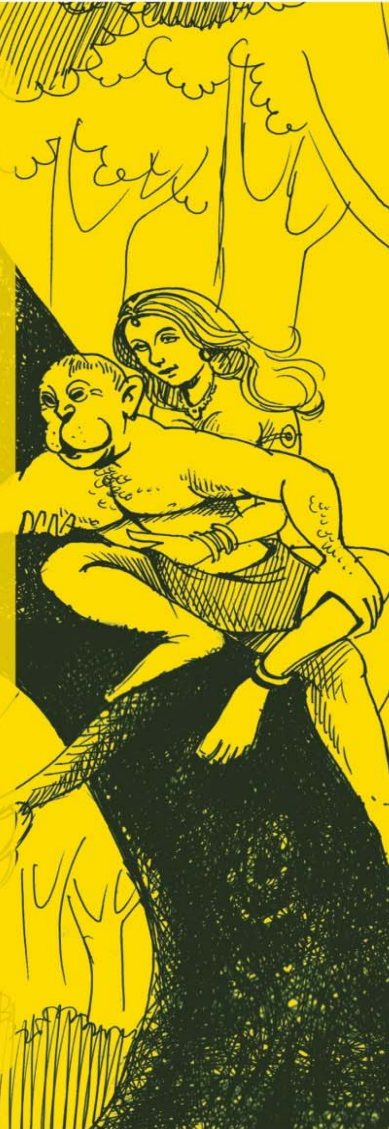


All the adult rakshasas in Lanka having been killed along with Ravana, their king, by Ram and his Vanara army, their young, sex-starved widows set out for neighbouring islands in search of men they could woo and marry. The leader of this romantic expedition is an intrepid princess of the royal family who would stop at nothing in her quest for a true lover. She finds one at last in a member of the enemy race. Their unholy union leads to cataclysmic events culminating in the founding of a new empire, with its own civilization, on the ruins of the old.

Essentially a graphic account of the thrilling adventures of the daring rakshasi princess and her equally brave Vanara lover, 'Vanaloore Shining' is also a reminder that Ravana's imperialist Lanka has been an ever present reality throughout our history and still is. Perhaps this is how its creator, sage-poet Valmiki, envisioned it.



VANALOORE SHINING

M.B. LAL

VANALOORE SHINING



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VANALOORE SHINING

*A fantasy describing a mythical city
of the Ramayana era, a marvel of Vedic science
resembling 21st century Bangalore.*

M.B. LAL

*Author of Through The Eagle's Eye
and
Manikpur Junction*

With a Foreword by Professor Rahamat Tarikere

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To the Memory of

Raj Kumar

the late legendary

Kannada actor

‘Vanaloore Shining’ is a spontaneously inspired offshoot of the riots that broke out in Bangalore on the death of Raj Kumar in April 2006. The city being by far the most outstanding symbol of ‘India Shining’, the ‘Silicon Valley of the East’, it reminded the author of a similar “civilization” that thrived in the Ramayana era.

Eight people were killed in the week long commotion which is said to have cost the economy around rupees one thousand crore (\$250 million). Hundreds of cars, buses and other vehicles were destroyed or damaged. This kind of homage to a departed leader is unprecedented in the history of India.

A contributory factor in the writing of this book is the author’s desire to pay his humble homage to the innocent children being kidnapped from Bangalore streets—at the rate of nearly 2,500 children per year—who for all practical purposes are as good as dead for their parents.

Their sacrifice, so essential to the building of the biggest metropolitan showpiece of a rising ‘Super-Power’, must not go completely unheard, unsung although, admittedly, child-lifting is too small a crime to be seriously investigated by the state police when the victims happen to be largely the drudges of the city who couldn’t have afforded a better life for their lost kids any way! (See page 296)

Reader Alert

The author has explained his reasons for writing this novel in the 'Afterword' — its last chapter titled 'The New Maharajas'.

Foreword

Why Did They Have To Die?

There was an explosion of grief at the death of actor Rajakumar who had won the love and regards of a large section of our people. That he passed away suddenly added to the grief. The mourners were even more incensed as adequate arrangements had not been made for them to pay their last respects to their chosen idol.

Eight persons died in the process, seven in Police firing and one was lynched by the mob. As reported in the Press, the names and background of those who died during Raj Kumar's funeral are:

Gopal, aged 27, was working as a mechanic, date of marriage had been fixed, has an aged father who is blind.

Janardan, aged 25, was working in a garment factory, had celebrated the marriage of his sister after obtaining a loan.

Shylesh Kumar, aged 28, only son of a security guard, has a sister who has lost both legs.

Yashwanth Shetty, aged 19, garment factory worker, the only son of Suresh Shetty.

Amjad Kattimani, aged 25, had arrived in Bangalore from a village in North Karnataka and was working in a very small factory. Wife was pregnant at the time of his death.

Muni Raju, aged 40, was working as a coolie in Kengeri (near Bangalore), survived by wife Radhamma and two daughters.

Kumar, aged 22, a carpenter.

Manjunatha Malladi, aged 25, under training with the state Reserve Police, hailed from Savadatti (near Dharwar), the only earning member in the family.

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These details indicate the following:

All the dead were men.

All, excepting Muniraju, were in their youth.

Most of them belonged to poor families from backward classes.

None of them was highly educated.

They were working in small factories to earn a living.

Two of them were from North Karnataka. In their villages they had perhaps no land of their own or else had small possessions of land which yielded little to make a livelihood possible. Obviously, they came to the city to find new moorings for their lives.

Excepting only Manjunath, a Malladi who was there to discharge his official duties, none of those who died had any security of job. They had to struggle hard to make both ends meet.

Most of the people who had poured out into the streets that day to mourn Raj had a background of this kind only.

While these deaths were happening, Rajkumar himself was endowing life on someone with his eyes donated for the purpose. That he was responsible for the death of eight persons Raj did not know. Likewise, he was giving his eyes to some one unrelated to him in any way.

Life and death, light and darkness were occurring simultaneously. This is symbolic in the sense that it suggests the two-fold impact of cinema culture over the last three quarters of a century in Karnataka.

Why only the socially neglected class went on the streets to express grief is the question. Why were they smashing police vehicles or setting them on fire? May be, some rowdy elements had sneaked into the emotionally surcharged crowd. They were not adorers of Raj Kumar. May be also that among those arrested

were many with criminal records as the Police stated. But not all were given to destructive tendencies; nor were they all anti-social elements.

A majority of them happened to be marginalised people in our economic political system with its perverted ideas of development. The emotional display by them, the destruction they caused, were bad and condemnable.

But there was this dimension to all that: the latent frustration and anger towards the established system.

At the time of cremation there were scenes of anarchy and bloodshed no doubt. But one cannot forget the fact that the lower classes of people wedded to secularism were expressing their love for a person unmindful of his caste. The affection showered on him for three generations was unprecedented. When he was alive and also when he died. This was not merely the personal attainment of Raj Kumar but also the result of the immense magnetic power that the film medium has.

Those who formed the crowd that day were not all Bangaloreans. Poor people had come all the way by buses spending money for it. The caste identities as well as the economic background of the dead bear this out. Their secularism did not mean renouncing caste; but they did not care for the caste of the dead artiste. The lower castes have this tradition within the framework of their castes: visiting the house of the dead, seeing the dead body, partaking of the grief of the family of the dead, participating in the funeral, going to the cemetery to salute the dead, etc.

The irony of it is that there were some tufted Brahmins to cremate Raj while the tradition of his caste is to bury the dead. Why they were there is anybody's guess. As it happened, however, people did not allow the elite class to pose for the cameras, nor did they

Foreword - Why Did They Have To Die?

allow the priests to have any say. They buried the dead themselves. The cinema culture which made the hero an idol devised its own mode of burying the dead in its own peculiar secular way.

The mob which had established human relations with film heroes thus, also itself became the victim on that occasion. Raj had no longer that old verve of his. He was old, afflicted by illness. A hundred days in the forest with veerappan, had made him look inwardly melancholy. The hero of the tinsel world had always vanquished evil and was saviour for the distressed. In real life, however, he had been a captive of the forest brigand and had urged the government to save him. Negotiations had extricated him from the clutches of the brigand and that must have sagged the spirits of the hero. Nevertheless he continued to be adored by the people.

For 77 years he had lived a fruitful life. One man through his acting and singing had entertained lakhs of people, gained popularity, earned lots of money. Still the people were dumb struck and they wondered if his death was justified.

But, are the deaths of those young men who orphaned their families just? They should have lived a long life supporting their families and they were there only to express their sorrow for the dead. If their death was not just, who then bears the responsibility? Unlike the gentle folk glued to their TV sets in drawing rooms they had come out on the streets. So were they themselves responsible for their death? Or was it the Police who fired? Or the government which mismanaged the event? Or the film heroes who are worshipped as gods by the fans? Or the film industry which provokes such foolish emotions in the cinema viewers? Or our economic political system which produces this class of people given to idolizing the heroes? Who indeed is responsible?

This has been amply discussed by many critics who know how to evaluate the cultural importance of Raj Kumar. One cannot write

the contemporary history of Karnataka, much less the history of the film industry and Kannada movement, by ignoring Rajkumar. He was one of the most popular persons of Karnataka during the 20th century, came from a backward social background, but grew very big by virtue of his talents and was the mainstay for the Kannada film industry providing employment to lakhs of people. He the roles of practically every milieu, entertained them and responded to their emotions, was a simple, innocent and nice person and thus became a legend. He became an integral part of the Kannada film world. What kind of mental make up did his films create among the film-goers? What are its consequences? Among the sentiments were pro-people ideals to be sure, but also traditional conservative reactionary values as well.

Films, actors, drama companies, popular novels, TV serials, tabloids: these are what hold the minds of many people in their grip, but no serious study in Kannada has been made as yet on their impact. In Tamil Nadu there were many studies on MGR's films and politics, but not much on Raj Kumar's films. In our studies, there is some kind of elitist contempt for popular culture; or else, simple acceptance, uncritically, of big artists becoming cultural icons. Our philosophical limitations in the search for alternatives, our political helplessness, perhaps goad us to view the culture of idol-worship rather liberally? We must view critically this phenomenon of worshipping film heroes (which has become part of popular culture) as also the fan-culture which has nurtured irrational emotions.

Films in Bangalore and elsewhere have scenes galore where the hero has a blood stained long rod in hand to attack his opponent who, when attacked, falls on some vegetables pushcart and all the vegetables get scattered on the road. A big chunk of the population views such films. They are the customers for the Gandhinagar

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market. [G'nagar in Bangalore is where film producers and distributors have their offices.]

In Hospet where I stay, there are at least two scenes every month in which the victims of our film culture participate with vigour. When there is some new Telugu film to be screened, they make a big star shaped emblem with the hero's picture, decorate it with glazing paper, garland it and take it out in a procession on a bullock-cart to the accompaniment of whistles and drum beatings. Those in the procession will be mostly in their 20's. The star procession invariably starts from a dalit labourers' slum and not from any decent extension. The boys are all in masonry, mining or working in small shops and the like. They spend Rs.50/- out of their weekly wages on seeing films and momentarily forget the drudgeries of their miserable lives. They thus transcend their limitations and insecurity!

For a whole century our cities have been creating such scapegoats. The new concept of development that our government currently has embraced prescribes that our cities be like Singapore. In the process, it throws up a new class of untouchables in our midst. Those from backward castes, migrants from the countryside, residents of narrow streets in slums, school drop-outs and those who have failed to land a decent job, - these are our new untouchables. Also among them are urchins labouring for 15-16 hours a day in dingy garages, hotels, bars and lodges. They are the 'scum of the earth' as the elites brand them. They cannot afford to live like the haves and to compensate for it they display some fake glamorous clothes, occasionally indulge in small thefts and get beaten up by the police for that.

When a new film is released in Bangalore, you see them in the queue at a very early hour. Their language and dress will tell you who they are. Those who indulged in arson on the occasion of Raj Kumar's death are their brethren. They throw stones and break

glasses, they cry and they set fire to what comes their way. It need not surprise anyone if among them were also to be found the sons of those farmers who lost their land around Bangalore over the last ten years to embellish the city with model infrastructure corridors.

This semi-literate community working with no security in demeaning surroundings needs two things to keep its mind balanced: an image or an idol to lovingly worship and an enemy to vent its anger and suffering. This community is always in search of an identity while struggling to escape from its drudgery. It needs a symbol and it could be in the form of a film hero or Kannada language or Rama or Ayyapa [offspring of Vishnu in the form of Mohini and Shiva!!]. God or some hero like a God or language or something else is a must for them.

There was a TV debate the day after Rajkumar's death. One could clearly see the class division of Bangalore there. There was a group which was horror-stricken because the "Lumpen elements" had besmirched the glorious name of Bangalore so assiduously won by the IT companies. This class is English educated, employed in reputed companies, earning lakhs of rupees, moving around in cars. Western music, English cinema, IT industry: these are their hallmarks. They harbour the desire to fly away to America some day. It is undignified for this class to identify itself with Kannada, Kannada cinema, Kannada actors and so on. They are more worried about the alleged loss of reputation of Bangalore than the real loss of Raj Kumar and the eight persons who got killed.

In that debate was a Raj fan who when asked a question, could not muster more words than 'Raj is my God'. He did not know how to speak in English. The little English he knew helped him to come out with just those four words. There is a big section of Bangalore which does not find it honourable to identify itself with Kannada and its actors. In the Bangalore which is in the process of

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a metamorphosis, there is a marginalized section for which identity was solely in the form of this hero-worship.

That is the reason why this class searches out an opponent to give vent to its ire as a reaction to the kind of development wherein this class has been kept out. The immediate opponent that it finds is the policeman who is the janitor of the establishment. Besides, there are cars that they will not be able to board and big mansions with glass panes that they will not be able to inhabit. At times, even the Tamilians that they find working alongside of them appear to be stiff competitors and hence also opponents. The upshot of it is that the repressed intolerance within this class must find expression in some form. And that requires an emotion-packed scenario. The funeral procession of Raj presented precisely such an opportunity.

There was a woman shown on TV repeatedly; her attire indicated that she was some very ordinary day labourer. She lifted a huge boulder and broke the glasses of a car parked in Sadashivanagar, a posh area in Bangalore where Raj himself also lived. There were some in the procession who gleefully lifted their hands up and danced with joy when the TV Cameras focused on them. (Ironically enough, there was also a reporter of ETV who by some mistake said that "the fans of Raj Kumar are dancing in joy")

Where did this joy come from in the funeral procession? These people were mourning the death of the actor; but at the same time they were destroying the wealth of those who were humiliating and chastising them day in and day out. It was joy in destruction, a peculiar social consciousness.

This consciousness is the creation of our popular cinema in a big way. There is a close relationship between this cinema and the lower classes of people in society, the sense of shame that is their lot in the struggle for living, their sense of insecurity and their wild

dreams. The popular cinema touches the core of the hopes, lacunae, anger and frustrations of this class. "Sanadi Appanna" (in which Raj Kumar acted and to which Bismilla Khan played the Shehnai) and "a poser to pelf" (title of a film of Rajkumar's) are films whose success is entirely because of this characteristic of theirs.

The heroic actors display their individual heroism and bravery by killing or trouncing villains in the films. This is an indefinite articulation of the anger of the oppressed people because of which the hero makes his home in the minds of these people as a god. Many a time our actors happen to be popular not so much because of their artistic talent but by virtue of the emotions that they touch, provoke and satiate as also by virtue of the story-yarn.

Why are so many films coming out with portrayals of blood-soaked axes in the hands of our heroes? I have a feeling that this does not represent our villages in Karnataka but the volatile life of Bangalore. Cinema as a medium has the power to reach wide masses and has thus established a live emotional contact with the helpless people at large; it even flourishes on this capital called the helplessness of people.

Those who died in firing after indulging in violence that day and our actors are each other's creation. If we may slightly alter the famous statement made by Karl Marx on religion, this fan culture formulated by our cinema heroes is a variety of opium besides providing people with a heart in the heartless big cities.

One has yet to evaluate properly the role of hero-worship that our popular cinema has fostered in the minds of the people. How does it impact on our democratic system? Modern cinema industry has actors from varying castes and religions. How then are they to gain acceptance among people of all castes and religions? Acquiring new names is a product of this situation. To get accepted in the Bombay film world Yusuf Khan had to change into Dilip Kumar.

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And Mutturaj born in a backward caste had to become Raj Kumar. These actors won the hearts of the people by pushing their caste-religion identity into oblivion by their sheer talent as artists. This is the peculiar secularism of the world of art. Raj Kumar with no princely background ruled like a king on the minds of lakhs of people. This is the magical miracle wrought by the film medium.

Around the time that Raj passed away, the son and daughters of the erstwhile king of Mysore had come to the streets demanding their proper share in their ancestral property. The people just did not care. In neighbouring Nepal, multitudes thronged the streets demanding the ouster of the king. Nobody seemed to be much sympathetic to the plight of the king. But at the same time, here in Karnataka was a man with no royalty in his background, but people felt that one of their own had just departed.

There is a further irony in this. Kannada drama and cinema were dwelling on themes concerning kings and emperors. When royalty was being scratched they were making films on gods and their spouses. How exactly they kept alive the feudalistic faith is unknown, but their purport was precisely that. Look at a film like "The fodder of a tiger's milk" (a film in Kannada). A cowherd boy in the film rises to great heights by virtue of his bravery and is even accorded royal recognition.

He gives his life to prove his devotion to the king. This reminds us of the times when devotion to the king used to be upheld as a cherished value. The besmirching lowly practices of those times were anything but virtuous. There were knights at arms who saved the King's life by losing their own lives. There were also those who embraced death voluntarily when their king met with death. Invariably, these people who thus made sacrifices belonged to the lower classes of society. Even now, there is in our democracy a culture of suicide when a political leader dies, nay, even when he

loses an election. An youth died by heart attack when Soniya Gandhi resigned her Parliament seat from Bellary.

Being a hero is not an evil in itself, but hero worship is. The question, however, lies in the kind of relationship that exists between the hero and his followers. Does the hero die for the people or do the people die for the hero? There are in history many revolutionary leaders who have laid down their lives for the sake of the people. That people die for MGR and Rajakumar is a sure indication of an uncritical fan-fad. Only the other day there was news that the billionaire of Gaya called Amitabh had not paid duty on the spectacles he had bought in America and that a notice had been served on him for that. His fans stormed into the streets for the alleged insult to their hero.

The Kannada film world also has generated this kind of uncritical culture of hero-worship. Especially those actors who play the roles of kings and gods obtain some kind of a divine image. It was his popularity as a player of Krishna's role that catapulted N.T. Ramarao to political power, at least partially. The trend of actors playing roles of mythological characters entering politics continues.

The fan-class nurtured in the film world by the culture of hero-worship always exists on the impulse that it is there for the sake of the hero. It would be relevant here to have a glimpse at the supporting or comic characters in films which are predominately hero oriented. Every prince and king has a jester for company in our ancient poetry and drama. In the Kannada film worlds, this role of a jester (vidushaka) was played by Narasimharaju.

The jester must not have good looks. He must wear some ridiculous garments to be truly comic. There is a film in which Rajkumar plays the role of a prince and Narasimharaja that of the joker.

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There is a sequence therein in which the prince needs to catch a glimpse of the princess singing in a garden. But the wall is very tall, which necessitates his standing on the shoulders of the jester. And standing thus, he enjoys the sight and song of the heroine, the princess. The poor jester below is horribly distressed at the weight he has to bear. This incident serves as a symbol.

The hero-centred film culture is philosophically a-democratic if not also anti-democratic. It purposely nurtures a fan culture. Because cinema is an industry, these raked up emotions and fanaticism have a value; it serves as an instrument to expand the market. This dimension is often not taken cognizance of. Some of those who witnessed mob violence at the time of Rajkumar's unreal procession averred that the true fans of Rajkumar would not resort to such acts. Their suggestion was that some outside intruders had precipitated violence. How could the fans of Rajkumar behave like that, they wondered.

After all, Raj never smoked or drank on the screen and in real life he never talked to anybody in such a manner as to hurt their feelings. This enigma is a fact. However, one must recognise that all fanaticism is fundamentally characterized by flared up emotions, glorification and uncritical devotion. It is a psychology in which there is no room for dialogue or differences of opinion. There is grave intolerance here for what is disliked. One hero may not be the sole cause of this phenomenon. It is the entire cinema culture that is the cause.

Also among the causes are the metamorphoses that our big cities are undergoing and the unstable communities that our economic and political motions are throwing up. The police bullets were not entirely responsible for the death of those eight innocent persons. In our mythology, it was the arrow from Arjuna that ultimately took Karna's life.

Vanaloore Shining

But behind the scenes there were others indirectly responsible for it: Duryodhana, Kunthi, Drona, Indra, Yudhishtira, Parashurama and a host of others. In the final analysis, even Karna who was a part of this Establishment.

Rahamat Tarikere

Courtesy : Hosathu

Translated from Kannada
by Dr. G. Ramakrishna



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*“Does history repeat itself,
the first time as tragedy,
the second time as farce?”*

Julian Barnes

(quoted in The New Penguin English Dictionary)

1

A Marriage with a difference

"There he is", shouted Raman.

"Who?" I asked.

"The Yeti."

"Who?" I asked again unable to comprehend the word.

"Ye-ti-eee", he repeated loudly.

Raman and I had gone on a hiking trip in the remote snow ranges around Lake Mansarovar and Mt. Kailash, one of the holiest places of pilgrimage for the Hindus, being the abode of Lord Shiva. We had lost our way and wandered into a weird mirage like oasis in a vast desert of snow, with a stream running through it. In short, we were at our wits' end and did not know what to do next when my companion shouted "Yeti."

A Marriage with a difference

Not far from us, at a distance of just about a hundred yards, I saw a large figure walking on a ledge of ice projecting from a snow covered mountain on the other side of the stream. His naked twelve feet tall elephantine body inspired awe. His long hair was flying in the breeze over his shoulders. The giant biped was walking with long steps over slippery snow with the ease of a snow bear. Evidently he had not seen us.

"Perhaps he can help us find our way back to civilization," Raman observed.

"He looks awesome to me. What if he eats up both of us?"

"Don't be silly. Yetis are known to be the most peaceable creatures." "Yes, but what do they live on, I mean what do they eat?"

"Their habits have not been recorded yet but it is certain they do not eat the flesh of animals. Dozens of expeditions have scoured the Himalayas following their footprints. Had they been carnivorous creatures the explorers would have found the bones of animals or birds devoured by them."

"Surely, those huge bodies cannot be maintained on air and water alone."

"It seems to me their bodies are bio-chemical factories that convert air and water into nourishing food."

Raman's observation struck me as funny but then I realized he might be right. "Perhaps there is something in what you say. Our ancient yogis have been known to thrive solely on air and water all their lives," I said.

While we were thus debating we saw the snowman disappearing around a bend in the mountain. But before we could turn our backs to the mountain in despair, we saw coming from its other end a large flock of his tribe. It included males and females, some taller than the specimen we had just seen, with children of both sexes who looked like baby elephants. The young ones were frolicsome like the offspring of any mammal. They leaped in the air, some as high as twenty feet, as they walked. The women sang and danced in circles. Their soprano voices sent a thrill of joy throughout the



In Lord Siva's Retreat

A Marriage with a difference

valley. The males were laughing, dancing and clapping or slapping each other's backs and hips in rhythmic beats in tune with the women's singing.

"Such a merry-hearted and sportive group can be anything but violent", said Raman cheering up, "Come, let us go and meet them. They are our last hope of survival in this no man's land."

I agreed.

"Wait", he said, "On second thoughts, I think let only one of us go first. In case they turn violent the other can escape and seek help. Let me go first."

"No, you can do that over my dead body. The honour must go to me since I am the leader here. You have been following me blindly all along the trip."

"Look Nakul, there is no time to lose," Raman said pulling out a coin from his pocket, "let us toss it and whosoever wins goes first."

I nodded assent and chose tail. Raman won the toss and ran off waving to me gleefully.

That was the last I was to see of my dearest friend. No sooner had he reached the group, huffing and panting, the tallest male among the Yeti's picked Raman by the hips in his palm, flew away with him high in the air and disappeared behind the mountain.

