

THE BOOKS OF

ARYA KALASH



A. ROYDEN D'SOUZA

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Fearlessness, will to strive for wisdom |
Opened hand and piety and love of lonely study |
Humbleness, heed to injure nought which lives |
Truthfulness, slowness unto wrath |
a mind that lightly letteth go what others prize |
Equanimity and charity which spieth no man's faults |
Tenderness towards all that suffer |
A contented heart, fluttered by no desires |
A bearing mild, modest, and grave |
with manhood nobly mixed with patience, fortitude, and purity |
An unrevengeful spirit, never given to rate itself too high |
Such be the signs, O Prince ||
of him whose feet are set on that fair path
which leads to heavenly birth ||

Deceitfulness, and arrogance, and pride |
Quickness to anger, Harsh and evil speech |
And ignorance, to its own darkness blind.
These be the signs, My Prince ||
of him whose birth is fated for the regions of the vile ||

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APPENDIX 4

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PROLOGUE



Snakes, everywhere. They crawled over the great roots that encroached the fallen city and slithered across the paved roads overwhelmed with weeds. If it wasn't the snakes, it was the vines that coiled around the lichen-covered fountains and climbed over the white stone structures that had once stood proud in the ancient city of Amaravata. The five peaks of Mahāmeru Parvat loomed around it, shadowing the great vale.

For the veiled figure moving silently through the abandoned streets, it wasn't the serpents among the vegetation that disquieted her. It was something else... something not of this realm.

The cotton *uttariya* was wrapped tight around her chest, but the *antariya* billowed softly from her waist as she advanced deeper into the heart of the desolation. The

garment's hem brushed against the uneven stones on the road, now split and broken by the elements.

Lightning flickered overhead, veins of pure energy arcing through the great thunderclouds that hung in the sky. They called to her, but she ignored them. She wanted no hand in the power that had driven her brother to... to become what he was now.

Ahead, the palace loomed above the city's remnants like a ghostly specter. Carved from the white stone of the great mountain, its once-pristine spires rose high into the sky, stained by the passage of time. Once a symbol of power and grandeur for the entire continent, it now stood as a monument to a forgotten age.

She stopped at the palace doors, half-hidden by the invasive vines. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and pushed them open.

They creaked apart ominously, giving her a moment of pause. The silence was even more profound inside, broken only by the soft hiss of snakes as they slithered out of her way. The air was thick with the scent of decay and neglect.

She moved through the halls with purpose, her footsteps echoing faintly in the vast, empty spaces. The farther she ventured, the more numerous the snakes became, as if they were drawn to something deeper within—something that pulsed with an unnatural energy.

Finally, she reached the throne hall, the very heart of the great palace. The *mrittika* doors hung slightly ajar, revealing the chamber beyond. She hesitated for just a moment before pushing them open and stepping inside.

The hall was vast, walls lined with faded murals and cracked pillars that had once supported the ceiling, now partly collapsed in several places. A great circle of runes had been etched into the floor, glowing faintly with a light that seemed to repel the encroaching darkness.

The snakes, for all their number, did not dare cross the markings, coiling and hissing at them.

The cracked throne, carved from the same white stone as the palace, stood at the far end, bathed in a faint, eerie light that filtered through the shattered windows above. It loomed like a ghostly sentinel over the vast, empty hall.

The one whom she had come searching for hovered just before it, legs crossed in a meditative pose, his figure outlined by the light falling on his back. His shoulder-length black hair framed a face etched with pain, though his expression remained serene. His skin, the color of polished bronze, was marked with several scars.

His eyes were closed, detached from the world around him. Dark veins crept from under the linen wrappings of his left hand, slithering up to his shoulder.

But the most unnerving feature about him was the ethereal jewel embedded in his sternum. It pulsed faintly, as if in rhythm with his heartbeat. The shimmering light coming from its depths seemed to agitate the serpents.

As she stepped into the circle of runes, his eyes parted. Those pupils, dark and deep, held a distant, haunted look. For a moment, neither spoke. The silence between them was thick with unspoken words, with a past that had been buried but never forgotten.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” his voice was low and hollow, filled with resignation. It was as if the world outside

this godforsaken place no longer held any meaning for him.

“You know what will happen.”

He descended slowly, his feet touching the floor. He grasped the ivory weapon leaning on the broken throne. It was a double-sided trident. Arcs of lightning danced along its length and between the three prongs on each end, casting flickering shadows on the wall.

“Oh, they’ll take away anyone you hold dear?” She felt a surge of emotions she had tried to bury—anger and resentment, but also love that hadn’t faded in the slightest.

“Tell me, do you truly hold us dear, Brata? You abandoned us!”

“For exactly that reason!” he snapped. “Do you think I skulk in this tomb of our forebearers by choice?”

She could see the pain in his eyes—a pain that mirrored her own. It softened her resolve. “We can find a way to lift the curse, together.”

With a sigh that carried the weight of worlds, he turned and sat upon the cracked throne. He shook his head, giving her a remorseful look. “This is my burden to bear, a just punishment for my karma.”

She felt her eyes sting but held her tears. “Fine,” she whispered. “Just know that it was Bhagini Apsara who sent me. Kanchi has fallen, and Raya Vishnuvardhana is dead. The Traisanghika has begun its siege on Vayupat. The Avonian armada from the east, Amarasena’s army from the south, Tarakavira’s troops from the east. We are greatly outnumbered.”

“You shouldn’t have mentioned her.” There was pain in his voice. “The more I want to live, the sooner they’ll come.”

Apsara gritted her teeth in frustration. “She needs you! She wants you to save our home, the same thing our mother and I want.” She had come to him out of desperation, knowing that he was the only one who could help them, but now she wondered if there was anything left of the brother she had known. “In your obsession of sparing us from your curse, will you let us get slaughtered by Amarasena instead?”

He stirred on the broken throne. For an entire span, he said nothing, his gaze distant. The celestial weapon in his hand crackled, but his grip on it was loose, almost careless. She could see the struggle within him, the war between duty and despair.

“You must take them and go to Maera.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “You think they’ll stop with Panchasthavi and Saha? Maera will be next to fall!”

He looked at her, helpless. “If I come, the Yamadutas will follow. I’ll only bring death and destruction.”

Her heart ached at his words, but she refused to give up. She had come too far, risked too much to leave without him.

“It’s still better than watching our home being pillaged by traitors and outsiders,” she told him. “We need you. Please, Brata, don’t turn your back on us now.”

“They’re here.” He stiffened, his attention diverted by something she couldn’t sense.

The snakes outside the circle hissed, writhing against the runes. The shadows darkened, absorbing the light pouring from the windows. A skeletal figure rose from the ground, rotting chunks of flesh hanging from its bones. The face was that of a rotting corpse, eyes burning with silvery light. Copper-red hair, like flaming tendrils, cascaded from its head.

The skin was black emptiness—a void consuming all color around it.

It advanced, rusted chains and coiled ropes clutched in its skeletal hands. The instruments clinked and rattled, heralding death. Its approach was slow and deliberate, each step measured to prolong his torment. Its mouth twisted in a sinister grin, revealing sharp, yellowed teeth.

She gagged at the stench of death.

Are you ready, Indraputra?

Its voice was raspy, like dry sand. Shadows moved around the terrifying figure like floating silk.

“Not yet.” He stood, his fingers closing around the celestial weapon. The skies thundered overhead. Lightning flashed, piercing through the broken sections of the ceiling.

How long will you run from the inevitable?

The skeletal figure towered over them, empty, bottomless eyes staring through the gaunt, skull-like face as it advanced. Its very presence filled her with dread.

Yet, it ignored her, its focus solely on her brother. Even then, she felt as if her skin was wrinkling, her bones were crumbling, and her heart was slowing.

You will never escape your karma, Indraputra.

Her brother walked down the steps and pulled her into his arms, pointing the celestial weapon at the sky. He was calm, unperturbed by the entity as it reached for him with its skeletal hands.

