice. She looked into Elli’s soul and was taken aback.

‘What is it?’ Iisuu asked.

‘Unbelievable!’ Myrhim exclaimed.

‘Tell me before I lose my mind,’ Iisuu cried.

‘Elli’s two souls have fused together!’ she remarked with surprise.

‘Fused together? But, how?’

‘It happened when we were at the seamone settlement....’ Yaduk began and then stopped.

‘What?’ Iisuu was startled. He also probed Elli’s soul. Lo, her

seamone and human souls had fused together and were now loaded with a new swathe of soul strings. The strings were dark and strangely, obscure. 'Where did these strings come from?' he cried in shock.

Myrhim did not reply and touched the strange strings gently with her divine scimitar. Lo, like coal turning to gold, the strings shed their darkness and began shining with blinding radiance!

'Elli,' Myrhim whispered, her face ashen. 'What can you see with your divine sight?'

'The entire universe, my goddess!'

Iisuu and Yaduk baulked.

'And, how much divine force can you exert?'

'I think I can move nearby planets...but I am scared!'

Iisuu's eyes bulged in utter disbelief.

'She is as powerful as you, Iisuu...do you know that?' the goddess exclaimed, her eyes wide with wonder, 'She is carrying *divine strings* in her soul. Not one or two, but the complete lot!'

'How did that happen?' whispered Iisuu, reeling with shock. The conversation was echoing on the yoke and all the iljjocks were listening to it with bewilderment. Wonder of wonders, Elli Iljjock was carrying all the *divine strings*!

'Three complete lots came from the *bor* into this universe...the ones that were carried by Hoon, you and me...so where did she get her lot from?' Iisuu was puzzled.

'You are forgetting one lot,' Myrhim whispered.

'Which one?'

'The one that Aakaa came with...and Hoon took away.'

'I know...God Hoon has given that lot to Elli as a blessing!' Yaduk cried excitedly.

'Holy heavens...' Iisuu gasped with astonishment and pride. 'It is unbelievable!'

'Yes, it is...' Myrhim replied tremulously. 'He healed her wounded soul and made it strong enough to carry Aakaa's lot of *divine strings*!'

'Aakaa will lose his sanity if he ever learns of this,' Iisuu said gravely. 'He must never know!'

‘But, why can’t the strings make Elli move her body?’ Yaduk cried in frustration.

‘They carry too much power,’ Myrhim explained. ‘Elli’s body will disintegrate...that is why God Hoon severed the connection between her soul and the body before giving the strings to her.’

Yaduk’s face fell. ‘How will she ever get up, then?’ he asked, anguished

‘I don’t think she will ever get up!’ Myrhim replied.

‘Give her a new body, then. Like you gave one to me.’

Myrhim shook her head. ‘I cannot!’

‘Why?’ Iisuu asked in surprise. ‘Your scimitar has the power to make a new body around any soul.’

‘I cannot give her a body that can withstand the power of the complete lot of *divine strings*,’ Myrhim was distraught.

‘Why not? You can give her a body similar to mine.’ Iisuu suggested.

‘Why don’t you understand...such bodies can be made only with a hot scimitar. My scimitar does not have that hotness anymore...the universe has cooled down.’

‘We have to do something,’ Yaduk said angrily. ‘Elli cannot continue like this.’

‘Yes, we have to do something,’ Iisuu agreed.

‘There is only one way to free Elli’s soul now,’ Myrhim said slowly.

‘What is that?’ Yaduk asked urgently.

‘She has a new soul, pristine and untouched. She can mate with Yaduk again, give birth and die!’

‘But, for that Elli has to responsive!’ Pikki blurted through the yoke.

‘How will they swap the strings if her body remains lifeless like this?’ the iljjocks asked.

‘They cannot!’ Iisuu agreed.

‘I will have to swap them myself...with my divine scimitar!’ Myrhim clarified. ‘After reducing the power!’

‘Will Elli recover?’ Yaduk asked anxiously.

‘Yes. I will also reduce the power of the strings in her soul. She will

be able to reconnect to her body and give birth!’

‘Wonderful!’ Iisuu nodded.

Pikki could not believe what he had heard. That his dear friend Yaduk was about to get the complete lot of *divine strings* was beyond his belief. He came racing inside the *beshel* and slapped Yaduk on the back. ‘Do you know what that means?’ he asked excitedly.

‘I do!’ Yaduk replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

‘What?’

‘I will become God Yaduk!’

‘Ha...ha...’ the two burst out laughing. Myrhim and Iisuu could not help but be amused and they smiled widely.

‘Will Yaduk’s divine strings be shared on the yoke like last time?’ Pikki asked eagerly.

‘Of course,’ Iisuu nodded. ‘The yoke will share the load of the divine strings!’

‘God Pikki!’ Yaduk nudged Pikki.

‘Ha...ha...I am so excited!’ Pikki giggled.

‘O wonder!’ the iljjocks cried jubilantly. Elli became jubilant too when she heard about it from the goddess.

‘Did you hear that Yaduk?’ she cried elatedly. ‘It will be such a big thing for the iljjocks!’

‘Yes,’ Yaduk agreed. ‘Each one of us will be as powerful as Iisuu!’

‘Don’t be crazy,’ she refuted. ‘You heard what the goddess said...she will reduce the power of the strings greatly.’

‘But, I want that power!’ Yaduk protested.

‘I don’t...I want to get my body back again,’ Elli sighed.

‘Of course,’ Yaduk reached out to embrace her. ‘You have to get up quickly so that I can take you to Earth with me!’

‘Take me to Earth?’ she exclaimed with delight.

‘Yes!’ Yaduk replied in a whisper, ‘Don’t tell anyone.’

‘I won’t ...because it is not possible,’ she sighed sadly.

‘You don’t know God Yaduk, then!’

Lo, the two burst out laughing!