I shouted, I cried, I wept, but to no avail. I was all alone in this stark wilderness. If the monsters did not eat me up I would very probably freeze overnight, I thought. There was no food or shelter to sustain me. In sheer panic I ran in the opposite direction up a hill and several hundred feet down the other side of it till I reached a grassy slope. I would have gone on running like a mad man had I not, in my blind haste, knocked down a goat grazing there. I stumbled and fell.

Next moment I saw a young woman of striking beauty bending over me and gazing into my eyes. She took my hand and helped me to stand.

"My friend," I stammered as soon as I was on my feet, "they

have taken him away.”

“Who?”

“The Yeti.”

“Oh, those giants! By now your friend must be basking in the bright sunshine of Haridwar along the banks of the holy Ganga. From there he can find his way home on his own. You need have no anxiety on his account. He is safe.”

“Why should the Yetis take so much trouble for him? And how can they fly so far in a trice, faster than the fastest bird known to us? They are so bulky too, like elephants. It seems more like magic than flying.”

“You may say so if you like. Those men are not what the world thinks of them. The illusive beings whom you call Yetis are, in fact, the ‘ganas’ (sentinels) of Lord Shiva who keep roaming these regions night and day to help anyone in distress. There can be no suffering in heaven.”

“Are we in heaven now?”

“Yes.”

“Then why was I not picked up by the Lord’s angels?”

“This means that He needs you here for a higher purpose. Perhaps your days on earth are over.”

I was alarmed. It sounded like death sentence. She guessed my fears and hastened to add, “of course, you can always go back to your earthly hell whenever you like. There is no compulsion here.”

I felt relieved. She poured goat’s milk from an earthen pitcher into a mug and gave it to me to drink. It revived my sagging spirits. What with the bouquet of pleasant surprises greeting me on all sides, I felt a new man. My friend Raman was safe. Those Yetis were not monsters but angels. I was in heaven, and to confirm this assertion a beautiful damsel who could be none other than a nymph of paradise, was serving me. The sky was bright, landscape beautiful and air balmy. The goat’s milk I had drunk tasted like heady wine. What

A Marriage with a difference

more could one want even in heaven, I wondered.

The maiden broke my reverie to warn me of an approaching storm.

"A storm in heaven!" I exclaimed.

"Why not? It only adds to the charms of this retreat of gods. Don't you think life would be dull and monotonous without such occasional harmless thrills. These storms toughen our guts and keeps us alert night and day."

"But the sky is so bright and clear".

"It will change in a few moments. A thunderstorm is fast approaching us from the East, over those yonder snow ranges."

"How do you know?"

"I can see it with my eyes and feel its touch upon my body."

"You mean it has already arrived?"

"Yes and no. Don't you feel the air around you trembling like a mouse at the sight of a cat?"

"No. Everything looks bright and normal to me."

"I can see the grass cowering and bending low so that the winds can fly past it. I can also hear the leaves of the trees singing in harmony to face the attack."

"I can see or hear nothing of the kind".

"Surely, it should not be difficult for you to see with your naked eye the strange aura the rocks and stones are emitting."

"No, to me the stones are silent as ever. But why should the rocks be agitated? They are strong enough to withstand any storm. For them it is but an airy melodrama, sound and fury signifying nothing."

"You are right. They are not worried. The terrible sound of a tornado, wherever it is, travels through the rocks all over the surface of the earth and also deep inside it. When there are bursts of lightning, its energy penetrates the ground and radiates over the surface."

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I marveled at the uncanny sixth sense of the jungle lass. "How soon will the storm be here?" I asked impatiently.

"In fact it is already here over this valley. Do you see that cloud mass above the mountain on the other side of the river rushing towards us?"

By the time I had lifted my gaze towards it the amorphous vapoury bulge over the distant peak had already covered the sky above the river, so terrific was its speed. It was preceded by a loud whistling sound resembling the siren of a train locomotive. In another moment it would have swept both of us off the ground and tossed us into a winding stream which was hurtling down not far from us to join the river. Instantly, acting like a practiced acrobat performing in a circus, the girl caught my hand and whisked me with lightening speed into a clump of tall bushes. We had crawled several feet deep into the thicket by the time the tornado announced its arrival with a blast of thunder.

It seemed my guide was an expert in disaster management. She skillfully positioned me, alongside herself, in a tiny cove where a thick cluster of plants had got entwined into an umbrella shaped canopy which secured our closely huddled bodies from the storm. The rest of the weedy mass around us was lying flat on the ground to allow the calamitous squall to pass over it. The wet earth beneath us trembled under the merciless assault of heaven's thunderbolt. I felt much like a soldier in his bunker amidst the boom of enemy guns firing from a nearby post. As the clouds above collided and roared, my eyes were dazed by flashes of lightning penetrating into our flimsy cave-like shelter and threatening to set it ablaze any moment. A sustained downpour of ice-cold rain water filtering through the leafy mesh wrapped around us had drenched my clothes completely.

The only sign of hope in this dismal prospect was the presence of the dainty and daring shepherdess by my side. We were sitting squeezed in a crouching position. The deafening noise of the thunderstorm had forced silence upon us. I could derive comfort mainly by looking into her eyes which were barely a finger length away

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from mine. They had the vacant look of a woman in an air-raided shelter patiently waiting for the all clear siren. Water was dripping from her hair all over her face and upon the shoulders of both of us as we sat squashed together in a hollow between the coarse stems of a clump of flowering shrubs.

The fifteen minutes or so that it took the storm to abate passed like an hour for me.

At the end of the ordeal my companion was the first to move. I was both astonished and overjoyed when, after deftly parting the tangle of plants around us with her soft hands she stood up erect. Shorn of the force of the gale the plants had been relieved of the pressure which had bent them to the ground. This meant we would not have to crawl out of the leafy cove brushing our limbs and cheeks against its prickly brambles. She took my hand and helped me to tread cautiously over the mire of weeds, grass and flowers which the hurricane had scattered all over the hill, blocking the flow of rain water that had accumulated in tiny pools and puddles.

We walked slowly up to a relatively dry spot on an elevated mound and looked around. The sky was clear though a low velocity tail wind of the storm was still lashing us and making my wet clothes stick to my body like prickly thorns.

The blizzard had shattered my morale. It had made me acutely conscious of the hopelessness of my situation despite the shepherd damsel's assurances about my safety. My principal anxiety was to find my way back home somehow. If this was heaven what would hell be like? To me both seemed alike. There was no place like home, I told myself.

"Where are your goats whom you had brought with you to graze here?" I asked the girl.

"They should have reached home well before the rain god unleashed his fury upon us. They can sense the coming of a storm long before it actually arrives."

"How?"

"No one knows the uncanny ways of these dumb creatures. They

seem to have a direct link with the mind of nature.”

“I wish I had their instinct to sense danger before it arrived and find my way back home in safety.”

She noticed my desperation and tried to soothe my ruffled nerves with her feminine arts.

“Calm down my friend. You may be on a glorious turning point in your life. I notice that you are shivering with cold. The first thing we need to do is to take off our clothes and dry them. This is what we do here when caught in the open in a thunderstorm.”

Though innocently made her suggestion seemed outrageous to me. “How can I take off my clothes in your presence? And the same objection applies to you, I suppose.”

She smiled. “Of course, I had forgotten that you come from a land where they have a twisted perception of the human body. Here we use clothes only as a protection against the weather and not to hide something,” she said in a taunting tone.

She lost no time in plucking several flowering branches of the plants around us and weaving them into two skirts.

“Here, take this. It should make you look respectable,” she said handing me one of the two floral garments. While I was still examining it she had, in a flash, shed her clothes and wrapped a flower decked bikini around her waist.

For a moment I was startled. I was beholding in flesh and blood beauty of the female form in a live natural setting. It was a thing I had hitherto seen only in jungle movies. She noticed my lascivious gaze and blushing cheeks.

“While you take off your clothes I shall go down to bring a herb for you that will cure your cold”, she said.

I demurred. “What if the wind which is still quite strong, blows away the only clothes I have into the gorge below?” I asked.

She laughed. “I shall make sure they are not lost. We shall tie the clothes of both of us to form a strong rope and fasten them between

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two branches of a tree.”

I persisted with my objections. “The air is still very humid after the storm. It may take them the whole night to dry.”

“You are wrong. The tornado comes all in one piece, like a flying lake. Once it is gone, fresh and thirsty mountain breezes rush in to fill the vacuum. Our clothes will be dry in no time.

She ran down the hill with the speed of a deer while I took the opportunity to quickly take off my clothes. But the moment I put them on the ground to replace them by the jungle wear, my shirt started slipping down the hill under the force of the wind. I screamed and ran after it, grabbing my trousers in my hand.

The girl heard my scream and looked up. She giggled at the amusing sight I must have presented to her and moved towards me to help me retrieve the shirt before it flew away beyond our reach. I hurriedly covered my nudity with the trousers and raised my free hand to stop her.

“Don’t come. I shall catch it,” I shouted. She smiled and returned to her mission of mercy to bring the anti-cold herb for me. Fortunately, I managed to reclaim the shirt and putting it and the trousers firmly under my feet proceeded to tie my new jungle dress round my waist. But try hard as I would I just couldn’t fathom the mechanism of fastening it into a knot. I was still struggling with it when the girl came up with a bunch of flower petals.

“Come, let me tie it for you,” she said matter-of-factly while thrusting the herbal petals into my gaping mouth and adding “chew them slowly, you will feel warm in a minute”. It took her but a few seconds to girdle me firmly with the leafy fabric. How she did it is still a mystery to me.

Within a few minutes my head started swimming. For quite a while, I couldn’t say for how long, I lost consciousness and lay flat on the ground. The drug she had given me had proved too potent, like a strong doze of opium, or a similar product of the cocaine family. When I revived the stiffness in my limbs caused by the chill had gone but the girl was nowhere in sight. I stood up in panic and

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started shouting "honey!" since I did not know her name. My only solace was the sight of her clothes strung with mine like a clothes-line on a tree. It assured me that she had not left me.

From somewhere, not far behind my back I heard her melodious squeak. "Coming", she was saying.

I turned round, she repeated her call, "Coming!", speaking more musically this time. It sounded like a bird cooing to her mate. I stood entranced as I watched her ambling with measured steps over the undulating green. Her skimpy, token dress matched perfectly with the surrounding flora while her golden skin glowed in the backdrop of the blaze of colours on the Western Horizon. As she came close I could sense a practiced ballerina's poise in her gait. Her long slender legs appeared to be moving rhythmically on her shiny toes. She had decked her head and neck with flower garlands. A slight lurch in her movement, occasioned by a small basket of twigs and leaves she carried in one arm tugged to her waist, gave her the aspect of a nymph bearing gifts from heaven. Her face showed no consciousness of her semi-nude state in the company of a similarly attired male stranger.

"Sit down and eat these while our clothes are drying", she said dipping into the basket and bringing out from it a bunch of fresh red berries.

The effect of the opiate I had imbibed to cure my cold, the bracing breeze, the luscious juicy berries, fulfilling to both taste and appetite, and the equally delicious company of a young female bubbling with confidence and devoid of all moral and social inhibitions, had for a moment made me forget my immediate objective – finding my way back home to rejoin my loved ones. But only for a moment did this mood last.

We sat under a tree on which she had hung the linen. My heart missed a beat when a strong gust of wind seemed to be taking away our clothes together with the tree which shook violently under the assault.

"Don't squirm. Your clothes are safe", said the girl. Then, with a

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mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she added, "heavens won't fall if our clothes fly away with the wind."

"Surely, I cannot go back to my people in this", I said pointing to the girdle of leaves she had wrapped round my waist.

"Why not?"

"I shall look a savage or a mad man fit to be sent to a circus, zoo or an asylum."

"I know that in the land you come from a person is known by the clothes he or she wears. But here we are we, not our covering."

"How long more shall we have to wait for those damned clothes to dry?" I asked with a touch of impatience.

"Why are you so jumpy? Is this the way your people in the plains behave when caught in a jam?" she asked admonishing me. Then, changing her tune, she added, "by the way you haven't told me your name."

"Nakul, What is yours?"

"Nimo" she said.

She snuggled up to me and putting her arm around my neck asked "why are you in such a hurry to go back to earth throwing away this golden opportunity of living in heaven that comes to one in a million?"

The touch of her bare arm and fingers upon my back and chest electrified me. Added to that was her rose-scented breathe, coquettish smile and floral attire which made her look like a fairy queen. The sky was clear and bright. Though the Sun was hidden behind the mountains its brilliance was being reflected in many colours by the distant snows. The grass was green, trees were blossoming, birds chirping and there I was, sitting in the arms of the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. If this was my first taste of heaven who knew what greater delights awaited me in this land of gods. I fumbled for an answer to Nimo's question and said in a feeble voice.

"My parents are there and, of course, my sweetheart."

"Why don't you marry me and settle down in these hallowed precincts?"

It was too sudden. Nimo's proposal was typical of what I had read about heaven in fairy tales, folklore and mythology. Nymphs and fairies were known for their instant passion for a stranger who happened to catch their eye during their aimless wanderings in the Himalayan skies. But such favours were normally reserved for rishis in deep meditation whose faces glowed like the Sun. Perhaps it tickled the egos of these daredevil dames of paradise to test the power of their charms over holy men dedicated to celibacy. They seldom failed. Occasionally a Kshatriya king or prince lost in the woods would catch their fancy. For me, a mere low-caste mortal, it was an honour undreamt of in a millennium.

Nimo took my silence for acceptance and embraced me with great ardour.

"Come, our clothes are dry and let us put them on. Let there be no squeamishness about dressing or undressing in front of each other now that we are husband and wife", she said with a roguish smile.

"We are not married yet", I said reminding her of proprieties.

"Who says so? I asked you to marry me. You agreed and warmly responded to my embraces. If this is not marriage I would like to know what is?"

"I thought there would be a ceremony of some sort to solemnize our bond."

"What ceremony? What bond? Why do you need a ceremony and a bond to make love to a woman of your choice?"

This was heaven indeed!

We hurriedly discarded our skirts of bark and donned dry clothes. I was bashful while I did so. She couldn't care.

"Come with me to our home", Nimo said picking up her milk basket. She started walking with springy steps, singing a merry tune.

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"I found a husband in the woods today,

He can dance, sing and sleep all day."

So ran her ditty

"Nimo! Wait," I cried as she turned a bend in the slope and went out of sight, hopping and singing. It was a steep, treacherous descent. She couldn't have been more carefree on plain ground, but for me each step required my full attention.

She came back laughing, gave me her free hand and said, "Don't worry. Nobody has ever fallen from here into the gorge. There are no accidents in heaven."

We were walking on a precipitous ledge in the mountain overhanging a deep gorge through which flowed a gurgling river. Nimo told me that being born in heaven the river had been named "Brahmputra," son of Lord Brahma.

The road was slippery. Water was trickling or pouring from various crevices in the mountain and flowing under our feet to join the river.

"It all seems frightening to me. I don't think I am fit for this kind of heaven. It is so full of risks at every step," I said.

"That is the beauty of it. It keeps you alert and watchful. Not for a moment is it dull. Besides you will not have to come on this road again if you don't want to."

"What do you mean? Won't you like me to come with you when you go out goat grazing? How can I let you wander alone near those desolate peaks haunted by frightful looking Yetis whom you describe as Lord Shiva's men.

She laughed. "Here in heaven, it is a woman's job to go out. Men stay home to cook, wash, tend the cottage garden, bring up children and attend to other household chores."

"The more I learn about your heaven the more I find myself unsuited for it. You call it paradise, I call it 'topsy-turvy-dom'".

She stopped, lovingly slipped her arm under mine and looking

fondly into my eyes said, "don't be impatient my dear. You will soon begin to love this paradise."

After a long a tortuous descent which took us close to the bank of the holy river we came to a cluster of huts, situated far apart on convenient mounds beyond the reach of water during floods. The hamlet had been craftily located in an alcove shaped shelter in the towering rocks. It was surrounded on three sides by high mountains which protected it from strong winds and blizzards. Compared to the chilly grazing slopes we had left behind this place was warm and cosy, though a bit gloomy.

Nimo headed for a stone hut surrounded by a lovely garden in which flowers of many colours bloomed. I could inhale their fragrance from a distance. In a clearing in front of the house sat on the floor four very handsome young men in vests and shorts. They were playing a game of dice.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"They are my husbands."

"Husbands! Did you say husbands?"

"Yes, I have four husbands. You are the fifth. Why do you look so surprised?"

"What will you do with so many husbands?"

"Make love to them. What else is a husband for?"

"How can you be in love with five men at the same time?"

"Why not? If the queen of Bharat can have five husbands why can't I?"

"What Queen are you talking about? Never heard of a queen of Bharat and her five husbands."

"Why, Draupadi of course. The Mahabharata war has just ended. Bharat is now ruled by the five victorious Pandu brothers. Draupadi is their common wife."

My head reeled. Was it a dream? How the hell had I, a Twentieth Century man, got transposed into the Mahabharata era? The very

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thought of being one of five lovers of a woman was revolting to me, even if she was the most beautiful maiden in the world. I had heard of men having several wives but never of a woman having more than one husband.

For me it was a sudden fall from heaven to hell. I had read of numerous cases of capricious gods and rishis ejecting Yakshas and other lesser residents from heaven and dropping them upon Earth. I was reminded of the Sanskrit drama Meghdoot by Kalidas, our ancient poet laureate, about a Yaksha, who had been exiled to the burning hot Vindhya plateau for some minor misdemeanor, pining away for his dearly loved wife he had left behind in heaven. In a curious reversal of roles it was my turn now to secretly yearn for Mary, my sweetheart in Allahabad. Nimo's horrifying disclosure that she already had four husbands and I was to be the fifth had changed heaven to hell for me. Compared to it my earthly home was heaven indeed. However, having little choice in the matter I decided to play along with her wiles?

The four youths looked up when we stopped near them.

"Meet Nakul, my new husband," she said in a matter of fact way.

They stood up and, one by one, stepped forward and hugged me warmly.

"You have come at the right moment. Come and join us. We are not finished yet", said one of them.

"What game in this?"

"Don't you know? This is not really a game but a trial of luck. It will determine which of us will sleep with Nimo tonight," replied one of them.

"What a fiendish way of making love!" I said to myself.

"What if she wants to sleep with some one else?" I asked aloud.

"Why should I not wish to sleep with the winner? Is he not a man? I love all my husbands equally," said Nimo butting in.

"Then why not allot equal number of nights to each of them in-

stead of putting them on the rack every day?"

"Ah! That would be too monotonous and spoil all the romance of having five husbands."

"You should also consider the husbands' feelings."

"They love this little suspense as much as I do. Therein lies the excitement of being in heaven. Your mind is conditioned by the kind of dull existence you and your ancestors have lived on earth for thousands of years. You are creatures of routine. You want to live for a thousand years so that you can repeat the same drill with the same set of people day after day, night after night, till the end of Time. You are slaves of habit because you take life too seriously. For you every activity is a ritual ordained by God. Even a minor deviation is sin for you. The gods in heaven are amused to watch your attachment to form. By contrast, for us life is fun, not a sacrament."

The boys winked at each other and threw away the dice. Nimo understood their meaning.

"Here is an example of what I mean. These gentlemen are saying this being your first night as my husband they will dispense with the dice ceremony and let you sleep with me tonight."

The boys were laughing. I looked stupid and sheepish.

She took me into the hut. It was a long room. On the floor were spread six straw mattresses. The one at the far end was a double bed.

"I sleep on that one" Nimo said pointing it to me.

"Do all your husbands sleep in this room every night?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. Where else will they sleep?"

I gave up. The very idea of sleeping in the same bed with Nimo with four other males present in the room was too ridiculous to contemplate. Fortunately for me just then I heard voices of children outside. The next moment they were inside the room, running towards Nimo, crying "Ma".

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“Come children, meet your new father,” she said welcoming them. She picked up the youngest one and hugged and kissed him.

“Our fifth father”, shouted the eldest, a girl of about eight. She jumped into my arms and kissed me on both cheeks.

I fainted.

“You are trembling my son” said the sage as I opened my eyes at the end of the trance.

“Yes, Swami I have been through a nightmare. I don’t know why you put me through this terrifying experience.”

“Oh, What a beautiful dream! I wish it had never ended,” murmured Mary as she came out of the same trance cast on both of us jointly by the holy man.



2

When Stars Meet History Repeats

Mary and I had gone to the visiting South Indian divine, Swami Bhragunanda, for spiritual help to make good the only shortcoming in our otherwise happy married life, the absence of a child of our own.

By the side of the saint, sat in a meditative pose a charming young woman wearing a saffron-robe.

The room in Allahabad where we sat on mats spread on black tiled floor looked quite ancient. Its roof of wooden beams was supported by ornately carved pillars, also of wood, placed between the walls. The room had been painted dark blue with thick oil paint, perhaps to absorb the grime, smoke and soot emanating from the dozen or more earthen oil lamps placed on pillars and walls. Reached

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through the inner courtyard of a several hundred years old haveli, after negotiating several lanes and by-lanes in a crowded cluster of temples along the holy Ganges, the room was dark in the forenoon when we visited the saint.

For a moment, on entering the blind sanctuary an hour earlier, something had hit me in the inside of my brain and I thought I would faint. The culprit was a highly toxic mixture of a variety of fragrances issuing from burning herbs and incense in the room and the stink from the pile of garbage dumped on the street pat opposite the main entrance door of this ancient mansion. I steadied myself by putting one hand on Mary's shoulder and the other on the brass knobs fitted all over a door of thick, stout, wood. This was the only opening for light and air which connected the room to the outside world through a wide, low-ceilinged, verandah and a small courtyard. We had to adjust our eyes to the darkness that contrasted with the light of earthen oil divas illuminating the faces of our hosts and the holy book placed before them.

"Jai Vaastu", said the sage as we walked in.

"Tathastu", said the young woman assisting him.

"You desire a son? Asked the holy man who had been briefed beforehand about the purpose of our visit by a friend who had fixed our interview with him.

"A child, male or female doesn't matter," replied Mary.

"Fine, so much the better. Vaastu Yoga will give you what you want provided both of you follow its commands."

Mary looked at me. I nodded.

"Nakul and I will do whatever you suggest to accomplish our heart's wish to have a child", she told the monk.

"Will you be prepared to leave Allahabad if our planetary calculations require you to do so?", the saffron robed maiden, asked?

"Leave Allahabad!", both of us exclaimed.

For us it was a Hamletian question, whether to be with a child of our own by leaving Allahabad or to continue to live childless in our beloved city. Though not our home town this was the place where

we had lived and loved for more than two decades since our college days. It was our little heaven. For us heaven would not be heaven if it was not in Allahabad. To both of us it looked as if our hostess was asking us to take another birth to be able to give birth to a child.

"How can you be sure that I shall conceive if we leave this city for the fulfillment of my wish to become a mother?", Mary asked.

"My Bhrgusangita has never failed me," said the monk, gazing fondly at the large Sanskrit tome placed before him on a small marble stool overlaid by a silk cloth. It was a thick bound book of the size of five volumes of Encyclopedia Britannica put together. Its pages were of faded bark of Bhoj tree. The large size characters were evidently written in indelible ink, using a quill, in olden times. The book inspired awe and reverence by its sheer antiquity.

Can't you see that if you only apply the fundamental Law of Vaastu Yoga enshrined in my Bhrgusangita your problem is solved."

"What Law?"

"That History must repeat itself"

How?

According to the cyclic law of our great science the wheel of Time keeps spinning in circles. What has happened once in our history must happen again and again. You are part of that wheel.

Mary questioned him. "How does this Vaastu Law apply to our case?"

The Swami frowned. "Do you know what day it is?"

"Yes, May 1, 1962."

"I am not referring to your English calendar but to our cosmic almanac of movement of the stars in heaven."

"I did not know there was such a calendar."

"You will know now since you happen to be our first visitor on this momentous day in the history of our planet."

"What is so historic about this day."

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"It marks the beginning of the Ashtagraha Katu Yuga. It is the day when all the eight planets in our cosmic astronomy are seen in conjunction. Do you know what that means?" He asked with a menacing stare.