“Hold on tight.” A lance of pure energy came down from the dark clouds, enveloping them in crackling light as the celestial weapon yanked them into the heavens. “Let’s get out of here.”

BOOK I
AVIDYA

॥ path of ॐ ॥



*“O Divinities, highest among us,
We honor Your presence, O protectors of Panchasthavi,
In Your worship, we attain auspicious fortune,
Through Your grace, our wrongs are cleansed,
Forgive our transgressions, O merciful Divinities,
For in Your worship, we find redemption and salvation.”*

Arya sat on a rugged slab of rock at the edge of the stream, reciting the daily prayers after a quick bath. The words rolled from his tongue, memorized through habit.

It was a mandate for everyone in Panchasthavi to start each day with the worship of divinities.

The drying droplets on his bare torso gleamed in the brightening dawn. Magpies skipped on the boughs above him,

picking their feathers. A couple of does lapped at the water across the stream.

They were used to his presence, and he was used to theirs.

When he was done with the customary prayers, he closed his eyes and proceeded to chant the secret mantra his mother had taught him. He didn't understand the ancient language, but he had learned the phrases:

बुल इंद्रेण देवराया नालाहा |
बुल इंद्रेण राजाया चोदलाहे |
लाहाइंद्रेया धीलाहा थान्ठ |
इंद्रेया प्राचोदयाथ |
बुल इंद्रेण देवराया नालाहे ||

She had asked him to chant it every day after the daily prayers, but only when no one was around. Never in the presence of the divinities.

She had said his father would hear him.

Arya opened his eyes and glanced around the clearing, but everything was as it had been before he started. The only

difference was that the darkness of early dawn had retreated, giving way to the morning sunlight.

“Are you there, Appa?” There was only silence.

His father never responded.

Yet, that didn’t stop him from following the same routine every day. He woke up at the crack of dawn, took a bath, offered the daily prayers, and recited the secret mantra before getting back to his daily grind at the gurukula.

Hope was all he had in this place.

He proceeded to perform the basic hatha yoga forms he had learned by watching Guru Vyānputra teach his shikshus. When he was done, he gathered his dried garments and dressed swiftly.

“There you are, akula!” The vegetation rustled behind him.

Arya’s heart jumped. Before he could defend himself, something hard slammed into his back, toppling him into the water.

He stumbled back to his feet and looked up at the four youths standing above him on the rock. Leading them was

Bhagwan Agnijit from the House of Pavaka, a divinity of the Agnivamsha.

Five *mruttika kadas* gleamed on each wrist—ornaments of the Divyakula, highest of the four varnas. The metal was many times more precious than gold. It glowed and glimmered with a scarlet sheen. Nothing could break it, not even the sharpest steel.

Arya fell to his knees and joined his palms, as was the custom in Panchasthavi. “Lord Divinity.”

“What were you mumbling to yourself?”

“Nothing, Lord Divinity.” He kept his head down. “I was offering the daily prayers.”

He subdued the resentment, burying it deep within the recesses of his own mind. It was a sin to show disobedience to the divinities, not only in action, even in thought. It was written in Ekaśastram, the sacred scripture of Ekadharmā followed by the people of Panchasthavi.

“I heard different,” Agnijit sneered. “I heard you talking to your invisible father again. Do you think he’s some

imaginary spirit of the woods that he can hear you from anywhere?”

Arya kept silent.

“He was probably some lowly outcast whom your mother bedded and left for dead in the streets,” Agnijit scoffed, and his lackeys laughed.

Arya’s face burned in humiliation. He sometimes resented his own mother. She had told him his father was always watching him. It was because of her he had come here, hoping he’d learn to be a warrior under the guidance of Guru Vyānputra. He had ended up becoming a laughingstock of the entire gurukula when he’d declared his wishes. The most someone like him could hope to become here was a *dāsa*.

Agnijit jumped down into the stream, splashing water. His brown curly locks and his dark bronze skin gleamed in the sunlight. He lifted his foot and placed it on Arya’s shoulder.

“What are you, *akula*?”

One of the lackeys crouched on the rock behind the divinity. He wore three silver *kadas* on his wrist. They were the

ornaments of the shura varna—a class of warriors trained to protect the divinities of the Divyakula.

A mocking smile twisted his lips. “Say it,” the shura urged. “Say you’re the dirt beneath our feet.”

Arya remained silent, barely clinging to the last vestiges of his pride. He struggled to maintain the mask of reverence. He wasn’t supposed to get angry and give in to sin. But no matter how he tried to let go of the bitterness, he couldn’t help it.

Agnijit wanted him to show dissent, so he could have a reason to punish him.

No one cared what happened to Arya... except maybe his mother and sister. They were akulas, the lowest of the society, beneath all the three common varnas that came after the Divyakula.

“What are you, akula?” Agnijit repeated, retrieving his foot. His eyes glowed and his body fumed as the traces of water evaporated from his skin. His fist burned red, as if flames ran in his veins instead of blood. The divinity raised his arm.

Arya averted his face, bracing himself for the searing blow. He mentally prepared himself for the pain that would last days. The flaring, the blistering, and the scabbing. He had experienced it so many times before. He would endure.

Again.

But if the flames from Agnijit's fist spread to his *uttariya*, he would have to collect more scraps to stitch it back together. His only consolation was that he was in the stream, so he'd be able save his drenched *antariya* at least-

"What's going on here?" a familiar voice, calm and contained, reached his ears.

All eyes turned to the girl standing on the slope that led to the water. She was older than them, slightly taller. Her brown hair, same color as her eyes, was braided and adorned with jasmines.

Bhumika wore the *mrittika kadas* of the Divyakula. She was the last of the fallen Bhuvivamsha. Someone had left her on Guru Vyānputra's doorstep. The sage had adopted her and raised her. She was the only one Agnijit didn't dare bully.

“Have you come again to poke your nose where it’s not needed, stray?” The divinity’s fist burst into flames, matching the rage bubbling on his face.

Bhumika remained calm, but the trees around her rustled ominously. The ground twitched, as if something was moving under the dirt. “The boy is my father’s dāsa, a servant of the gurukula. He is needed to tend to his duties. If you injure him, then you might be asked to do the work instead.”

“Me, do the work of an akula?” Agnijit fumed. “I’m the son of the Agniraja. He wouldn’t dare!”

“My father is brother to the Vayuraja,” Bhumika countered. “Besides, this is a gurukula and not your palace. Everyone has to carry their weight. You wouldn’t want to add to your weight, would you?”

Agnijit cursed, turning his hateful eyes on Arya. “You are nothing more than a fatherless son of a fruit-seller from your nameless village. Let go of your delusions and accept the reality, akula.”

The infuriated divinity gestured at his lackeys to retreat. As he passed Bhumika, he spat, “Just you wait, stray. Your

father won't be there to protect you forever. Your disgraced Bhuvivamsha has no place among the Divyakula anymore.”

She didn't acknowledge him or look at his face.

Arya waited until they were gone before rising to his feet. He went up to her, knelt down, and joined his palms. “I'm grateful, Lady Divinity.”

“You did good,” Bhumika said, giving him a kind smile. “No matter what you feel, keep it inside. Don't give them a reason to hurt you.”

Arya inclined his head.

“Go, complete your chores now,” Bhumika said. “You'll be late for your evening lessons otherwise. Maybe we'll have time for a tale or two.”

Arya nodded, spirits lifting. She had taken it on herself to teach him how to read and write... probably out of pity. Listening to her tales from lands far away was the only thing that made him feel good in this place. It made him forget his misery, even if it was for a few hours. Today, she was supposed to recite the tale of Vikrama, a lesserborn from Saha who had conquered Indravati after the fall of Indravamsha.

He wrung his drenched clothes and gathered the rest of his garments from the boughs where he had put them up for drying. He turned his stride back toward the gurukula, eager to finish his work by dusk.

The sun was rising over the small collection of huts nestled in the lush valley guarded by Indraneel Parvat. The secluded place of learning nestled in the foothills was one of the many gurukulas in Panchasthavi. Shikshus from the Divyakula and the three varnas—pundita, shura, and vanija—came here to learn and master their societal roles.