‘God Yaduk...oh, my!’ Elli giggled. ‘I would like to accompany you to Earth...as Goddess Elli!’

The iljocks agreed with Yaduk’s view and wanted to attain as much power as they could get. They could not believe that God Hoon had blessed them so generously and they chattered excitedly on the yoke.

‘How far do you think we will be able to see?’ Pikki wondered.

‘To the ends of the universe...I am sure,’ Jerro replied jubilantly.

‘Does the universe have an end?’ Pikki was puzzled.

‘Of course...it will be fascinating to see what it looks like.’

‘Shut up, you two!’ the others yelled. Why discuss far-flung things corners when there were more fascinating things to do nearby!

‘Hey...do you think we will be able to fly to the *Nors* like Iisuu?’ they all wondered together.

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DIVINE LORE

Time: Yadu’s 20th day on Seabor, 17th century AD on Earth

STRANGELY, Elli became silent when Myrhim asked her where she wanted to give birth and die.

‘I would like to give birth near the holy shrine at *Kirll*...but I don’t think I am going to die after that!’ she sighed heavily when Myrhim asked again.

‘Don’t be crazy!’ Myrhim scolded. ‘Why won’t you die?’

‘Yaduk says that he has prayed to God Hoon to spare my life...’

‘Don’t tell Iisuu...he will lose his mind!’

‘I won’t!’

Myrhim stared at Elli’s limp body in disbelief and shook her head. Her human children were beyond her! ‘Hatti, tell everybody to shift to *Kirll* forest,’ she bade. ‘We will stay there until I finish swapping Yaduk and Elli’s strings!’

Hatti heard her and directed the iljocks through the yoke. ‘We are all going to the *Kirll* forest immediately!’

‘What about our things?’ the iljocks asked.

‘What about them?’ Myrhim was bewildered.

‘The seamones will steal them behind us!’

‘Take them all with you,’ the goddess shrugged. Her iljjock and seamone children were also beyond her!

The settlement bustled with activity as the iljjocks packed jewelry, pots, pans and their other things and moved to *Kirll* forest in pairs. Yaduk shifted to Kirll too. He had an additional chore – he had to make a soft bed of leaves for Elli to lie down.

God Iisuu carried Elli carefully to Kirll and put her down on the bed that Yaduk had made. He left them together while he went to collect Myrhim for the swapping.

‘Elli...’ Yaduk said, reaching out to her soul. He was talking constantly to her to alleviate the feeling of suffocation.

‘Yes...’ she sighed forlornly. She was tired of being trapped inside her body and had come close to screaming a few times.

‘Elli, you know, I am a man of faith now...’ he blabbered. ‘I mean, I am an iljjock of faith.’

‘An iljjock?’ she chuckled.

‘Yes, I have tremendous faith in Myrhim, Iisuu and...’

‘God Hoon?’ she teased. ‘Do you know how many times you have told me that?’

‘How many?’ he asked in surprise.

‘At least a thousand times!’

‘Really? I wonder why he is after me...my ears don’t buzz anymore, but I can feel him around me!’

‘He is after you?’ Elli laughed.

‘Of course.’

‘You have a beautiful soul, that’s why!’

‘Not more beautiful than yours!’ Yaduk said in a choked voice.

‘Are you flattering me?’ Elli asked suspiciously.

‘Not at all...why do you think so?’ Yaduk replied playfully.

‘He would have been after me, otherwise!’

Lo, the two burst out laughing! The iljjocks looked at them in

surprise. Elli's misfortune had only made the love between these two stronger.

'I think I should try calling God Hoon once more...what do you say?' Yaduk joked.

'NO!' Elli exclaimed.

'Ha...ha...you are scared of him!'

'Of course, I am...he may be listening...you have no idea how evil he can be!' Elli said gravely.

'All right,' Yaduk sobered down.

'One day, you will fly to the *Nors* to him...I can see it,' she sighed dreamily.

'I won't go anywhere!'

'I know it is your dream!'

'But, I want to stay with you forever!'

'But, I will be dead soon!' she replied dully.

'How can you say that?' Yaduk asked in an agonized voice. 'I am not going to let you die...you know that.'

'I do. But, I hate being trapped like this...it makes me feel morose...'

'You will soon be fine.' Yaduk assured, fighting the heaviness in his chest. 'I have prayed to God Hoon to spare your life...and, I have told him that I will not...absolutely not go back to Earth without you!'

'You think he will listen to you?' Elli asked curiously.

'I have complete faith...we will go to Earth together!'

'I can't wait then...where is Goddess Myrhim now?'

Yaduk looked around and saw the goddess chatting animatedly to Iisuu. He guessed what she was blabbering about – human knights! Weird names were being mentioned - Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler!

Elli heard her too and pleaded, 'Begin the swapping, my goddess...I am aching to be free!'

Startled, Myrhim stopped her conversation and came rushing to Elli. 'Yes, my child...' she said, taking Elli in her arms, 'I will set you free in a moment!'

'Set you free? What do you mean?' Yaduk asked in alarm.

‘She won’t feel trapped in the *bor*...that’s all.’

‘The *bor*?’ Hatti asked, walking up to them, ‘Why...what’s in the strings, my goddess?’

‘The *divine lore*!’ Iisuu announced calmly.

Hatti got such a shock that he almost fell down. Lo, the *divine lore* was the long story of the *bor* that Iisuu and Myrhim had been keeping secret for ages!

‘What are we waiting for now?’ Yaduk cried in exasperation.

‘Nothing...’ Myrhim said hurriedly.

‘Let’s begin then...’

Myrhim began the swap. She did the easy part first. She transferred Yaduk’s strings to Elli’s soul with one swipe of her divine scimitar. Elli was happy to receive all Yaduk’s memories again!

‘Be careful!’ Iisuu warned as the goddess proceeded to carry out the difficult part. One by one, she picked the *divine strings* from Elli’s soul and placed them in Yaduk’s soul. She reduced their power significantly, but they still had enough residual power to make him reel.

