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1

The sea was calm that day, but it was a mischievous child putting on an innocent face. Popping out from the calm emerald waters were a cluster of little islands called Saptadweep. The islands were sparsely populated, with just over twelve thousand people who lived by fishing and cultivating paddy. Their homes consisted of simple thatched huts. Each island was lush green but in three variations: the lime-green shades of the paddy fields; the emerald-green of the panchavati forests; and the pine-green of the mangroves, where the land met the sea.

Rahul balanced himself carefully on his small fishing boat as he confidently tossed his flax-woven net into the water. Stepping on a jagged rock some years ago had caused a deep wound in his left leg. It meant that he always needed to place a greater burden on his right foot. Over the years, though, he had figured out ways of getting around this minor disability.

Rahul was around nineteen, with mocha-colour skin. His perfectly even teeth flashed white each time he smiled. His hair was shoulder-length and he had tied it into a ponytail, as most men in the region did. His body was bare, except for a dhoti tied high around his waist, like shorts. His feet were always bare, the soles hardened like leather.

It was a tough life, but the inhabitants of Saptadweep were content. They had few wants. As long as the sun warmed their backs, the rains watered their fields, the sea gave them fish and their modest homes gave them shelter, they were fine. In their view, happiness was not about having what one wanted, but wanting what one had. It was a simple formula that seemed to work for them.

Rahul pulled in his net and surveyed the catch. Nowadays there were enough fish in the sea—pomfret, singara, cat fish, mackerel, tuna, prawns and sardine. But he only took those that were needed and tossed the others back. Why waste? Most fishermen followed the same approach. It ensured that Mother Nature kept the oceans bountiful.

He used his oars to make his way to the southern island. Along the way, he passed the area known as Jaalishthal. It consisted of hundreds of iron-rich grids that popped out of the open sea. One always had to be extra careful while passing through here because the grids could damage the underside of the boat. But it was also bountiful in pickings because millions of fish had made Jaalishthal their home along with sponges, sea anemones, algae and other brightly coloured marine life.

He continued rowing, skipping middle island. Towards its southern tip was a structure that jutted out of the water at a forty-five degree angle, almost like a finger pointing towards the sky. Inhabitants called it Teekha Chokha owing to its pointed end. Under its jagged cap was some rusted junk that made strange noises when the winds became stronger. Rahul shuddered. He preferred avoiding the area whenever he could.

No one knew who had put those structures there or why. The locals of Saptadweep ignored them and went about their daily existence. In their world, getting from one island to another implied a boat ride of a few hours. Very few had seen all the islands in entirety. Rahul was one of those few. He had a fairly good understanding of the geography of the islands.

The area where his family lived was Dakshin Tapu, at the southernmost end of the cluster. If he rowed his boat northwards, he would pass two middle islands that lay to the east and west of his route. They were called Poorva Tapu and Paschim Tapu. Further north lay Upari Tapu and Uttar Tapu. Two fringe islands completed the cluster. Common to the isles was the fact that they were beautiful, idyllic even. But something sinister lay beneath the picturesque landscape. Rahul could never put his finger on it, but he felt a sense of foreboding under the surface of all that beauty.

He reached the dock and moored his boat. He then hauled his catch to the hut where his family lived, limping slightly as he moved. Outside their home was a stone block. His father was waiting, sharpened knife in hand. They would first select the fish required for their own consumption and then proceed with inspecting, washing, sorting, grading and butchering the

harvested fish. The non-edible portions would be removed on the block.

The butchered and cleaned fish would be sold and consumed by buyers the very same day. The fishermen of Saptadweep did not have any technology to preserve the catch other than drying, salting, pickling or smoking. None of those options worked for the islanders who needed fresh fish for their spicy curries.

Two hours later, the butchering was complete. Rahul began the process of clearing away the remains. That was when he noticed a shiny object amidst the debris of viscera, heads, tails and fins. He picked it up carefully from the bloody remains and stared at it. It was a pendant, the like of which he had never seen before. For one thing, it seemed to be made of gold. It also had very intricate engraving, not the sort that simple fisherfolk like him were used to. Crowning the centre of the pendant was a blue coloured stone held in place with finely crafted studs that resembled a left-facing swastika. He had seen variations of that symbol outside their local temple.

Rahul showed the pendant excitedly to his father. “Where did you get this?” asked the old man. “It was in the waste that I was about to throw away,” replied Rahul. His father turned the pendant over many times in his palm with a slightly worried expression on his face. *Why had the fabled pendant appeared in Rahul’s hands? What did it mean? Was it an omen of sorts?*

Rahul could see that his father was tense. It was evident that there was something on his mind. “Three children went missing in the last one week,” said the old man. “This is becoming a regular occurrence.” He shrugged. “I shouldn’t bother you with all this. Let’s just focus on today. Live in the present rather than worrying about the past and the future.” The worried father handed the pendant back to Rahul with a smile on his face. “You keep it, since you found it, son,” he said.

But inside, he was a troubled man. He knew the legend. *No one ever finds the pendant. It is the pendant that finds them.*

Pankaj looked into the distance. All that he could see were sand dunes. The sun beat down on him mercilessly as he walked towards Khoon Kot. No one knew why it was called by that name, but it was intimidating. The desert region that his tribe inhabited was known as Dheeli Reti. One needed to be tough to survive the harsh conditions.

The inhabitants of Dheeli Reti had one thing going for them. Near the broken stones of Khoon Kot lay a pool of water called Yama Sagar. The oasis allowed the inhabitants to grow wheat, dates, maize, corn, eggplant, beans, peppers, cotton and pumpkin. It wasn't much, but it was enough to take care of the eight thousand who lived in Dheeli Reti.

Pankaj reached the farm, took a drink of water from the lake and washed his face. He felt like jumping in to beat the summer heat, but he knew that his family would call him a slacker if he took time off. Every capable hand was needed in the fields. He trudged to the row of pumpkins that were being planted. His mother, a hardy, no-nonsense woman, immediately put him to work. In Dheeli Reti, you either worked for your food or you starved.

All of twenty, Pankaj was a muscular chap. Hard work ensured that he had a physique that attracted stares from the opposite sex. Pankaj was wheat-complexioned but the harsh desert sun had turned him into a creamy-chocolate colour. His muscles rippled under a film of sweat. On his body were three pieces of cloth—a full dhoti, a sash at his waist, and another cloth tied around his head like a turban. All were made of coarse, hand-spun cotton.

Pankaj used a trowel to dig a hole, carefully preserving the soil around it. The mud was precious. Unlike the barren sand that surrounded them, the earth of Yama Sagar was fertile. Life giving. He carefully placed the saplings in the hole and packed the mud around it. One done, hundreds to go.