"No"

"It means war or pralaya (the Deluge). The two epic wars of Lanka and Mahabharata, when God had to come down from Baikunth Lok and take birth on Earth, first as Rama and then as Krishna, were fought under the shadow of a similar rare concatenation of these heavenly bodies. It heralds an era of catastrophic events throughout the country such as a historic battle, famine, pestilence and death of the King."

The priest's observations confused us. "How is all this connected with our visit to you to find a spiritual remedy for our childlessness?" Mary asked him.

"The fact that you have been sent to me by a divine power at this auspicious moment of the dawn of a new era is clear indication that the answer to your problem lies in your moving to a place where you two lived together during the period of a similar conjunction of the eight planets. My guess is that very probably both of you were husband and wife during your incarnations in the times of Rama and Krishna. The same intuition suggests to me that you had children then. All that you have to do now is to allow history to repeat itself."

Swami paused to watch our reaction to his startling theories. We sat passively, our minds vacillating between hope and despair, faith and disbelief.

Casting a reverent glance at the holy book he said, "It contains the past and future of every man, woman and child who comes to seek its guidance."

"I thought Vaastu Yoga was a new fad floated by a fake guru. It had nothing to do with Bhrigusangita, our most ancient book, Other saints known to possess copies of this book do not link it to Vaastu." I ventured to say.

"That is why their prognosis goes wrong", retorted his female

disciple with a sneering smile. "Remember, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and that God was Vaastu who has manifested Himself as Cosmos. It was by unraveling the mysterious code of Vaastu that ancient seers were able to write the Bhrigusangita. Only the person who knows this code can read the book correctly. Others are mere pretenders."

"How many other gurus know this secret code?" Mary asked

"Our Baba is the only one"

I was struck by the pink aura surrounding the charming moon-like face of the tall slim maiden who from her graceful figure could well have been mistaken for a talented dancer. Her melodious voice carried conviction.

The monk became grave and said, "normally I would have sent you away with a polite shrug asking you to seek help somewhere else. But, as I told you, today is a special day. I shall use my rare siddhis to take you on a journey to visit your past incarnations during a similar conjunction of the planets.

"Shall we travel in our bodies as we do in an aeroplane."

"No your bodies will remain here. Only you two will go on this unique odyssey in Time that no man or woman has undertaken before."

"Are we different from our bodies?"

"It is not the appropriate time, my son, to ask this question. Everything will become clear to you on your return. For the present all you have to do is to sit motionless, facing me."

Mary seemed eager to go through the unique experience but I was frightened.

"Baba, if I am unable to stand the sight of those horrible times I might faint and die," I pleaded.

The swami thought for a moment, then said, "I shall give you the option to come out of the trance whenever you are on the verge of collapse. While taking them on a flight to higher planes of consciousness I give my devotees a dual identity to make sure that they retain a faint awareness of the present as happens in a dream when

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one seems to be living two lives at the same time. I promise you that if ever you experience a shock while visiting your incarnations in bygone days, you will wake up with a start as from a nightmare."

This reassured me and I joined Mary on this unique flight into our past. In no time we found ourselves transported in spirit near Lord Siva's abode on Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas, where Mary was cast in the role of Nimo the shepherdess and I, somehow, operated as a Twentieth Century tourist who had strayed into the age of the Mahabharata war.

* * *

"You are trembling my son" said the sage as I opened my eyes at the end of the trance.

"Yes, Swami I have been through a nightmare. I don't know why you put me through this terrifying experience."

"Oh, What a beautiful dream! I wish it had never ended," murmured Mary as she came out of the same trance cast on both of us jointly by the holy man.

"Nakul! You have spoilt everything. It was so beautiful, so perfect in the most perfect of all worlds when you dashed everything by going into a faint."

What with my own traumatic state, her wild accusation irritated me.

"What perfect world are you talking about?" I asked brusquely.

The Mahatma intervened.

"Both of you have been together on this journey into the past to the days of the Mahabharata war when you two were living like today, as husband and wife in a shepherded clan in the vicinity of Mt. Kailash and Lake Mansarovar. The girl Nimo whom you married according to the custom of the day was none other than a past incarnation of Mary. By a strange coincidence your name was the same as it is today. This is how history keeps repeating itself in small things and big."

I had heard enough. The monk's revelations only added fuel to the fire that was burning in my heart. Venting my fury on May I said,

"So you enjoyed having five husbands at the same time. I did not know you had such promiscuous yearnings for sexual relations with other men lurking in your mind. Were you not revolted by the idea of sleeping in the same room with five lovers every night? You thought it was great fun. This is your idea of heaven."

"For heaven's sake stop this drivel, Nakul have you forgotten the children we had there," she replied.

"You had them. Not me. It was so sickening to have that stripping, whom I didn't know from Adam, call me father, jump into my lap to hug and kiss me."

"Oh! They were so cute. How I wish our dream like experience could come true today so that I could still have those little ones skipping and prancing around me."

"And also, so that you could sleep with as many men as you liked. If such licentious behaviour is all you get in heaven, this hell is all right for me, with or without children, I said rising from my seat.

Mary caught my arm and pulled me back to the floor. I slipped and nearly fractured my hip. Ignoring my groans she said.

"Can't you see Nakul that those were different times when people's attitudes to marriage and sex were entirely different? Why could you not look at those happenings in the context of that age?"

"You would not say so if you were Nakul and I Mary."

"It is not that Nakul. It is your jealousy that is hurting you. If you have any fault it is this extreme possessiveness of yours. You are the kind of man who is jealous of his own shadow."

"Who wouldn't be jealous with a wife like you to watch? It all comes back to me now. Those trips of yours to Calcutta, ostensibly for research, coinciding with your favourite colleague Prof. Bhattacharya's visits to that city, his home town, your fraternization with your research students, specially that young Punjabi who is always in and out of our house and..."

"Stop" cried Mary. "These false slanders against perfectly respectable people are a reflection of your own guilty mind. It is you who

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have been chasing women in Allahabad as if that was your only job as a newspaper reporter. What about that month-long trip to Sewagram, supposedly to attend a Gandhian camp but actually to have a good time with your former sweetheart, Sujata, who was also going there?"

"You have no right to bring Sujata into this dirt. She is a saintly woman."

"I know you are all saints, you Indian hypocrites. It is only we Europeans who are sinners in your eyes", said Mary bursting into tears.

The Swami noticed that our husband – wife slanging match was becoming too acrimonious. He raised his hands to quiet us and said:

"Look friends, I am a religious man. You will pardon me if that also makes me superstitious. Though you did not plan it that way, it so happens you are my first callers on this most auspicious moment of Ashtagraha Katu, the rarest of rare occasions in our Vedic astronomy when all eight planets are seen in conjunction. It heralds the dawn of a new era in history. I do not want your present visit to end in a fiasco. It would be a bad omen for my business. This is why I am offering you a visual demonstration of how history repeats itself.

"So, you want us to live near Mt. Kailash?" I asked.

"No, far from it. We have to look for similarities, not identical situations.

"What place in the civilized world could be similar to those barren snow peaks?" Mary said feeling frustrated.

"Our astrological 'stars' called 'grahas' govern our behaviour, not our physical surroundings. Their target are the people whose minds they control in a subtle manner."

I was alarmed by what on the surface appeared to be an innocuous observation by the monk.

"Sir", I said, "Your statement implies that once we move from Allahabad to the place of your choice our attitudes will change."

"Yes, my son. They will alter but in a very subtle manner. On the surface you will always be the same Nakul and Mary."

"It could mean that our feelings, emotions and attitudes in general will be like those of Nimo and her fifth husband whom we met during this trance-like journey into ancient times." I said.

"You may possibly be right."

"My attitude towards Mary and hers towards me could change.

Our love for each other may lose its ardour", I said persisting with my question.

"Nothing in this world is permanent, my son. Everything changes. You have to be prepared for it."

"Then I do not want a child at any cost, holy father. Mary is my world. I cannot afford to lose her love at any cost."

Mary flushed with joy on hearing my spontaneous declaration of my deep love for her. She drew close to me and putting her arm round my neck said,

"What has put this silly idea in your head, Nakul? Our love has stood the test of time. No one can destroy or even dilute it, not even the stars in heaven."

For from being thrilled I was disturbed by her remarks. "Don't mock the gods, dear. They always have the last laugh and could turn you against me in a jiffy. For me your love is everything. I cannot live a moment without it. Don't make light of it by challenging the divine powers who guide our destinies," I told her.

"I would like to see them try."

"What if they make you another Nimo?"

"Nimo is a plain village girl. I see nothing wrong with her."

Her reply disturbed me. She had touched a sore wound in my heart. Forgetting all the loving words we had exchanged a moment ago, I said. "A woman with four husbands, ever ready to add to the list the next man who happens to catch her fancy. And you call that promiscuous flirt a plain village girl!"

My remarks infuriated her. She retaliated in kind. "Oh Nakul!

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how could you ever allow such cheap thoughts to enter your mind? I am ashamed of you. Do you think I shall start running after other men if we moved from here?"

The kind hearted Baba Bhrigunanda noticed that we were again lapsing into a slanging match and reprimanded me. In his eyes, the fault was all mine.

"If this is the way you treat this saintly European lady I am must admire her patience in sticking to you all these twenty years.

"Young man, the trouble with you is that the world is too much with you. You are the kind of man who must cling to every thing in your grasp. This is why you were so obsessed by your present identity even during your trance, while Mary had let herself go. I have a remedy for that failing of yours. You are not the man for the times of Lord Krishna, the darling of the Gopis of Vrindavan, where women enjoyed all the freedom undreamt of elsewhere in Aryan Society. Instead, I shall now send you to your past incarnation during the still earlier conjunction of the eight planets which heralded the great Lanka war. It was the age of Lord Ram when men were men. Ram's father, Dasratha, had three wives and his enemy Ravana, had hundred. Let us see how many you had then.

"This time I shall not give you a dual personality which kept you dimly conscious of your present identity while you were visiting your past in the Mt. Kailash region. You will lose all consciousness of today's world in this dream journey into the hoary past."

Before I could protest the Swami had waved his wand and we were in a swoon again.

* * *



3

A Unique Manhunt

“Man!” Shouted the women in unison to express their joy on sighting what they had been longing to see ever since they landed several weeks before as refugees on an island neighbouring Lanka in the Indian Ocean.

The four females were part of an armed contingent of several hundred young war widows from Lanka who had been scouring the territory in search of lovers they could marry and settle down with. Their husbands had been killed with almost the entire adult male population of Lanka in the battle between Ram and Ravana. At last their hunt of several weeks had been rewarded by this first sighting of a male of the species though of a different race, on the forested lower slopes of a mountain. They called it the Luminous Mountain’ because its upper part consisted of barren, incandescent

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rocks which radiated a bright glow day and night.

The moment he saw them the native islander whose name was Neal dashed to the nearest tree and climbed to its top.

Charmed by their discovery the alien visitors who were armed with bows and arrows ran to the tree, like a group of huntresses after their prey, surrounded it and looked up.

"Come down", shouted Nora, the youngest member of the group. She was their leader. A daughter of Lanka's royal family, her companions addressed her as Princess Nora. They belonged to the race of Rakshasas, or demons, so called because of the voracious appetites of its members for the flesh of all animals, including man.

Nora recognized Neal as a member of the monkey-faced Vanara race. Another branch of Vanaras living in Kishkindha on the southern tip of India had defeated her clan of Rakshasas in the Lanka war. Neal, however, was a primitive tribal youth who had no part in Lanka's war with the Vanara kingdom, no member of his tribe having ever set foot outside the island.

The fugitive kept crawling up a thick branch to hide behind its leaves. In his mind he had no doubt that he was merely gaining time by this device. Very soon those Rakshasis would shoot him down with poisoned arrows and eat him up. Unluckily for him the tree he had climbed had no close knit neighbours to enable him to hop from tree to tree and effect his escape.

Neal waited with bated breath for the Rakshasis' arrows, lying prostrate upon a sloping, leafy branch to protect himself from the imminent assault. Minutes passed without any action from his pursuers who were making noises the meaning of which he could not make out. He peered through the leaves and was surprised to see that all four of them had dropped their weapons on the ground and were making friendly overtures beckoning him to come down. They smiled, laughed, danced, sang and blew kisses at him to assure him



Caught at last!

A Unique Manhunt

of a warm welcome. When this did not work, Nora made amorous gestures at him. She bared her breasts and threw the garment she had taken out towards him. It got stuck midway in a branch. The hunted tribal youth watched these histrionics from behind the leaves without stirring an inch taking them to be baits to lure him, so convinced was he of the sinister intent of the female demons to devour him.

Hours passed. The status quo continued. The sex-hungry women would not lightly let go their prize catch, nor would the trapped Vanara youth dare to risk his life by yielding to their blandishments. Once he came down he would be at their mercy. To him they belonged to a different species of living beings. He or his ancestors had never seen one animal eating the flesh of another. All residents of the island had equal right to live. Judging from the gusto with which the marauding horde of female invaders had been pouncing upon any animal or bird they could catch, and turning it into an item of food within moments, he could see no reason why he would be treated differently once he fell into their hands.

Ravenous eaters that they were, by the evening the Rakshasis felt the pangs of hunger. But they would not give up their vigil. Two of them rummaged the forest for fallen fruits which they had rarely tasted in their new habitat, their appetites being always satiate with a more lively fare of meat of all varieties. They collected whatever they could lay their hands on and brought it to their companions to partially appease their hunger. The meagre repast cheered them. It reinforced their resolve to stay put and tire out their quarry till he gave up and came down or just fell in their lap unconscious.

But Neal was made of different stuff. Trees were his home. He was born and brought up in their branches, could walk on them with his hands free, and fight and play with his friends games that involved jumping from tree to tree. By and by his fear had abated and by nightfall he had dozed off to sleep. He had, however, taken the precaution of creeping to a remote branch taking advantage of a

strong gust of tropical breeze that shook the forest forcing his female stalkers below to hold fast to the trunks of trees lest they be swept away by the blast. In this noisy interlude which sounded like the boom of a hundred guns the sound of the Vanara youth shifting to another location was not heard by them.

It was dark by the time the storm subsided. The rakshasis decided to stay put all night. They lay down on the grass forming a ring around the tree and decided to take turns at the watch, so that one of them was awake while the other three slept.

Neal woke up from his slumber in the middle of night and thought this was the time to make good his escape. He assumed the Rakshasa women would have given him up as a lost case and gone away to find another game to appease their hunger. Little did he know that the resolute females were afflicted by a different kind of hunger which, at the moment, only he could satisfy and that too without losing his life in the bargain. He scrambled down the branch he was on and, dispensing with the leisurely practice of gradually sliding down the trunk of the tree, swung from the tip of the lowest branch dropping straight on the weedy ground below him, a fall of about a dozen feet from the tips of his toes. It was dark in the forest. All that he could see was the outline of nearby trees silhouetted against the diffused starlight filtering down through them. Being fully familiar with the terrain he was not scared. Until the invasion of their island by the rakshasis fear was a thing unknown to all the species living on the island.

Nor was he in a hurry to move up towards the hideout of his clan in the perennially lighted barren upper reaches of the Luminous Mountain, beyond the jungle. His heart was light and sportive. The fact that he had not eaten anything since the female devils laid a siege around him did not bother him. The Vanaras were not compulsive eaters. They could stay without food and water for days. A merry tune sprang to his lips and he started humming it. The very next moment he felt a soft hand gently moving over his bare shoulder. He

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leaped three feet from the ground only to fall into the waiting arms of another young woman. By then the females had formed a circle around him to pin him down. But unarmed they were no match to his agility. Placing his hands on the shoulders of one of the girls he performed a double leap and was out of their ring. The maiden uttered a scream. Before they could react to his unexpected manouvre he had reached a tree some distance away and was half-way up its trunk to seek shelter in its branches. The females were barely able to identify the tree he was scaling in the dark.

The girl he had used as his prop to catapult himself to safety over the heads of his captors was none other than Princess Nora, the alluring wide-eyed leader of the bunch of four love-sick maidens. Being the youngest among them she was also more sprightly and impulsive. The impact of the sudden thrust of the full weight of the youth's body as he levered himself over her bare shoulders for a brief moment had sent a thrill down Nora's body from head to foot. After a momentary shock she felt exhilarated. Her bosom swelled, spine tingled, legs trembled, cheeks flushed and eyes glared in the dark. This was just the kind of masculine touch she had been missing and vaguely pining for in Lanka, now that the demon kingdom had been deprived of young males by the disastrous war with the prince of Ayodhya.

She led her group to the tree Neal had climbed. They squatted around it for the rest of the night without a wink of sleep. As the first rays of dawn covered the Eastern horizon over the ocean, with its bright, gold-laced spectrum of colours and enveloped the sky in their haze, the contours of their immediate surroundings became visible to the girls. Nora shifted her dreamy gaze upwards to look for the loved object among the leaves of the tree. She spotted him sitting awake and alert in a safe cleft amidst a cluster of branches a few feet away from where they joined the trunk.

Nora now proceeded to execute a plan she had worked out in the long hours of her patient vigil during which her mind's eyes had

been seeing varying images of her fancied lover. She had but a fleeting glimpse of the blithe Vanara youth the previous day before he clambered up the nearest tree on sighting the rakshasis. The women had to choose between two options. They could wait patiently under the tree until Neal gave up through sheer exhaustion. But Nora was afraid that this strategy might be injurious to the poor boy's health. He could even fall down due to fatigue and hunger. The very thought of losing him in this manner made her shudder. Her second option was to reach him in his leafy lair. This meant climbing the tree. During her riotous youth, in days when Lanka ruled the world, she had tried her hand at every sport and frolic. She could dance, sing and outpace a colt in a race. The only athletic skill she had not acquired was that of climbing a tree. But now, spurred by a strong emotional urge to reach the cherished object of her heart, she decided she could do it, though in a devious manner.

Accordingly, Nora made one of her companions sit hunched like a frog close to the trunk of the tree. Then she made a second girl climb on the back of the first and sit likewise. Using the third girl as a prop, she hopped on top of the other two. Standing on this human ladder Nora was thrilled to discover that, true to her earlier mental calculations, by merely stretching her arms upwards she could bring the lowest branch of the tree within her grasp. She let herself swing from the branch and, using her gymnastic skills, heaved herself over it by taking a somersault in the air. The boy was now barely five feet away on another branch. He was watching and debating whether he should climb higher to increase the distance between them. Nora looked at him with love-lorn eyes and stretched out her arms as an expression of her desire to embrace him.

The young man was unable to read the meaning of her gesture. He knew that unarmed she could not harm him. He could throw her down if she tried to grapple with him. But this would mean inviting an armed assault with poisoned arrows from the girls standing below. Nora's endearing smiles, bubbling youth and graceful

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figure could not allay his fears. He decided to wait. Sitting on the branch Nora crawled upto the trunk and used it as a support to stand up. She could thus reach Neal's branch and hold it in her hands, assuming that by performing one more somersault she could reach Neal and sit by his side. The hasty move nearly cost her life. As she swung her body up and put her toes close to Neal her hands lost their grip and feet slipped. The next moment she was in the air in a free fall. Neal's observant eyes saw everything. The Vanaras were used to such happenings. The tragic sight instantly stirred the youth's whole body into action. He swung down with lightning speed, tightening his legs around his wooden perch, and simultaneously threw his hands around Nora's waist.

The whole thing was a split second action which no phantom, demi-god or Devil's agent could equal. The girl was dangling in his arms like a corpse with her hands and feet drooping towards the ground. It needed another Herculean feat by Neal to lift her and place her safely by his side on the tree joint while his feet still remained entwined around the branch. Neal had completed the whole 'operation rescue' within a few seconds only to discover that Nora had fainted from the shock. He lifted her, put her on his back like a sack of grain, fastening her arms around his neck, and descended from the tree, ignoring the risk he was running by exposing himself to the armed rakshasis waiting on the ground. He resembled a female monkey carrying her baby.

On reaching the base he laid Nora on the grass and would have certainly tried to run away or climb a tree again had the girl regained consciousness. He was saddened by the sight. In some way he considered himself related to the tragedy and even responsible for it. The other girls gathered around their friend and started crying. He tried to calm them by signs and muttered a few words suggesting that he would bring a herbal remedy to restore Nora to life. They understood. The moment he left Nora smiled, opened an eye and winked at her companions meaningfully before feigning un-

consciousness again. The girls were overjoyed. Their leader was safe and close to success in the mission of hooking her man.

The Vanara returned within a few minutes with a bunch of herbs. Crushing them between his palms he asked for water. One of the women emptied a vase shaped iron case containing their arrows, ran to the nearest stream with it and returned after filling it with water. Neal slipped his hand under Nora's neck, made her sit up with his support and pushed the herbal mix into her mouth with his fingers. One of the girls forced several sips of water down Nora's throat to help her swallow the medicine before Neal laid her back on the grass. When the remedy produced no effect her companions started crying. "Let us carry her home", said one of them.

Neal raised his hand to stop them. In one quick move he thrust both his hands into Nora's elbows, lifted her limp body and flung it on his back. Her chin was reclining on his shoulders, cheeks touching his face and buttocks resting on his palms folded behind his back. The girls picked up their weapons from the grass and led the way.

What Neal could not see but the three girls could were Nora's open eyes and smiling lips. The girls who were privy to the cunning feint made a pretense of deep sorrow over their leader's plight. They led the way and Neal followed with his precious burden. Little did he know that with her free hand and eye movements Nora was directing her friends to a place of her choice where she could tackle her unsuspecting victim in her own way. It was a long trek of five miles through hills and dales, across streams and rivulets and, at intervals, via jungle terrain. Neal bore Nora's weight throughout the two-hour ordeal without a murmur. Not once did he put her down or halt for rest, being anxious to reach her to her relatives before it was too late. His guilt complex for being the cause of her misadventure was gnawing his vitals. This was the least he could do to expiate his crime.

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His penitent mood brought about another subtle change in him. The burden he was carrying was heavy but it was also soft. Nora's warm cheeks were touching his, her breasts which she had already bared earlier during the previous evening, were tickling his naked back and her breath exuded a fragrance that was soothing to his strained nerves.

"Surely, such a soft creature cannot be a man-eater," he said to himself. He had been wrong in assuming that she and her friends were after his flesh. Then why were they chasing him? Perhaps they had something important to say. May be they needed help. Or, perhaps it was their first contact with a member of another race on the island. Secretly, he began to desire a closer relationship with Nora. It seemed an impossible dream since she belonged to a superior race which had the power to destroy all life on earth. The longer he felt the gentle throbbing of Nora's heart on his back, the more his flesh tingled with a longing for her. He tightened his grip on her hand. It was limp. Nora was too clever to react and betray any sign of recovery that might induce him to put her down and run away.

On her part Nora was enjoying every moment of her piggyback ride, this being her first intimate contact with the male muscle ever since the fall of Lanka. And what muscles! A Tarzan's arms could not have been more masculine. The force with which he had plucked her from the jaws of death in mid-air while arresting her fall from the tree had sent a thrill through her body that would remain implanted in it all her life. The nimbleness with which he had brought her down to the ground hopping over branches and sliding down the trunk backwards, while holding her tightly clasped to his body without letting her feel the jolts on the way, as if she was a feather placed on his back, betrayed his Herculean strength. And now the ease with which he was carrying her showed him to be a dynamo of inexhaustible energy, a fraction of which was racing through her body like an electric current. Every pore of her skin from chin to waist, was throbbing with the thrill of his magnetic appeal. Then

there was his chivalry of which she could find no parallel in her memory.

Neal was the first human being the Rakshasis had seen on the island ever since they arrived on it three months ago. Nora was conscious that for some reason he appeared to be mortally afraid of them. Perhaps he and other members of his race saw her tribe as enemies and were hiding from them. Yet to save her he had put his own life at risk by placing himself in their hands. The more she thought of him the more her bosom swelled with the desire to possess him. In Neal providence had sent her its choicest creation to appease her soul's yearning for a lover. She knew she would have to work carefully to conquer his heart. This was why, unseen by him, she had cleverly directed her companions to take him to an isolated part of the island where no one would come looking for them.