‘Mercy...’ Yaduk gasped, as divine energy surged in his soul. He thought he would collapse when the support of the yoke kicked in. The iljocks rallied behind him and absorbed the huge surge in their souls.

He steadied himself and found that he was back in the *bor* again. The feeling was now familiar - he was suspended in the divine continuum and colossal energy was pouring in from every direction. Surprisingly, he heard people chattering loudly!

The iljocks had accompanied him to the *bor* - Pikki, Jerro, Hatti and the others were having the time of their lives in the surreal surroundings of the *bor*. ‘Elli!’ he cried suddenly, looking around. ‘Where’s Elli?’ he asked sharply.

‘There...’ Hatti pointed with a grin.

Lo, Elli was twirling slowly under a shower of moments, hands and legs and all! ‘Yaduk...’ she whispered, stretching her hand.

‘Oh, Elli...’ Yaduk sighed, tears streaming down his eyes.

They held hands and the old magic surrounded them. A more magical moment wouldn’t come. Moments were dripping over them like light rain,

secrets were drifting around them and *boids* were teasing them with caresses.

‘Are you feeling better here?’ Yaduk asked huskily.

‘Yes...’ Elli twirled with pure joy.

‘Good.’

‘I want to race with the *boids*...’ she said excitedly. Oh! She took off like a gazelle, darting in and out of the *boids* playfully. Like flocks of lamb, the *boids* scampered with her, making her burst into loud laughter.

‘Elli...stop...’ he raced behind her.

‘Come...’ she laughed, grasping his hand. Oh! As if in a beautiful, magical dream, they raced hand in hand between the *boids*, feeling very exhilarated and happy.

Suddenly, Yaduk realized that they had come very far from everyone. ‘Hey...’ Elli exclaimed as all of a sudden, darkness descended on them.

‘Elli, where are you hiding?’ Yaduk yelled, his soul sinking. He tried to feel her in the darkness.

‘Here!’ she broke into sudden laughter and swished away the darkness.

Lo, they were swathes of secrets. They had ambushed them and were now trying to tie them up!

‘Yaduk and Elli...come here!’ Iisuu’s voice boomed suddenly.

‘Let’s go...’ Elli pulled Yaduk behind her. The two raced towards the voice and found Iisuu and the others standing at the edge of the *bor*.

They were all staring at the dark ocean that lay beyond the *bor*. Yaduk followed their gaze and was taken aback - a cluster of eight pots was floating in the ocean and was emitting blinding radiance.

‘What are they?’ Elli asked curiously.

‘You are seeing the *force of death*!’ Iisuu replied grimly. ‘It was supposed to purge the *bor*!’

‘They are pots of *Orgis*!’ Myrhim explained. ‘The Holy Knot produced eight pots of *zol*, one for each season. As the *zol* burned it produced an equivalent amount of *Orgis*!’

‘So, the *bor* lived for eight seasons?’ Hatti frowned.

‘Yes, eight seasons of life! The *bor* followed a cycle of two seasons – life and death. In the season of life, hordes of new gods took birth to inhabit its energy...in the season of death, they all died! Hoon and Evil killed them!’

‘But, the *bor* remained alive?’

‘Yes. The *bor* was ordained to die at the end of the eighth or the last season, when the divine venom in these eight pots was supposed to spread and purge it in one massive explosion!

‘The *force of death* acted through Hoon, the devil’s, scimitar. But, he still joined hands with Time and Mystery to stop the purge?’ Hatti asked.

‘Yes. When it became clear that this was the last season of life...he made a choice...he decided to go against the *force of death* and save the *bor*!’

‘It was a wise choice!’ the iljjocks said in unison.

‘Wisdom, actually, was a rare divine mood. It bloomed very late!’ Iisuu remarked. ‘But, when it bloomed...all mayhem broke loose as the gods realized that the *bor* was dying!’

‘How exactly?’ Hatti asked curiously.

‘They saw that the Holy Knot had become barren...and all the blood in the *bor*’s heart was gone!’

‘Blood like ours?’

‘No!’ Myrhim exclaimed. ‘It was divine blood and only it could give birth to new souls. No new souls have taken birth since the *bor* died. I created all of you from old souls and in a way, all of you have come from the *bor*’s heart!’

‘The moment the *bor* came to know that it was dying, it started fighting back...’ Iisuu remarked.

‘How?’ the iljjocks asked.

‘By ignoring all its instincts except for one...the instinct for survival!’

‘More events took place in the last season than all the earlier seasons put together,’ Myrhim remarked. ‘The *bor* lashed out evilly at first. Later, it relied more on wisdom!’

‘Is that what we are going to see now?’ Elli asked.

‘Yes, the *divine lore* will show you the entire eighth or the last season of life as it happened...’ Myrhim trailed off.

‘Watch quietly now...’ Iisuu said grimly. ‘The last season is about to

begin!’

The iljjocks nodded and watched intently.

The *bor* was in a very grief-stricken mood. The thickest crop of sorrow blooms was in bloom in the cavern and under no circumstances, did it want to begin what it knew was the last season of its life!

Goddess Mystery’s womb, however, was bursting with eggs for the new season and she was restless to give birth. Finally, she got fed up and decided to begin the new season by forcing Time to gallop forward!

Lo, the *bor* lashed out promptly. It forced the devil Hoon and its old slave Evil to assault Mystery’s womb until all her eggs were broken! But, Mystery’s fertility was indestructible and the nascent souls of gods could be seen glowing within the cracked eggs!

Finally, the *bor* let the gods take birth. Wisdom bloomed in the cavern profusely forcing all the gods to become wise! They realized that Evil was the one ordained to kill them all and they killed him!

Evil was nothing but a slave to the *force of death* and new slaves rose to take his place! The God of Fate and Goddess Shol took birth to take the *bor* to its doom.