He wiped the sweat off his brow and looked at Khoon Kot in the distance. No one lived there anymore, owing to the large cobras that now called it home, but it was rumoured that ghosts walked the ruins at night. They made strange sounds and could even convince innocent visitors to kill themselves.

There had been stories of disappearances, particularly of children.

Pankaj and his friends often hung out there at night if they wanted to be adventurous and spook one another with horror stories. But most nights they would walk over to the Gombaparat, which was a few miles away. It was an isolated area but the boys had fun climbing up the hill. Right at the top was a circular structure. They would take turns sitting on it and then allow themselves to slide down the smooth sand on pieces of tree bark.

Pankaj dug another hole close to the first. It had to be far enough to allow the plant to get its own share of nutrients but near enough to maximize the premium placed on the Yama Sagar fields. Just as he was about to place the next sapling, he saw something glint in the sunlight. He reached out tentatively to feel it. The surface was hard and shiny. He used his fingers to pull the object out of the earth. He gasped. It was an exquisite pendant.

He held it in his hands approvingly. It was fabricated in unblemished gold, with intricate engraving. At the centre of the pendant was a green coloured stone held in place by fine studs that were designed to look like four crooked arms. He had seen that symbol before, on the doors of residents. He looked around furtively. He was quite certain that no one had seen him find it. He quickly placed it in the sash around his dhoti and carried on with his planting work. It would be better to keep his mother out of the loop. She would tell his stepfather, who would then find creative ways to take it away from him.

Pankaj was smart. He had heard about pendants like this. His grandmother used to narrate tales about pendants which had special fantastical powers. She told him about the things they could do, and also about the havoc they could wreak if used wrongly. Pankaj had grown up imagining a pendant without ever seeing one.

Now that he had it in his possession, he wasn't about to let it go.

The furnace was smouldering hot. Each time Shalini used the bellows, the fire danced even higher. She sat on a rickety stool with her leather bellows pointed towards the kiln. Next to her, her uncle was hammering a piece of metal into submission. It was backbreaking and exhausting work, but someone needed to do it.

On this coastal settlement dotted with coconut trees, the main occupations, besides farming and fishing, were rope-weaving and ironwork. Everyone knew each other. There were only five thousand inhabitants in all, so that wasn't surprising.

Mudirasa's blacksmiths had always been famous. They were able to create agricultural implements, cooking pots and weapons from the reddish stones that could be found in the outskirts. Sometimes Shalini would go with her family to collect these rocks, which were rich in iron. They would gather them by hand and bring them back on wheelbarrows to the workshop.

There, the rocks would be heated on an open fire for several hours. Then they would be pulverized into fine gravel which would be loaded into a kiln made of clay. The kiln had one opening for ventilation and another at the bottom to expel molten slag. Once released, what was left inside the kiln was a lump of iron ready to be worked into everyday objects. Around five lumps of ore produced one lump of iron.

Her uncle stopped hammering and walked over to the kiln, gesturing for Shalini to stop feeding air via the bellows. He looked at the molten goo inside and released the slag. He nodded at his niece to take a break. She smiled gratefully. Stepping outside, she breathed in the fresh air and felt the gentle breeze on her face. She took a drink of water from the earthen pot outside. It tasted delicious. She splashed some water on her face and felt relieved to feel the soot escape it.

Shalini was a pretty girl, but also tough and hardy. The vision in her right eye had been affected by a flying ember some months ago, but the damage wasn't visible. She was always dressed in a simple saree tied in the *panchagacham* style so

that her legs and arms could remain entirely flexible. Her large, expressive eyes looked out intensely at the world, in contrast to her neat, shiny black hair that was always fashioned into an extra-long ponytail.

In the open yard that surrounded the workshop were piles of rocks that were brought in by teams that were often contracted for collection and transport. She sat down for moment, using one of the heaps as a backrest. She thought of how good it would feel to take the day off and have a dip in the ocean or walk on the sand. A gentle smile played on her lips as she daydreamed. Her right hand reached up to feel the pendant that she had discovered the previous evening.

Shalini was a curious sort, but her day left her with very little time to indulge her curiosity. On Mudirasa Beach lay a smooth black column of stone that the kids used to perform gymnastics on. The locals called it Karuppukal. Last evening, when she had been playing there, her hand had brushed against a metallic object near the column. She had picked it up and quietly run away with it so that she could look at it unobserved.

When she examined it in the palm of her hand, she realised that it was something that Shiva the storyteller often spoke about. In Mudirasa, the only entertainment available to its residents was a dip in the ocean, a drink of coconut water, a barefooted walk on the sand in the breeze, a puppet show, or a story by Shiva. Shiva was a burly man with very large teeth who could regale both kids and adults with his fascinating tales. One of these was about a magic pendant that could save the world. The kids always wondered why the world needed saving. They did not pick up on the ominous vibes beneath the surface.

Shalini had lost her parents at a very young age. One of the heaviest coconut trees had fallen on their hut during a cyclone. The tree had narrowly missed her. Alas, her parents had been crushed to death, and her aunt and uncle had taken her in. Although poor substitutes for real parents, they took good care of her and brought her up like one of their own. They were also protective of her. If she were ever late, they would gently

admonish her, telling her that several children had gone missing in recent times and she must be careful. Shalini felt that they worried about her quite unnecessarily.

Shalini fished out the pendant from the little pouch that was tucked at her waist. She ran her fingers gently over it. The delicate engravings felt smooth and at the very centre was a gemstone, fiery red in colour, held in place with metallic studs that were equally exquisite in their craftsmanship. The studs had been designed like a swastika in the opposite direction, very similar to the symbol outside the temple. Shalini wondered if there was a chant that accompanied it. Could she turn that beachside bully, Ananth, into a plodding turtle? Could she transform herself into a fairy? Could she rub the stone and have a genie appear?

Just as she was able to actually give it a try, she heard her uncle's voice calling her back inside. Break time was over. She hastily put away the pendant, stood up, and ran back to the workshop. "Yes, mama, I am coming," she said.

4

It had been raining incessantly in Kalisthal. It wasn't the rainy season yet, that usually took place between the third and seventh moons of the year. Everything was topsy-turvy these days. Aruna ran inside on hearing her mother's voice. She had been quite happy to get drenched outside with her friends. Her mother gasped as she saw her, water dripping down her thick and lustrous hair. "You will catch a terrible cold," she scolded. She set about towelling Aruna's hair vigorously, till the girl thought her head would fall off. "Change out of these wet clothes," said her mother.