In the dominion of Panchasthavi, the divinities held the place of gods. Their learning was distinct from others and was conducted in secret. Theirs was the path of divinities, which would prepare them to guide and judge the people of Panchasthavi as its guardians.

KUKURU-KU-KUUU!

The crowing of roosters echoed across the valley, their racket piercing his ears as he sprinkled the grains in the coops. There were almost twenty of them, with at least fifty hens.

He collected their eggs and took them to the granary.

“Is that all?” Jatasya asked him with narrowed eyes. He wore the two bronze *kadas* of the vanija varna on his right wrist. He wasn’t much kinder to him than Agnijit and his lackeys. “I hope you didn’t steal any?”

Arya shook his head.

The cook didn’t seem to believe him. His lips curled in disdain. “Go, get back to work.”

He nodded, proceeding to his other tasks. He had to sweep the yard and coat the grounds with dung-slurry from the pit. It would settle the dust and fend off the mosquitoes.

Every now then, his eyes would wander to the training grounds, where Guru Vyānputra was instructing his shikshus. The divinities trained in the enclosed arena, but the pupils of the shura varna practiced their astra and shastra vidya in the grounds.

He listened to their lessons. At night, when everyone slept, he would take the discarded weapons and his self-crafted bow and arrows into the depths of the forest, where he would practice with them.

He had to be extremely careful. If they ever came to know, he would be kicked out of the gurukula, if not worse...

An akula wasn't supposed wield any weapons.

Not that he could ever become a warrior. But that didn't matter to him. He needed to be dependable for his mother and his sister. He had to protect them. They had no one else.

A cool breeze blew across the fields as he made his way to the cowshed. The cows, Nandini, Moksha, and Manasa, were waiting for him. They were always happy to see him. A content grumble reverberated through their gullets as he scratched the underside of their necks.

He liked their company. They never looked down on him or tormented him. They never hurt him. They were more his friends than anyone else at the gurukula.

He milked them as usual. Shoveling the dung from the cowshed and covering the floor with a fresh layer of dried leaves took him a lot longer. He had to repeat the same in the stables as well.

The smell of manure and straw was comforting. It kept his tormentors away, especially the betterborns.

When he was done feeding them, he collected the water-pots from the storehouse and turned his stride to the lake across the fields. The narrow path was lined with swaying paddies painted gold by the noon sun.

The skies were clear today, save for a few clouds sprinkled across the blue expanse.

He waded into the serene lake and dipped a pot into the shallows, feeling the cool liquid rush in. Tiny ripples spread out, disturbing the otherwise mirror-like surface. The sound of gurgling water mingled with the distant calls of birds returning to their nests.

As he heaved the pots to the bank, his attention was drawn to a small boat tethered nearby. It wasn't there yesterday.

Curious, he set down the pots and approached the vessel. It bobbed slightly. He leaned in, trying to see what might be within-

Suddenly, a hand gripped his shoulder.

Arya flinched and turned, eyes widening as he took in the stranger standing on the riverbank.

Sunlight fell over the deep-set lines and scars etched across the man's weathered face. Gray hair spilled down to his shoulders, framing a beard streaked with white. A bow rested on his back, and he leaned on a sturdy cane. But it was the stranger's eyes that caught Arya off guard—clouded, sightless.

“Who... who are you?” Arya noted the three silver *kadas* on his wrist—ornaments of a shura. His tanned skin, the peculiar lilt in his voice, and the ocher tone of his garment all hinted at someone from Svahi.

“An acquaintance of your mother,” the stranger's voice was low and urgent. “She sent me to bring you home.”

Arya's heart raced. What did his mother have to do with a blind shura from Svahi? “Did... did something happen?”

The man's face darkened. “Adhya isn't well,” he said bluntly. “But that's not the worst of it. Your village panchayat has taken her captive.”

॥ तुरङ्ग ठी रिरु ॥



Night had fallen and the moon had risen. Shadows clung to the dense foliage fringing Jalagam. Silvery shafts penetrated through, falling upon a straw canoe that drifted down the small rivulet.

The paddles rose and fell with barely a splash, steering the sleek vessel underneath the low-hanging boughs. It skirted the palisade wall, making its way toward the gap in the rotten logs.

Life wasn't easy within the village's confines. Harsh woods surrounded the settlement. Few travelers came—a handful of merchants, hunters, and tantriks. The will of the sarpanch and his panchayat was the law.

It didn't help that most of the villagers were irrational in their devotion to the divinities, feeding on the sarpanch's lies. He twisted the edicts of Ekaśāstram to his own benefit—especially if it helped him blame his own failures on the

villagers. Every time something unfavorable happened, he would proclaim it as a curse brought upon them by their sins.

The sarpanch and his panchayat had but one solution for this—narmedha, a blood sacrifice to the divinities.

Every now and then, a wandering company of soldiers commissioned by Zamindar Balakarta from the nearby town of Beltola passed through the village. They were responsible for upholding the edicts in villages surrounding the town, but the sarpanch and his panchayat believed in taking care of Jalagam's matters internally.

Anyone who dared question or stand up to the panchayat always found themselves being branded a heretic and punished in the presence of cheering villagers. This time, they had chosen Adhya Kalash as the next victim for the narmedha.

The villagers knew her as the fruit-selling widow living by the village's only ashvattha tree with her thirteen-year-old daughter. The sarpanch had convinced most of them that she was also a heretic cursed by the divinities. Some had been hesitant to believe him, but it didn't matter. His goons would

take care of the very few that dared show any dissent. They'd serve as an example for the others.

An amavasya ago, the sarpanch had made a move on her after the monthly assembly, only to be given the cold shoulder. Since then, he had been waiting for a good excuse. He didn't want her talking to his suspicious wife or the other villagers. It wouldn't be good for his reputation. A man from the vanija varna trying to lay with an akula woman—it was forbidden by the Ekaśastram edicts.

Not to mention the humiliation. No matter how beautiful, how could an akula woman reject a betterborn like him? She would learn her lesson.

When the news of Adhya's strange ailment had reached him, the sarpanch was elated. He knew almost everyone would believe him now. They saw it with their own eyes, the terrifying illness that made her skin look like scorched bark. He could do away with her—like everyone else who had shown him disrespect.

When his goons dragged her from her house, no one protested. The naramedha was to take place on purnima, and the sarpanch was waiting eagerly.

The night of the full moon had finally come. Only a few hours remained. Adhya's only hope was her fifteen-year-old son and the blind shura rowing down the small rivulet in the canoe.

I'm coming, Amma.

Arya clutched the *dhāranapana*, a silver coin, strung to the string around his neck. His mother had given it to him before sending him to the gurukula, for his expenses. He had kept it safe, buried between stones under the straw in the barn, where no one could find it. Before leaving, he had put it on the string around his neck.

It wasn't the only keepsake he bore on him.

Bhumika had given him her *mriddika* kundalas. "For good fortune on your journey," she had said. "Return them when you come back to the gurukula."

He had refused, but she had insisted—almost desperately. He'd covered the *kundalas* with dirt, for they were

too valuable to be found on a mere akula like him. He'd be accused of stealing them. It was a wonder Bhumika had entrusted him with something so precious.

“Are you ready, boy?” Vrishiketu retrieved the paddle, letting the small vessel drift along the stream. The old shura might've been blind, but he was aware of his surroundings. His extreme sense of hearing compensated for his lack of sight.

“I... I can do it.” Arya steeled his nerves.

“You better.” Vrishiketu jumped onto the grass-choked bank as the canoe's nose touched land. The etchings and carvings of the longbow on his back gleamed in the moonlight. “I'll most likely find her by the mandir. That's what your sister's last letter said. Wait for me at the house. Do as I tell you, nothing more.”

“Will you be able to find the way?”

“If your description of the village was accurate, then I will find the way.”

Arya watched him direct his soundless steps toward the gates.