The place she had selected for her rendezvous with her deemed lover was a cave on a promontory overlooking the Indian Ocean. Its base was being lashed incessantly by strong waves, some of which kept occasionally rising over high rocks and splashing all over the cave. The undulating slopes of fertile land behind the rugged shore line were covered with palm and coconut trees and a variety of tropical flowering shrubs. A natural underground spring had formed a pool of clean water in a bowl shaped projection in the mountain at the foot of the cave. From there it spouted like a waterfall into the sea. The rock jutted on a luxurious sandy beach running along the coast as far as the eye could reach. To enter the secluded cave the party had to first climb down to the beach and then walk up a natural snaky staircase. The mouth of the den being large, the warm, sodden sea breeze flowing freely through it was suffusing the room with an erotic aroma considered ideal for inducing a romantic languor in young hearts. Nora was already in the seventh heaven of happiness when Neal laid her gently on the stony floor of the cave, polished for millions of years by wind and rain.

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Imagine Neal's astonishment on finding no other human being, nor any mark of habitation inside or outside the forbidding rocky hollow. Little did he know that this was only the beginning of the historic drama of which he was to be the hero.

He stood watching her for a while, hoping that by then she would have revived from the faint. For the first time he was seeing her with the eyes of love, free from the fright which had haunted him since his encounter with the young rakshasis the previous day. Nora's feeling touch had inspired a softer emotion in him. This was as it should have been. It was the way of all flesh. Nora knew it. The more Neal gazed at the sleeping beauty the more he liked her. Lying straight on her back with her legs crossed she looked like a mermaid emerged from the sea. But for the skirt covering the well rounded curves of her hips, her body was bare displaying her smooth dusky skin shining in the glow of the mid-day Sun. She had already discarded her upper garment and thrown it at Neal in the forest in a fit of passion the day before.

A feature of her attire which he had overlooked completely in his excited state was the gold and diamond jewellery with which Nora was decked from head to foot. Lanka had been known to be a city of gold. Its palaces and domes of big mansions were said to be plated with the yellow metal. The Rakshasas and rakshasis routinely adorned their bodies with a surfeit of diamond studded golden rings, necklaces, wristlets, waistbands and anklets. Nora and her three friends had done likewise. Unlike the other girls she also wore a tiara round her forehead which marked her out as a princess. A blue diamond piece sat on the tip of her nose. A long bejeweled gold pendant suspended from each ear was touching the floor as she lay before him feigning unconsciousness.

Like his compatriots Neal had never seen or heard of gold or any other form of jewellery. If the Vanaras chanced across a shell, bead or a radiant stone they used it for medicinal purpose. They could capture the invisible energy vibrations that emanated constantly from

every object, animate or inanimate. They believed that there was no disease that could not be cured by a proper matching of these energy waves with those of the diseased person. According to their medical science deficiency of the primal 'vital energy', which animated all life and manifested itself in various forms in different elements, was the sole cause of physical and mental ailments.

Without being impressed in the least by Nora's opulence, which her ornaments suggested, Neal was struck nonetheless by the lustrous effect they produced on her personality. She dazzled like a goddess he could worship and admire. The natural radiance of her youth was enhanced manifold by the glitter of gold and diamonds all over her person. It acted on him like a magnet. He could have stood thus transfixed by Nora's alluring charms all day had she not, after a few moments, opened her eyes. He woke up with a start from his dream-like state and smiled. At last she was saved, he thought.

She asked for water.

He looked around and not finding the other girls in the cave picked up the vase shaped metallic arrow case and went out to the pool below the mouth of the cave to fill it with water. He looked around for the other females but there was no sign of them. He thought they would return soon. Meanwhile, he took the water to Nora, gently lifted her head with one hand and helped her drink the precious life saver, sip by sip, with the other.

Nora smiled as a token of gratitude and with considerable effort remained sitting without his support.

This, Neal thought, was the time for him to leave the rakshasis and go back to his tribe. But he could not leave Nora alone. He had to await the return of her friends. May be they had gone to fetch other members of their tribe, a physician perhaps. He moved to a corner of the cave near its wide entrance and squatted with his face turned towards the sea to wait for the girls.

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Nora was watching him. She could read his thoughts and knew that only a sense of duty towards a helpless female was preventing him from running away. She admired him for this.

An hour passed during which never once did Neal look in her direction. Nor did Nora for a moment take her gaze off him.

She let out a gasp.

He heard it and looked at her.

She beckoned him to come close to her. He complied.

"What is your name", she asked him.

"Neal".

"Mine is Nora".

She caught his hand and made him sit down near her. With outstretched arms she declared in a loud whisper,

"I love you".



4

Nora's Great Secret

"I am hungry", Nora said.

Neal dutifully sprang to his feet and said "Wait, I shall bring you some fruit from the groves nearby."

"No, I am coming with you", she replied holding his hand for support to rise from the ground. Together they walked out of the cave hand-in-hand and ran towards the fruit trees which were plentiful in the vicinity. Neal jumped upon the trunk of a banana tree while Nora stood below it, watching her hero with love-lorn eyes as he scaled the tree with the agility of a monkey. He plucked bunches of the fruit and threw them down. Nora caught them. He came sliding down the trunk. Leaving the bananas on the ground they ran upto a mango grove, not far from there. Nora tried to climb a small tree and swung from a branch which was looking close to her head. Her hand got hurt by a prickly shoot jutting from it between its leaves. She cried in pain, lost her grip and fell but Neal, who was

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observing her, caught her in his arms with one leap before she could touch ground.

"Not again", he said reprimanding her.

She giggled as she regained her feet and hugged and kissed him.

"Thank you. This is the second time you have saved me today. It is an omen from the gods which suggests that I must stick to you all my life for my protection", she said.

They both laughed.

The ice was broken.

Neal plied her with a delectable fare of a variety of the island's choicest fruits which were available in abundance in the groves along the beach. Their juices made a cocktail inside their stomachs and acted like a heady wine on their brains which were already under the influence of an intoxicant of another kind—their lust for each other. For some time thereafter they wandered aimlessly along the beach and in the groves and indulged in water sports in the Sea.

While they were roaming a herd of deer crossed their path. Purely for fun Nora took advantage of the confusion to hide herself behind a bush. Not finding her with him after the animals were out of the way Neal panicked and called out her name. His shouts were echoed and broadcast in the jungle by the obliging trees. A kindly deer who heard his voice and could detect in it a tone of anxiety, came running and whispered something in his ears. It took him to the clump of shrubs behind which Nora sat watching his histrionics. But she was outsmarted by her native lover through a device she could never have thought possible. That this rustic ape-faced man could commune with an animal made him look a superman in her eyes. At the same time in her heart she was highly pleased to witness a live demonstration of Neal's passion for her.

"What were you doing here? I thought you had run away from me for ever", Neal mumbled. She could see his mind was still confused. The shock of her sudden separation from him had been too great to mend quickly. She embraced him warmly and declared,

"I shall never leave you, never." Neal cheered up and responded with equal ardour to her endearments."

Vanaloore Shining

As the night wore on their cup of joy from their mutual togetherness was full to the brim. By the morning Neal was seeing Nora in a new light. Devoid of the upper garment which she had discarded the day before in the jungle, both in her dress and manners she looked to be one of the island lasses of the Vanara race, if only more pliant and forthcoming than the native beauties in expressing her emotions with spontaneity and passion. In fact she was like a flute in his hands on which he could play any tune he liked.

True to the Vanaras custom they had slept in the open on the beach and experienced the Bliss of true love with heaven as the sole Witness. Nora had woken up before Neal who was lying by her side. She did not wish to disturb him but curiosity made her raise her head by leaning on her elbow to have another look at her lover's face in the first rays of the golden dawn which was smiling at her from the Eastern horizon over the ocean. Neal had the expression of a man lost in the seventh heaven of peace, calm as the sea, his breath rhyming with the sonorous music of its waves which was playing on his ears like a lullaby. The gentle sea breeze blew Nora's freely flying hair over his face, tickling his eyes and cheeks and partly blocking his nose. It disturbed his breathing. He sneezed, opened his eyes and was delighted to see his sweet heart lovingly peering at them. She smiled but felt guilty of having woken him up from a deep slumber.

"I am sorry my dear I woke you up."

Neal grinned, hugged her to his bosom and said. "This is how I would like to be woken up every morning."

"All your life?" Nora asked raising her head slightly from his chest and staring at him mischievously.

"Yes, all my life."

"Done", she said.

They sat up and gazed at the landscape around them.

It was here, in the rising dawn of a new era in her life, that Nora revealed to her lover the great secret of her past.

A popular tune of customary morning obeisance to the Sea God

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had sprung to Neal's lips. Nora joined him and sang it to perfection. Neal beamed with admiration on this surprise discovery of yet another Vanara trait in his beloved. It suddenly occurred to him that ever since she first opened her lips in the cave the previous day to declare her love for him, she had been talking in the language of the Vanaras. And yet till a moment before it for almost twenty-four hours she and her friends had been waving and gesticulating at him in a garbled tongue of which he could not understand a word.

"Why did you subject me to this daylong torture if you have such mastery over our language and customs, even our way of worship?", he asked.

"Therein lies the greatest secret of my younger days. If I reveal it to anyone I lose my life."

"Then don't tell me anything about it."

"No, I have to tell you and I will. If I cannot trust the first true lover I have met in all these years of my wasted youth to whom will I ever open my heart? Instinct tells me that you are not the man who can betray anyone, even if it costs you your life. Your conduct in saving my life and risking your own to bring me here is proof that my faith in your loyalty and devotion to me can never be wrong. If still you happen to the cause of my undoing, life won't be worth living any more for me, any way."

Neal listened to her in silence and became grim. He realized the gravity of the role that was being thrust upon him and in his heart pledged himself to stand by her through thick and thin, come what may.

After this preamble Nora proceeded to unfold her tumultuous past to Neal.

"First of all, let me warn you, my dear Neal, that you will be shocked beyond belief when I reveal to you my true identity. I have enough faith in your integrity to believe that if, after knowing who I am, you start hating me, my secret will still remain locked in your heart."

Neal's heart beats quickened with the suspense and anxiety Nora was inflicting on him and, while he waited with bated breath for her

to come out with facts, he declared.

"Nothing can change my love for you, even if you are the Devil himself in a woman's garb."

"Are you familiar with the name of Sarupenakha?", Nora asked him in measured tones.

"You mean that witch who, by her rash act of proposing marriage to Lord Ram, wrought the biggest war in history which brought down the great Lanka empire and destroyed the peace of this silent part of the ocean for all time."

"Yes Neal, I am speaking of the same woman."

"Why are you mentioning her name to me? What have you to do with her?"

"You may believe it or not, I am the same 'witch' It was during my wanderings for years in Vanara territory that I picked up your language."

Neal shuddered inwardly but preserved his outward calm. The great Lanka war was like a tectonic upheaval which had shaken the entire globe. Though the care free inhabitants of the secluded island of Suryadweep were not involved in it, stories of how their valiant kinsmen of the Vanara kingdom of Kishkindha had vanquished in battle the mightiest empire on earth, had traveled to them through seafarers. During the war there had been a sudden spurt in flights over their territory by the gods who are ever eager to seize the first opportunity of escaping the monotony of heaven by rushing to earth in their aerial chariots to incite kings and take sides in human conflicts. A few clairvoyant seers among the islanders had seen the whole drama of the war through their inward vision and described it to their fellow countrymen. In a display of Super human feat, Hanuman, the commander-in-chief of the Vanaras, had single-handedly torched and burnt down the golden city of Lanka, for which act he was dubbed a "terrorist" by the Rakshasas. Ever since, even like the Vanaras of Kishkindha, the residents of Suryadweep had begun to worship Hanuman as a god and other great commanders in the Vanara army as all time heroes. They were aware of the uneasy peace that existed between Lanka and Kishkindha, the two Kingdoms being located cheek by jowl facing

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each other across a narrow strait in the Indian Ocean. Earlier too the brave Vanara King Bali had trounced the mighty Ravana in a straight duel. The humiliated emperor of Lanka had to flee the battlefield and hide himself in the netherworld to escape the wrath of Bali.

But despite their heroic record in preserving their freedom, the Vanaras were not arrogant and boastful of their prowess in war. They had no empire building ambitions and simply wanted to be left alone. For them Ravana and members of his family were embodiments of evil, Sarupenakha being the worst of them all, since it was she who had instigated her brother, Ravana, to launch it. To attract public sympathy to their side the bards of the winning side had painted her in dark colours as being hideous looking, and a scheming woman of loose character.

Despite sharing the inbuilt prejudice against her in the mind of his race, Neal could see that the alluring maiden sitting before him had none of the dreadful qualities attributed to her by the chroniclers of the war. For a moment he thought she was joking.

"Even if this is not one of your pranks of which I have seen many examples since yesterday, why should your life be in danger in Lanka. The people of your nation should hail you as a goddess who played a key role in a war aimed at enhancing the glory of the empire. That Lanka lost the war is not your fault."

"It is not that, Neal. The people of Lanka still adore me as the goddess of their heart. I am in danger from the present king himself."

"Is he not Ravana's brother, Vibhishana?", Neal broke in. "He is supposed to be a saintly man, an angel in human form. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Yes, I am talking of the same person. He is my brother too. You are describing him as he is seen by our enemies because he is their man. For us he is the Chief traitor who betrayed the national cause and wrought this disaster upon Lanka. The Rakshasas hate him and regard him as a satrap of Ram, the Prince of Ayodhya who led the war and handed over the kingdom to him as the price of his betrayal of his own people."

"Does Ram want you eliminated?"

"No, Ram sits thousands of miles away. How Lanka is ruled is not his concern. He has made Vibhishana the absolute master of the great Ravana's kingdom. If there is any one Vibhishana fears in the whole world, it is me. He knows that the only person who can incite a rebellion against him and arouse the people to put the noose around his neck, which he richly deserves, it is me, Sarupenkha," she replied.

"What about Mandodri, Ravana's Chief queen? Isn't she equally a threat to him?"

"She is his prisoner, a captive. He cannot have her killed because Ram has forbidden him from acts of reprisal against Ravana's family, specially his wives".

"Why did he not capture and imprison you like Mandodri?"

"Because I would be too hot to handle for him. I could engineer a palace revolt against him. He cannot rest in peace on his throne until he knows for certain that I am dead."

Nora told Neal that if she had escaped with her life from Lanka it was because of the kindly help of Ravana's Chief surgeon Ayurvedacharya Manvantari, the only person in the whole world who could restore broken body parts by grafting new ones in place of the old. It was a divine gift bestowed upon him by Brahma. He had affixed live replacements for the parts of her nose and ears, which had been chopped off by Ram's brother Lakshman.

"Our royal surgeon made a few cosmetic alterations in my face to enable me live under a new name and personality and thus dodge the eyes of Vibhishana's spies who are prowling all over the kingdom."

"But you are still known as a princess, a title which only the king's daughters and sisters can hold."

Nora laughed. "It is not such a rare honour as you think. My brother had a hundred wives who gave birth to several hundred children of both sexes. The royal house-hold is swarming with them. There must be at least two hundred princesses. I know most of them are illegitimate, not begotten by my brother. But they are all princesses, nonetheless. The emperor's establishment surrounding his

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main palace where he sports with his wives at night, is like a fish market during the day. A visitor would not be able to withstand the loud cacophony produced by the hundreds of princes and princesses eternally embroiled in petty quarrels which serve as an outlet for their bloated egos. It was not difficult for my benefactor, the royal physician, to introduce me as a princess the group of warm migrating to this island."

"You fear they will start suspecting you and ask you inconvenient question if you revealed to them your familiarity with our Vanara language? Perhaps they would like to know where and how you picked it up."

"Yes, they are not as innocent as they look. Some of them are sharp and would at once infer that I must have spent years roaming in lands populated by Vanaras. I know that at least two or three of the nosey parkers in our group must be snooping for the king and reporting to him all that happens here."

"Do they travel to Lanka often?" "No. They do it through pigeons. Nearly all of us have brought pigeons as pets who carry our messages to our dear ones and bring back their replies."

"Does this mean that you live in constant danger to your life?"

"Yes, absolutely. I am safe only so long my secret is not out."

"Can you not take preventive measures?"

"No. We have to leave it to fate."

"Do you mind if I intercept every message from Suryadeep to the royal palace," Neal asked.

"Do you know that the punishment for waylaying a royal messenger is death?"

"I don't care. My life is yours now. I shall be happy to die for your sake."

"Tears started streaming down Nora's cheeks on hearing Neal's words of love."

She snuggled upto him and said, "You are the kind of lover I have been pining for all my life. I am grateful to God that He has sent me one before death takes me away from this world."

"Don't talk rubbish. I shall make sure no one touches a hair of your head with harmful intent while you are in Suryadweep."

"How can you be so sure?"

"From now on every pigeon leaving Suryadweep will be trailed and apprehended and killed if it heads towards the king's palace but left untouched if it goes elsewhere in the city."

"Who will do it?"

"Suryadweep is cooperative commune of men and other species. Any of our flock of Eagles will be glad to oblige us."

"Can you communicate with the other species?"

"Yes, you have already seen a demonstration of it when a friendly deer spotted you behind a bush for my sake and promptly led me to you."

"But suppose one of the girls transmits this information to the King through her family. Surely, we cannot kill all pigeon messengers. That itself would arouse serious suspicions. Once the king comes to know of my whereabouts he has only to send a boatful of soldiers to kill or capture me alive."

"I have a remedy for that too", said Neal. "Our shores are watched night and day ever since your group landed here."

"By whom?"

"By the same eagles. They will inform us of every boat approaching Suryadweep. This should give me enough warning to hide you in a safe place where Lord Brahma himself cannot find you."

Nora was overwhelmed by emotion. She thought she would be burnt to death by the flame of love that Neal had kindled in her heart by instantly pledging his life to her. All her life she had been pinning for such a lover but never met one. She was by nature a woman of steel but Neal's loving words had transformed her into a candle of wax that could melt away and get extinguished after dazzling for a short while. She collapsed in his arms and fainted.

Nora kept Neal to herself for five days. She was afraid that the violent and assertive behaviour of members of her clan might scare

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him away if she took him home with her straightaway. Patience was needed to woo him and make him love her as much as she loved him. For this some sacrifice was needed on her part. Instead of trying to induct him as her protégé into the gluttonous life-style of the Rakshasas she must herself adopt the carefree and austere ways of the Vanaras. She let herself be guided by him in every matter, be it food, sport or love-making.

Nora and Neal spent those five days and nights honey-mooning in Sun and shower, wandering in remote parts of the island as much for the joy of togetherness as to acquaint Nora with secrets nooks, caves and tunnels where she could hide in case her brother, king Vibhishana's men came looking for her. As princess Sarupnakha Nora had roamed in many lands studded with forests, rivers hills and lakes but nowhere had she seen a concentration of so much natural beauty in one place. It was as if Mother Nature had conceived this small island as her favourite offspring to whom she had bequeathed her choicest bounties and placed it in a quiet corner of the earth, away from the prying eyes of other claimants of her wealth.

Surcharged with abundant youth and romance they scaled mountains, walked through jungles, crossed eddies and waterfalls, explored underground tunnels, caves and dungeons and swam across boisterous rivers and calm lakes, with demonic zeal, defying the tropical heat. Everywhere they were greeted by flower shrubs, lotuses blossoming in pools scattered in the dales between the rivers and mountains. Polished rocks of many colours gleamed through the crystal clear water flowing over finely cut curves and ledges from the upper reaches of the hills. But what fascinated them the most were their encounters with wild groups of numerous other species including ducks, swans, peacocks, deer, cows, elephants and other non-carnivores who roamed freely criss-crossing their path where ever they went.

For Nora it was a unique experience since so far she had been seeing these dumb citizens of this island paradise as objects of food, in a hunter-hunted relationship. Now for the first time, instead of running away from her they were fawning upon her. The climax of these pleasantries was reached when they came across a large herd of elephants. Nora was scared but Neal assured her they were harm-

less and insisted on walking through the mob of animals who were moving towards them between the trees, swaying their bodies and waving their trunks in the air. As they came close to the group one of the jumbos, who was nearest to her, curled its trunk around Nora's waist and hoisted her up. She screamed with fright only to find herself the next moment seated on the elephant's neck. After her it was Neal's turn who knew what to expect and was not perturbed in the least when he received the same treatment and found himself perched on the giant mammal's head in front of her. Not being a stranger to jungle life, Nora soon got into the spirit of the sport and traveled through forests, hills and dales and across rivers on the elephant's back. It took them to the highest point in that range of hills. From there they could have a panoramic view of the island and the Sea around it.

But the object that attracted Nora's attention was a huge eagle perched on a tree on a neighbouring peak. She drew Neal's attention to it. He whistled a tune. The bird rose high in the air and then came swooping down towards them with great swoop. Instinctively Nora clutched Neal's arm and dragged him to take cover under a tree to avoid being attacked by it or, worse still, lifted away by the bird in its talons. After her recent shocking encounter with the elephant she wished to take no chances with members of the island's animal kingdom. The bird slowed down, flew in a circle over the tree and then glided gracefully to the ground, settling down near Neal's feet. He patted it on the head and it fluttered its large wings in response and squeaked in a still voice. Neal peered into the sky to the West and saw a tiny object in the ocean moving towards Suryadweep. He showed it to Nora.

"This bird is our sentinel. Members of its flock sit on this peak day and night to watch out for any boat or desperate swimmer approaching the island. They waited for the boat to approach. But before it could come close, a large flight of eagles rose from the trees in the vicinity and chased it away.

Nora was impressed. "Nowhere on the whole continent of Bharat which I have traversed on foot from Lanka to Mt. Kailash in the Himalayas have I seen such a commune where human beings and other animals and birds live as a cooperative kingdom," she said.

While she was speaking a group of sharks rose from the sea and swam towards the boat. Some of them could jump a few feet in the air. The crew of the boat saw them and reversed gear at top speed.

“You see”, said Neal proudly. “Even the Sea God is offering us his protection.”

“How did they allow our fleet to enter your waters and land on the beaches here?”, she asked.

“All these defensive measures have been put in place ever since the invasion of our peaceful island by your ravenous clan. Before this, for thousands of years Suryadweep slept in peace”, he said.

“This should reassure you,” he added that it will not be easy for king Vibhishana’s men to take you by surprise here as long as I am with you.”

Nora took a long breath to express her relief.”

In short, Nora found herself transported into a nature lover’s paradise, the like of which she had never seen before. They lolled on numerous sandy beaches, some of them miles long, and enjoyed the thrill of surfing in tidal waves striking them when the sea happened to be in an ugly mood. As they went along they braved short spells of strong winds and torrential rain which threatened to sweep them off their feet. They didn’t even seem to notice these pranks of nature as they went through them, so completely engrossed were they in each other.



5

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After five days of such blissful existence during which they did not sleep in the same place for two consecutive nights, Nora took Neal home with her to the rakshasis' colony. For Neal it was wonderland of a kind he could have never imagined in his dreams. An encampment of a touring circus group would be far less colourful and active. For one thing, having never sat foot anywhere outside Suryadweep he had seen no shelter or dwelling other than caves, trees and grasslands under the open sky. Here, spread out luxuriously over a large part of the forest on the lower slopes of the luminous mountain facing the beach, was a tented township bustling with life. While starting out from Lanka on their Voyage of hope in search of the male of the species, the rakshasis had equipped themselves in style. Their baggage ferried on scores of boats included choir mats and a generous supply of broad sheets of jute and cotton

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which they had dyed in all shades of the spectrum. What with the forest's own greenery and flowering shrubs and the multitude of small tents sporting curtains of every hue, the rakshasi's abode left Neal flabbergast with wonder and astonishment. The enterprising females had cleverly fabricated their little homes, barely sufficient for two to sleep in, with poles framed in bamboo nets and dug deep into the earth. These were fastened to trees for shelter and protection from rain and storm, and then draped by sloping choir roofs and cloth walls which hung from them like curtains.

Nora and Neal had barely entered the campus when, from the lower branch of a tree in front of them a girl jumped down and greeted them with a broad grin. Neal recognized her as one of the three of her companions who had hunted him down and cornered him in the jungle. Soon they were joined by the other two members of the group.

Nora had already warned Neal that they would not speak to each other in Vanara tongue. Instead she had formulated a small vocabulary of words common to both races and a few others specially selected from the languages of Lanka and Suryadweep to establish a working link between him and the other females of her clan. They used, in addition several universally understood symbols, signs and gestures to communicate with him.