Inside the small cottage, a beautiful scent lingered in the air. Aruna and her mother collected flowers, roots, spices and herbs and ground them into wonderful fragrances. It was a tiny business but it allowed mother and daughter to get by. Most of the women of Kalisthal picked up their favourite perfumes from them. Aruna's mother only chose the freshest of roses, jasmine, rajnigandha and raat ki rani for her concoctions. She would combine these with sandalwood, kewda, camphor, oil and spices to create heavenly aromas.

When she was little, Aruna had been curious about all the jars that sat on shelves along one wall of their little house. As she became older, her mother involved her in the manufacturing process. She would patiently explain to the little girl how massage oils could be given floral notes, how incense sticks could be made to burn a little longer, how herbs could be distilled to create intoxicating essences. Aruna had been a good learner. At seventeen, she knew the exact proportions and processes that went into most of the common fragrances. Whenever she was confused, her mother was at hand to guide her.

Kalisthal was inhabited by artistic people. In the settlement of five thousand, people grew up surrounded by singing, dancing, painting, sculpture and storytelling. The wise sages knew that Kalisthal had been special even in ancient times. Its people knew methods by which they could preserve and transmit knowledge, and this had made them the envy of many others. Alas, Sankat had changed all that. They prayed to Shakti that one day they would again be able to find, retrieve, store and transmit their ancient wisdom. They prayed that they would find their missing children.

At the heart of Kalisthal was a statue. It was of a beautiful girl with wings. No one knew who had sculpted it or what she represented. Nonetheless, she was beautiful, and most people thought she was a manifestation of Shakti. Aruna spent idle moments sitting and staring at the lady with wings. The people of Kalisthal called her Phereshta.

Aruna got into a fresh *aathpoure* garment while her mother quickly hung up the wet clothes to dry. That was when she noticed the pendant that Aruna had strung around her neck. “What is that?” she asked the girl. Aruna was nonplussed. “We had gone flower picking earlier today and I found it in the mud near a parijat plant. It was pretty so I picked it up and strung it. Ma, I promise that it does not belong to anyone else.”

Her mother smiled. She knew that Aruna was a good girl. She would not steal. But the pendant was unlike anything she had seen before. She felt a nagging sense of fear. The pendant was pure gold, with an exquisite white diamond set in the centre of

a left-pointing swastika. “You should have told me,” she said to Aruna. “Someone may have lost it and may be looking for it.” Aruna’s face fell. She knew that her mother was nudging her towards spreading the word that she had found a pendant. Then they would have to wait for someone to come forward and claim it.

Seeing Aruna’s crestfallen face, her mother reached out to hug her. “Don’t be upset,” she soothed the girl. “It’s yours to keep, given that it was buried in the earth. But in future, tell your mother about such things.” Aruna nodded vigorously, relieved that she could keep it.

Her mother took some boiling milk off the stove. She then added a spoon of honey and a pinch of turmeric to it. “Drink this,” she said. “It will prevent you from catching a nasty cold.” Aruna sat down on the earthen floor with her mother and sipped the hot milk from a tumbler.

“Let me tell you a story,” said her mother. “Once upon a time, a little princess lost a pendant in the forest. She did not realize that she had lost it until she reached the palace. Guards were sent out to find it, but by then a bird had picked it up. The bird flew to a distant land and dropped it on the window sill of a room in which sat a handsome prince. When he saw how exquisite the pendant was, he began to wonder how beautiful its owner would be. He searched the entire kingdom to find her.”

Aruna finished her milk and asked, “Then what happened?”

Her mother took the empty tumbler from her and said, “The prince found the princess. They fell in love, got married and lived happily ever after. So you see dear, a pendant is no ordinary object. It usually has a story. This one too must have a story attached to it. I’m sure, one day, we will find that story too.”

5

Inside the dungeons were flaming torches. The castle was located at an isolated spot deep in the jungles of Madhyabindu. Very few people even considered approaching it. Everyone knew that you would have to cross dense forests that were

inhabited by tigers and snakes to reach the forbidden place. This suited Sankatputra, the dark lord, just fine.

Sankatputra sat on a throne that was covered with animal and human skins, evidence of the numerous kills that he had personally been involved in. Around him stood terrifying female guards who covered their bodies in charcoal so they would be one with the night. Each guard wore a necklace of human bones and carried an oversized spear that could instantly pin a man to his death. Around their waists they wore animal skins, but they kept their torsos uncovered.

Sankatputra was a a hulk of a man. He wore a tiger's head as his crown and flowing robes that were woven from human hair. Around his neck was a necklace fashioned from the skin of a serpent. The malevolent expression on his face was permanent, even when he was pleased. Whenever he walked about, a group of drummers followed him, their drumbeats matching his footsteps.

Sankatputra's right-hand man was called Vibhooti. Sankatputra asked him, "What is the progress?" Vibhooti bowed before the dark lord and replied, "We have picked up around three hundred children till date. The process of training them has begun."

Sankatputra smiled wickedly. "Good," he said to Vibhooti. "The inhabitants of Chaaranga will not know what hit them. Brainwash these children into believing that their sacred duty is to kill their parents; teach them to be most comfortable with cruelty and depravity; train them to be lethal killers; educate them in the art of war and deception; make them greedy, possessive, jealous and fiery; but most importantly, teach them to be afraid of me!"

Vibhooti nodded. "The population of Chaaranga is rather small. Around twelve thousand in Saptadweep; eight thousand in Dheeli Reti; five thousand in Mudirasa; and another five thousand in Kalisthal. The disappearance of so many children has been noticed. Should we continue with the abductions?"

"All I need are a thousand children," replied Sankatputra. "Brainwashed, ruthlessly obedient and trained to perfection.

That will be sufficient to bring Chaaranga under my rightful rule.”

From the corner of his eye, Sankatputra noticed that his cook and two attendants were waiting to bring his evening meal. He motioned for them to enter. Each one carried a huge tray with handles that they set down before Sankatputra. Then, with a flourish, they lifted the serving dome and Sankatputra surveyed his evening meal. He picked up a bone with meat hanging off it, and took a generous bite. His court watched as he chewed.

He said approvingly to his cook, “This is tender and delicious.” The chef was relieved. He bowed humbly and said, “One of the boys was behaving badly. The guards killed him. I’ve prepared him with onions and green chillies, just the way you like it. Human flesh tends to be on the sweeter side, like pork.”

Sankatputra continued eating. “Terrify the children with the idea that they could be my next meal,” he said. “But do not allow the headcount to decline. Keep adding new recruits. It is important that I take my rightful place as the master of Chaaranga. Sankat has arrived; Sankatputra must emerge.”

Vibhooti bowed in acknowledgment of his master’s instructions. “The inhabitants of Chaaranga will soon understand how wrong they were to exile you,” he said. There was a flash of anger on Sankatputra’s face.