Vrishiketu had barely spoken during the three days it had taken to reach the village. The only new piece of information he had gleaned was that the blind shura had once been like a father to Adhya—long before she had Arya.

He couldn't fathom how that could be true. They belonged to different varnas and different domains. He'd tried to ask for more details, but the blind shura had only replied, "That is all you need to know, boy."

Arya hadn't pressed him further. His worry for his mother's safety loomed larger than his curiosity. Right now, his only priority was rescuing her from the panchayat and getting his family out of the village.

He followed the small rivulet, carefully picking his way through the matted underbrush, past the opening in the palisade wall that served to keep out the wild animals.

He waded into the shallows. The currents slithered past his ankle like serpents. The long grass grazed his bare skin as he crept across the bank toward the sparsely spaced mud-and-brick huts.

The broad streets between them were deserted and barely illuminated by the lanterns peeking through the half-closed windows. Wisps of smoke rose from the chimneys, filling the air with a woody smell.

Washing stones lined the bank. He slunk past them into the shadows behind a small hut. Most of the villagers would be fast asleep at this time.

Arya's wary stride cost him a better part of an hour to reach his house, located halfway across the village. Hunger clawed at him as he scrambled through the streets and alleyways, but he it paid no heed. He ignored the barking dogs and the peeking villagers, leaping over ditch and gutter until the familiar ashvattha tree came into view.

The grass-thatched hut built by his mother sat enclosed by a low mud wall, shaded by the leafy boughs of the sacred tree. A cow tethered to a buried hook in the yard flapped its ears, fixing its eyes on Arya as he scanned the surrounding houses from the wall's shadow.

There was no discernible movement behind the windows. He soundlessly slipped through the bamboo-woven

gate and crept to the front door. It was chained and padlocked. But there was pale light seeping through the window seams.

He knocked, hoping... “Amma? Adhira?”

The sound of muffled footsteps fell into his ears.

“Brata?” It was his sister’s voice. “Is that you?”

Arya exhaled in relief. “Are you alright?”

“I... I’m fine.” She sniffled. “They... They took Amma. Is Sriman Vrishiketu with you?”

“He went to the mandir to get her.”

“No...” Adhira’s voice was full of dread. “She’s not at the mandir.”

Trepidation crept into his heart “Where is she then?”

“They took her to the sarpanch’s bungalow.” She sobbed, drawing shuddering breaths. “I tried to stop them, but they locked me in.”

Arya’s palm trembled on the door. He punched the wood and cursed, wincing at the blast of pain.

“Wait, I’ll get you out.”

He rushed into the yard and picked up a rock. He hammered it against the padlock, but it barely made a dent in the iron. He rammed it again, only for the rock to shatter.

He swallowed his frustration and ran to the small shed beside the ashvattha tree. He slipped over the drying coconuts in his hurry to find something to break the padlock. His eyes fell on a pickax lying beneath the sickles hanging on the wall.

He grabbed the tool and rushed back to the house.
“Stand back, Adhira.”

Arya lifted the heavy pickax and brought it down with all the force he could muster. It missed the padlock and slid into the gap between the bolt and the door. The weakened wood splintered at the force. The padlock and the chains fell at his feet.

He tossed aside the pickaxe and yanked open the door.

“Brata!” She rushed into his arms, weeping uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” He held her, tears welling in his eyes. It had been five years. She had grown. Her baby face had become sharper, prettier.

“I didn’t know what to do,” she murmured into his chest. “I was so scared.”

They went inside.

A lantern hung on the wall, casting its light on a rickety table and an overturned bench. He sat on the bed near the window. His mother’s bed. He clutched the covers, inhaling the fragrance of flowers and fruits. It was her smell. He closed his eyes and let the old memories wash over him.

He remembered waiting for her to return from the village bazaar in the evening. He and his sister would be busy building miniature houses with clay. She used to bring them sweets and ginger-infused sugarcane juice.

Arya didn’t know how long he sat there, letting his tears get absorbed by the cotton sheet. He didn’t even realize when his sister sat beside him and put her head on his shoulder.

He wanted his mother back.

“What are we going to do, Brata?”

Arya strengthened his resolve.

Vrishiketu had told him to wait here no matter what happened, but there wasn't much time until midnight. He couldn't wait for him, not while his mother was in danger.

It was up to him. He would go to the sarpanch's house and free her himself. If he waited here as the blind shura had asked, it would be too late. "We'll get her out of there."

He told her to get a small handsaw and a hatchet from the shed. He picked a sharp sickle from the kitchen, if they needed to protect themselves.

"Ready?"

Adhira brushed her eyes, wearing a determined expression. "I'm ready."

"Let's go."

The sarpanch lived in the village's only bungalow, almost half a mile north in the heart of Jalagam. The structure sat on the banks of the great pond, shadowed by coconut palms and surrounded by a massive brick wall. He'd had it built by masons and artisans from Beltola.

He had increased the village tax to a third of the earnings instead of the usual fifth when building it. He had

told them it was the will of the divinities. He had claimed the money would go to the shura soldiers protecting the domain of Varuni.

The villagers were under the impression that the neighboring domain of Svahi would invade their home any day now.

“Wait,” Arya whispered as they approached an ornate gate set into the looming wall. The street in front of the sarpanch’s bungalow was deserted.

He peered through the iron wrought vines and flowers. A tall, buff figure paced near the storehouse outside the bungalow. It was Dushyasa, the sarpanch’s tax collector. The villagers despised him, and so did Arya.

Dushyasa was an akula like him. He had come to the village a beggarly man, asking for work. He had almost killed the gatekeeper when he had tried to turn him back. The sarpanch had taken him in and nurtured him to become one of his most loyal goons.

His devotion to his master was unquestionable.

“What should we do?” Adhira whispered. “There could be others.”

Their mother had to be in the storehouse. The sarpanch would never take an akula into his house. His hand felt the hatchet at his waist. He had to try freeing her without confrontation. Besides, he would be like a calf challenging a bull elephant if he faced Dushyasa.

His gaze drifted behind the storehouse. A stack of firewood sat against the wall, covered by a small canopy. The eaves were within reach.

“I thought of something,” he whispered to his sister. “Can you distract him?”

Adhira nodded, tightening her grip on the sickle.

“From afar,” he warned her. “Don’t let him recognize you. Run away and hide if he sees you.”

“Leave it to me, Brata.” Adhira crept along the wall and disappeared into the underbrush on the bank.

He waited several spans, until he heard an alarmed outburst from Dushyasa’s lips. The henchman cursed, massaging the back of his head. He hefted his club, grabbed a

lantern from the wall, and strode toward the second gate that led to the pond.

Arya quickly scaled the main gate and soundlessly crept to the storehouse. It was thrice as big as their hut. It was probably where the sarpanch kept all the grains from taxes and donations he collected from the villagers.

The roof was higher up than he had thought. But it did not deter him. He deftly clambered over the stacked firewood and leaped, grabbing the beam underneath the eaves. He swung his feet over the shingles and climbed onto the roof.

Arya's gaze darted to the pond. Dushyasa was searching the bushes with his lantern.

Be safe, Adhira.

He started from one side of the roof, removing a shingle over each section of the storehouse. The first section was piled high with sacks of grain and the second section was filled with coconuts. He found what he was looking for in the third section.

A thin figure curled under dirty sheets, cast in the dim light of the lantern on the wall. It had to be his mother.

“Amma...”

She wasn't moving.

Arya hastily removed the other shingles, baring the sleek beams supporting them. He took out the handsaw and swiftly cut through the wood. He yanked off the pieces and placed them aside on the roof. He continued the process until there was enough space for him to squeeze through.

He turned his eyes to the pond. There was no sign of Dushyasa. His sister must've led him farther away. Dense as he was, the henchman would realize the ploy soon enough.

Arya used one of the sturdier beams to lower himself. He hung for a moment and let go, landing softly on the floor. It was easier than leaping down from a high bough of a tree at the gurukula.

One glance revealed the dank chamber. There was straw everywhere and a slop bucket in the corner. A rotting stench hung in the air.