For the Rakshasis Neal's arrival in the colony with their princess was the most exciting event in the three moths they had spent on the island. They gathered around him in strength to gaze with lustful eyes at the first specimen of a male of the local natives they had met since their arrival. They flaunted before him their dresses and jewellery which were as colourful and dazzling as the general ambience of their tiny township.

Perhaps what surprised and impressed Neal the most was the medley of animals of several species roaming between the tents. They included deer, goats, sheep, hens, ducks, cows and buffaloes. Some of them were tied to stakes. Nora told Neal later, in the privacy of her tent, that the Rakshasas were great animal lovers and could not live without their pets.

"But you eat their flesh. How can they love you?" he asked.

"No rakshasa has ever eaten the flesh of his own pet which makes the animal love his master even more, since he protects it from being eaten up by others," she replied.

* * *

It was fortuitous for the Vanaras that the female demons saw in the island's residents excellent material for satisfying their appetite not for food but sex, which was as keen as their constant longing for meat. They urgently needed virile males with whom they could mate, bring up families of numerous children and revive, if only in hybrid form, the dying race of the great rakshasas. They were not bashful or secretive about their overpowering urge to fill this emotional vacuum in their lives at the first opportunity that happened to come their way. They lionized Neal and plied him with favours and honours to make him their messenger of love to his fugitive tribe. The emissary was armed with powers to offer the Vanaras full freedom to roam the island and to limit the domain of the rakshasis to only a part of it.

Here Neal came up against a big hurdle. Try hard as he might, he could not persuade his compatriots to buy their freedom at the cost of the lives of other animals and birds who were being slaughtered in their hundreds every day by the demon women. To them one life was as good as another, be it of a man or animal. They were now being asked to accept a new paradigm for interpreting Nature's laws.

Equally repulsive was the thought of parting company with a pre-fixed number of their young males and allowing them to re-settle as husbands of the rakshasis. From the point of view of the invaders this was the only non-negotiable condition of the deal. Other matters could be sorted out to the satisfaction of the Vanaras. There again the Vanaras had their qualms. They had but fleeting glimpses of these quaint females, and the little they had seen of them had only inspired hatred and awe towards them. Seen from a distance in sunlight, their painted faces and glittering jewellery made

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them look like visitors from another planet, a species of supermen.

Till Neal enlightened them on the subject the Vanaras did not know that all the new settlers were women and that there were no men amongst them. Vanara women were known for their tenderness and emotional appeal. By contrast the new feminine breed that had now appeared on their soil, and struck terror in every heart, had more in common with ferocious beasts than with members of the human race as the Vanaras knew it. The revelation that all the new settlers belonged to the gentle sex made their conduct all the more reprehensible in the eyes of the natives. They seemed to be hardly the kind of women with whom any member of their race would like to develop an intimate relationship.

Neal was asking them to not only turn this hatred into love but go a step further and induce the cream of Vanara youth to marry these dangerous women.

"What is marriage?", asked Kona, the wise man of the tribe, when Neal went to meet his kinsmen from the Rakshasis' camp as their emissary.

"It is a ceremony through which a man takes a woman as his wife", Neal replied.

"What is a 'wife'?"

"The woman a man marries becomes his property. She cannot have sex with any other man. Her duty is to obey her husband in all matters and bring up their children according to his wishes."

This led to a lengthy debate in which Vanara women freely articulated their revulsion at the very idea of an institution which made members of one sex permanent slaves of the other half of the race.

"Why should a woman be a man's slave?", a sprightly young Vanara girl asked Neal.

"To make sure that he is the father of her children."

"What is a father?"

Vanaloore Shining

"You cannot become a mother without having sex with a man. He is the father of your child. If you are mating with more than one man how will you know which one is the father of the baby?"

"Why should anyone want to know who is the father?"

Because the child inherits his or her father's property".

"What is property?"

An elderly Vanara who was respected as a seer by the whole tribe because of his powers of clairvoyance intervened.

"It is not good for our people to know about these things. We have lived happily all these centuries without marriage, property, meat-eating and a thousand other practices of man in different parts of the world. I have visited several lands in my invisible astral body. They have many objects of pleasure and enjoyment that we do not have."

"Why can't we have them too?" asked the eager girl with irrepressible curiosity.

"Because, my dear child, we have one thing which they do not possess, nor ever will."

"What is that?"

"Happiness."

"What is 'happiness'?"

"It is good that you do not know the meaning of this word."

"Why?"

"Because you are happiness itself.

At Kona's suggestion this digression into the sordid aspects of marriage was closed at this point.

The elders of the community shuddered when they thought of the new breed of children who would spring from such inter-racial unions.

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“Demons can only breed demons,” said one of them.

“All the more reason for us to tame them. If they will be mothers we shall be fathers of those children. We shall instruct them,” Neal claimed.

“Your infatuation for that sorceress, Nora, has turned your head, I can see it in your eyes.” Retorted the elder.

“You do not belong to us any more. You can go back to that witch and leave us to grapple with our fate in our own way”, added another.

It was obvious that Neal’s mission had failed. He went back to Nora with a broken heart. He had expected his kinsmen to hail him as their saviour. Instead they had turned him away as a traitor and blackguard.

But Nora was not the one to give in easily. She appeared in person before them the very next day, accompanied by Neal. She had discarded her jewellery and donned floral wreathes to resemble Vanara women as closely as possible. But for the structure of her jaw and the mildly shiny texture of skin, she could pass off as a native. Her arrival in the upper ridges of the luminous mountain caused a flutter among the Vanaras who were distributed in caves all over the hill. It being morning they had just returned from their nightly forays into the forest in search of food and water. On a signal from Neal they staggered reluctantly to the spot which he and Nora had selected for the meeting.

Nora’s beauty proved to be her best advocate. She used it artfully to plead her case not with words but with looks and gestures. It didn’t take her long to soften the hardened hearts of Vanara youths who gaped at her in wide-eyed wonder. They began to envy Neal who had won her love. Standing alongside him at the edge of a bowl shaped plateau overlooking the azure sea, to them she looked more like a goddess than a witch or sorceress. Her face was all smiles, teeth gleaming and hair flying loosely in the ocean breeze. If the other young rakshasis were like Nora they saw no harm in mating with them. They might not be as tender hearted as their own

home bred lasses but, if Nora was a true specimen of her race, the youthful she-demons were certainly more alluring. Nora's soft skin glistening in sunlight, her large, half-exposed, heaving breasts, the shapely curves of her body and long legs made her an eminently desirable object of their passions. They just stood and gazed at this new vision that providence had sent them, all their fears of her race having vanished like mere phantoms or a bad dream.

Nora gave them ample time to drink in her beauty with their eyes. Not a word was spoken till all the elderly Vanaras, both male and female, had assembled on the spot. By then for Nora the battle had been half-won. The younger hearts had already melted in her favour.

But the elders proved to be a hard nut to crack. They would not give in so lightly. The very sight of hostile aliens strutting about their homeland with impunity was revolting to them. Nature had made them guardians of a paradise on earth. Suryadweep was a sanctuary where all non-carnivorous species could roam without fear. Here every creature had equal opportunity to enjoy life in its own way, and no one had exclusive rights to anything. Not even a blade of grass could be claimed as one's personal property. The predatory vandals who had suddenly appeared on this island of peace and plenty had turned the whole place upside down and made the Vanaras and all other species living on it fugitives in their own ancestral habitat. All these months they had been secretly devising plans to throw out the invaders. Other intelligent animals like elephants, deer, bulls and buffaloes were privy to their schemes. They were only waiting for the right moment to strike. They knew that hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of them would have to die in the attempt but ultimately, with their overwhelming numerical superiority, they would succeed.

The elders of the community looked at Nora with eyes blazing with anger and hatred. Kona, who was regarded by everybody as the wise man of the tribe, spoke,

"You want our young men to marry your women to produce a

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new race?"

"Not a new race but valiant rakshasas who will bring glory to Lanka", replied Nora.

"If you mate an ape with a tigress what will the offspring be, an ape or a tiger?"

"A child conceived and nourished in a rakshasi's womb can only be a rakshasa."

An elderly Vanara woman differed with Nora. "In our land all the boys resemble the men and girls are copies of their mothers. If rakshasis mate with Vanaras the male children will resemble Vanaras and females rakshasis."

A boy of eight butted in. "I once saw a dog mating with a cat", he said.

"And what was the result of this union?", an inquisitive old man asked.

"Nothing", the child replied.

Everybody laughed.

"So there you are", observed Kona. "Truth sometimes speaks with the lips of a babe. What if this bond between the two completely different species proves to be sterile? What will you do with our young men then? Will you not throw them out?"

"No, we shall love them all the more, since in the absence of children we shall have no one else to love", Nora replied.

The elderly woman who had spoken earlier blurted out, "Why don't you say you want our men to satisfy your insatiable lust for sex and all the talk about producing a race of warriors is merely an excuse for it?"

Her observation produced general merriment. But Nora displayed no sign of annoyance or embarrassment on her face, nor did she rebut the woman's remarks. She stood firm by her 'take-it-or-leave-it' stand with the natives.

Finally kona spoke:

"We shall accept your proposal but on one condition."

"Name it."

"You will take with you as many Vanara youths as you need for the propagation of your breed and then leave our island peacefully."

Nora was stunned.

"But we have nowhere else to go."

"Our young men will help you to find another island on which you can settle with comfort."

"How can we survive on it if we can find no animals to eat there?"

"No piece of land above these waters is totally devoid of life. Only you will not find human beings on many of them." said the elder.

"If you have no objection to our eating flesh on other islands why can't we do it here? We can promise never to attack a Vanara for food."

"Who are we to object to what you do? We did not make this world. We are too few and helpless to protect all life on Earth. We know that we cannot change the ways of nature. But we would certainly lay down our lives to protect every living being on our territory. We are all one family here."

Nora was non-plussed but she did not reject the wise Vanara's proposal out of hand.

"I shall come back tomorrow with my answer," she said.

Neal followed her tamely like a dog wagging its tail while following its master. He was now her slave and the Vanaras knew it.

The youths who had been expecting a more hopeful turn of events were disappointed. The island was their life. A brief romantic fling with the ravishing young females whom chance had thrown in their way was one thing. But being exiled with them for life to a different

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country was quite another. True, that turncoat Neal had stabbed them in the back and absconded with the devil, but they could not follow his example. They flocked around the group of wise men sitting in the center of the rocky bowl and asked them why they wished to banish them from their homeland?

"We would sooner die than leave this island," they said in unison.

Kona, their acknowledged counselor, told them that it was a sacrifice they were required to make if they truly loved their ancestral country as much as they claimed. He explained that the demon clan must be got rid of as soon as possible.

"Look at the hundreds of innocent lives we are losing every day to feed those rapacious devils. They are human only in their faces but their hearts are those of beasts. If we let them live here our culture of peace will be destroyed for ever."

"Let us fight them with all our energies and drive them out or kill them."

"The use of the word 'kill' by you shows how the presence of these rakshasis has silently corrupted our minds. The destructive vibrations of their vital energy are slowly penetrating our consciousness. If they stay long enough in our midst killing and getting killed will become the rule of life amongst us for settling all our differences or disputes. I want to avoid war and killing at all costs. Perhaps many times more Vanara youths will be killed in an all out war with the rakshasis than those we may now have to send away with them to satisfy their lust for men. But who am I to force you to make this sacrifice for our tiny nation? Mine is only a suggestion. It is upto to you to accept or reject it."

Kona's calmly delivered observation was followed by a grim silence. Then a youth spoke,

"I think I shall go along with your advice," he said.

"Me too", said another.

"We shall go with the rakshasis," said the rest of them with one voice.

"What if Nora rejects your conditional offer?", asked a senior Vanara.

"She won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have lived on this island longer than you. During this period I have had opportunities to observe people at close quarters. Shipwreck survivors have dwelt in Suryadweep for brief periods. I have found that people who consume the kind of food these demons take are ruled entirely by passion. I could see no trace of reason or compassion in their consciousness. They are single-minded in their pursuit of pleasure or what they perceive to be a desirable course to serve their individual self-interest. If it happens to be the collective passion of a group or community they act like a mob to possess what they are after."

"Do you think their craving to mate with our youths is their primary goal on this island?"

"Yes. I could feel amorous energy waves emanating from Nora pervading the atmosphere and tingling my body with sensual urges I have never experienced before in the company of our own women folk. Here lovemaking is on our minds only when it is time for it. These witches carry their erotic aura with them all the time wherever they go. Its pervasive influence has polluted the sacred precincts of our holy mountain. I can sense seductive vibrations in the airwaves rising from the rakshasis' habitat on the beach a mile below us."

* * *

The wise man's conviction that the demon girls would gladly agree to quit their homeland, taking a band of Vanara youths with them in the bargain, proved to be only partly true when Nora and Neal returned to their old stand on the luminous mountain the next day.

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It was a business-like meeting with no commotion or excitement on either side. Everybody waited for Nora to speak first after they had gathered in strength on the bowl-shaped plateau overlooking the sea.

"Today I have come to you with a counter proposal and I trust you will give it your earnest consideration," she said. She paused to allow her words to sink in the minds of her audience from whose members she expected little sympathy. During her first encounter with them the previous day she had been shocked by the intensity of their hostility towards her tribe. But she did not allow her feelings to get the better of her and maintained a suave and pleasing countenance.

"Will you allow us to remain on an allotted portion of this island if we promise not to kill any creature living on it?"

"Does this mean you will give up your flesh-eating habit altogether and live like us on roots, fruits and corn that grow in abundance here?" asked Kona, the wise elder who had assumed the role of spokesman of the tribe.

"If you really think you can so drastically change your ways and live with us virtually like monkeys we could give the matter another thought", he added without committing himself.

The young Vanaras beamed with joy. Here was hope of their escaping permanent exile. The wise man was, however, scrutinizing the faces of the other elders who were nodding their approval of his remarks.

Nora spoke. "As I understood you yesterday, you have no objection to our consuming meat so long as it does not come from your territory. We shall abide by this rule."

The elders' smile turned into a frown.

"Where else will you go for meat if you live here? There is no other place for miles around where you can satisfy your hunger for flesh," observed one of them.

"There is," replied Nora.

"Where?"

"In the sea. We can get all the food we want from the ocean without touching any animal or bird here."

"We can never agree to that", replied the old Vanara with unconcealed anger even before Nora had finished speaking.

"Why should you say that? The sea does not belong to you."

"This is something you will never understand. This island does not belong to us either. We belong to it. It is not our property. We are its children and love it as our mother. We own nothing on land or in the sea. The sea around us is equally sacred to us. The Sea God is our father even as Nature whom you see manifested on this land is our Mother. We are nourished by the Mother and protected by our Father."

As the wise Vanara had anticipated Nora was flabbergast by his reply. It went over her head completely. Though frustrated in spirit, curiosity prompted her to ask.

"Why do you call the Sea your father?" How does it protect you?"

"You are the first armed aliens to have landed on our shores with the intention of settling down on this island in all these thousands of years that our ancestors have lived here. Our folklore is full of stories of many similar attempts made by adventuresome tribes to conquer Suryadweep. Each time they were met by a stormy wave in the sea and turned away or drowned. Perhaps the Sea God made an exception in your case because you are women and he did not expect you to create the kind of havoc you have perpetrated here. But thanks to His protecting arms around us you are cut off from your kinsmen. You may be more powerful than us today. But sooner or later you will have to leave."

"Why should the Sea God be angry with you if we eat Sea food?"

"It should be obvious to you that the fish thriving in his waters are more dear to the Lord of the Sea than life elsewhere. He is both

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father and mother to them. When he hears that we have bought our safety from you at the cost of the innocent lives of his own dearly loved children he will be furious. If he likes with one strong tidal wave he can wipe out all life on our land. We live on his mercy."

Nora could offer no argument against such monkey-talk. To her it was pure bilge, the ravings of a lunatic. She refrained from reacting to the Vanara's remarks. A long spell of suspenseful silence on both sides followed. At last she spoke and gave her final answer.

"All right, Sir. You may have your way. We shall leave this island early tomorrow morning. Once you have given us as many of your young men as we need we see no reason to wait here a moment longer."

Her impromptu statement aroused both joy and trepidation in the hearts of her audience. While it was generally welcomed as good riddance from the Devil the boys heard Nora's observation as a punishment closely resembling the death sentence. They looked up to heaven and quietly submitted to their fate.

A ticklish problem arose in the implementation of the deal. The Vanaras did not know how to count, all branches of mathematics, including the basic numerals, being unknown to them. Through the ages their energies had been concentrated on learning the secrets of Nature which they had acquired from her in the manner of a child sitting in its mother's lap. She had never let them down. Their needs of life were different. They did not think of themselves as individuals with personal rights and claims as humans do. They considered themselves a part of the panorama created by Nature in the form of their island home. To them it was a living entity with a mind of its own which was exhibited in its flora and fauna, including man.

Their limited, compliant brains were occupied in probing the mysteries of nature. They worshipped trees as living species, each with special gifts of its own. They had mastered the medicinal properties of thousands of herbs and plants with which they cured themselves and fellow animals and birds of every disease. Sickness was virtually non-existent in Suryadweep. But what attracted them even

Vanaloore Shining

more towards trees were their perceived mystic powers. For them trees were divine beings whose bodies gave them shelter and spirits protected them from calamities and suffering.

They had no sense of Time since they could not keep count of days, months and years. No one knew his own age. Instinct had taught them to live in harmony with all living beings who were dying and being born all the time in a natural cycle, which made no exceptions for any species.

Mother Nature who ruled the universe had imparted to them her most special gift: her language, not the spoken dialect of the tribe but a technique of silent intuitive awareness of the feelings, emotions and intentions of other living beings. It was a faculty dormant in all creations of Nature but only a chosen few among the Vanaras had been given the key to unlock its secret chamber within their brains. Absence of conflict of interests of any kind among themselves or with other animals left room for peaceful creativity, fun and sport which occupied nearly all the time of the people.

In addition, the holy Mother had given to them the Luminous Mountain whom they worshipped as the presiding deity of the island. He was their guardian and protector. Often Mother conveyed her wishes to them through the mountain God. Throughout the ages one elderly Vanara among them had enjoyed the gift of hearing its voice. He was called the Oracle and given due respect by the residents.

Whatever he heard from the deity was accepted by the people as gospel truth since the art of lying was unknown in Suryadweep. They just did not know how to twist or invent facts.

Their women were fond of music and with their springy steps would break into dance any time of the day or night. The men loved to play on the flute to the accompaniment of a crude string instrument resembling a guitar and a drum made from the skin of dead animals. They had a natural grace, all its own. When they walked up and down the valley doing small chores, they appeared to be dancing in step with the rhythmic tinkle proceeding from their an-

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klets.

The arrival of the Rakshasis had dealt a deathblow to their Garden of Eden. Their peaceful way of life had been rudely shattered by the invaders who practiced the philosophy of 'Might is Right' in everything they did. Their first action upon setting foot on their sacred soil was to go on a killing spree. They proceeded with zest to kill and devour whatever they could catch. The Vanaras escaped in good time to their cave hide-outs in the luminous mountains. But the other species were caught in the rampage like sitting ducks.

Thus the Vanaras were like innocents in Mother Nature's lap. Their actions were guided solely by her inner promptings. Only physical verification could determine the number of Vanara youths who would have to be sent away with the rakshasis.

Anxious to clinch the issue and unwilling to take any chances, lest the Vanaras changed their minds, Nora returned within an hour to the same spot with her entire female brigade numbering over five hundred. By previous arrangement, negotiated by Neal, all of them had left their weapons behind and were completely unarmed. They knew that in doing so they were placing their lives at the mercy of the far more numerous Vanaras and their other accomplices of the animal kingdom. But Nora had acquired a silent respect for the utter honesty and truthfulness of the Vanaras. She had persuaded her tribe to trust the natives for their safety.

Gaily attired in their colourful best, decked out in diamond-studded gold jewellery and exuding the fragrance of the best perfumes of Lanka, the women came dancing and prancing with light, doe-like steps, exhibiting their youthful vigour and exuberant high spirits to the simple tribals.

For a variety of reasons Nora's demands proved to be quite reasonable to meet. Polygamy was the common practice of her race, and the rakshasis were accustomed to sharing husbands. The icon of their clan, Ravana, had more than a hundred wives. The Vanaras were relieved when she demons asked for only about hundred and fifty young Vanaras who would have between them three to

four wives each under this arrangement.

There was also an element of cunning behind the rakshasis' frugality in their request for husbands. They did not wish to be outnumbered or overwhelmed by the brave Vanaras. Nora and her three friends had been mightily impressed by the Herculean strength displayed by Neal during their first encounter with him. Though they were ignorant in the use of arms, if aroused the Vanaras could still wipe out their entire group in a surprise attack. As an extra precaution against such an eventuality the women had decided to maintain strict but secret surveillance over their husbands and to refrain from instructing them in the use of arms. It suited Neal and his captive companions since they abhorred killing and showed no interest in weapons.

The Rakshasis returned to their camp with the Vanara youths in a jubilant mood. After a night of hectic activity spent in packing their possessions in crude bundles and placing them in the boats which had brought them from Lanka, they left Suryadweep well before dawn. Guided by the Vanaras they sailed South-West-wards and landed on the shores of the island of Kontuk, equidistant from Suryadweep and Lanka.

The day after their arrival in Kontuk a solemn ceremony was held on a large clearing along the main river of the island. A big fire was lit with logs placed in a specially dug a large pit three feet deep. Amidst the chanting of Vedic mantras several buffaloes were thrown alive into the blazing fire as an offering to the fire god to seek his blessings and make him a witness to this great event which marked the union in matrimony of the two principal races inhabiting the region. The Rakshasis baptized their new husbands as members of the Aryan faith and rechristened them, adding an "ana" to their names after the style of the legendry rakshasas Ravana, Kumbhakarana and Vibhishana. In his new guise Neal became Nealana, though Nora continued to address him as Neal.

Nora appointed Neal as the Chief administrator of Kontuk. His first act was to ensure the safety of the princess. He was aware that

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the moment Vibhishana, the Lanka king, came to know that she was none other than his own renegade sister, Sarupenakha, the only surviving thorn in his side, he was sure to dispatch to Kontuk a battalion of soldiers to capture her, dead or alive. The Vanara leader had brought with him in secret two trusted Eagles who had flown unseen above the fletch which had brought them from Suryadweep. They were assigned the task of keeping a constant vigil on the shores facing Lanka. In addition, he deputed a small band of Vanaras to act as naval guards to patrol the sea routes to Lanka which was barely a day's sailing distance from Kontuk, ostensibly as a precaution against surprise attacks by pirates who operated along the shores of the Kingdom. It was, in fact, an additional safeguard to remain forewarned of any sudden move against the princess by Vibhisana.

At the same time the threat from the sea brigands was indeed real. They never eyed Suryadweep whose residents lived without any possessions whatsoever, like monkeys. But the Rakshasis had brought with them from Lanka stacks of silken clothes, gold and jewellery and weapons including bows, arrows, swords and explosive missiles. This was just the stuff that attracted robbers.



6

War Drums

It was bright dawn following a full Moon night when the Vanaras were woken up from their slumber by the cawing of eagles and other birds. They had gathered in their thousands like a dark cloud above the forested part of the Luminous Mountain overlooking the beach. Their raucous cries puzzled the Vanaras for a while. Then, in a sudden flash of enlightenment, Kona, the wise man of the tribe, identified the cause of the rumpus.

"The enemy!", he shouted at the top of his voice. With his powers of clairvoyance he could see a small fleet of boats a few hours' sailing distance away from the beach. Within a few minutes his clarion call was echoed by a thousand mouths throughout the length and breadth of the island.

Though twenty years had passed since the savage attack upon them by the rakshasis, the islanders had not relaxed their vigil. The scouts and sentinels at once took positions on high rocks to sight

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the foe. The rest of the community rushed to higher points where they had kept piles of thousands of boulders. These were arranged in terraced arcs parallel to the beach on the mountain's slopes under thick layers of wild grass, leaves and branches which served as a camouflage against detection by enemy agents.

Standing there the Vanaras awaited a signal from their leader, Kona, for sending the stones hurtling down the mountain upon the invaders as soon as they anchored their boats and moved inward on the beach.