That was when Iisuu and Aakaa, a new generation of wise gods were born. Together, they managed to bring Fate and Shol under their control.

The slaves had failed. So, Isas, the God of Orgis, rose himself to take the *bor* to its eternal death! Time, Hoon and Mystery not only corrupted his soul but also tied him to Iisuu with a powerful bond of love!

Isas imbibed Iisuu’s love for the *bor* and spent great moments laughing with him and loving him! When, suddenly, Fate and Shol freed themselves and the *bor* began hurtling inevitably towards its death. A jealous Aakaa was greatly responsible for their resurgence!

To save the *bor*, Isas sacrificed his life and killed Fate and Shol with himself. With their deaths, most of the *bor* was purged, but an iota survived. And, to ensure that the iota resulted in a new universe, Time and Mystery sacrificed themselves.

Myrhim took birth with the universe and she created the iljjocks and seamones. On Hoon’s direction, she created the humans. Fate’s soul had died but his carcass had remained. Hoon decided to sculpt a new soul for Fate from human souls. This, to make him course wisely towards the future and in

favor of the new universe!

Shockingly, Myrhim's knocked in shards of Aakaa's soul in the human souls. She sealed them hurriedly lest Aakaa connected to them directly when they were alive. But, she could not stop him from connecting after death, when the souls became free.

Aakaa had escaped the *bor* with residual *Orgis* and an old connection to Fate. The connection came alive when Hoon started knocking in human souls in Fate's carcass! He realized that he could actually rule the future! That's when Iisuu decided to make the human yoke! And, Yaduk was abducted to Seabor!

And, with that, the *divine lore* ended. And, the iljocks came out of the waking dream and found themselves back in *Kirll*. They could not believe that finally, they knew what the long story of the *bor* was!

So many questions had been answered. Time was different in different parts of the universe because the God of Time's arrow had broken countless times! The humans had the power to chart the future because their souls were being knocked in the carcass of Fate!

Hatti was stunned by the revelations. All his life, he had been hankering to know the *divine lore* and he was very relieved to have learned it before his death.

Most relieved was Goddess Myrhim. She had managed to swap the *divine strings* successfully, with absolutely no mishap. 'Elli can now give birth and die peacefully!' she declared, having reconnected her body to her soul.

God Iisuu and the iljocks were overjoyed to hear that. Elli would not die a *coon*!

Elli was relieved too, but was still very weak. She could move her limbs but did not have the strength to get up.

'You will be fine and ready to give birth in a few days!' Iisuu assured. 'Yaduk will feed you plenty of *kiks* and take good care of you!'

'Yes!' Yaduk nodded, relieved to see Elli regain control of her body. He was sure that Elli would give birth safely but would not die after that. He had unshakeable faith that God Hoon would spare her from death and she would accompany him to Earth!

The complete lot of *divine strings* was loaded on the yoke now and

the iljjocks were eager to explore their enhanced powers! Indeed, they could see the entire universe, right up to the very end, with their enhanced divine sight!

‘I can actually see the dark ocean!’ Pikki whispered in shock.

‘Yes!’ the others agreed, shivering to see the cold and barren expanse of nothingness lying beyond the edge of the universe.

It was dawn now and a faint orange radiation lit the horizon. Surprisingly, no one was sleepy or hungry! When, they had spent the whole night watching the *divine lore*!

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THE SEAMONE ATTACK

Time: Yadu’s 21st day on Seabor, 18th century AD on Earth

YADUK began taking care of Elli in real earnest. He fetched wholesome *kiks* from their pit, fed them to her, took her for grooming in the bay and finally, put her down to sleep on a bed of leaves in *Kirll*!

Elli was connected to the yoke now and at peace. ‘You must take rest, too...’ she caressed his brow lightly.

‘Yes!’ he replied, warmed by her loving touch. Stretching his arms wide and yawning loudly, he patted her forehead gently. ‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Much better...’ she sighed.

‘Good!’ he lay down next to her. He crossed his arms under his head and listened drowsily to the *saykriles* on the treetops. The flapping of their wings sounded like the footfall of herds scampering down the misty trails.

A cold gust of wind blew in suddenly and he shivered. The oceans were super-cold and he could smell their chilly odor. Snuggling closer to Elli, he waited for the warmth of the forest return.

The forest was naturally full of warmth because of the radiant *Nahlu* trees. He took in deep breaths of the smoky aroma and his eyelids began feeling heavy. Hazily, he noticed that tired from the sojourn in the *bor*, most of the iljjocks had fallen fast asleep under the trees. Myrhim and Iisuu, however, were still awake and chatting animatedly!

As usual, all their worries were related to Earth. Was Aakaa still

spreading epidemics? Were the human knights that Myrhim had created to vanquish Aakaa's powers doing any good or just whittling their time away?

Iisuu caught his gaze and whispered sternly, 'Go to sleep, my child!'

Yaduk nodded drowsily and closed his eyes. But, sleep evaded him and he continued listening to Myrhim and Iisuu's chatter.

'The knights are doing a splendid job up in the *Nors*!' Iisuu murmured to Myrhim, 'They have managed to weaken Aakaa considerably.'

'I guess so...the scourge of Black Death has not been repeated,' Myrhim replied.

'But, there is still plenty of disease around. I think Aakaa is still fiddling with the germs on Earth.'

'Well, Shakespeare, Akbar and some of my newer knights are doing a very good job of slashing the strands that run from Aakaa's soul to the *Nors*. But, Aakaa's power is not to be underestimated...he grows back new strands every time! Apparently, we will truly get rid of him only when he dies.'

'You know that we cannot let him die,' Iisuu rued, 'He carries the last of *Orgis* in his soul!'

'Correct,' nodded Myrhim. 'The only way to cutoff Aakaa from the humans...'

'Is for me to make the human yoke. And, control all human souls, living and dead!'