He rushed to his mother. “Amma...”

She stirred. The sheet shifted to reveal skin like scorched bark. Fiery veins jutted across her face and forked

down her neck and arms like minute streams of flame. Her chest rose and fell with each ragged breath. Her eyes had sunk deep into the dark pits surrounded by blackened skin. The pupils were grayer than brown.

The sight jolted his heart, but he resisted the urge to shrink back.

“A... Arya?” her voice shook.

“Amma...”

He moved closer, letting her frail fingers trace his face. His eyes burned.

“You... you came?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” He blinked, unable to keep the tears from flowing. “I didn’t know you were ill.”

She didn’t seem to hear his words. Her hand moved over his shoulders and arms. “You’ve become tall and strong. You must’ve trained hard.”

Arya’s throat went dry, and a sour taste filled his mouth. He diverted his gaze, unable to reply. How could he tell her that he hadn’t been accepted as a shikshu by the great Guru Vyānputra? How could he tell her that he was no more

than a dāsa, a servant at the gurukula? A mixture of grief, shame, and resentment swirled in his chest.

“It... it’s not safe, Amma.” He rose to his feet and brushed his cheeks. “I need to get you out of here.”

He first examined the door. It was too sturdy. Even if he tried to break it with the hatchet, it would draw attention. He walked over to the window. He unlatched it and peered through the thick wooden rungs. There was no movement in the shrub-filled space behind the storehouse.

Arya closed the window. He had to cut through the rungs without drawing Dushyasa’s attention. It was the only way for him to get his mother out of here.

“Give me some time, Amma.”

He took out his handsaw and began cutting through them one by one. The sound seemed loud in the nightly silence. He took off his *uttariya* and draped it over the tool, trying to muffle the sound as much as he could.

He sawed through the last rung and gently placed it on the ground. He had barely pushed open the window when he heard it—the snap of a lock behind him.

The door slammed open.

Standing on the threshold was Dushyasa, flanked by two others. The henchman glared at him, hefting his club.

“Who’re you, boy?”

For a heartbeat, Arya remained still as a stone. A stab of panic went through him, and he forgot everything he had learned at the gurukula.

Was this not the reason he’d been training in secret, so he could protect his family?!

Arya’s fists clenched. If he died, so be it. It would be a honorable death. “I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Is that so? Bring the girl,” Dushyasa growled at his companion. “She’s gotta be from the same brood.”

One of them dragged in Adhira and pushed her on the ground before him. She was barely conscious. Blood trickled from the side of her lips. Her blackened eyelids were half closed.

His heart quaked at the sight and his insides boiled. Rage welled in him, sending him hurtling at the hulking man, all his practiced restraint forgotten.

It was his fault. He shouldn't have let her out of his sight. He shouldn't have sent her to distract the henchman.

If something had happened to her-

Dushyasa effortlessly knocked him aside with a strike of his bare palm. He tasted iron. He spat the blood and struggled to his feet. His fingers were wrapped around the hatchet's handle, but the henchman was quicker. He hefted his club and swung, forcing Arya to roll away.

He had practiced for countless moons, yet as he faced his opponent, all that he had memorized slipped through his grasp. The henchman was countering his every move without even trying.

"Argh!" A scream tore from his lips as he threw himself at the henchman again, brandishing his hatchet. The back of Dushyasa's hand caught an inexperienced Arya across the temple and sent him toppling to the ground. His head spun. He tried to stand but stumbled and fell.

"Go, tell master," Dushyasa snapped at his lackeys. "Get rid of 'em. Make it look like they did it themselves, outta grief or somethin'."

One of the men walked past Arya to his mother, while the other lifted his knife to slit his sister's throat. He screamed at them from the ground, empty threats pouring out of his mouth.

He might as well have been a croaking frog.

They raised their blades-

Zzzt... thuck!

Arya's eyes widened in shock as Dushyasa's two companions collapsed to the ground, wooden shafts protruding from their backs.

Adhira let out a shriek of fright, cowering against the wall. An enraged cry escaped Dushyasa's lips. He turned his gaze to Arya and lunged, but before he could reach him, another arrow found its mark in the back of the henchman's head.

His limp form crumpled to the ground.

Arya sat there for several moments, staring at the fallen goon, until his sister's gasps fell into his ears.

He stumbled to his feet and ran to her, taking her into his arms. Terrified sobs rocked through her spine. "I'm sorry,"

he whispered. "It's going to be alright. You're safe. Amma is safe."

"I told you to wait for me, boy!" An enraged Vrishiketu appeared at the doorway, a strung longbow in his hand. "Look at what you've done."

"I... I had to save her."

"How far did you succeed?" the old man growled. "Your impatience and impetuosity nearly killed them both. All you have learned will be of no use if you can't control your impulses, boy!"

"I..." Arya lowered his head, stung by his words. "I didn't know if you'd make it in time."

The blind shura huffed in annoyance. "It will be midnight soon. We need to leave. Go, get your sister out of here!"

"Here!" One of the young akulas Vrishiketu had brought with him gestured from the gates. They had wrapped their *uttariyas* around their foreheads and mouths, hiding their faces. "Quickly."

Arya nodded. He lifted Adhira in his arms and carried her to the waiting bullock cart.

Vrishiketu brought Adhya from the storehouse. He placed her gently on the cart. “Let’s go!”

The lamps were being lit in the bungalow. Dark silhouettes appeared at the windows and doorways. They were halfway down the road when the shouts reached their ears.

“Hyah!” The driver snapped his whip, forcing the bulls to break into a trot. The cart trundled down the uneven road toward the village gate, steadily gaining speed.

Arya held his mother’s hand, trying to subdue his guilt and shame. His gaze drifted to his sister. She wasn’t crying anymore.

“I’m sorry, Adhira,” he whispered.

“It’s not your fault, Brata,” she replied, clutching his arm. “It was—”

A loud explosion shook the air as the sarpanch’s storehouse burst into flames. Doors and windows began slamming open all along the street as villagers rushed out of their huts and peered out of their hovels.

“Look!”

Arya followed his sister’s panicked gaze. Four riders emerged from the side streets, two from each side, thundering after them. The brown horses, ears erect and tail tufts raised, galloped fast behind them. The goons on the saddles brandished long machetes, drawing closer to their cart.

“Keep going,” Vrishiketu said, stringing his longbow and aiming it horizontally. He drew four arrows from the quiver and nocked them in one fluid motion, head cocked as he listened intently with his practiced ears.

The riders were almost upon them when he turned and loosened his fingers. The bolts zipped past Arya, nicking all four horses above their forelegs. The stallions shrieked in alarm and reared, throwing off their pursuers. One horse veered off into an adjoining street, leaving its rider in the gutter.

Arya gaped, wide-eyed. How could the blind shura shoot like that? He could barely aim a single arrow with such accuracy, let alone four. The only one he knew who could do that was Guru Vyānputra.

The driver snapped his whip. “Hyah!”

The cart rounded a corner and entered the main street, rumbling toward the gates. The palisade wall wasn't far away. It loomed beyond a cluster of huts, obscured by a thin veil of mist.

"The gates are closed." The cart driver cast a furtive glance at the old man. "What should we do."

"Keep going," Vrishiketu repeated. "The gatekeepers have been taken care of."

Arya trusted his words, but he couldn't help feeling anxious as they neared the wall. The lines on his brow deepened.

Adhira's fingers tightened on his arm, turning his skin blue.

"Look!" She pointed. "There's someone at the gates."

He glimpsed shadows slip into the gatehouse. Probably men from the local watering hole, hired by Vrishiketu with coin enough to cover their sura for two moons.

They were only a few strides away when the great log gates groaned and parted, letting them out of the village's confines.

“Brace yourselves!” The driver cracked his whip, forcing the bulls to accelerate their pace. “The sarpanch will surely send more riders after us.”

Arya grabbed his mother’s hand and held on to her as the cart lurched and rocked, taking them away from Jalagam.