The Vanaras stood alert to sight the enemy boats. After a couple of hours' watch in the direction of the birds' repeated flights they saw the fleet. When it came closer they discovered to their relief that it consisted of about a dozen canoes each carrying merely two passengers. The natives suspected that these would be advance guards of a larger army and decided to closely watch the visitors' movements. The first thing the Vanaras noticed about the new arrivals as they landed on the beach was that they carried no arms. Also, among them were several young women. Preferring peace to war at all times, the elders decided not to attack them. A few wise men of the tribe noticed that the face and gait of one male member of the visiting party was somehow familiar.

Half-hidden by a flowing beard and a bushy moustache, the stranger's face betrayed Vanara features. But he differed from the islanders in one vital aspect, his dress. It was similar to that worn by the Rakshasis when they visited the island twenty years earlier. It consisted of a half-shirt and a lungi made of silk. The Vanaras on the other hand, wore only a short skirt made of bark of trees and left the rest of the body uncovered. The new arrivals wore wooden sandals fitted with leather straps. Their being completely unarmed came as a surprise to the natives, since the boat people resembled the barbarian race of rakshasas who during their short stay in Suryadweep two decades earlier had left a trail of blood and massacre, of which the stains still lingered on the floor and walls of hundreds of caves on the island.

Leaving his companions on the beach the man with a familiar face walked confidently up the forest on the luminous mountain,

wending his way through the wild undergrowth with the alacrity of a Vanara. Standing deep in a coconut grove he called out the name of Kona, the wise man. His voice bounced on the surrounding trees and rang through the entire hill. Light of recognition shone in Kona's eyes as he heard his name called. The caller was none other than their own Neal, the first among the brave youths who had to abandon their homeland to liberate it from the invaders. He came down the slope running to welcome his long lost kinsman. After an emotional embrace the two walked up together to the clearing behind the stones to meet the elders collected there. They all cheered Neal and showered him with more kisses and embraces after the Vanara custom.

For a long time the Vanaras stood gazing at Neal with mixed emotions. He was the same and yet not the same man who had left them twenty years ago. He had brokered peace between Vanaras and Rakshasis. His infatuation for the beautiful young Rakshasi, Nora, the leader of her clan, had become part of the folklore of Suryadweep. The Vanaras related the story to the younger generations in their own way without blemishes. They recognized that but for his chance encounter with the demon princess resulting in a happy ending, they might have been enslaved or eaten up by the Rakshasis, or, forced to fight bloody wars with them.

Lurking in the minds of the elders was the caution that for all practical purposes Neal was now an alien. He was a member of a clan of cannibals. After the first flush of enthusiasm over his surprising reappearance in their midst had subsided they had second thoughts about him. Why had he come? Why had he brought with him this large party of young men and women? Was it a prelude to another invasion by the Rakshasis? How long would Neal and his friends stay?

These questions arose in the mind of almost every senior citizen but no one put them in words. They waited for Neal to speak.

"I have brought our children to see their ancestral home," he said breaking the silence.

"Today's children are tomorrow's fathers and mothers". Said Kona smiling.

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"They come from the wombs of those rakshasis," said a cynical elder.

"Our Vanara youths have fathered them" said a third

"Our young men went from here as slave husbands of those witches. The boys and girls Neal has brought have been trained and brought up by their mothers. They must be like them," said a female Vanara who had been listening to these exchanges with an alert mind.

Kona about summed up the mood of the elders when he said, "Let them stay and go about Suryadweep as long as they please. It seems it is the beginning of a new era in our lives. We have neighbours now and are no longer alone in our part of the ocean."

This was all Neal needed, freedom to roam the island with his friends. His companions were eager to fraternize with their native cousins. But the latter were reluctant to befriend the new arrivals for fear that it might encourage them to lengthen their stay. They might even be tempted to make Suryadweep their permanent home. A leopard does not change its spots. Sooner or later these children of rakshasis would return to their carnivorous ways and start eating up birds and animals who were like family members to the Vanaras.

Neal had his own agenda to pursue. The indifference of the locals towards his group did not unsettle him. Homecoming has its own rewards, howsoever unwelcome one may be in his native place. The realization came to Neal in the form of a rude shock. He was roaming with his party collecting fruits and plantains for their meal when he heard from a distance the loud whine of an elephant. He turned in the direction of the sound and saw the animal charging towards him at full speed. His companions ran in terror while he hurriedly climbed up the nearest tree. The tusker stopped close to the branch on which Neal was sitting. With one sweep of his trunk it lifted him and hurled him unceremoniously on its back. In a flash of intuition Neal realized that the animal was none other than Bimbo, his old friend on whose back he had spent days exploring inaccessible mountains and gorges in the heyday of his youth. While most Vanaras he came across had failed to recognize him due to his changed appearance, Bimbo had identified him from a distance the

moment he spotted him in the tourist group.

Bimbo whined and danced till, hearing his shrieks, other members of his herd came running and joined in the celebration. In a matter of minutes, at Bimbo's direction, the elephants sat down. Neal hailed his friends who rejoiced in this happy turn of events. With his help they mounted the elephants. At a signal from Neal Bimbo rose to his feet along with his herd.

The riders performed their part admirably. They were all athletes with strong muscles and elastic bodies. A fall from an elephant's back would not hurt them. Balancing themselves on the wildly swaying backs of their high mounts did not unnerve them. They enjoyed the ride. The party now resembled an emperor's safari.

The Vanaras, on their part, gave the visitors a cold shoulder and stayed away from them. Their being half-Vanaras by blood did not make the Kontuk natives look less dangerous in their eyes than their mothers whose images, engraved in their minds, still sent a chill down their spines. Kona, the wise man, however, was not completely indifferent towards the movements of Neal and his companions, as he appeared to be. He quietly set spies on their trail. The divine power that presided over Suryadweep unseen had gifted him with the faculty of communicating with the other species cohabiting the land with the Vanaras. Kona picked a small group of fast footed deer to keep track of the visitors. An old eagle was deputed to maintain aerial surveillance on their activities. Meanwhile, sentinels and volunteers manning the barricades kept round the clock vigil against a surprise attack by a large Kontuki army. They were assisted in their task by bird spies who intensified their watch over the surrounding seas. The thought that a formidable armada might any day attack their haven of peace haunted Kona and other elders day and night. A pall of impending doom fell on the residents of the colony, including the dumb species, casting its ugly shadow over their eternally frolicsome mood.

The aliens had come prepared to meet with resistance. They had brought no arms but, concealed in their baggage were pigeons who were to act as messengers to Nora in case their lives were in danger. She would then rush to their rescue with several hundred warriors

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armed with deadly weapons to storm the island and capture it. Luckily, as Neal had foreseen, true to their creed of non violence, the Vanaras proved to be pliant. They were content to be passive spectators of this new development the full implications of which they were too naive to fathom. "What must be must be," said Kona philosophically when his bird scouts reported to him that pigeons had been flying back and forth between Suryadweep and Kontuk with leaf-shaped tokens tied to their legs. From the herd of deer trailing the suspects Kona got reports that the intruders were exploring caves throughout the island. The wise man and the few elders with whom he shared this information shook their heads in dismay.

"We should send these nosey parkers away", said a Vanara to Kona when, after seven days' stay Neal's group showed no signs of leaving Suryadweep.

"We can gain nothing by use of force. If we attack them they would flee to the jungles and before we can catch them their pigeons would bring the entire Rakshasa clan of Kontuk armed with deadly weapons to our shores. We have no choice but to wait and watch. We do not know what this group is looking for on our island. Let us hope they find it soon, take it away with them and leave us in peace."

Unknown to Kona and his tribe Neal's two-point mission was proceeding famously. His first objective was to assess the quantity of luminous stone that could be excavated in Suryadweep. And the second was to find out if there were any other hills or rocks containing the precious stone buried deep in their bowels.

Members of his group had been given special training in a similar mountainous belt in Lanka. They could spot similarities on the outer surface to detect the presence of the luminous stone in every rocky region. The willing assistance given by Bimbo and his team of half-a-dozen elephants had speeded up their task. Within ten days their mission was done and they were ready to depart.

Kona and his spies could make nothing of the strange movements of Neal and his friends though he was certain that they were pursuing a definite objective. Other Vanaras merely felt that the visitors were taking those jumbo rides merely for fun.

Throughout their ten-day stay the visiting team had no direct communication with the Vanaras at any level. Its members were far from happy with the tour since Neal had forbidden them from killing any living being for food. Meat was their staple diet. It was difficult for them to survive on mere corn, fruits and roots. They were starving. There had been occasions during their excursions when they came very close to killing a deer or bird on the sly. But each time the angry screech of an elephant stopped them from committing the heinous offence against the laws of Suryadweep. Such solidarity within the animal kingdom on the island puzzled them. They saw in it a form of witchcraft. To them the Vanaras were no better than animals. They looked down upon the natives, treating them as a low breed species of man with which the civilized race of rakshasas could have no meaningful cohabitation.

Before finally leaving for home Neal sought out Kona for a long chat with him about the future of the Vanaras in Suryadweep. He tried to explain to him, step by step, in rudimentary terms, the immense value of the luminous stone to the civilized world as an energy source.

"What is a 'civilized world'?" asked Kona.

For a moment Neal was nonplussed. Then he found words to explain his point.

"Well, he said, civilized man leads a better life."

"How?"

"He eats better food and does not starve as our people do here."

"What is better food?"

"Animals and birds," said Neal hesitantly.

Kona's eyes blazed with anger as he heard these words.

"And also human flesh. Why do you omit that? The rakshasas devour human beings with the same relish," he retorted.

"Not on my island of Kontuk".

"That makes no difference. Why do you differentiate between life and life any way?"

Neal was silent.

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"What else do you have in your great 'civilization'?" Kona asked.

"We wear clothes there and do not go about naked or barely covering our genitals with bark of trees."

"What else?"

"We live in homes made of wood or stone, safe from heat or rain."

"What else?"

"Every one in our community belongs to a family with its own house, land and other belongings. Every man has wives and children of his own. They are his exclusive possession. This promotes a bond of mutual love between members of each family."

"What else?"

"Our society is divided in a rigid hierarchy of command and obedience. Disobedience can mean death. There is order everywhere. At the top of the command chain is the Princess. Below her are her advisers. Duties are assigned to each person according to his rank and field of work."

"Why should one person tell another what he should do or not do?" asked Kona incredulously.

"It is necessary for producing more wealth", replied Neal.

"Wealth for whom?"

"For the King of Lanka, of course. He distributes some of it to the others according to each person's rank."

"What is wrong with living without a king as we do? Why should we have to work to make the King rich?"

"Because he protects us from being enslaved by outsiders."

"How does he protect you?"

"By raising an army. A civilized society's first sign is its ability to defend itself. It should have adequate force to conquer others less civilized people and civilize them."

"What is an army?"

"It is an organization with a large number of soldiers."

"What is a soldier?"

"One who fights the enemy on behalf of his community or nation."

How does one become a soldier?"

"Anyone can become a soldier. He is given special training to fight."

"To kill or get killed", added Kona.

"Yes, you can put it that way."

"What does he get for doing this work?"

"The King provides him with food and maintenance for himself and his family."

"We have plenty of food and comfort here without having to flight or work for a king," said Kona.

"What would you do if a tribe from another country attacked you with a large army?" Neal asked trying to outsmart the old native.

"Why should any body attack us? We have done them no harm."

"They may want to civilize you and make you better human beings."

"We shall tell them we are happy as we are."

"They may not think so."

"Why?"

"Because they have the force to impose their will. You don't"

"So, ultimately, civilization means having the power to kill. The more killing power you have the more civilized you are," Kona shot back.

"A man must live a civilized life. Here in Suryadweep we have been living like animals and believing that every animal or bird is one of us. God has made man with a special purpose."

"What is God?"

"He is the Creator of this world. A civilized man will never ask such a stupid question. We live and die by His will."

"Does He tell you to fight and kill?"

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"Yes, everything happens at His command. To die fighting for your country is your highest duty. It sends you straight to heaven."

"What is heaven?"

"That is where God lives."

"My heaven is here and the Spirit Mother of Suryadweep is my guardian. I do not need another God to protect me."

Neal felt this discussion was leading him nowhere. It was best to come straight to the point. He told Kona in no uncertain terms that the Lanka empire needed to tap the inexhaustible energy of the luminous stone to strengthen its armies and extend its domain over the entire known world. Very soon the Lankans would come with a huge army of slaves to excavate the mountains at the points where this precious object had been detected by his team. If they cooperated the Vanaras could be used as stone diggers and brought within the pale of civilization. Otherwise they would all be killed and eaten up like animals. They could not expect to continue to enjoy their present freedom of roaming the island at will and doing nothing whatsoever for their living.

"You must understand that you cannot stop us from taking away Suryadweep's precious gold, the luminous stone. It is of no use to you, anyway," Neal told Kona by way of a final warning.

Kona heard Neal in silence. There was nothing he could say against this stern pronouncement. The parleys between them closed at this point. Neal and party picked up their canoes from the estuary where they had anchored them and left for home. They were jubilant over their achievement and longing to meet their loved ones. Above all they were hungry for the only food that suited their appetites: flesh.

* * *



7

Vanaras Discover Themselves

Kona swung into action at once. He summoned his entire tribe on a plain along the river for a council of war. Birds and animals also came. Though they could not speak they could listen and understand. Kona told them of the Rakshasa's plans to capture their island. They would dig and cut its rocks and take them away. It would mean cutting down all the trees on the mountains. They were barbarians who ate flesh. If they invaded Suryadweep very soon the island would be bereft of life.

"We shall fight them," the Vanaras shouted. The elephants waved their trunks in the air, stamped their feet and made angry sounds to express their resolve to fight the enemy. Birds rose up in the sky, fluttered their wings and cooed and cawed to display their ruffled feelings. The deer panicked and ran about the grounds. Cows and

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bulls bellowed in anger and fright.

The defences were strengthened. Thousands of more boulders were added to the collection of stones on the luminous mount and camouflaged with wild grass, weeds and shrubs.

In a matter of days small parties from Kontuk started visiting Suryadweep for short durations. These included a few elderly Rakshasas. They were experts whom Nora had invited from Lanka to plan and supervise excavations for the luminous stone.

Kona and his men decided to keep their powder dry for the big moment. Neal had told him that thousands of experts and workers would come from Lanka to excavate the island's white gold. That would be the time to attack and wipe out the entire horde of barbarians at one go, they resolved.

At last the expected day arrived. They came in an armada of canoes and rafts that covered the surface of the ocean upto the far horizon. Over a thousand Rakshasas landed on the beach in a jubilant mood. They had brought with them crude implements of giant size to cut the mountain and bore tunnels to its interior. Hundreds of shovels, axes, long-pointed spears and wheel carts were unloaded on the beach. The demons had also brought with them arms loaded in over a hundred boats. On top of the piles of weapons which the invaders had unloaded and stacked on the beach the Vanaras saw bows and arrows of all sizes designed to kill animals and humans in different situations. Beneath them were fireball missiles, swords, spears and several other peculiarly shaped weapons. They were hurriedly dumped on the sand. The larger boats were carefully anchored in the estuary while the small canoes and rafts were merely dragged over the beach and stowed away in a banana grove nearby.

Before proceeding to the interior of the island to found a settlement for themselves, the rakshasas spread out on the sand to relax and appease their hunger with the venison they had brought with them. It was like a royal picnic party. The demons were scattered in

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small groups at the foot of the mountain beyond the reach of tidal waves so that they could eat and drink in peace. The victuals, placed in large baskets, consisted of all kinds of meat and large jars of wine from which they sipped or gulped the liquor straight without the aid of mugs or glasses.

This was the big moment the Vanaras had been waiting for months since the departure of Neal and his group. Each time a small reconnaissance team of the enemy had landed on their shores their muscles had itched to wipe it out. By the time the Rakshasas finally arrived in full strength their reluctant hosts were mentally and emotionally prepared to give them the reception they had organised for them. Several days ahead of the fateful event the Vanaras had been fully warned by their bird scouts of hectic preparations on the Kontuk coast for the imminent launch of the armada. On the morning of the attack the eagles had come flying on a favourable wind to alert the Vanaras. A favourable breeze was what the rakshasas had been waiting for their historic journey, little realizing that their movements were being watched from the sky by Suryadweep's blythe aerial spies who could travel fifty times faster than their rafts. If they were expecting to take the Vanaras by surprise they had grossly underestimated their enemy's strength.

The anti-climax that greeted their campaign will go down in the annals of human warfare as a shining illustration of the triumph of war over peace, of violence over non-violence, of hatred over love, of dictatorial tyranny over freedom, of body over spirit.

The festivities on the beach were at their peak. For the rakshasas it was a celebration of victory. They had taken over Suryadweep, so they believed, without an arrow being shot and with no sign of resistance by the natives. They assumed that as during the invasion by the Rakshasis twenty ears earlier, the Vanaras must have seen them coming with full force and fled into the interior jungles with animals and birds. The invaders were confident they could flush out the monkey faced natives from their hide-outs after they had

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settled down and use them as slaves on their project. They ate, drank, danced and indulged in ribald jokes about the Vanara race. Their drunken revelries amused the natives who were watching the spectacle from above, seated behind their stone barricades and on perches in the forest over of the Luminous Mountain.

Quite suddenly, the revelers heard a rumbling sound. In their inebriated state they took it to be the beating of victory drums by some of their over enthusiastic youths. The illusion lasted but a minute before the boulders let loose by the impatiently waiting Vanaras started raining death upon the cannibals on the beach. The stones came in all sizes, instantly covering the entire army making no exceptions for the few good people in it. All were swept away to their death by the same broom. Within a few minutes the rakshasas' game was up. A modern atom bomb could not have worked such a miracle faster. Once again the Vanaras and their dumb fellow citizens, animals and birds, were masters in their heavenly home.

There were, however, nearly fifty stragglers who, not being over-drunk when the attack came, managed to run to safety in the nick of time. Small groups of Vanaras were waiting in caves on the flanks of the mountain to cope with them and prevent them from fleeing the ghastly scene in their boats. The natives were unarmed but no mammal could match them in speed and muscle power. In a few long leaps they had reached and pounced upon the still surviving demons. Without their weapons the bloodthirsty barbarians were no match to the Vanaras one of whom could take on four or more rakshasas at a time in hand-to-hand combat and reduce them to pulp. The Vanaras had physical as well as numerical superiority on their side. Kona had instructed his men not to kill those who escaped being crushed under the stones. They were to be captured and rendered helpless by maiming one leg of each prisoner.

The captives were kept bound on trees from where they could not climb down. Their hands were tied to branches with one leg disabled by administering a sharp blow on the ankle and fracturing

it. Only one prisoner was kept on one tree so that they could not converse with each other and use their devilish brains to conspire against their captors.

Despite all these precautions one able-bodied Rakshasa managed to escape and sail to Kontuk with news of the disaster that had befallen their nation. He was dead drunk and half-asleep at the time of the attack on his tribe. Providence had spared him a direct hit by the falling stones. He was not even conscious of the calamity. For long hours of the night he lay motionless on the sand amidst the mangled bodies of his compatriots. He had woken up around midnight and was dazed to behold the horrifying spectacle. He thanked his stars, crawled softly to where the canoes were stacked and sailed away in one of them, trusting his fate to the same power that had saved his life. He believed that he was the sole survivor of the tragedy in the Kontuki army.

No words can describe the pall of gloom that descended upon Kontuk on hearing of the catastrophe that had befallen their community. The whole island broke out into a heart-rending wail whose echoes could be heard in the high heavens and in the depths of hell. The tragedy had come like a Tsunami earthquake laying Kontuk flat spiritually and emotionally. Overnight the cream of the youth of this tiny Rakshasa haven had been wiped out. The dead warriors had been born of the wedlock twenty years ago between Vanaras and Rakshasis. Thus the ingenious scheme devised by princess Nora, to replenish the male population of the Rakshasa clan which had been decimated in the Lanka War had come to naught. The matrimonial union between the two races had produced a hybrid breed of about two thousand people of whom half were females. With its main fighting arm gone, Kontuk was left virtually defenceless. Its population now consisted mainly of women, teenage boys training to be soldiers and several hundred children. Compounding the tragedy was the colossal loss to the armoury. Their finest weapons had

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fallen into the hands of the Vanaras and could be used against them.

Nora was completely distraught. "It is the will of God that our valiant race must perish at the hands of these monkeys", she told her husband.

"First, the destruction of Lanka by the Vanaras and now the rout of the Kontukis by the same people. It seems Lord Brahma, our ancestor, and Lord Siva, the preceptor of the clan, are angry with us."

There was no question of mounting a retaliatory expedition against Suryadweep. They would be lucky to escape a counter attack by the Vanaras. So low was the morale in the camp of Nora and Neal that had Kona decided to launch a punitive campaign against the Rakshasas his men could have over-run Kontuk unarmed in one sweep.

The only option left to Nora if she were to avenge her defeat was to report the debacle to headquarters in Lanka and seek reinforcements. But that would mean her fall from grace. She had proved to be a bad commander. How could she think of sending out her entire army and weaponry in a single offensive? Why were no spies sent to gauge the Vanara mind? The massive preparation they had made for months or years should have been common knowledge in Suryadweep. How had the Vanara's elaborate defensive measures to counter the attack by the Rakshases escaped the notice of the numerous exploratory missions from Kontuk that had visited the island before the invasion? Nora had no answer to these questions which pricked her conscience in retrospect. She could not tell her superiors on the mainland that she had been misled into committing this blunder by her Chief advisor who was none other than her beloved husband, Neal. Himself a Vanara he had found his former kinsmen meek, submissive, completely unarmed and defenceless, when he visited Suryadweep on a reconnaissance mission. Apparently the natives had proved smarter and misled him into a false sense of complacency.

If she conveyed all this to Vibhishana, the reigning King of Lanka, he would perhaps draw other meanings. His Majesty would suspect Neal to be traitor who had secretly warned the Vanaras of the coming attack. He would be thus held guilty of conniving with his own kinsmen to destroy the rakshasas. The only punishment for the crime, even if it was not proved, would be death. Nora loved her husband. In the public eye she was the ruling princess and Neal one of her subjects. But in private he was her lord and master. He virtually ran the government for her. She could never see him humiliated or separated from her. She decided to lie low for some time and suffer in silence. Not the least cause of her sorrow was the loss of her only son, Sura, who was the leader of the vanquished army. She bore her anguish with equanimity and asked the community to be patient.

“We shall find a way”, she told them.

Ironically, it was indeed Neal who had told Kona, the Vanara leader, of the Rakshasas’ intention to capture Suryadweep if the natives did not capitulate voluntarily and agree to serve as slaves of the victors. Neal had hoped to subdue the Vanaras into submission by this threat. Not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined his primitive kinsmen capable of carrying out such a diabolical and ingenious plan of mass slaughter. But adversity is the mother of invention and sheer desperation must have led the elders to Suryadweep to devise this scheme, he thought.

Neal’s oversight should serve as a glaring reminder of the first principle of starting a war: “Never underestimate your enemy.” The Rakshasas’ debacle could also be cited as a typical case of divided loyalties. Underlying Neal’s well-meaning advice to the residents of Suryadweep to surrender before superior might was a desire to save his race from wanton destruction, and possible extinction, at the hands of the ruthless rakshasas. His dubious conduct is proof of the dictum that, unlike in a debate or a street brawl, in a military conflict dual loyalties can be disastrous. Battle lines have to be clearly drawn. One has to decide unequivocally which side he is on and

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fight for it in a do-or-die spirit, regardless of whether his nearest and dearest happen to be on the other side. This cardinal principle of war imparted by Lord Krishna Himself to his favourite friend and disciple, Arjun, on the battlefield of Kurushetra in the Mahabharata war, stands good for all times.

Nora was aware of her husband's role in the whole affair. Had it been another person she would have probably had him executed. But Neal was Neal. She would sooner offer her own life to expiate for his sins if that could save him. Love and war were the two main passions of the Rakshasa race. When a Rakshasi loved a man she did so like a woman possessed, or a soldier in the frontline of a war, losing control over her actions.

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8

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Kona, meanwhile, had other plans. Far from contemplating an assault on the Rakshasas, whom his tribe hated and called 'man-eating monsters', he was expecting another attack any moment. To him Kontuk was but an extension of the mighty Lanka Empire. He had no idea of the debilitated state of the island colony after the massacre of almost its entire male population.