“I was meant to be the rightful inheritor, the reigning monarch,” he growled. “But that meddling Shantiputra convinced them otherwise. I would have made them strong and powerful. The world would have quaked when our armies marched. Instead, they wanted peace, harmony, goodwill and love... bah! Such pussies. But I shall still have the last laugh.”

Sankatputra paused, realising that he had exposed himself a little too much to Vibhooti. He quickly changed track. “What is the training schedule that you have implemented for these children?” he asked.

Vibhooti began reciting from memory. “Deadly combat, resistance training, pressure points, garotting, camouflage,

disguise, stealth, stamina training, survival, swimming, climbing, drowning, sword fighting, archery, martial arts, wrestling, hand-to-hand combat, poison formulations...

“That’s enough,” said Sankatputra. “But make sure they know that utter and fanatical devotion to their master is paramount.”

“I will ensure that they love you, O master,” said Vibhooti.

“It is better to be feared than loved,” replied Sankatputra. “If anyone falls out of line, make sure the culprit’s friends know that he or she is being served as my evening meal!”

6

Rahul sat on a smooth rock that overlooked the ocean, sipping coconut water. The breeze on his face felt blissful. He could hear the cries of seagulls in the distance. He gulped down the last few drops of the nectar and then threw the coconut shell with all his might into the sea, proudly noticing that it hit the water even further than it had the last time.

He pulled out the pendant from his dhoti. He held it in his hand and allowed himself to notice the details. It had a diameter that was equivalent to the length of his little finger. It was made of pure gold, such that it could not be tarnished by the elements. At its centre was a blue stone, chiselled to perfection, its facets sparkling in the sun. A thick band surrounded the stone with exceptionally detailed filigree work.

Rahul did not know anything about the pendant, but he had agreed with his father’s request to keep the discovery secret from anyone else. Now he felt a strange urge. It was almost as though he had to do what the pendant was telling him to do. When he held it, he lost control to the whims of the object. He held it firmly and drew a circle in the air with it.

No sooner had he drawn that circle than the strangest thing happened. The imaginary circle transformed itself into a porthole—a window. The border of the porthole was defined by a golden frame with the same sort of filigree work that was present on the pendant. Beyond the circular frame lay a landscape that was entirely different from that of Saptadweep. It was a window to another world.

Rahul put one of his arms through the window and felt the chill air of winter. When he pulled back his arm, it came away fragrant, almost as though he had dipped it in rosewater. He popped his head into the circle, almost as though he were looking out of a window. All that he could see were verdant hills and sparkling streams.

Rahul had been unable to control his urge to draw a circle with the pendant, and now he was unable to control the impulse to walk through the window. He knew that he should consult his father first, but the yearning to get to the other side was impossible to suppress. He made up his mind. He took a deep breath and dived head first through the window. The moment he did that, the porthole sealed shut behind him.

It was as though the window had never existed.

7

It was late at night and Pankaj was returning with his friends from Gombaparat after several hours of sandboarding. He turned eastward in the direction of his house after taking leave of the last of the group. He put his hand into the sash of his dhoti and fished out the pendant with the green stone at its heart. His fingers twitched, and he felt them move as though on their own accord. He looked about him to ensure that he was entirely alone. Then, with his arm raised, he drew a circle in the air with the pendant. He gasped at the result. It was nothing short of magic. Whereas Dheeli Reti was dark and still, the world framed by the window was sunny, breezy and fragrant. There was simply no way that Pankaj could avoid the temptation. He stepped through the golden window tentatively.

Far away in Mudirasa, Shalini was dozing on her *khatiya*. Everyone was asleep, but Shalini and her aunt usually slept outside, under the stars, to avoid the stifling heat and stillness inside the hut. She looked up at the twinkling stars and wondered what worlds existed on them. She fished out the pendant from the little pouch that was tucked at her waist. She held it up against the night sky and wondered if all the stars in the sky were pendants too. She noticed the red stone of her pendant twinkling like the stars. Unthinkingly, she began drawing shapes in the air with the pendant in her hand. She

couldn't explain why she needed to do it, she just did. A moment later, she sat up on the bed, startled to find a portal opened up beyond a golden-framed window. She didn't think about it. She lunged, head first, through the window.

In Kalisthal, Aruna had finished dinner and was outside their house listening to the melodious notes of a bard who was singing about unrequited love. She hung on to his words carefully.

My love for you is eternal like the sun

I will love you even when life is done

No one can ever love you like I do

But now I know I'll never have you

It almost brought tears to her eyes. Shalini had never experienced romance, but she couldn't help wondering if someday, someone would come to sweep her off her feet. She gently ran her fingers over the pendant that hung around her neck. Her delicate fingers felt the white stone that lay embedded at the centre. On a whim, she took the pendant off her neck and began outlining a shape in the air. When the window appeared right in front of her, she was terrified. She looked at the form of her aunt, who was snoring soundly. She then turned back to the window.

She knew exactly what she had to do.

8

Rahul took in the sight of the breath-taking valley that was nestled high in the mountains. In the distance, he could see the snowcapped peaks of the Himalayas. And for miles around stretched verdant grasslands, with colourful flowers dancing in the wind. Babbling brooks, clear and pure, crisscrossed the land. The air was crisp and invigorating. The only sounds that he could hear were those of running water, the rustle of leaves and the chirping of birds. He pinched himself. Was he in paradise?

In the distance, he saw three figures walking towards him. A young man and two young women. He took a few steps towards them. They met in a meadow of wildflowers. Rahul

introduced himself to the others. They did the same. Four strangers with a strange affinity to one another. Rahul, Pankaj, Shalini, Aruna. It was odd that none of them had to speak. They simply imagined the words in their heads and communication happened.

There was a sudden blaze of light and a figure dressed in a white dhoti and angavastram appeared before them. There was something calm and serene about him. There was a gentle smile on his face and his eyes sparkled as though they reflected divinity. He communicated with them through his thoughts.

“People call me Shantiputra,” he said to them. “But that presumes I am male. That assumption would be a mistake.”

Shantiputra kept his eyes on them as he began to rotate on his feet. They watched, astonished, as he alternated between male and female forms every few seconds. “All of us are a combination of Shiva and Shakti. So are you. I am just a little more aware of it. I am the one who made sure that the four of you found those pendants. I am the one who made you come here.”

“Where are we?” asked Pankaj.

“Sukhavati,” replied Shantiputra. “It is a place where very few can enter. The four of you are pure of heart and that is why you have been invited here.”

“Is Sukhavati like the legend of Shambhala?” asked Shalini. She remembered the stories that Shiva used to narrate.