॥ जीमि ठि थुनदेर ॥



Arya sat on the porch, watching dark clouds approach from the west. The misty breeze washed across his face, carrying the scent of wet soil and vegetation. Lightning flashed in the blackened skies beyond the encroaching trees. Rain began to fall, pattering on the roof. The roar of thunder rattled the shingles.

They had found refuge in an outlying two-story cottage hidden in the woods hemming the western coast. It belonged to Vrishiketu's acquaintance, a renegade he had helped escape from the Imperium of Avona.

Mona de Sienna had once been a healer in the Avonian Revolutionary Army, before it was vanquished by the imperial forces and disbanded. She hadn't hesitated a moment to take them in after the old man had told her of their plight.

"Something weighing on your mind, boy?"

Arya looked up as the blind shura walked out of the door and sat down on the *charpai*, placing his cane on the wall. “I’m grateful, Sriman Vrishiketu,” he murmured. “I’d have lost them if not for you.”

“Hmm.”

The old man hadn’t left his mother’s side, except for brief intervals. She treated him like her own father. It was strange, considering how most betterborn held them in contempt. There was certainly a past Arya wasn’t aware of.

The blind shura took out his chillum and tamped down some crushed herbs into the stone-carved pipe. He lit it using a tinderbox. “Is there a reason you’re not there with her? She’s been asking for you.”

The pungent smell prickled Arya’s nose.

His eyes followed the trees swaying in the rain. He had spent the night with her in the room upstairs, tears flowing tirelessly as he watched her sleep, heavy breaths rattling through her chest. He hadn’t stayed for her to wake up. “I... I don’t know if I can tell her the truth... me being a mere dāsa at the gurukula. She thinks I’m a shikshu...”

“You shouldn’t be ashamed of life’s circumstance, boy.”
Vrishiketu’s unseeing eyes reflected the lightning in the sky.
“There have been many great warriors in the past who weren’t
born a divinity or a shura, yet they have managed to ink their
name into history.”

He dipped his chin. “I know, but... I don’t want to
disappoint her.”

Vrishiketu took a drag and exhaled, letting the smoke
drift into the rain. “You’d rather squander whatever little time
you have left with her feeling sorry for yourself?”

Arya’s face burned. But before he could respond, the
door creaked open behind them. Mona came out with a kettle
of boiling tea and two stone cups. She placed it on the charpai
beside the old man.

“Drink while it’s still hot, you two.”

Arya inclined his head. “Thank you, Srimati Mona.”

She gave him a kind smile.

The Avonian renegade was barely three decades of age.
Long braided hair, darker than raven’s feathers, framed a lovely
face. Her slight figure was garbed in a long piece of clothing

that extended from her shoulders to ankles, with long sleeves that reached her wrists. He hadn't seen such a garment before.

Vrishiketu waited until she went back in before taking another puff. He let it drift out into the rain.

“You have something to say, boy?”

“What wrong did she do to suffer like this?” Arya tried to control the stinging in his eyes. “Is it truly the divinities who caused this? Why do they hate us so? Is it because we're akula?”

“I don't think they're the cause of what your mother is going through.” Vrishiketu's brow furrowed as he let the smoke rise into the air. “At least, not directly.”

Arya glared at the dark skies, watching the lightning lance through the clouds. For years, he had trained so he would be able to protect his family, so he could keep them safe. Yet, he now found himself helpless.

“I won't let her die,” he murmured, clenching his fists as tears rolled down his cheeks. “I'll take her to a healer somewhere. There has to be someone who can cure her.”

“She's in no condition to go anywhere, boy.”

“What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch her die?!”

Vrishiketu took another puff and exhaled calmly. “I’ve heard of these symptoms before, but never seen them myself. There was a scholar who was researching on them.”

“Will he know what has happened to her?”

“If anyone knows, it has to be him.”

Hope kindled in his chest. “You know where he can be found?”

“I have an inkling where he might be. I’ll send a pigeon, make sure he’s still there.”

“Let me go to him,” Arya begged. “I’ll try to convince him. I’ll do anything.”

“I doubt he’ll talk to an akula.” Vrishiketu turned his gaze to the clouds. “I’ll go.”

“Take me with you.”

“You need to stay here and look after her.”

Arya’s fists clenched. “If you don’t take me with you, I’ll search for the cure on my own. I won’t sit here and watch her suffer.”

Vrishiketu frowned at him. “If you don’t learn how to control your impulse, boy, it will be the death of you someday.”

Arya looked at the tea in his cup. He didn’t feel like drinking it. He put it aside, glaring at the rain.

The blind shura exhaled, turning his gaze to the clouds. “Mona says she can impede the progression with whatever knowledge of medicine she possesses. Even then, we won’t have more than six moons.”

Arya rose to his feet. “Does that mean you’ll take me with you?”

“You’ll do as I say till we find a healer capable of curing her condition. Is that understood?”

Arya bowed his head. “I promise, Sriman Vrishiketu.”

The blind shura placed his cup on the *charpai* beside him. “If you have to say your goodbyes, say them now. We’re leaving at dawn. Once we set out on this quest, there’s no turning back. Not till we find a healer or a cure.”

Arya cast aside all reservations and misgivings from his mind. He didn’t want to leave his mother’s side, but what if

Vrishiketu couldn't find the cure? He had to make sure she was going to be safe.

He climbed the steps to her bedchamber, dismissing the possibility that this might be the last time he would get to see her. He would definitely see her again, and when he did, she would be cured.

He stood at the doorway for a moment, afraid to come in and see her in a condition worse than the day before.

Yet, he forced himself to enter.

She was curled in the sheets. Despite the scorched skin, she was beautiful as always... and peaceful.

Adhira looked up at him. "Amma's asleep, Brata. Did you need something?"

Her wounds and bruises had healed, although the village henchmen still haunted her dreams. Her screams had woken him up the night before on the cart, and he had held her tight, whispering courage into her ears.

Ever since they had reached Mona's cottage at the break of dawn, she hadn't left their mother's side. She had

stayed with her and fed her, cleaned her chamber pots, and bathed her.

Arya walked to the bed, watching his mother's form rise and fall with ragged breaths. "I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Adhira rose, hurt manifesting on her face. "You promised you wouldn't leave me again."

"I... I'm going to find a way to save her." His voice broke with sudden emotion. "I'll come back."

"Then I'm coming with you." She walked around the bed to his side. "We'll do it together."

"No... you can't." He didn't want to put her life in danger again.

"Why?" Her anguished look pierced his heart. "She's my mother too!"

Arya averted his gaze. "If I don't come back... she won't have anyone beside her."

"Why do you have to leave always...?" Adhira swallowed, tears welling in her eyes. She wrapped her arms around him and sobbed onto his chest.

Arya remembered the last time they had parted. His mother had told Adhira she would attend the gurukula after him. He would never let her go through what he had gone through.

Never!

Arya patted her hair, trying to contain his anguish. “When I return, I’ll take you both away from here. I’ll take you to Saha. You’ll be happy there. We don’t have to live like this, treated like dirt.”

“You promise?” She looked up into his eyes.

He nodded. “I promise.”

“Arya...” His mother stirred on the bed.

He pulled back from his sister and knelt down beside the bed. “I’m here, Amma.”

Adhya turned her head. For a moment, she didn’t seem to recognize him. “Putra...?”

He took his mother’s limp hand. It was so frail and thin, barely any strength left in it. “Are you feeling well, Amma?”

“I... I don’t remember the last time I was... well.”

The door opened behind them.

Mona walked in with a clay bowl containing a dark, pungent liquid. “I brought you something, Adhya.” She walked to his mother and lifted her head. “Drink... it will help you sleep.”

“Hmm...” His mother obliged, weakly sipping the medicine.

She gasped.

“Easy now,” Mona warned. “It’ll take effect.”

Her body seized and arched, and fingers dug into the sheets. An agonizing cry parted her lips before she fell back and lay still on the bed.

“It’s going to be fine.” Mona pulled the sheets over her. “Sleep now. You can talk to them all you want when you’re feeling better.”