His mind was in a turmoil for yet another reason. Kona had seen four generations of Vanaras coming up during his life time. In all these years he had never seen anyone killing even a fly. Nor did the folklore of the clan handed down from generation to generation ever speak of violence committed by the Vanaras. And here, at one go, by leading his puny nation into this heinous act of mass slaughter of a thousand people, he had destroyed all the spiritual goodwill that his race had accumulated in heaven's eyes over centuries. He had enough vision to see that henceforth Suryadweep would be

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like any human habitation on earth, a hotbed of intrigues, murders and wars. The die had been cast and there could be no going back. If they were to reap the fruits of their glorious victory against the Devil they must brace up for more wars with him and outdo him in his own devilry. For this to be possible they would have to transform themselves from angels to demons.

The very next day after the rout of the Kontukis, Kona emerged early from the cluster of trees inside which he and several other members of his tribe used to sleep. Standing on a high point he sent out a call which the trees and mountains echoed across the island like a siren or the blowing of a conch shell. Within a short time the entire population of Suryadweep was there. He told them that they should first carry the bodies of the dead Rakshasas far out to the sea and immerse them there.

On completing this distasteful task they were to collect and deposit the weapons of the enemy inside a large dry cave.

"Why should we not throw them in the sea as well?," said an elder. "Such means of killing can bode nothing but evil. Who knows someday one of our impetuous youths may be tempted to use these harbingers of doom and kill a harmless bird or animal? He might even kill one of his own kind. The sooner these creations of the Devil are destroyed the better."

"We have to choose between survival and death", declared Kona.

"How can these weapons save us? We do not know how to use them."

"We shall have to use them. The time has now come when we have to fight the demons with their own weapons. If we don't, we die."

"Who will teach us and show us the way to fight with swords, arrows and fire missiles?"

"Our Rakshasa prisoners", replied Kona.

"Why should they?"

"They will have to if they want to live. We shall force them."

"What if they refuse?"

"We shall kill them one by one till the rest fall in line with our wishes".

The elders listened, silent and aghast. For all their distaste for taking somebody's life to gain their objective, they knew Kona was right. In this do-or-die battle there could be no ifs and buts.

Unable to reconcile himself to Kona's advice of settling scores with the Devil by adopting his violent ways, an elder asked.

"Is there no place in this wide ocean where we can live in peace?"

"None, specially after what we have done to the demons of Lanka. They will seek us out to the ends of the earth. You cannot challenge the mightiest empire on earth, kill thousands of its soldiers and then sleep in peace as if nothing had happened. From now on it is goodbye to peace for the Vanaras if our race has to survive."

"All they want from us is the luminous stone. They will be too busy with their mining activities to find time to chase us once we leave this place." said another conscientious objector to war.

Before Kona could frame his reply some of them noticed a big flame rising from the forest over the mountain. They watched it wonderstruck. Such a phenomenon had never been witnessed, nor heard of, in Suryadweep. Slowly a few more flames started shooting from the beach side of the mountain. The wind was blowing its hot smoke in their direction. An intrepid youth ran towards the inferno. After going a hundred yards he was sent back by its scorching heat. The nauseating fumes of the smoke overpowered him and he fell on the ground unconscious. Several men and women ran to pick him up and brought him to safety. They barely escaped being choked by the poisoned breeze. It was a signal for the entire crowd to rush to the farthest end of the island. They ran and ran as the gaseous air pursued them. Animals and birds, large and small, did likewise, each species fleeing at its top speed. The only baggage the Vanaras carried with them were their babies. They had nothing else in the world to carry.

It was only when they had crossed two high hills and reached the shore at the other end of the island that they found their voice and spoke.

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"The gods are angry", said a woman.

"It is the work of the Rakshasas' ghosts. They have set the mountain on fire," said another.

"Soon they will be upon us and attack us."

"They can take any shape."

"Or no shape at all. They can be invisible and throw us all into the sea."

Such comments from different people spread panic in the mob.

"We should not have killed those monsters", said a woman sobbing.

"If we had not killed them they would have finished us off", said an elder.

"It was the will of the Mother Spirit. We had to suffer it."

"She wants us to leave this island."

The idea gained momentum. Everyone waited for Kona to take a decision.

"But where shall we go?" he asked.

"To the nearest island over there", said another elder.

"Any place is better than here," said a woman standing next to him. "I know ghosts cannot swim. They are afraid of water", she added.

Kona listened to the panicky statements of his countrymen in silence. His mind was in turmoil. For him leaving Suryadweep for ever was like death.

In desperation he remembered the Oracle and turned to him for advice. As was his custom, the old man sat in a corner watching the sea with complete calm and ignoring all the hubbub around him.

Responding promptly to Kona's request the Oracle sprang to his feet and walked upto the highest point of the hill at the foot of which they were gathered. Turning his face towards the glistening peak of the mountain God he raised both his hands to the Sky and stood in silent prayer for a minute. The Vanaras watched him with suspenseful quiet as he lowered his arms and walked down the hill to join

them.

"The Deva has spoken", he said.

"What does he say?", Kona asked.

"He said," replied the Oracle quoting the deity, "My children, I am leaving you today. This is the Mother's command. I must obey it".

The commotion that followed this brief announcement amidst the Vanaras defies description. After a moment's stunned silence, they broke out in a myriad voices. Some wept, some moaned, others expressed their anguish in words.

"How can the mountain disappear?" they all wondered. 'They had no idea of the secret workings of the mind of the Mother for whom nothing was impossible.

After the excitement had abated it was agreed by general consensus that they must leave Suryadweep immediately. The day was still young. By afternoon they should reach their destination. All of them were good swimmers. Improvised rafts were hurriedly floated to carry old people and children. It was decided that the stoutest among them would take turns to propel the rafts in front of them as they swam.

Forgotten were the piles of weapons which Kona had planned to use against the enemy. Also left behind were the captive rakshasas who, the Vanaras assumed, must have been choked to death, being tied to the branches of trees where they were held prisoners.

* * *

Providence has its own regime of reward and punishment which passes human comprehension. Its eye is fixed on a whole species, race or community. The individual is but a pawn in the game. His fate is linked to the destiny of his people.

A passing observer of the massacre of the demon invaders, viewing the ghastly scene in isolation, would perhaps view it as an omen of bad days, if not doom, for the rakshasas. They were plunged in mourning and could never imagine that this calamity would one day turn out to be a blessing in disguise for them.

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In this state of shock and despondency the proud descendants of Ravana and his clan were resigned to their fate. To attack Suryadweep again and explore its white gold they would have to wait till the male tiny tots of the day would grow into great fighters and redeem their empire's lost élan. Towards this end women of Kontuk were told to enhance their fertility by the use of appropriate herbs. Breeding must start as soon as a prospective mother attained the age of puberty.

By contrast, despite their mass exile to another island the Vanaras were jubilant. They had defeated the great Lanka Empire in war. Kona had not given up his plan to arm and militarize the youth of his tribe. He was convinced that their hope of survival in the hostile environment lay in taking to arms. They needed good fighters. This meant that the young men would have to give up their easy going ways. They must devote themselves to drills and mock fights while he would devise ways of sneaking in weapons into the colony from Lanka. He had no hope of retrieving the Rakshasa's armoury left behind in Suryadweep since he assumed that the fire must have consumed it.

But fate is a cunning mistress. It delights in keeping its victims lulled into a false sense of security and oblivious of the danger lurking in their backyard. Equally, it keeps in the dark those whom it decides to favour about the good fortune waiting to befall them in the immediate future. When one is dying of thirst it may dash the cup of water he has just brought to his lips. Yet on another parched throat it may rain torrents. To those who are familiar with the dirty games gods in heaven keep playing with their earthly minions, a new startling twist in the ongoing battle between the rakshasas and Vanaras should come as no surprise.

While tying them up on treetops in the forest on the mountain the Vanaras had underestimated the strength of their adversaries. They had assumed that since one leg of each captive had been fractured by them by a sharp blow with a stone hammer, the arrested demons had been rendered permanently immobile. Not being familiar with the superhuman feats of their enemies they were judging their potential for harm by human norms. They were not aware

that the phrase demonic strength was coined as a tribute to the stupefying prowess of this race of devils distinguishing them from normal human beings. During the night of their captivity, an intrepid rakshasa managed to jerk himself free from the thick jute cord with which the Vanaras had tied him to the trunk of a tree.

Who else could it be but Prince Sura, son of Princess Nora and Neal. Blood will tell. The blood of the ancestors of Ravana the great flowed in his veins through his mother who secretly nourished the ambition of Sura one day becoming the Emperor of the mighty Lanka Empire. She had him trained for over a dozen years in the hermitage of sage Suratsya on the banks of river Godavari in India. Suratsya was a great guru known for his wizardry in Vedic and tantrik techniques of overpowering the enemy with mantras or secret weapons. On his parents' advice Sura had never displayed his occult talents to the citizens of Kontuk lest they might start suspecting Nora's true identity. Nora and Neal were careful to keep even their son in the dark about his royal ancestry. How would the Vanaras know that the prince was no ordinary mortal to be taken prisoner by mere men?

One of the tricks Sura had learnt from his guru was to shrink his body to the size of a mouse or expand it to that of an elephant even as the legendary Vanara Chief Hanuman had done during Ram's Lanka campaign. The youth allowed the Vanaras to capture him and bided his time till all was quiet when he could exercise his extra-ordinary powers in secret. It needed but a little reduction in his body to loosen the grip of the rope and free himself. Thereafter, the prince lost no time in going to the aid of his colleagues.

Walking like a three-legged monkey, substituting his hands for his crippled leg, Sura deliberately behaved as an ordinary Kontuki though, if he wished, he could straighten his broken leg in a jiffy through tantric mantras. Hobbling and hopping with the support of rocks and trees he reached the top of a hill and let off a shrill bird cry which was in fact a coded mode of communication between the demons. In response to it scores of similar voices were heard in quick succession from nearby trees. This gave him a clue to the whereabouts of his friends. He rushed to the nearest among them

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and untied his chains. Within about four hours, just before dawn, every one of the imprisoned demons had been freed. Their strength notwithstanding, they were a terrified lot and dared not go back to the scene of the previous day's massacre for fear of being captured and killed by the ferocious Vanaras. The possibility of retrieving their arms which had been dumped on the beach never occurred to them. Their only thought was to lie in wait in a safe spot till nightfall when they could sneak out in the dark, seize their boats and sail home. While they were looking around for a safe sanctuary, one of them sighted the crowd of Vanaras gathered far away in the valley along the riverbank. He beckoned the others to watch the spectacle but they couldn't do so for long for soon hell broke out around them. The hill below their feet started shaking.

"Earthquake!!!" many of them shouted.

This decided them. In a flash they were limping down on all fours towards the beach. They had barely reached the shore when fires started erupting over the mountain. Within an hour it had engulfed the entire forest. In the distance they saw fumes of poisonous smoke rising above the flames, racing towards the valley and chasing away the Vanaras to far off parts of the island. They jumped into their boats and set sail for home.

Hardly had they gone a hundred yards when they were thrown off their crafts by a powerful tidal wave. It was not a normal tide but the offshoot of the turbulence stirred up in the ocean by the earthquake on the mountain. It drowned their boats but, in a balancing act of poetic justice perhaps, it also spared their lives and thrust them back on the island. Soaked and defeated in their bid for freedom, the demons sat for a while brooding over their fate. They could not move inward because the valley was swathed in the poisonous smoke which had driven away the Vanaras. On the beach they were safe from the fumes which were not blowing in their direction. But the Luminous Mountain had turned into a blazing inferno. It was shaking and might erupt any moment. The Sea was still stormy. They could not sail homeward though more boats were lying anchored along the shore. After much deliberation they decided they had no alternative but to hop into the boats and cruise along the

coast. It proved to be a wise decision. They had hardly gone a few hundred yards keeping close to the shore when the mountain blew up with a loud rumble followed by a series of blasts. Huge boulders came hurtling down its seaward slope. Large stones that were tossed up in the air by the volcanic eruption came bouncing with high leaps like balls of fire before sinking into the sand or plunging into the ocean. In quantity, ferocity and velocity the landslide was a hundred times bigger than the previous day's rain of stones by the Vanaras which had killed a thousand rakshasas.

After a large slice of the burning hill had been deposited on the beach and in the sea the landslide stopped, revealing a wide fissure in the mountain. Fires were still burning over its glowing surface, consuming the uprooted trees that had tumbled like flaming torches along with the supporting earth into the newly formed craters as the rocks rolled down the slope. Within a few hours the entire greenery on the seaside of the mountain had vanished into ash and smoke. The hill looked like a live volcano of red stone, sand and ash.

* * *

Far from frightening them the spectacle thrilled the Rakshasas. Nature had given them on a platter what they were planning to secure by deploying a labour force of several hundred thousand people over a period of two to three years. Among the survivors of the previous day's mass slaughter of their clan were a few geologists who had strayed away from the crowd within minutes of their landing on the beach and decided to take a look at the mountain from various angles with a view to prospecting it.

They had been specially sent by the Government in Lanka to guide excavation of the luminous stone. They could correctly infer the genesis of this earthquake which had placed an enormous bounty in their lap. These experts surmised that action leading to the rupture in the hill had been triggered by the cascade of thousands of boulders which the vanaras had unleashed upon them a day earlier. The impact of the concussions caused by the bouncing rocks on the surface of the mountain were felt deep inside its hot bowels twenty feet below. In its natural state the luminous stone was a kind of solidified lava storing its volcanic energy in the form of heat and

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light. The incessant blows of the massive manmade rockfall would have caused heaps of debris and stones to fall upon these eternally glowing stones from the roofs of the tunnels and caves where nature had stored them. This should have been sufficient to spark fission among the luminous stones and trigger powerful explosions. A chain reaction followed causing the whole hill to tremble till its surface opened up and released the expanding lava and gasses.

All that the rakshasas had to do now was to allow the mountain a few weeks' time to cool down before scooping out the rich treasure of raw energy that had opened up before them in the form of rocks and boulders of the luminous stone, like the fabulous jewels in the cave of Ali Baba and Forty thieves. Watching the scene as they sat in their boats anchored at a safe distance in the sea, the rakshasas speculated on their next move.

They knew that by a miracle "Operation disaster" had turned into "operation victory". The immediate task before them was to neutralize or get rid of the Vanaras. Judged by their extremely hostile behaviour it was most unlikely that they would cooperate. The demons knew that military might was overwhelmingly in their favour. They had been taken by surprise by the Vanaras once. The trick could not be repeated.

By evening everything calmed down. A bright full moon lit up the scene. Cool breeze relieved the sand on the beach of much of the radiated heat it had received from the mountain. The demons re-anchored the boats in the estuary and stole stealthily towards the beach to wait for the dawn before sailing homeward, little knowing that yet another battle awaited them on the island and that in the end this too may turn out to be a blessing disguised as nature's wrath.

It was now the turn of rain to pound the dismembered rakshasas. Largely as a chain reaction to the previous day's rain of rocks unleashed upon them by the Vanaras, volcanic heat from the mountain generated a low pressure above it. After simmering for some time the agitated sea rushed in with tidal waves and storm winds. Had the occupants of the beach been ordinary human beings they

would have been almost certainly washed away or drowned by the deluge. But the demons were made of sterner stuff. They held fast to the boulders littered over the sand, swallowing much water but managing to keep their noses above it. It rained cats and dogs all through the night. Mounds of earth, rubble, weeds and whole trees came rolling down the mountain with gushing streams of rainwater. This gave the demons another opportunity to test their superhuman strength while extricating themselves from the resulting quagmire in which they had got trapped. They were thoroughly mauled, disheveled and grisly when they pulled each other out to save themselves from being buried under mounds of slimy mud that had stuck to them. They were trapped in a tank of glue. They staggered out of the mess, limping and falling on each other as each man inched forward towards the shore which was relatively clean since it was being washed every few minutes by small tides in the sea. Taking off their clothes and keeping them under heavy stones on the beach, they plunged in the ocean to wash themselves.

It was then that they realized that dame fortune had blessed them with yet another miracle. Nearly all of them found their fractured legs almost healed. They could wade through shallow water or swim in the sea with perfect ease. A simple surgical act of Nature had cured them. Their struggle with the elements for sheer survival had forced them to over-stretch their broken legs, forgetting the pain it caused. This had joined the ruptured bones in a straight line. Due to their remaining stuck in the mire for hours a hard muddy crust had formed over their legs, preventing the joined bones from separating again. This was similar to the plaster mould surgeons normally put on a fractured part of the body. The rakshasas thanked their demon gods for this mercy. They were intelligent enough to realize what had happened. While scrubbing the mud coating off their bodies, they were careful to leave the fractured legs wrapped in the natural plaster so that the broken bones could regain their normal tenacity in a couple of weeks.

This discovery led them to apply the same remedy to those among them whose legs had not been similarly straightened out by the mudslide. It was a painful cure which had to be endured. The sub-

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ject was laid on the ground, held in powerful hands by the shoulder and feet and stretched till the broken bones were restored to their normal position. This crude way of joining the bones produced a loud click while the injured rakshasa writhed and moaned. Finally the leg was coated with several layers of the sticky mud and the man was asked not to stir for an hour or two to allow the mould to crust.

Prince Sura, the acknowledged leader of the demons, felt there was no time to lose. They must rush back home with the good news. Soon it would be dawn. Its herald, an aureorean spectrum with a blood red base could already be seen emerging on the Eastern horizon. The sea was calm. It had spent all its fury. The mountain had resumed its silence of centuries, as if nothing had happened. The disappearance of its forest cover and rocky crust had been no more than a face wash for this giant whose feet rested miles deep in the bowels of the Earth.

For the survivors it was a new day. The past lay buried with their dead comrades along with their weapons under thick layers of mud and rouble. In course of the next few days Sun and wind would solidify it. In time to come on its surface would spring up a new forest from the seeds of plants which had sunk into the Earth during the earthquake. The mountain and beach would again be green. These and similar thoughts swarmed the minds of the wise men among the demons. They were people who never took defeat lying down. They were visionaries. Upon the ruins scattered before them they saw rising a new city, the home of an altogether new civilization, the city of their dreams.

* * *



9

A Tigress Licks Her Wounds

Princess Nora, the tigress of Kontuk, sat licking her wounds in a quiet corner of the island. She wept in silence over the disastrous outcome of the expedition she had mounted against Suryadweep on the advice of Neal, her husband and chief adviser.

She was completely unaware of the dramatic, last-minute, favourable turn in Rakshasa fortunes in Suryadweep. The surviving battered remnants of her army, who had witnessed the climactic developments on the Luminous Mountain, had not yet returned home to give her the good news that, thanks to the helpful hand of providence, in today's defeat lay tomorrow's victory.

The graying husbands of the rakshasis whom the women had brought as hostages from Suryadweep twenty years before were dumbfounded when they heard of the military victory of their un-

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armed tribe over the Rakshasas, the world rulers. Theirs had been a community which had never known violence in any form. Disputes between them never went beyond fisticuffs and were quickly settled. How could this peaceful community perpetrate this scene of mass murder without losing a single man on its side? They held their breaths in wonder and speculated on the reasons of this fundamental shift in the psychology of the Vanara race.

After intense deliberations they concluded that a sweeping attack of this magnitude could not be the act of a human agency, much less of the half-witted race of Vanaras who had never been known to have killed any one, man or animal. This kind of carpet-bombing of the entire beach with heavy boulders could have been wrought only by a divine power. Who else could it be but the Mountain God himself who had been worshipped by the Vanaras for thousands of years as their sole guardian and protector? The all-knowing deity had understood the sinful intentions of the invaders to defile it and eventually destroy it. He had decided to give the demons a demonstration of his super natural powers so that they or their descendants would never again venture to cast their avaricious gaze on Suryadweep.

The theory of a divine origin of the attack on their army spread terror among the Kontukis who began to feel unsafe within their own territory. Nora also shared this view, partly owing to the natural feminine proclivity to believe in the occult, but mainly because it absolved her husband of all blame in the affair. The only person on the island who was not fully convinced on this point was Neal himself. But, on Nora's advice, he kept his doubts to himself and wholeheartedly embraced the general consensus on this issue.

The princess decided to propitiate the presiding deity of her race through a proper religious ceremony and thus counter the looming threat from the Mountain God of Suryadweep. Her pious plan was heartily approved by her devastated subjects. In their abject mood of utter despair they were like victims of a shipwreck in the sea willing to cling to a straw to stay afloat. The ritual was also consid-

ered essential to pray for the salvation of the souls of their youths killed in Suryadweep.

Accordingly, a grand fire sacrifice prescribed in the holy Vedas for such situations was organized. Overnight they built a large pit, collected mountains of wood from the forest and ignited a fire whose flames seemed to touch the clouds. By day break the intrepid rakshasis had collared and brought about a hundred buffaloes from the forest. The animals were richly fed with sweets, anointed with holy paints and marks all over their bodies and then thrown into the fire to be roasted alive.

The ritual was conducted amidst loud chants of appropriate Vedic mantras on a clearing along the main river, in the center of which stood a twenty-foot high statue of their chief god, Ravana, the founder of the clan and its empire. A descendant of Lord Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, the ten-headed demon king had been elevated by them to the status of an Aryan god. The women had sculptured the statue with loving hands over a period of one year using a mixture of clay and ground stones. It served as the community temple where they gathered for their daily worship.

After the sacrificial havan, roasted flesh of the buffaloes was offered to the deity to the accompaniment of incense and candlelights, before being served to all worshippers as 'prasad'. An atmosphere of the self-righteous Aryan holiness pervaded the entire valley which blended perfectly with the demonic aura of the shrine of their god, Ravana. His valiant spirit rang out loud and clear in the frenzied singing of hymns, songs and mantras. The noisy ceremony revived the sagging morale of the crowd consisting mainly of women and children, most of the adults males having been slaughtered by the Vanaras in Suryadweep. The rakshasis had imbibed their home-brewed favourite liquor before the start of the ceremony to drown their sorrow and enhance the ardour of their devotion. Many of them danced with devillish zeal to exorcise the evil spirits haunting their island.

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And then, moments before the close of the ceremony, a miracle happened. The chanting and singing was at its loudest; the dancers were experiencing the height of ecstasy; children were shouting and jumping in raptures, their stomachs being full with the freshly roasted buffalo meat; the semi-naked bodies of the participants were soaked with sweat induced by the heat of the flames of myriad colours shooting into the sky from the large fire pit. Clouds of smoke were billowing from the blazing fire, and spreading the intoxicating fragrance of incense and herbs, mixed with the stench of burning buffalo flesh. In short, the excitement of the occasion was at its peak when the worshippers saw approaching them from the coast a column of people who, in the pervading haze, looked like angels from heaven who appeared to have decided to come in person to bless their prayers. On closer look, when the visitors were barely ten feet away, the rakshasis recognized among them their own sons, led by Prince Sura, the only child of the royal couple, Princess Nora and Neal. The mob's joy turned into fright when, on recognizing the faces of the new arrivals, someone shouted:

"Ghosts!"

In a moment the crowd's god-intoxication evaporated and people ran helter-skelter at top speed to put themselves at a safe distance from what they thought were ghosts of their dead youths who had come to haunt their old abode. Once again destiny had cheated the settlers of Kontuk, they moaned. They thought that the gods were still angry and had sent this unholy visitation upon them to defile their prayers and sacrifice.

Only Nora and Neal, as befitted their status, kept their cool and stood their ground. They embraced their son, Sura, and all his companions one by one.

* * *

But alas! This emotional spectacle only added fuel to the fire of anguish burning in the hearts of the hundreds of mothers who were not so lucky as Nora and could not discern the faces of their be-

loved sons and husbands in Sura's disparate band of merely about fifty survivors.

It did not take long for the bitter truth to sink in. The jubilant new arrivals soon realized that this was not the time to gloat over the indeterminate achievement of the ill-fated expedition. It could bring but token cheer to the families whose hearths would remain cold and unlighted during the long days and nights of mourning that lay ahead of them.