“Yes, my child,” replied Shantiputra. “It is the Pure Land. But this is not a geographical place. Rather, it is another dimension, a five-dimensional one. If you stood at the geographical spot at the Himalayas that Sukhavati occupies, you would still be unable to access it. The reason being that your world is only three-dimensional. You may reach the physical location at Sukhavati but you would be unable to see or experience it even though you were right there.”

“Why have you brought us here, Guruji?” asked Rahul.

“I shall answer all your questions,” said Shantiputra. “But first come with me so that you may rest.”

“But my mother must be worried,” said Aruna.

“You are still physically there with her,” explained Shantiputra. “We humans do not realize that a full third of our entity is the astral body, the subtle intermediate between our physical body and our umbilical cord to the universe. I have only pulled your subtle bodies into Sukhavati. Your loved ones will only feel that you are being distant and distracted, not missing.”

Rahul, Pankaj, Shalini and Aruna followed Shantiputra across the beautiful meadow to a fruit orchard on the slope of a misty hill. “Only the purest of heart can ever reach here,” explained Shantiputra as he led them into a cottage that was simple but picturesque. Everything around them radiated positive and reassuring energy.

“Refresh yourselves,” said Shantiputra. “I shall see you soon.” Before they could ask him anything more, Shantiputra disappeared.

9

“Are you feeling rested?” asked Shantiputra. The youngsters wondered how long they had been in slumber. Their sleep had been so very deep and satisfying.

“It has been less than a minute,” replied Shantiputra. “Here in Sukhavati, time runs differently. In your dimension, even eight hours of sleep may not get you fully rested. Here, just a minute will achieve that. The same principle applies to food and water. Very little will satisfy you completely.”

Rahul thought about what Shantiputra was saying and realised that it was completely true. Before resting, he had picked an apple from the orchard. Every tastebud had exploded with flavour and just a few bites had been enough to satiate his appetite. He mentioned this to Shantiputra.

Shantiputra laughed. “The inhabitants of Sukhavati do not need food. They are able to consume prana—energy—from the sun and the air. Because you are still partially in physical

form, you feel the need to eat. But the apple you ate was just your imagination. It was prana presented to you in a shape and form that you were familiar with.”

It was then that Rahul noticed something about himself. He was no longer exerting more pressure on his right leg while standing. “Yes, I know,” said Shantiputra. “The healing powers of Sukhavati are incredible. Each of you has been re-energized, healed and fortified within a magic minute.”

He turned to Shalini. “Child, try closing one eye at a time and see if your vision has been restored.” Shalini yelped with joy as she realised that he right eye was perfectly normal once again.

“Now let me tell you all about your history,” said Shantiputra.

The four were confused. History? Didn’t they already know all the stories from the years gone by? But Shantiputra seemed to think differently.

“Several centuries ago, there was an event called Sankat,” he said. “A great civilization that people called Bharat was completely destroyed. This land is what your elders now call Chaaranga—four limbs—because only four pockets remain.”

Shantiputra took in their startled expressions as he continued, “Towards the west was a great city called Mumbai. At one time, eighteen million people lived there. It was swallowed up by the sea owing to global warming and the melting of ice caps.”

“What happened to it?” asked Rahul.

“You see, the inhabitants of Mumbai had gotten used to ignoring the signs provided by regular floods. Some years, the local authorities would say that the arterial river, more like a sewer, had clogged. In other years, the wise scientists would say that the rainfall in that particular year was much higher than the historical average for the city. The residents claimed that too much construction had killed the mangroves. In the end, it was these residents that had borne the brunt.”

Shantiputra explained that Mumbai had started as seven islands separated by unhealthy swamps. About a millenia

earlier, the white men had gained control of the islands and set up a trading centre there. They called it *Bom Bahia*, or the good bay. But then, there was a royal marriage and the islands were gifted as dowry to the new king. The new king had no desire to rule these far-off islands and he gave them to a group of traders who were willing to pay him an annual tribute in gold.

“The traders then set about making the place into a business hub and a trading port,” said Shantiputra. “They began filling up the marshes that separated the islands and turned the cluster into one. And it became a prosperous city, a place where people came to fulfil their dreams. Mumbai was not a fair place. Some lived in swanky highrises and others lived in slums but everyone had stars in their eyes. Unfortunately the sea never forgot how it had been duped. It always nursed the hope that it would be able to reconquer ceded territory. And it did one day.”

Shantiputra paused. “The roads, tracks, bridges and monuments were swallowed up by the angry sea; the swamps that had been filled yawned open once again. This happened five hundred years ago. The descendants of the handful of survivors decided to call it *Saptadweep*, or the Seven Islands.”

Rahul gasped. *Saptadweep? His home?* Shantiputra nodded. “When you take your fishing boat out into the sea, you pass a colourful reef, don’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Rahul. “It’s called Jaalishthal.”

Shantiputra smiled. “The hundreds of metallic grids that pop out of the open sea are not an accident, son. The area was a flourishing commercial area that people called BKC. Tall towers made of steel and glass used to stand in a cluster. But when Sankat happened, the gigantic waves destroyed everything. Now all that you have are the original iron grids that held up those structures. And, of course, sponges, sea anemones, algae and other marine life have made it their home.”

Rahul was bewildered by this revelation. It seemed incredible. *Saptadweep could once have been a megapolis called*

Mumbai? That sleepy cluster inhabited by twelve thousand was once home to millions?

“The area where your family lives—Dakshin Tapu—means South Island,” continued Shantiputra. “It used to be called the Colaba area of Mumbai. Above that lie Poorva and Paschim Tapu. Those two were known as Malabar Hill and Fort, connected by a bay called Marine Drive. Above that, Upari Tapu and Uttar Tapu were known as Worli and Mahim.”

“Do you also know about Teekha Chokha towards the southern end of Paschim Tapu?” he asked Shantiputra.

“It used to be a monument called the Rajabai Tower,” replied Shantiputra. “It was the crown that marked a great university where thousands of students came to learn. During Sankat, the tower tilted and you now see a portion of it sticking out from the sea at an odd angle. The sounds that it makes are of the winds howling through the clock mechanism that sat on top.”

“Clock?” asked Rahul, confused.

“It was a machine that men invented to tell time,” replied Shantiputra.

“But why does one need to tell time?” asked Rahul innocently.

“The sun and the moon do that perfectly.”

10

“What about me?” asked Pankaj. “Is my history the same as that of Rahul?”

“Well, the place that you live in is called Dheeli Reti and lies towards the north,” replied Shantiputra. “At one time, it was a huge city called Delhi. The name Delhi came from a fable. It was said that a king once uprooted a pillar, causing the ground to loosen—hence *Dheeli*. It was once the capital of the land that is now Chaaranga. It was home to sixteen million people.”

There are only eight thousand today, thought Pankaj.

“What happened to Delhi?” he asked.