Adhya struggled to part her drooping eyelids. “Arya...”

“Let her get some rest, you two.” Mona picked up the bowl from the bedside table. “I will set up a mattress for you here, Adhira. Arya can share the room downstairs with Vrishiketu.”

He inclined his head. "I'm grateful for everything, Srimati Mona. For letting us stay here and looking after Amma."

"It's the least I can do for Vrishiketu." Mona smiled. "I owe my life to him." She patted his shoulder and left.

Arya turned to his mother. He kissed her darkened brow, unable to control the tears welling in his eyes. There was still warmth in her skin. "Wait for me, Amma," he whispered, filled with a terrible sense of foreboding. "I'll be back before you know it."

"I'll take care of her till then," Adhira murmured, not meeting his gaze. She kept her eyes on the boughs swaying outside the window. "Come back to us soon."

The skies thundered, rattling the windows.

"I will."

॥ दत्तदण्डे र्ठे पुत्रे ॥



Arya awoke in the woods, leagues away from Mona's cottage, lying on a straw mat softened by the grass beneath. The air was thick with the earthy smell of dew, and the rustle of leaves drifted down from the branches above.

The old man was already awake, eating his morning stew by the fire. He extended a bowl. "Eat something. It's going to be a long day of walking."

Arya shook his head, murmuring an excuse. "I'll find something in the woods, Srīman Vṛshiketu."

At the gurukula, animals had been his closest companions, more so than humans. He wouldn't be able to look them in the eyes if he ate meat.

Vṛshiketu studied him for a moment, then reached for the bamboo bow beside him. "Then take this. You'll need more than a blunt hatchet to keep away the vanavasis."

“But I’m an akula...”

“I know you can use a bow, boy,” he said, passing him a makeshift quiver with a few arrows. “You don’t have to pretend otherwise with me.”

Arya hesitated but took the weapon. He slung the bow over his shoulder and fastened the quiver to his waist. He yanked his hatchet from where it was lodged in the nearby trunk and set off into the trees.

The first light of dawn made the dew-covered leaves glisten along his path as he followed a babbling stream downhill, leaping agilely over smooth stones.

A set of footprints along the bank caught his eyes—likely vanavasis. They didn’t look recent. He continued, stopping at a secluded bend in the stream where he took a quick, bracing bath in the icy water.

He sat on the bank when he was done, eyes closed and recited his morning prayers. He whispered his mother’s secret mantra into the still air. He didn’t expect his father to respond, so he wasn’t disappointed. He performed a few hatha yoga forms before returning to the camp.

On his way back, Arya spotted clusters of mushrooms nestled in the damp soil. He carefully selected the edible ones and knotted them in his *uttariya*. Wild berries appeared here and there on the path. He ate his fill, saving a handful for later.

When he returned to camp, Vrishiketu was already preparing for departure. Arya surveyed the land from the outcrop's edge—a patchwork of villages lay in the lowlands, reaching out toward a narrow strip of sand where a small harbor stood waiting.

Their destination—the Boatmaster's Cove.

As the sun climbed higher, they began their descent down the rocky plateau. Shadows thickened under the young trees that grew close together on the slope, swallowing any light that tried to reach the forest floor.

It was a challenging descent, the ground cluttered with roots and jagged stones.

“Have you traveled much?” Arya ventured, eyeing the rough path beneath his feet.

“Not as much as some, but more than most.”

“Have you ever been to Saha?”

“Hmm, once or twice.” Vrishiketu lit his chillum, packing it with herbs from his pouch as he walked.

“What’s it like?”

“It’s a land like any other, with its own ups and downs.”

“Is it true anyone can be what they want?” Arya asked, hope flickering in his voice. “Even akulas?”

“To an extent,” Vrishiketu replied with a wry smile.

“Depending on the coin in your purse I suppose.”

Arya glanced down at the iron *kada* on his wrist. “They don’t wear ornaments like us?”

“They don’t,” Vrishiketu confirmed, blowing smoke into the air.

A faint smile touched his lips. Perhaps Bhumika had been right about Saha. He might even be able to become a great archer, like Guru Vyānputra... like Vrishiketu.

“Do many people go to Saha?”

Vrishiketu gave him a sidelong glance. “It’s not so simple, boy. The divinities forbid it. Even if one can somehow avoid the patrols along the border, there are spies and assassins in Saha, tasked to kill deserters from Panchasthavi.”

Arya swallowed. Saha wouldn't be the easy escape he had thought it to be.

"Where else have you been? Have you been to the north, beyond the Mirazi desert lands?" Bhumika had told him about the northern reaches of the continent, which seemed very different from the dominion of Panchasthavi and the kingdom of Saha. "Is it true that the deserts are as white as milk?"

"They are, in a way," Vrishiketu replied, his voice taking on a graver tone. "Beyond the Great Mountains lies a winter realm. Snow, not rain, falls from the sky, and the cold there would make even the chill of Panchasthavi's highest peaks seem gentle."

"Does anyone live there?" Arya asked, shivering slightly at the thought.

"Perhaps those born to it," Vrishiketu shrugged. "I wouldn't spend a single night north of the Great Mountains."

Arya fell silent, pondering the old man's words.

Bhumika had told him that everything south of those icy lands had once been a united territory before invaders had broken it apart. Somewhere in those northern reaches, the

remnants of an ancient empire still lay buried in frost and sand. He wondered if, one day, he might be able to travel to the northern lands and behold the lost wonders.

They plodded on.

It was almost midday when they stopped for lunch, before pressing through the rugged lowlands. The woods grew sparse, broken by sprawling farmlands. By nightfall, the distant glow of firelight hinted at denser civilization.

Arya slipped off his *kundalas*, knotting them carefully in his *uttariya*, as they approached the coastal settlement.

A cluster of rickety sarais lined either side of the busy, sand-trodden road. Tents and fire-pits peppered the glades beyond the town's edge, where travelers and villagers mingled in the torchlight.

"This is the Boatmaster's Cove?" Arya asked, peering at the lively, ramshackle scene.

Vrishiketu nodded. "A place of rest for those coming and going to Varunapat."

Horses picketed by the path whinnied as they passed, their breath misting in the evening chill. He heard a loud voice,

a divine preacher anointed by the divinities standing atop a weathered wooden platform near the dock's edge and addressing a group of adherents gathered around him.

Vendors' shouts mixed with the laughter and bargaining of travelers, while the aroma of street food—smoked fish, pickled prawns, *bhujia*, *handia*—permeated the air.

Arya's gaze lingered on a busy food stall, his mouth watering, when a bony hand seized his wrist.

He started. The hand belonged to a skeletal old man, hunched beneath a palm-leaf canopy, face painted in black and white colors. The *gyotishi's* eyes glinted with an unnerving intensity, hollow and deep. Trinkets dangled from his shelter, glimmering in the firelight. Smoke from a nearby fire-pit curled around Arya, filling his lungs with a heavy, intoxicating scent.

The *gyotishi's* parrot squawked from a perch overhead, its eyes as sharp as its voice. "Mr̥tyu! Mr̥tyu!"

The seer cackled, tossing a fistful of ashy powder into his fire-pit. Flames roared to life, licking toward Arya. "They

come, they come! Serpents from the shadows... bringing death with them.”

“Enough,” Vrishiketu growled, gripping Arya’s shoulder and steering him away. “Let’s go, boy!”

The old seer’s laughter faded as they moved through the crowd, but Arya couldn’t shake the feeling that those dark eyes still watched him.

Ahead, torches cast a warm orange glow over the waterfront, where a restless crowd gathered before the closed gates of the dockyard, arguing with the armed guards barring the way.

“The ferries aren’t here till morning,” came a soft voice from behind them. Arya turned to see a woman, perhaps his mother’s age, standing there with a boy clutching her hand. She wore silver jewelry that glinted in the torchlight, her wide, almond-shaped eyes studying him with kindness.

Vrishiketu narrowed his gaze. “Who are you?”