'Don't despair...I am sure you will succeed,' Myrhim assured. 'I think the idea of the human yoke is what won God Hoon over to our side!'

'It is not going to be easy, though,' Iisuu mulled grimly.

'Why do you say so?'

'The seamones have not been not idling,' he remarked, looking far into the Seamone Ocean with his divine sight, 'Look at the weapons they have been stockpiling!'

Myrhim followed his gaze in alarm. The seamones had rebuilt their damaged settlements. Tall *beshels* towered from the ocean bed to the sky and were teeming with seamones working actively to make weapons. She shivered to see the piles of spears and arrows that they had made.

'What are they going to do with them?' she asked in consternation.

'Obviously, they will shoot them at us!'

‘But, why?’

‘They have become insane with despair...that’s why...’ Iisuu shrugged worriedly. ‘That’s what happened in the *bor*...Aakaa’s despair-ridden soul led us all to doom!’

Frowning with anxiety, Myrhim looked at the seamones intently. There was a lull in their activity. ‘You can sleep, Iisuu,’ she offered, ‘I will keep watch!’

‘All right!’ he replied. He walked over to where the iljjocks were sleeping and lying down under a tall tree, fell fast asleep.

Yaduk, who had been listening to them quietly, also rolled over to sleep.

Myrhim sat down on a rock and kept her divine sight firmly fixed on the seamone settlements, not letting her attention wander even a little. She knew that, although she could see everything with her omnipresent sight, she was slow in understanding whatever she was seeing!

The day passed slowly for her. But, she did not get bored. Because, every now and then she reached out to Earth and created a few more human knights! It hardly took her a moment- her soul left her body, sneaked into the vortex of divine continuum in her *beshel*, reached out to Earth through it, created the baby in the womb of a human mother, and then, quickly sneaked back!

She was happily watching Napoleon grow up and Edward Jenner create a vaccine against smallpox, when she noticed sudden activity in the seamone *beshels*. She turned her sight away from Earth and watched the seamones intently. They were picking up the arrows and stringing them in bows!

It took Myrhim some time to understand what was happening. And, by the time she understood, it was too late. Thousands of arrows had flown up in the sky from the seamone *beshels*. They were powered by *zol* crystals and were aimed towards where she was sitting- *Kirll* forest!

‘STOP...’ she yelled in alarm, seeking to destroy the arrows in mid-air with her omnipresent powers. Thousands of arrows burst in the air, lighting up the sky with bright explosions!

‘What?’ cried Iisuu, waking up, startled.

‘We have been attacked by the seamones!’ Myrhim yelled.

‘Damn!’ Iisuu thundered.

No one was hurt as most of them were sleeping under trees. The trees also stopped the falling debris.

‘Where are they?’ Yaduk jumped to his feet hastily, ‘We will beat them to death!’

‘The cowards are shooting from their *beshels*!’ Hatti exclaimed.

‘Hey!’ Jerro pointed to the sky, ‘What’s that?’

Everybody looked up, startled. Lo, thousands of gleaming spears were falling down from the sky!

‘Take cover...everyone....’ Iisuu yelled, ‘They are attacking us again!’

The seamones had resumed shooting their weapons- this time they were shooting spears powered by *zol* crystals!

‘Under the trees...’ Hatti yelled.

‘Elli!’ Yaduk leapt to pick up her up and stand under a broad branch.

‘What is happening now?’ Elli asked anxiously.

‘I don’t know,’ Yaduk strained to look up at the sky.

The iljjocks peered upwards too. Even as they looked, the spears exploded in mid-air to light up the sky. It was Iisuu’s doing! He had burst all the spears by using divine force!

‘Why do they even try?’ the iljjocks laughed in unison. Days of seamone hard work had been vanquished in moments!

‘We have nothing better to do...that’s why!’ a divine voice growled back mockingly.

Startled, the iljjocks turned to look in the direction of the voice. Lo, God Aakaa had come to *Kirll* and was standing there! He was not alone but had come with the Triar. They had come to see the death and destruction they had caused and were wearing strange metallic robes and caps that made them look like buffoons!

‘Iisuu?’ Aakaa growled, oozing a foul and deathly spoor.

Yaduk looked at Aakaa with glowering eyes. He had terrible memories of him and the seamones. He would never forget how cruelly they had tortured Elli and him. ‘Kill him!’ he roared vengefully.

Lo, using his newly acquired divine powers, he hurled broken branches, metal pots and pans at Aakaa and the Triar!

‘I like this!’ Pikki declared with glee. ‘Don’t hesitate...hit them hard...’ he yelled to the iljjocks.

‘Beat the daylights out of them...’ Hatti yelled, hurling metal pots at Aakaa. ‘Ha! Ha!’ he guffawed with delight, ‘It feels so great!’

Encouraged, the iljjocks began hitting the two seamones with missiles from all sides. ‘Ha! Ha!’ their laughter echoed loudly in the *Kirll* forest.

‘Ha! Ha!’ Aakaa and Triar Seamone laughed back. Surprisingly, the missiles were causing them no bodily damage. The metal pots were hitting them with loud clangs and falling down without hurting them!

‘Can’t you see that they are wearing armor?’ Iisuu yelled to his ignorant brood.

‘Correct,’ Aakaa growled with glee, ‘We copied it from the Mughal warriors!’

Flustered, the iljjocks stopped the barrage of missiles. Aakaa laughed loudly. ‘Before hitting me...see what I carry in my soul!’

Bewildered, the iljjocks looked intently at his soul. It was glowing eerily. Lo, it was the glow of *Orgis*, the divine venom. God Aakaa was almost as deathly as Evil from the old *bor*!

‘Ha! Ha!’ Aakaa cackled eerily. His eyes smoldering with hatred, he suddenly gripped Yaduk’s soul and gave it a mighty wring!

‘Aaargh...’ Yaduk groaned, collapsing to the ground.