“There was an earthquake in the region and thousands died,” explained Shantiputra. “But that shock could still have been overcome. Unfortunately, the earthquakes caused rivers to

change course. The land became parched and the once-fertile plains became desert lands.”

“And what about the ruins of Khoon Kot, that dark and foreboding place I see each day?” asked Pankaj.

“It used to be a great fort called the Red Fort,” replied Shantiputra. “Many people died there during the earthquake and the survivors called it Khoon Kot—*the place of blood*. To one side of the fort flowed a river called the Yamuna. After the earthquake, the Yamuna stopped flowing and dried up into a small lake. That lake is the oasis where you grow your crops—the Yama Sagar. The current name still reflects the fact that Yamuna was the sister of Yama.”

Pankaj couldn't contain his excitement. “And the Gombaparbat where we boys play?”

“That is the dome of a structure that was once called Rashtrapati Bhavan,” replied Shantiputra. “At the top of the dome was a circular structure, which is where you boys sit and launch yourselves for sandboarding.”

11

“And my history?” asked Shalini.

“You live in Mudirasa, child,” answered Shantiputra. “This was once a place called Chennai, towards the south, and was home to nine million souls. The city was named after a ruler called Damarla Mudirasa Chennappa Nayakudu. So it was called Madras or Chennai. After Sankat, it re-emerged as Mudirasa.” *But with five thousand people instead of nine million.*

“What happened to Chennai?” asked Shalini.

“There was a volcano in the Karur region that hadn't erupted for ten thousand years,” replied Shantiputra. “But then earthquakes changed the flow of liquid magma underneath the earth's crust. Everyone thought that the volcanoes were extinct, but they weren't. When the eruption happened, Chennai was destroyed along with its population.”

Shalini looked crestfallen. “Why don't we know such things about our history?” she asked.

“Because humanity almost entirely ceased to exist after these events,” answered Shantiputra. “And along with humans, all records of their civilisation were also destroyed. Men used to write accounts in books and store information in machines called computers. Everything was obliterated. By the time the first green shoots of civilisation re-appeared, all the recorded accounts had vanished. The stories that you hear from wandering storytellers are orally preserved memories. Your elders call them myths but they refer to events, places and people that were quite real.”

“I like playing on that smooth column on Mudirasa Beach,” Shalini said.

“I know,” smiled Shantiputra. “That beach was called Marina Beach. It had a column known as the Anna Memorial. When the volcano erupted, the column was uprooted and the lava moved it some distance away. But the column stayed on the surface. Later, people began calling it Karuppukal—*the black stone* .”

“And what about Kalisthal?” asked Aruna.

“It was the greatest city in eastern Bharat,” replied Shantiputra. “It was called Kolkata, named after the goddess, Kali. The people of Kolkata were always at the pinnacle of art and culture. The land produced the finest painters, sculptors, musicians, poets and novelists.”

“What happened there?” asked Aruna.

“There was a terrible epidemic in which thousands died,” said Shantiputra. “The fields were deserted and virtually no one remained. The epidemic was followed by famine and the population was wiped out. A hundred years later, there was a massive cyclone and any ruins that remained were flattened.”

“There is a statue of a lady with wings,” suggested Aruna.

“Was she the ruler of Kolkata?”

“No, child, it is the statue that once stood on top of Kolkata’s main landmark, the Victoria Memorial,” replied Shantiputra.

“It was the Angel of Victory and she had wings and held a trumpet. The dome collapsed, but the statue remained.”

“But what lies beyond Chaaranga?” asked Aruna.

“There were many countries and many kingdoms,” replied Shantiputra. “Unfortunately, they became greedy. One country wanted to defeat the other. They unleashed nuclear weapons and biological weapons on each other. Their industrial effluents polluted land and sea. Glaciers melted, rivers died. Populations grew in an unchecked manner and food scarcity killed millions. Besides Chaaranga, there are only five other pockets where some human settlements exist, but most of them are characterised by harsh living conditions, scarcity of food and spiralling disease. Many of them have marauding gangs that enforce their diktat over the remaining populations through extreme violence. Man has become caveman once again.”

“And beyond all these countries?” asked Aruna.

“Our sun is merely one star among the two hundred billion stars in our galaxy and the universe consists of two trillion galaxies,” replied Shantiputra. “There is no end. It is infinite. And each of us needs to realise that.”

12

The four young people listened to Shantiputra with rapt attention. What he was telling them was frightening, yet exciting. To imagine that the world was once a buzzing place with high levels of sophistication and technology was quite amazing. The fact that people could sit in metal tubes that flew across the globe in minutes was incredible. The fact that men had visited the moon was amazing. The fact that people would talk to one another over miles of string—called wires—was astonishing.

“But if all the records are gone, how do you know all this, Guruji?” asked Rahul.

“Because I am immortal,” replied Shantiputra. “I am the keeper of the Akashic records. Every thought, action, intention, event or spoken word leaves an imprint on the universe’s ether. I am the keeper of those imprints. I know not only about Chaaranga but about the rest of the universe.”

“What can you tell us about the wider universe?” asked Aruna.

“The planet Mangal was once a thriving civilisation that seeded our Earth with advanced DNA,” said Shantiputra. “But their advancement eventually destroyed them. Great civilisations like Atlantis and Lemuria were finished by their own lust for power. Our Earth is 4.6 billion years old, but humans appeared only 40,000 years ago. And we only know of their last 5,000 years. Imagine how many times we have destroyed ourselves and re-emerged from that destruction.”

“But why have you brought us here?” asked Pankaj.

Shantiputra gestured for him to be patient. He walked up to Rahul and tapped his forefinger on Rahul’s forehead, where the proverbial third eye lies dormant. Within a few seconds, Shantiputra knew everything.

“You have lived many past lives, Rahul,” said Shantiputra. “In one of them, you were responsible for protecting Mumbai from terrible terror attacks. That explains why you have taken birth in Saptadweep and feel a protective affinity towards it.”

He walked over to Pankaj and tapped the boy’s third eye. “In one of your lives you were a soldier who saved the lives of many prisoners who would have otherwise died in the Red Fort. This explains why you were reborn in Dheeli Reti.”

Shantiputra then told Shalini that she had been a doctor who had taken care of the wounded during a battle between the French and the English in Madras in 1746. Hence her attraction to Mudirasa. And Aruna had been one of the construction crew who worked on building a great bridge called Howrah over the River Hooghly in 1943. Hence her kinship with Kalisthal.

“Each of you has past-life connections with the places that you now call home,” explained Shantiputra. “It must follow that you will be protectors of the people who live there. But doing that is going to be more difficult than you can imagine.”

“Why?” asked Rahul.