“I am Shuravathi, and this is my son, Muthuvara.” She gestured to the boy beside her, who held a pakora in one hand, looking up with a shy smile.

Vrishiketu gave her a slight nod. “Are we supposed to wait till tomorrow?”

“If you want to go to the capital.” Shuravathi shrugged. Then her face went blank for a moment. She blinked and said, “Come join us at our fire-pit, if you like. We’ve some food, and it’s safer together.”

To Arya’s surprise, Vrishiketu accepted. They followed her past the gates toward the forest’s edge, where groups of travelers had set up makeshift camps.

At Shuravathi’s fire, she introduced the others. Chandrani and Sulochana, two older women from Paniyadvīpa, and Narada, a wandering sage wrapped in simple *uttariya* and *antariya*, his belongings bound up beside him. He held a veena in his lap.

Arya settled next to Vrishiketu on the rough log, tucking his arm with the iron *kada* beneath his *uttariya*. Narada’s keen eyes seemed to notice.

“The world’s darkened and troubled enough to bring strangers together, it seems,” he said. “Here, at least, we share in the same light and warmth.”

They began with small talk, which soon turned into more somber topics. Chandrani and Sulochana spoke of their home, where conflict simmered, pitting village against town and town against city. “Paniyadvīpa feels less ours and more Avonian each day,” Chandrani sighed, pausing to chew her paan.

Sulochana’s voice was low with frustration. “They bribe the panchayats, buy our lands, pit our people against each other while their armies creep closer.” She looked toward the stars, a distant glimmer of hope in her gaze. “Perhaps eastward, we may find a new life, a patch of land where we’re free of their grasp.”

“So, what brings you this way, Sriman Vrishiketu?”

The old man glanced around the fire, shrugging. “Business in Varunapat, nothing of interest. And you?”

She hesitated, her gaze flickering. “My husband’s stationed at the Red Strait, keeping pirates at bay.” Her voice caught, layered with bitterness and longing. “Our home was taken. We’re going to join him there.”

As the night wore on, the stars glimmered, a soft canopy of light above the crackling flames. Vrishiketu turned to Narada, who sat quietly, watching them.

“What of you, Sriman Narada? What brings you here?”

The sage’s eyes twinkled. “Oh, I am but a wandering poet-sage, carrying tales from distant lands.”

Shuravathi’s eyes brightened. “A tale, Sriman Narada! Do tell us one. It’s been long since we’ve heard anything beyond grim news.”

The sage chuckled, a deep, rich sound that filled the air. “A tale, you say. Well, if the company insists, who am I to refuse?”

The others smiled, settling in more comfortably around the fire, eager to hear what exciting tale he would weave.

The fire flickered and danced, shadows playing on their faces. As the tension settled, Narada plucked the strings of his veena, its resonant tones rising into the air like ripples on a still pond.

“Very well, then. Let me play you the *kavya* suited for this occasion, The Fallen King.”

The notes formed a solemn prelude, weaving an atmosphere both somber and captivating. His voice, steady and melodious, joined the music:

*Long ago, beneath the boundless skies |
A king arose, with power his prize ||
Drunk on might, he forged his throne |
From the cries of the weak, their flesh and bone ||*

*By fear he ruled, by cruelty's hand |
A shadow cast across the land ||
While feasts of plenty graced his halls |
The people starved within his walls ||*

*The winds of sorrow sang their plea |
Yet he reveled in his tyranny ||
His wealth was wrought from pain and despair |
A kingdom thriving on silent prayer ||*

Yet time, the master, spares not a soul |

*Its silent march taking its toll ||
The king grew frail, his breath turned thin |
The call of death brought him within ||*

*His funeral blazed with gold and gem |
A garland of riches adorned him then ||
But the messengers came, with faces grim |
Their task was clear, to deal with him ||*

*They came like wraiths, with silent tread |
Bound to the god who governs the dead ||
With iron chains and an unyielding grasp |
They seized his soul in death's cold clasp ||*

The veena's melody deepened, its notes carrying an ominous weight as Narada's voice softened, like the rustle of leaves on a still night.

"Mind your words, Sriman Narada!" Chandrani hissed, pressing her hand to her mouth. "You speak of gods other than

the Divyakula. Such talk is blasphemous, not to mention dangerous!”

“And doesn’t the Ekaśastram say death is the end of existence?” Sulochana added, glancing warily around. “Aren’t tales that contradict the scripture forbidden?”

A tense silence fell over them as fearful glances darted toward the shadows beyond the fire’s glow. Shuravathi hugged her son close, her voice barely a whisper.

“You shouldn’t tell such stories where anyone could overhear.”

Vrishiketu raised a calming hand. “It’s just a tale,” he murmured. “I doubt anyone’s listening that closely.”

Narada inclined his head toward the blind shura in silent acknowledgment, his fingers deftly plucking the strings of his veena, weaving an ominous melody that took them back into the tale.

To the netherworlds, their path was drawn |

Where truth prevails and lies are gone ||

No crown nor treasure could shield his sin |

The judgment awaited deep within ||

A river flowed, both foul and red |

Fed by the blood of the lives he bled ||

Its currents swirled with agony's cries |

Echoing pain beneath storm-filled skies ||

Into its depths, they cast him down |

No throne, no scepter, no jeweled crown ||

For every curse, each deed of ill |

The river exacted its bitter will ||

The fire crackled louder, as if in response to the mounting tension in Narada's voice. His fingers danced over the veena, its tone shifting to mimic the torment of the tale.

Arya gulped, glancing around the shadows, hoping no one could hear him. A hush fell over the others, punctuated by the crackling fire. The river almost sounded worse than the divine punishment mentioned in the scripture.

Specters rose from the blood's embrace |
Forms of anguish, each a cursed face ||
They grasped, they clawed, they shrieked his name |
Monsters born of his sin and shame ||

The river boiled, it scorched, it tore |
Yet spared his life, to suffer more ||
Each gasp for breath, each desperate plea |
Was drowned by the tides of his own cruelty ||

Through endless torment, his soul did wail |
Bound to the river, confined to its trail ||
For every wrong, a price was paid |
And guilt's heavy chains around him laid ||

Narada's voice softened, the veena's melody becoming a mournful dirge, the tones echoing the despair of the tale.

Then came a whisper, soft and clear |
A voice within that he learned to hear ||

*Repentance rose, from pain's deep well |
A spark of light in the shadows of hell ||*

*The chains grew slack, the river stilled |
A path emerged where hope was instilled ||
Though freed from torment, his lesson stayed |
A mark on his soul by his actions made ||*

Narada let the final note hang in the air, its resonance fading into the quiet of the night. The group sat in silence, the weight of the tale pressing heavily upon them.

“Thus is the path of karma,” he said softly, “written not in stone, but in the souls of all beings.” With a faint smile, he looked at his audience, his eyes gleaming with wisdom.

“That is one grim tale,” Vrishiketu said, his unseeing eyes searching for the sage. “What do you wish to convey, Sriman Narada?”

“It is not the divinities you need to fear, but your own choices and actions,” Narada said in a solemn voice, his eyes meeting each of theirs. “Death is not the end.”

Sulochana and Chandrani shot to their feet, murmuring hurried excuses before slipping into the shadows. Arya understood—if anyone important heard Narada’s words, they could all be punished for blasphemy by the divinities.

“You’re no ordinary pundita, are you?” Vrishiketu chuckled. “Most of them never stop preaching that there are no other gods than the divinities... that there is no other world than this one.”

The sage smiled gently, his eyes lingering on Arya. “Change is coming. The end of this yuga may be closer than we think, and the old gods may yet return.”

Shuravathi gave a nervous chuckle. “Our only gods are the divinities of the Divyakula,” she said, louder than was necessary. “Perhaps we’ve had enough tales for tonight.” Narada’s laugh echoed softly, mixing with the distant voices that filled the night at Boatmaster’s Cove. The veena rested quietly in his lap as his gaze lingered on Arya, who, though shaken, could not help but feel a deep and unsettling premonition.

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