‘AAKAA!’ Iisuu exploded, retaliating with a divine blow so hard, that Aakaa was forced to release his hold on Yadu!

Groaning loudly, Yaduk slumped on the ground and the iljjocks rushed to soothe him. God Aakaa took one long look at the human and departed hurriedly. His eyes were dazed- as if he had seen something that he had not expected to see!

Triar Seamone ran behind him and the two jumped into a *zolboat* bobbing on the shore and sped away in the open ocean.

TRIAR SEAMONE noticed that God Aakaa was subdued on the way back. Almost when they had reached the burrow, Aakaa exclaimed in shock, ‘I don’t believe this...the human is carrying *divine strings* in his soul!’

‘All iljjocks carry one string of *divine lore*!’ the Triar replied wryly. ‘And, he is an iljjock now!’

‘Not one string, you fool...’ Aakaa growled. ‘He is carrying the complete lot!’

The Triar gaped in disbelief. ‘It is not possible!’ he blurted, ‘He would have died!’

‘Exactly,’ Aakaa growled bitterly. ‘But he is alive!’

‘My lord,’ the Triar whispered in a trembling voice, ‘There is only way this could have happened...’

‘What is that?’

‘God Hoon must be involved...he must have done something!’

‘Nonsense!’ Aakaa bristled angrily. ‘It is all Myrhim’s doing. She has done something to his soul with her scimitar. She has made him stronger.’

‘What should we do now, my lord?’

‘Snatch the *divine strings* from him, what else?’ Aakaa growled bitterly.

The Triar looked aghast. ‘Are we going to abduct the human now?’ he spluttered in disbelief.

‘Whack!’ a hard slap landed on his face in reply.

‘Oooohhh...’ the Triar moaned loudly. But, he was faking his agony. Aakaa had picked the practice of ‘slapping’ from the humans, which was a lot milder than his earlier habit of wringing souls!

‘It is a very big conspiracy against me,’ he growled in a low and bitter tone.

‘A big conspiracy?’

‘Yes. Iisuu won’t just make the human yoke...he will load it with massive divine power. The humans will use the powers to break the divine connection to me!’

The Triar could not suppress his delight. If that had happened, Aakaa would belong only to the seamones!

‘Whack!’ a hard slap landed on the Triar’s face again. ‘You want me to fail?’ Aakaa fumed.

‘No, my lord,’ the Triar gasped. ‘We want you to make the human

yoke...that is why the seamones are working so hard to breed a germ that will break open the seal that locks the human souls!

‘Nonsense!’ Aakaa snapped furiously. ‘Your germs have stopped working. Forget about opening souls, the cursed germs are not even killing humans now. We have not had a decent epidemic on Earth for ages now...a few viral fevers, small bouts of plague and cholera...you have made me look ridiculous! I have a good mind to wring all of you to death!’

‘Our germs are truly killer germs,’ the Triar retorted indignantly. ‘It is your powers that have suffered, my lord. The human knights have cut you down!’

Aakaa was about to slap the Triar resoundingly again, when the *zolboat* lurched to a stop. They had arrived at the burrow!

‘I don’t want to spread disease anymore,’ Aakaa growled angrily, getting off the *zolboat*, ‘I want to tear open the human souls...do you understand?’

‘But....’

Aakaa was gone.

Shrugging with relief, the Triar headed back the seamone settlements. After every meeting with God Aakaa, he felt as if he had escaped death! One thing was sure, though. Iisuu was racing ahead and Aakaa was lagging behind because of which he was becoming desperate!

Which was a good development for the seamones! They would pressurize him at every opportunity now to give them drops of *Orgis*! A germ that would break open the human souls was still far away. But, a germ that could breakdown the human immune system was almost ready!

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NELLI ILJJOCK

Time: Yadu’s 23rd day on Seabor, 20th century AD on Earth

TODAY, surprisingly, the iljjocks were oozing the spoor of despair and anxiety. They were sitting on the ground of the *Kirll* forest and Iisuu and Myrhim were seated with them. Lo, God Aakaa had managed to spread a new killer virus on Earth that had broken down the immune system, making them very worried that the seamones may be very close to breaking open the

human souls!

It was dusk now and the fading radiance lit their anxious faces. Myrhim was fretting over Yaduk's safety. 'I am telling you...he is in great danger...' she wrung her hands worriedly. 'Aakaa has seen the treasure that now lies in his soul...he has seen the *divine strings*!'

'Aakaa will try to steal them for sure!' Iisuu frowned.

'You are right!' Hatti agreed, 'Do you remember how he once attacked *Coon* iljjock?'

Myrhim shivered. *Coon* was a baby iljjock, whose soul Aakaa had once tried to devour. The baby iljjock had died and his soul had remained trapped inside his body, lending his name '*coon*' to all such deaths on Seabor!

'I think we must send Yaduk back to Earth immediately!' Iisuu declared agitatedly. 'Aakaa will not be able to reach him there!'

Yaduk was appalled to hear Iisuu's words. 'I am not going anywhere,' he said firmly. 'Elli is with child!'

Elli had regained her strength and was sitting with the others. 'I would like Yaduk to be present when my child is born,' she said in a wavering voice.

'In that case...' Myrhim declared. 'We will wait for Elli to give birth!'

'We will stay here and keep watch...' Hatti suggested.

'Yes...yes...' the iljjocks agreed, happy to spend a few days in *Kirll*.

Following Hatti's directions, they spread in every niche of the forest and locked their divine sight on the seamone settlement!

Yaduk and Elli sat down under a tree to rest. 'Don't leave me...until I am safely dead!' she pleaded in a faltering voice.

'There you go again...' he burst out in exasperation. 'We will go to Earth together...alive and well...I have told you so many times!' He took out some fresh *kiks* and pushed them in her mouth. Myrhim had told him that Elli's infant was growing very fast and he had to keep on feeding her.

Hatti came up and sat down next to them.