“All of you lead simple and contented lives,” said Shantiputra. “But as your prosperity grows, your lives will become more

complicated. Humans have short memories. They forget how they brought destruction upon themselves. Your prosperity and advancement will create a new set of counter pressures.”

“What do you mean?” asked Aruna.

“Every action has an opposite and equal reaction,” replied Shantiputra. “After Chaaranga re-emerged, the citizens decided that they wanted to banish all negativity from among themselves. They knew that mindless economic growth, environmental laziness and military expansionism had brought them to the brink of extinction. So they banished their leader, Sankatputra—the son of troubled times.”

“Where is he now?” asked Shalini.

“He lives in the central part of Chaaranga, an area called Madhyabindu,” replied Shantiputra. “It used to be called Madhya Pradesh, the middle kingdom. Deep in the forests is his castle. He is now raising an army of children to eventually restore his command over Chaaranga.”

“You mean... those missing kids?” asked Rahul nervously.

“Exactly,” said Shantiputra. “And now you can understand why I invited you here. Or rather, why I gave you access to the wormholes that take you from your 3D realm to a 5D one.”

13

Shantiputra said, “Your energies are aligned with mine. The four of you can achieve the impossible if you work together. Defeat Sankatputra and preserve Chaaranga!”

“But how shall we do that, Guruji?” asked Rahul.

Shantiputra smiled. “Rahul, did you notice that the pendant that you found has a blue stone in its centre?”

“Yes, Guruji,” answered Rahul.

“Blue is the colour of water,” said Shantiputra. “And if you notice, your occupation—fishing—relates to water.”

Turning to Pankaj, he asked, “What colour is the stone on your pendant, son?”

“Green,” said Pankaj.

“Exactly, the colour of earth. As you know, what you have been doing so far—farming—is inextricably linked to the earth.”

“My pendant had a red stone,” said Shalini. “What does that mean?”

“It’s the colour that symbolises fire,” answered Shantiputra. “You have been working with fire to smelt iron, child.”

Then he turned to Aruna. “What about your pendant?”

Aruna looked at her stone. “White,” she replied.

“The colour of air,” answered Shantiputra. “Hence the focus on fragrances. The four of you are endowed with the qualities of water, earth, fire and air. But in the universe, there are five elements, not four.”

“What is the fifth element?” asked Aruna.

“The fifth element is ether, the substance that fills huge gaps in space; the very substance on which my Akashic records are maintained. I represent that fifth element which is colourless.”

The four looked at Shantiputra. Around his neck they could see a pendant, but it had no stone. “The stone exists,” said Shantiputra. “But it is transparent. Invisible.”

Shantiputra paused. “In our temples, we use Panchamrit—five ingredients—in worship. The four of you, along with me, constitute Panchamrit. If you work as a team alongside me, we can make sure that Sankatputra never rears his ugly head again. Have you seen the swastika? It has four arms radiating out from a focal point. I am that focal point and you will be my arms.”

“But we are powerless,” argued Pankaj.

“You are not,” replied Shantiputra. “When I tapped your third eye, I vested in you significant powers. Rahul, you can now breathe underwater like a fish. You can manipulate water bodies as a battle strategy. You can freeze anything into ice.”

Rahul looked bewildered. “Go on, try it,” said Shantiputra, motioning towards the placid lake. Rahul walked towards it and stepped inside. He immersed himself fully and waited for

the breath in his lungs to run out. But that never happened. He came out of the water smiling.

Rahul knelt down before Shantiputra, seeking his blessings. Shantiputra blessed him and said, “Now shift that lake towards the east.” Rahul faced the lake and closed his eyes in concentration. As he stretched out his arms towards the lake, the water rose like a fountain and leaped forward in a graceful arc, then poured itself into a spot to the east. Pankaj, Shalini and Aruna looked on, wide-eyed in amazement.

“Now Rahul, I will try punching you,” said Shantiputra. “Defend yourself.” Shantiputra reached out to hit Rahul. But with a single swift movement of his hand, Rahul encased Shantiputra’s hand in freezing-cold ice. The frozen hand could no longer move. Shantiputra was able to melt the ice instantly, but his point had been amply demonstrated.

“Step forward, Pankaj,” said Shantiputra. Pankaj took a few steps forward, a tad hesitantly.

“You are a son of the soil. All of your powers are related to Mother Earth. Going forward, you will be able to create dust storms. You will be able to disintegrate anything to dust and reintegrate it from dust. You can now create sinkholes at will.”

Pankaj looked at Shantiputra disbelievingly.

“See that boulder some distance away?” asked Shantiputra. “I want you to make it fall into a sinkhole.”

“What do I need to do to make it happen?” asked Pankaj.

“Simply imagine it,” replied Shantiputra. “And once the imagination yields results, use your hands like a guiding device.” Obediently, Pankaj focused on the boulder and imagined that it was sinking into a hole. Within seconds, the large boulder disappeared with a rumbling sound into the ground!

Pankaj fell at Shantiputra’s feet in gratitude.

“Stand up, there’s more,” said Shantiputra. “Can you see that tree in the distance? I would like you to create a storm around it and lift it off the ground.”

Pankaj visualised the storm and the tree being uprooted, and watched in wonder as it happened. He felt guilty for having uprooted the tree, so he created another storm to plug it back into the ground with force.

Shantiputra laughed. “Good show,” he said. “That’s the sort of empathy that will keep your powers in good stead. Let’s try something else. I want you to turn Rahul into dust.”

“I can’t do that, Guruji,” said Pankaj. “He has become my friend.”

“Relax, Pankaj.” “It’s just a demonstration. You can not only disintegrate but also reintegrate.”

Rahul laughed nervously. “Just don’t forget the second step, Pankaj,” he said.

Pankaj began imagining Rahul disintegrating and almost immediately, he was a pile of sand. Pankaj then imagined the sand becoming Rahul, and he was back.

14

“Step forward Shalini, my child,” said Shantiputra. Shalini came forward confidently.

“You are the fire element among the four,” said Shantiputra. “You can shoot darts of fire at anyone or anything. Personally, you can survive heat and flames. And you can melt anything at will. Want to try?” Shalini nodded. This was just too damn exciting!

Shantiputra pointed in the direction of a haystack. “Send a fire dart towards it,” he said. Shalini pointed towards the haystack but nothing happened. Shantiputra smiled. “Just pointing won’t work. Visualise it.”

Shalini imagined the bolt of fire leaving her fingertips and setting the haystack ablaze and the next thing she knew, it was in flames. But before she could thank Shantiputra, he generated a fireball that set Shalini on fire. The children gasped as they saw her go up in flames.

But Shalini made no sound. The flames and the heat had no effect on her. She calmly walked to the lake and doused

herself, and came out looking exactly as before, without the slightest injury.

When she stood before Shantiputra again, he commanded, “See that wall? Melt it!” Shalini stared at the wall, then lifted her hands slightly to limit the range of her power. She saw the wall melting to the ground like wax.

Suddenly, she burst into tears. Her new friends wondered what had happened. Shantiputra smiled. “She is just overwhelmed. Also, there is a growing doubt in her mind about whether such potent powers should be concentrated in the hands of the four of you. I’ll explain in more detail later, but now let’s turn to Aruna. Come forward, my child.”

Aruna took a step towards Shantiputra. “You are the element of air. You have the ability to levitate and fly. You can create air currents at will. And most importantly, you can suck the air out of anyone, anything or any place. Let’s try to see how all this works. First, let’s see you fly.” Aruna looked sheepishly at Shantiputra. There was no way that she would be able to fly!

Shantiputra admonished her gently. “Imagine yourself taking off into the air and soaring above us,” he said. Aruna did that, and suddenly, she was airborne. She whooped in joy as she flew above them like a bird. “Come back down!” shouted Shantiputra, and she reluctantly obeyed him.

“Next,” said Shantiputra, “the boulder that Pankaj sank into a sinkhole... create an air current and fish it out.” Aruna pointed towards the sinkhole and suddenly a strong gust of wind emerged from the depths of the earth and the boulder flew out as though it had been fired from a cannon.

“Shalini,” said Shantiputra. “Set that second bale of hay alight please.” Shalini did as she was asked and the bale was soon in flames. “Aruna, now suck out all the air around that bale.”

Aruna sucked in her breath and visualised that she was consuming all the air around the bale. The fire was put out in a moment.

The four youngsters remained absolutely quiet as they took in the enormity of all that had just happened. They had been

transformed from ordinary individuals into a team of super beings.

“Do we actually have these powers?” asked Rahul.

“Do you actually exist?” asked Shantiputra. “Your hunger was extinguished by a piece from an imaginary apple. What is that, if not Maya? The apple was an illusion, Sankatputra is an illusion, your powers are an illusion, even I am an illusion. But within this illusion is an underlying reality. Sankatputra has a purpose—to test humanity. Vanquish him, and you rip off the veil of illusion, so that humanity may move from a 3D consciousness to a 5D consciousness.”

“What does that mean?” asked Aruna.

“3D means that we are focused on our physical form. Most humans live with 3D consciousness. Survival, fear, success, sexuality, jealousy, desire, competition and worry are the primary drivers,” replied Shantiputra.

“But can one reach a higher dimension than that?” asked Shalini.

“Yes,” replied Shantiputra. “The opportunity presents itself when we have a significant challenge—collectively or individually. The destruction of Bharat and the emergence of Chaaranga is what propelled you from 3D to 4D.”

“What is that?” asked Rahul.

“When humans continue to live in their 3D worlds but now also understand the power of compassion, love, sharing and spirituality. This makes them happier, more content, more evolved. This is the stage you are in.”

“But what about the 5D that you mentioned?” asked Pankaj.

“This is the reason why Sankatputra has appeared before us,” replied Shantiputra. “To nudge us towards 5D. Once we are there, we would have compassion for all living beings; we would understand that we are not individuals but part of a much wider universe; we would be perfectly tuned to the universal frequency; words would become irrelevant and intuition most common; food and water would be replaced by prana; ill health or ageing would be impossible. You are in

Sukhavati, which is already 5D, but you will be returning to a 4D world with the aim of elevating it to the next level.”

The youngsters absorbed the deep import of what Shantiputra was saying.

“You shall henceforth be called *Sauvastika* —well-being,” said Shantiputra. “Your ancestors worshipped the Swastika that faces right but the Sauvastika faces left. You first need to set right the problems carried over from the past before you can look to the future. I am the centre of the Sauvastika and you are my four outward pointing limbs. We are not separate but one cohesive whole. Your frequencies are tuned to mine and together we are tuned to the frequency of a super-consciousness that transcends time and space. It is vital that you work together.”

“And by doing this we can elevate Chaaranga to 5D? Just like Sukhavati?” asked Aruna.

“Yes, child,” replied Shantiputra. “Besides your powers, your greatest weapon has to be happiness. Always remember that happiness lies in being grateful for what you have instead of grasping for what you don’t. Happiness is in experiencing the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future. Happiness is the natural order of things; sadness is your own artificial formulation. Send out positivity into the super-consciousness and Sankatputra will have a tough time defeating you. The only real way of containing Sankatputra is by being happy. As the Upanishads say, *sat-chit-ananda* — follow your bliss!”

15

Sankatputra and Vibhooti looked at the children being put through their paces. Some were throwing spears at sacks filled with sand; others were wrestling with each other; some kids were jumping through rings of fire; others were climbing steep vertical rock faces.

“By when do you think we will be ready?” asked Sankatputra.

“We are driving them to the limits of their endurance,” replied Vibhooti. “While I cannot predict how much time it will take, I

can tell you that these will be the best fighters ever.”

“Any news on Shantiputra’s plans?” asked Sankatputra.

“Our agents followed him but could not get through the portals of Sukhavati,” said Vibhooti. “We are told that four young men and women are being trained by him to neutralise you.”

Sankatputra roared with laughter. “*Neutralise* me? They will not know what has hit them.”

Vibhooti remained quiet. He was not quite as sure as his master. It never helped to be overconfident. “What makes you so certain?” asked Vibhooti.

“Human success breeds its own evils,” said Sankatputra. “The four flanks of Chaaranga look happy, content and idyllic for the moment. But then their economies will grow; fishermen will no longer be as conscious about taking only what they need; farmers will find ways to pump out more water from the ground; blacksmiths will not be content lifting stones of ore... they will chop down forests to mine for it; perfumes, cosmetics, jewellery and clothes will denote the status of a person, not their ideals or values. By the time these children become warriors, it will be child’s play for me to take over Chaaranga, for its people will already be divided.”

“And what about the four youngsters that Shantiputra is training?”

“Shantiputra thinks he can give them superpowers,” replied Sankatputra. “But they have probably not understood something very important.”

“What is that?” asked Vibhooti.

Sankatputra laughed. “Their powers work when they remain happy, positive, content, confident, and in the moment. If fear and doubt creep into their minds and hearts, their powers will diminish. The cycle never ends. All I need is for them to stop living in the moment and yearning for what they don’t have. The instant that happens, their defenses will be down. My forces will attack and dominate. If they are unable to take Chaaranga into the higher 5D realm, I will be all-powerful! Game on!”

Vibhooti nodded. “And what do we do with Shantiputra?” he asked.

“My blood brother must die,” said Sankatputra simply.