'I was just telling her...God Hoon has no choice but to spare her life,' Yaduk remarked, offering him *kiks*.

‘I hope he shows some sense,’ Hatti snorted, ‘The last thing this universe needs is one more love-crossed lunatic joining the fray!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Elli giggled. ‘Yaduk won’t be a *good* love-crossed lunatic, though!’

‘I will shut my shop,’ Yaduk agreed, ‘I have warned God Hoon...if he wants me to make the human yoke, Elli will have to be by my side!’

‘I am sure he will listen to you...’ Hatti patted him on the shoulder and then glancing around covertly, slipped away!

‘What’s he up to?’ Yaduk muttered.

‘Probably eavesdropping on Iisuu and Myrhim...’ Elli remarked drily. ‘He feeds on gossip like we feed on *kiks*!’

‘But, God Iisuu shared everything on the yoke a little while ago...’

Indeed, God Iisuu had already shown the latest visions of Earth to the iljjocks. Noticeable were four new knights, who, because of their rare charisma, had caused mass-adulation!

‘Do you remember the young president we saw...the one who had captured the hearts of millions?’ Elli recalled in awe.

‘*Ask not what I can do for you – ask what you can do for me?*’ Yaduk chuckled, ‘Pikki has pinched his famous line and has modified it to use it on Jerro!’

‘Ha...ha...do you remember that charismatic singer who held stadiums full of people in the palm of his hand?’

‘*I am just a musical prostitute?* Hatti has picked up his line and is blasting it everywhere...when he has no experience in music or prostitutes!’

‘Ha...ha...’ Elli rolled with laughter. ‘What about the actor who was so insanely popular that millions stood outside his seaside home for a single glimpse...his lines were the best!’

‘*Life should be big and not long!*’ Yaduk recalled. ‘God Iisuu’s favorite...and to think that he has already lived longer than the universe!’

‘You are so wicked!’ Elli guffawed. ‘And, do you remember the beautiful princess who won the world with her compassion?’

‘*I don’t go by the rule book!*’ Yaduk quoted her eloquently. ‘Myrhim is struggling to make a rule book first!’

‘Ha...ha....’ they cackled loudly, tears streaming down their face.

Their best moments together had been the ones that they spent laughing. Hiccupping loudly, they sobered down and ate fresh kiks in companionable silence.

Yaduk was aware that Elli's charisma was no less than that of the knights they had been discussing and he beamed with pride. He also noticed that she was wearing his favorite robes. 'Are you praying, Elli?' he smiled gently.

'All the time!' she replied fervently. 'I think I know why God Hoon gave me the *divine strings*!'

'Why?' he asked, bewildered.

'He wanted *you* to have them eventually. Because when you die, your soul will go to Fate. That way the God of Fate will get the complete lot of *divine strings*!'

'Aha...you are right!' he nodded in astonishment.

She snuggled closer and put her head on his shoulder. The old magical haze enveloped them and the two spent long, soulful moments just looking and smiling at each other. Tears ran down Elli's eyes and she suddenly became sad.

'Now what?'

'I want you to name our child *Nelli*!' she said huskily.

'Shut up...and pray,' he scolded. 'Never lose your faith!'

'Yaduk...' she moaned suddenly.

'What is it?' he gasped.

'I think I am giving birth!'

'What?' he cried in panic. He looked at her toe. It was swollen! 'God Iisuu!' he yelled on the yoke.

Iisuu came running and so did Myrhim. 'Let me see...' the goddess touched Elli's toe gently.

'Elli iljjock is giving birth!' Hatti announced on the yoke.

The iljjocks heard him and gathered around Elli quickly.

'Keep holding to your faith!' Yaduk held her hand calmly.

'Stay with me...always....' she whispered haltingly.

'Everything will turn out fine,' he assured. 'Believe me...and focus

on our child!’

Elli did as told and with God Iisuu’s help, gave birth. Moments later, an infant iljjock tumbled out of her toe!

Yaduk burst with joy and rushed to pick up the infant. Lo, she was a beautiful baby and had a wrinkled doe-face! ‘Look at Nelli!’ he held the infant in front of Elli so that she could have a look.

Surprisingly, Elli’s eyes were closed and her face was deathly calm. Lo, defying the unflinching faith that Yaduk had harbored in his soul, Elli iljjock had passed away.

GOD IISUU said later that he actually heard Yaduk’s soul scatter. For, Yaduk froze to death immediately, and Iisuu had to pull Nelli out of his arms.

There was a pandemonium as Myrhim and Iisuu tried to revive him. They peered in his soul and saw that it had scattered along old fault lines – his soul had scattered once before when it had been ravaged by the seamones!

Then, Hoon had healed his soul by joining the scattered shards. He had plastered them together with a thick paste of *faith*, made from divine blooms plucked from the *bor*! That thick paste of *faith* had cracked now, making his soul scatter again!

Iisuu and Myrhim were furious with God Hoon.

‘Why did he make a bond of *faith* when he intended to break it?’ Myrhim ranted angrily.

‘The God of Time would never have done this,’ Iisuu said grudgingly. ‘He kept every bond of *faith* that he made and did not break a single one till the very end!’

‘Try as he might...Hoon can never be the father that Time was,’ Myrhim ranted bitterly. And, then looking at the sky with her full divine hauteur, she declared, ‘My lord, I will fight for this child of mine....’

Lo, before she could say a word more, lightning fell on her and all her aplomb fizzled out! She was left with a body trembling in shock and cheeks tingling with pain!

‘What did he say?’ Iisuu asked in alarm, well aware that Hoon had responded to the goddess.

‘He said he was too busy to wring my soul...so, he had to slap me!’

‘What?’ Iisuu baulked, ‘But, why?’

‘He said that he was tired to doing my work for me...I had to stop being lazy and waiting for miracles to happen! Miracles did not happen themselves, one had to labor to make them happen...I should have learned that in the *bor!*’

‘What else did he say?’ Iisuu gaped.

‘He said...if I had wanted to save Elli so much, I should have worked on her soul before she had given birth. I should not be ranting after she has died. Now, that I have made a royal mess...and Elli has to be brought back... he has had to do double the work on Nelli’s soul!’

‘What?’ Iisuu looked at Nelli in shock.

Little Nelli was sitting near Yaduk’s still body and eating kiks happily. Suddenly, she giggled!

‘Let me see you, sweet child,’ Iisuu picked her up gently. He and Myrhim peered into her infant soul and were flabbergasted.

‘Holy heavens...’ Myrhim gasped, ‘God Hoon has separated both her souls. Her iljjock soul is intact but the human one is missing!’

‘Where did human soul go?’ Iisuu gaped.

‘And what about the *divine strings*?’ Myrhim wondered. ‘They are missing too. Where did they go?’

Nelli looked at them with big, melting eyes and giggled mischievously.

‘Nelli, do you know anything about it?’ Iisuu asked suddenly.

‘Yes!’ she squealed with delight.

‘Where did your *divine strings* go?’

‘God Hoon took them back...he said he was taking me out of danger!’

‘I hope he did not hurt you!’ Myrhim asked anxiously.

‘No!’ she shook her tiny head.

‘Good for you! Now tell me...what happened to your human soul?’

‘It belonged to my mother...and so, he sent it to Earth to take birth again!’

‘What?’ Iisuu and Myrhim cried incredulously

‘God Hoon said that...he could not stand it if another love-crossed

lunatic joined the fray!’

Lo, Iisuu and Myrhim laughed suddenly. Then, ashamed of ranting against the almighty Hoon unnecessarily, they raised their arms in obeisance to him!

Iisuu looked at Earth anxiously. Lo, wonder of wonders, indeed, Elli’s human soul had taken birth and was already one year old! ‘Yaduk, run...’ he cried urgently. ‘Elli is growing like a forest-fire!’ But, then he remembered, Yaduk was dead!

‘I have to find a way to revive his soul...’ Myrhim cried in panic.

‘We don’t have the time,’ Iisuu cried in an anguished voice. ‘By the time he reaches Earth...she would have died and migrated to the *Nors*!’

‘What should we do then?’

Both divine beings were busy thinking furiously about what to do, when Nelli tugged their hands suddenly.

‘What is it...my child?’ Iisuu asked distractedly.

‘God Hoon is saying...what do you take him for? A dimwit who will leave his task half-done?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Of course, he healed my father when he separated my souls! Why are you whiling your time away...when you should be waking him up?’

Startled, Iisuu and Myrhim glared at each other accusingly. Then, before Hoon slapped them or did something worse, they rushed to wake Yaduk up!

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RETURN TO EARTH

Time: Yadu’s 24st day on Seabor, 21th century AD on Earth

YADUK was flitting in and out of dreams when he heard a tiny voice. ‘Father...father...wake up, father!’

‘Nelli...’ he croaked, opening his eyes with a start. Hazily, he saw that he was lying in *Kirll* and everybody was standing around him and strangely, weeping tears of joy!

‘My brave child...’ Iisuu gathered him fiercely in his arms.

‘It is a miracle!’ Myrhim gasped, wiping away her tears. ‘I mean...it is God Hoon’s hard labor...no, it is my mistake...whatever it is...I am very happy!’

‘Yaduk...wake up...’ Hatti, Pikki and the iljjocks cried happily.

‘Elli...she is alive on Earth...can you believe that?’ he gasped with joy, his face radiant like a *Nor*!

‘Get up and run,’ Hatti poked him hard. ‘Or, you won’t find her alive!’

‘Yes...hurry,’ Pikki urged. ‘If she finds her way to the *Nors* before you find your way to Earth...God Hoon will think nothing of slapping all of us!’

‘Yes...yes...’ Yaduk groaned and staggered to his feet.

‘Are you going away, father?’ Nelli asked in a small voice.

‘Yes,’ he replied, tears welling up in his eyes. ‘I have to rush...and catch your mother...before she grows too old for me!’

‘Come back soon!’ she cried, skipping away in the *Kirll* forest. ‘And, bring her back too!’

‘Take care of her, my lord...’ Yaduk clutched Iisuu’s hands.

‘She will be fine,’ Iisuu replied gently.

‘Don’t worry, I am still alive,’ Hatti said gruffly. ‘Now leave...’

‘Don’t die behind my back...’ Yaduk smiled faintly.

‘I won’t...at least not until I have seen the human yoke!’ Hatti assured jovially.

‘How many years have passed, my lord?’ Yaduk asked God Iisuu.

‘2,338 years, my child...at present, it is 2049 AD on Earth!’

A lesser lad would have fainted. But, Yaduk had the courage of a hundred men! ‘How do I travel?’ he asked, bewildered.

‘Through the vortex...’ Myrhim smiled. ‘Your skin will protect you. I created it keeping in mind that you will need to travel back to Earth one day!’

Lo, Iisuu helped Yaduk blow out *boids* from his skin! Protected by a layer of *boids*, Yaduk entered the vortex of divine continuum and came out in the core of the moon. He rose to the surface of the moon like a fiery ball and

spotting Earth in the sky, leapt towards it!

As he hurtled towards Earth, he searched for the mountains. Seeing a range that looked familiar, he veered towards it and landed as a fiery ball in the Kinnauri Himalayas!

When the fire around him had died down, he looked at his surroundings. Far off, the snow capped mountain peaks glistened white in the moonlight and long glacial tongues could be seen running down the slopes.

‘Ah...’ he sighed, taking in a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. Feeling invigorated, he looked at the valley and saw many houses dotting the slopes below. People were living in them and he realized that he had to reach out to them as soon as possible.

But, first, he had to find Elli.

Lo, where was Elli hiding now?

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