Deep anguish cannot be shared by others. It is too personal to be expressed or communicated by any means. It is the iron in the soul that gets welded in it. The survivors and sufferers of the assault on Suryadweep lived in two different worlds. Sura and his band of escapees rejoiced in secret over their achievement. They looked forward to the day when His Majesty the King Emperor of Lanka would himself reward them for adding to His Empire its richest jewel, Suryadweep. The boundless energy resource of the Luminous Mountain which was now theirs for the taking, since it needed no extra efforts to excavate it, would make him the most powerful sovereign in the world. They were conscious that their triumph had made no impression upon the rest of the population of Kontuk, which consisted mainly of Rakshasis who had lost their dearest sons, nor upon their Vanara husbands whom they had brought from Suryadweep as hostages to be used as stud bulls to father a new hybrid clan of demons. These men had remained Vanaras at heart, primitive, uncivilized and totally unfamiliar with the trappings of power.

"What is luminous stone to us? We cannot eat or drink it", the rakshasis would say whenever the subject was broached before them. "We were happier without it when our sons were with us. Without them Kontuk is a living hell as Lanka was when we lost our first husbands and sons in the great war between Ravana and Ram. The same calamity has afflicted us again, for the second time. God has been extra harsh on us though we worship Him daily according to Vedic rites and rituals", they would add with bitterness, while their husbands would nod assent.

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Emotional loneliness is a disease for which no cure has been provided by any human or divine agency. It is an ailment of the soul which transcends both body and mind. When caused by a sudden tragic happening, like the mass killing of rakshasas in Suryadweep, the afflicted mothers or wives are left speechless and aghast. Even in the midst of crowds of relatives and friends loneliness was haunting the rakshasis like a ghost whose presence they could feel but not see. It had settled deep within their hearts. Each suffering mother looked like a tree whose trunk has been hollowed out by termites.

A mass tragedy of this nature brings in its train a thorny crop of incriminations inside a defeated nation. The devastated Kontukis secretly blamed Nora and Neal for their rout. Nora was a royal princess. She was above reproach. But Neal was a commoner. To the elder males, nearly all of whom were Vanaras, he was one of them. They had not fully reconciled to his being their defecto chief whose orders they had to obey. In Suryadweep every one was care-free and there was no Chief to tell them what to do or not to do.

The rakshasis viewed him as an upstart catapulted to a position of dominance by a quirk of fate. In their eyes he could never acquire the clout of a rakshasa prince. He was an evil influence on their noble princess. They believed that it was due to his wrong advice that the mothers in Kontuk had lost their beloved sons. It was a loss which no gift from an earthly king or the gods in heaven could mitigate. A few of these embittered women talked in whispers about ways of poisoning Neal who had now become a thorn in their eyes, the source of all that was evil in their little island paradise.

Others spoke of informing His Majesty of this man's treachery and thus having him liquidated by his command.

Reports of these confabulations to kill Neal kept coming to Nora and Neal through their secret agents from all parts of the colony. This unnerved them and brought the distraught Vanara to the verge of collapse out of fear that his days were numbered and the hand of fate might strike him down any day.

Vanaloore Shining

This is how matters stood for about two weeks when the ruling family of Kontuk comprising Nora, Neal and their son, Sura, was struck by a thunderbolt from heaven.

It was a bright moonlit night. They were sleeping in their hammocks suspended from trees behind their two-room thatched-roof cottage. Every family had a large compound to itself. Nora being the ruling chief, her estate covered about an acre of land which nature had planted with coconut, banana and palm trees. In its center stood the house. There were no fences or dividing lines between individual properties located along a perennial stream flowing from a nearby hill into the ocean about two hundreds yards away.

It was the hour of midnight when everyone slept like a log after the day's exertions. The dank ocean breeze acted like wine on tired nerves and muscles. Though all Kontukis slept in the open, the foliage of well nourished plantations and the noise of wind and water afforded enough privacy to each family to enjoy its leisure its own way. Neal and Nora's spacious hammocks were suspended adjacently from the same branch of a stoutpeepul tree while Sura slept in a smaller hammock some distance away.

On the fateful night, Sura, who was a trained soldier and alert sleeper, was the first to hear a patter of running feet heading towards their house across the cottage ground. He sat up and hailed the intruders. They turned towards him and stopped close to his bed, panting and gasping. Sura at once recognized them as Nora's four trusted guards. He had never seen them so agitated before.

"Master, we are undone. All is lost. Wake up the princess at once. A great calamity has befallen her."

Sura sprang from his bed. Together with the loyal foursome he rushed to where she slept and woke her up. Neal heard the commotion and jumped from his hammock. The guards lost no time in blurt-ing out what they had come to tell.

"Princess", said the chief guard addressing Nora, "His Majesty

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the King has sent a strong force of about a hundred soldiers with instructions to carry out public execution of the Prince, your husband, and take back with them his severed head as proof that his command had been carried out."

Neal's blood froze as he realized that what he had been fearing all these weeks had come true at last.

"Where are they?", he asked hoping he could run and hide himself in the ocean by swimming to a quiet cove along the rocky coast.

"They are coming in about a dozen boats and should land on our shores before dawn", he replied.

"This means there is still time for us to escape," said Nora. "But how do you know they are coming and with such orders?"

"They have sent an advance guard of two soldiers in a canoe to scout our colony and make sure we are not prepared to defend ourselves against a surprise attack."

"Where are they now?"

We have left them lying dead drunk near our watch post on the coast. It will be some time before they are fit to sail back to the flotilla waiting for them out in the sea."

"It they are spies why should they have revealed their secret to you?", Sura asked.

"Because they got drunk and lost their senses. They had landed some distance away round the corner of the estuary where we have our normal seat on the beach. We came to know of it when two of us noticed their long shadow cast in front of us by the Moon on the sand, while we sat drinking and chatting. We turned our heads and saw standing right behind us two giants draped from head to foot in black robes. I nudged my companion who at once took my hint. With one swift move we caught their legs and hit our heads hard on their groins. They toppled over our bodies and fell on the ground, yelling with pain. The noise they made plus our own shouts at-

tracted two other guards seated some distance away. They came running and together the four of us hammered the strangers' heads with our clubs and disarmed them. We also tied them to each other by their legs and hands to prevent them from trying to run away."

"But how did you make them speak and tell you the purpose of their coming here?", Nora asked. "Tell us everything quickly. Be brief. We have no time to waste", she said impatiently.

"They were bleeding and badly hurt. When they saw the barrel of liquor, which we normally carry with us on these watches, they requested us to let them drink from it to restore their nerves. I thought it would be a good way to pump out their secrets from them. So we plied them with the strong drink till they were thoroughly sozzled. We did not have to ask them anything. They blurted out everything on their own in the form of a dialogue between them. We merely listened."

"What were they saying to each other in the dialogue?" Neal asked.

"They said this prince was no prince. He was a bloody Vanara. He had proved his low birth by betraying our princess and secretly warning the Vanaras about our plan to attack them. His majesty was right in ordering his public execution."

"Can you take us to them? Nora asked.

"Certainly, please come with us." They all raced towards the watch post at top speed and were just in time to see a little canoe sailing out into the ocean with two dark figures, silhouetted against the moonlight, looming above it.

They had seen enough. Nora was in command now.

"We leave at once to a place beyond the reach of the emperor," she said in a calm voice.

"Why you? You are safe here," he said and added, "only I must leave. Perhaps I can go back to Suryadweep. The Vanaras are kind

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and compassionate. They will forgive me.”

Nora flew into a rage on hearing Neal’s remarks and hit him hard in the head with her fist. His head reeled. With difficulty he balanced himself on his feet.

“I shall jump into the Sea and kill myself before they touch a hair on your head. Can’t you see I cannot live one moment without you. I love you! I love you! I love you!”

The next moment she burst into tears and collapsed in Neal’s arms. The guards rushed to the next watch post and brought the wine they had kept there. Neal administered a large measure of it to Nora as she lay unconscious in his lap. Little by little she revived and instantly swung into action.



10

Beyond Earth in a Toy Plane

Thanking the loyal guards for their valiant service she walked back to her cottage with Neal and Sura.

“We have no time to lose”, she said on entering for the last time the grove of coconut, palm and banana trees by the sea which had been her home for over twenty years. In its idyllic surroundings she had experienced the bliss of true love with her husband and son. Nora took Neal and Sura to a green lawn behind their cottage before revealing to them her plans of escape from Kontuk.

“Sura, my son, I command you to fly off immediately to the ashram of your guru, sage Suryastananda on the banks of the holy Godavari and stay there till I send for you. You are the apple of my eye. I shall die of grief if anything untoward happened to you.”

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Like a dutiful son, Sura offered his customary obeisance to his parents by prostrating at their feet. He stood up, walked about a dozen feet away from them and lay down on the grass on his back.

Nora then directed Neal to keep standing where he was till she asked him to move.

“Why?” Neal asked.

“Let us not waste the precious moments left to us for running away from here on silly questions. Do as I tell you.”

Neal obeyed. She lay down flat on the grass some distance away from both Neal and Sura. In the light of the full Moon Neal could clearly see her body silhouetted against the ground. He stood still and alert for a long time, perhaps a quarter of an hour or more, and began wondering whether Nora had gone into a trance. Just when he was debating whether to move a few steps forward to have a close look at her, in defiance of her wishes, he felt a whiff of air wheezing past his legs. Next moment the earth beneath him seemed charged with a current that was tickling the soles of his feet. The ground appeared to be mildly shaking. In a moment the tremors subsided and instead he could see Nora’s outstretched body rising slowly above the ground. She was lying on what seemed to be a large balloon with a flat top. It was floating towards him. He stood frozen to the ground. The aerial craft stopped as it hit his body. It was so light that it wobbled at the mere touch of his fingers. How it was supporting Nora’s weight was a mystery to him. She caught his arm without looking in his direction, lifted him off the ground like a toy and laid him by her side.

In a flash he seemed to have lost his weight as if he was made of paper, an airy nothing, all mind and no body. The inside of his wafer thin skin felt like an organless, vapourous mass of intelligence, a void, even like the transparent balloon supporting the ultra-light air pad of grass and earth. Neal was too dazed to realize that this was the beginning of a long flight to unknown lands. Apparently guided by Nora through an invisible signal, the balloon moved with

a jerk. Neal rolled on its surface from side to side. He tried to hold her arm to steady his body but found he had lost his grip the moment he caught it.

Suddenly as the craft made a parabolic dive Neal found himself lifted one foot high in the air, turned upside down and dropped squarely upon his companion's body. He tried to clasp her between his arms and legs but in vein. His limbs had no holding power and he was tossed up once again only to fall flat in the narrow space to Nora's right.

"Stop, Stop," Neal cried as their raft came to a halt in mid-air. "Leave me here to my fate. I am sure I shall drop from this wobbly balloon any moment into the sea and drown."

His pleadings had no effect upon his better half. Her face exuded divine clam. The vehicle had already started rising vertically and was soon soaring above the cloud zone into higher skies. She cast a smug, contented look at the ethereal landscape as if this was her original homeland to which she had returned after a long period. By contrast, Neal was all in a twitter, a bundle of nerves. He was holding Nora's arm as best as he could, believing it to be his only support against being thrown off their shaky sky boat into oblivion. The balloon was floating effortlessly with a gentle rocking movement like a raft on a calm sea. It was frightening when it sailed through dense clouds. At the same time he was intrigued when he found that the clouds did not seem to touch them at all. Apart from the sound of a gentle cool breeze rustling past them at a constant low velocity they could hear or feel nothing of the winds that were buffeting their little craft sideways as it soared towards the stars. For them it was quieter than inside the sound proof body of a plane flying at high altitude, where passengers have to contend with the engine noise.

Nora stood up with a jerk releasing her arm from Neal's grip. It gave him a jolt and threw him off balance.

"Come, stand up", she said bending down to hold Neal's hand.

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He was scared stiff. What was she upto? He knew she meant well but no amount of rationalization of his situation could cure his height phobia. No sooner had he taken an upright position by her side she gave him a push.

“Nora!!!”, he screamed in a fit of terror, fearing certain death, as he hit an invisible wall and bounced back into her arms, almost unconscious. She held him tight to save him from slumping to the floor and gave him a warm kiss to restore his sinking heart to its normal beats. When he had come to she said,

“Now walk around the edge of the balloon holding my hand.”

He did so and hit a rubbery substance which was encasing the craft on all sides. Instinctively, he raised his hand above his head. It hit an invisible elastic ceiling. It was transparency itself, a solid roof which the human eye could not perceive. The sky, Moon, and the clouds flying past them in clusters were clearly visible through it.

Was he a victim of witchcraft or was he dreaming, he wondered. There seemed no way of uncovering this mystery.

“Please Neal, forgive me for playing this cruel trick upon you. It was to prove to you that here you are as safe as in a steel box. You just cannot jump out of this raft if you wish to. It is sealed all round.”

“Sealed by what?” he asked.

“By the magnetic field of my panic energy.”

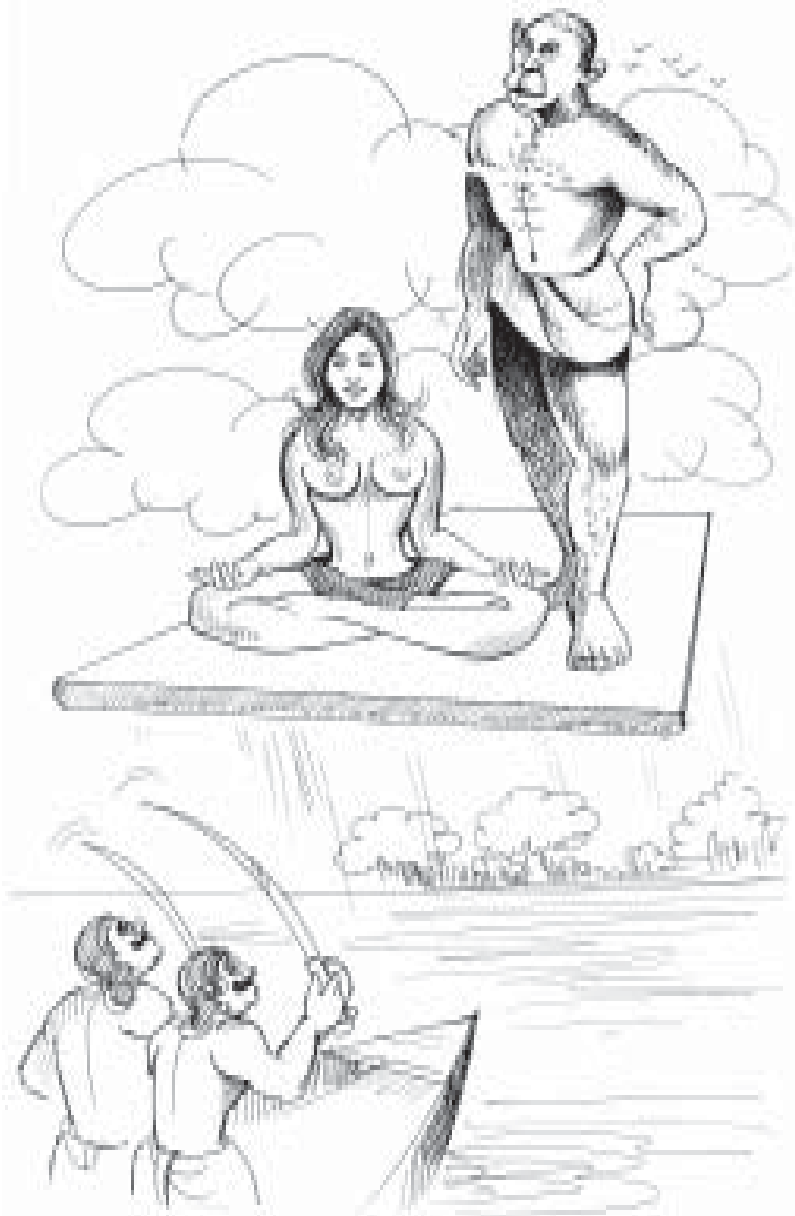
“What is pranic energy? Is it a form of black magic?”

“Brahma has endowed everyone with a pranic shield upto a radius of three feet around his body. But only advanced yogis can use its magnetising powers for performing such feats.”

“You are not a yogi?”

“I am.”

“How can a member of a race of cannibals, the rakshasas, be a yogi?”



On wings of love

Beyond Earth in a Toy Plane

“Rakshasas are perverted yogis who use their mystic powers to satisfy their sensuous desires for wealth, power and sex.”

“I am jittery all the same”, Neal said.

“Don’t worry. Let us lie down.”

The moments Neal spent lying still in Nora’s embrace were pure bliss for him. In every respect by her touch she seemed to be a different person from his beloved wife of twenty years. He felt like being in the arms of a woman he had never known before, a goddess or a fairy of heaven. Wafers of clouds were flying past the transparent walls of their aerial chariot. The Moon and stars were showering multi-coloured rays upon the lovers bathing them in the nectarine essence of divine romance. He was experiencing heaven in his veins. Neal felt he was not the same Vanara whom Nora had wooed and married, nor was she the rakshasi who had clung to him to satisfy her lust. There was much more to their attachment than the mere bond of flesh. It seemed to Neal that the gods were watching with joy this spiritual fusion of two loving souls of which he could see no parallel in earthly existence.

The experience gave Neal an insight into God’s deeper purpose in creating the two sexes, apart from its gross sensual manifestation in worldly life. It was as if he was beholding with the naked eye the inner workings of the Lord’s marvelous bi-polar energy network around which He had woven the web of the visible universe. He saw Nora and himself as bodiless spirits, or souls like the weightless walls of their aircraft which only gods could see. Neal closed his eyes and alerted his senses to record every sensation, howsoever slight, of this state of divine ecstasy. Nora’s touch was soft like that of a rose petal, made softer by the airy weightlessness of their bodies. His ears could hear light musical note flowing through her nostrils. Her breath was emitting a perfume he had never smelt before. To him it smelt like a mixture of the fragrance of sandalwood and pine. He could feel the rhythmic beats of Nora’s heart, the pulsations of her soft heaving breasts and the undulations of her hips

induced by the invisible thrusts from below of the aerial waves upon their little raft. He took it as mother nature's lullaby which was lulling their twin souls to dreamless sleep in the deep silence of heaven.

It has been well said that heaven is where Love is. In the company of loved ones one sometimes experience the 'Presence' of God. For, God is Love. Neal could inwardly perceive a divine aura illuminating his soul.

There was no way to tell how long they lay in this blissful state. For them Time had stopped moving. They woke up with a start when their ethereal balloon halted in mid-air, giving them a rude jolt. They disengaged themselves sat up and discovered that they had joined the ranks of heavenly bodies, the stars and asteroids. There was no sign of the Earth below them. Around their little mattress-sized flying capsule was a void brightly decked in the far distance by galaxies of stars flooding space with their brilliance. Wide, multi-coloured bands of light appeared to be flowing from them like rivers heading towards the sea.

Neal felt like a fish lost in an ocean of light. He had still not recovered fully from the trance-like state of divine romance he and Nora had experienced, during which both of them had lost all sense of Time and space. The absence of the Earth, and with it also of the Moon, from his view had slowly begun to register on his mind, making him wonder whether he and his beloved had lost their mortal earthly identity and become pure spirits.

"Where are we?", he asked Nora.

"In heaven, of course, my dear."

"But I can see nothing here, absolutely nothing."

"You will, by and by, as your eyes adjust to this new world."

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know."

"How long has it taken us to come here from the Earth?"

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“Again, my answer is the same. I don’t know. Lying in your arms I lost all sense of Time. It might have been an aeon spanning several millenniums or it could be just a moment like a flash of lightning. In Siva’s heaven both are same. Time does not exist here.

* * *

Nora and Neal spent the next twenty years exploring various hermitages in the Himalayas. Thanks to Nora’s unique gift of rigging up flying mattresses powered and shielded by panic energy, no part of the Himalayas, world’s tallest mountains, was inaccessible to them. But she used this talent sparingly. Being adventure loving they preferred to walk. For them climbing mountain peaks on foot was as easy as flying. They had only to tap this inexhaustible mystic reservoir of power in their souls to be able to go bouncing over the toughest rocks and ice slopes like a deer prancing in a prairie.

The divines they visited welcomed them with great warmth. These holy men generally dwelt in caves or small cubicles constructed by them by mixing mud with pieces of stone. It gave them just enough space to spread a thick mattress of straw on the floor upon which they slept or sat and meditated. Most of them lived singly or with one or two disciples. Though aware of each other’s existence as distant neighbours they loved solitude and seldom socialized among themselves. When they did it was more a silent communion of souls than a feast of reason. Their minds lived in the mystic cavity of their hearts and rarely came out of it. It was there that they explored the mysteries of creation which were beyond the reach human perception in the external world. For their dwellings they chose spots where pilgrims and wayfarers were least likely to go.

Interspersed here and there in salubrious valleys were located ashrams or small colonies where monks lived with their wives and children and ran religious schools.

Nora and Neal were interested to meet only the former type of ascetics, the singletons who had turned their backs upon the world.

The true recluse vowed to quietitude of the spirit shuns casual or curious visitors. At the same time he welcomes with open arms a true seeker of the eternal truth in whose hearts the spark of enlightenment is just waiting to be ignited by a holy spirit.

Nora and Neal qualified for entry into this secret empire of the mystics of Himalayas because, before entering this fabled paradise, they had burnt their boats, severed all connexiouns with their homeland, Lanka, and had no intention of returning. The sages recognized their secret urge to taste the Bliss of peace which could only be savoured in the Silence of the soul where all is Love.

But neither Neal nor Nora were prepared for the surprise that awaited them when they reached the snowy regions of Mt. Kailash, the eternal abode of Lord Siva. It is a vast wilderness of snow where nothing grows. Only gods or those possessing superhuman powers could survive in those harsh surroundings.

Not far from the highest peak in the range was another mountain on which they beheld a sight which they thought was an illusion. It could not be true. In the midst long vistas of snow stretching upto the horizon on all sides there stood a hill covered with a lush green forest in the middle of which was situated a palace with a golden dome. Birds of different colours and sizes were flying in the sky above it. Trees were blossoming with floral boughs of every hue. Matching its green verdure the sky above the entire hill was pure blue in contrast with the surrounding landscape which was cloudy and misty. The whole place resembled an oasis in a desert, if not a mirage.

Nora and Neal were baffled by the sight. They decided to change course and trek towards it before approaching the holiest of the holy precincts of Lord Siva's throne of crystalline ice. They discovered that the dividing line between the two adjoining peaks was a wide stream of clear water, shiny like a mirror, spread out over a broad plane of white and blue pebbles. Wonder of wonders! while fording the swiftly running river they found that the first half of its

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wide span was white, reflecting the colour of its bed of hard ice. It was bitterly cold while the next half bore the taint and warmth of the blue pebbles underneath. Yet the two streams were flowing as one, forming a single sheet of water.

The moment Nora and Neal reached the other bank they saw a maiden wearing a short skirt who had been bathing in the river. On seeing them she came out and accosted them before drying herself and putting on her garment which she had kept on a shrub nearby. She did not seem the least abashed on being seen by strangers in a semi-nude state. Her whole body radiated a glow they had never seen. Was she an apparition or a real person? She greeted Nora and Neal with a grin.

To allay her suspicious Nora walked up to the young beauty and asked her, "do you mind if I touch you?"

"Not at all", replied the girl as she rushed to embrace the rakshasi princess with unbounded enthusiasm. She was proceeding to accord a similar welcome to Neal when he shrank back in an utterly confused state which was a mixture of shyness and fright. If she was a real woman how could he clasp her to his bosom while she was still virtually unclothed. On the other hand if, as he and Nora feared, she was a mere apparition created by one of the gods who resided in those parts, her touch might rob him of his wits.

But his hostess was no ordinary woman. She could read the minds of the visitors as an open book.

"Don't worry friends. You are in safe hands. In fact I was waiting to receive you. You do not happen to be here by chance."

"Are we not on Planet Earth now?", Neal asked.

"Ours is small pocket of heaven on Earth. Your being here is the reward of your good deeds and the pure life you have been leading in the nether regions," she said coming close to Neal and embracing him.

He was astonished when he realized that though he could clearly

see her clinging to his body he could not feel the slightest physical contact with her. His sense of touch could not confirm the evidence of his eyes. The moment she released him a thrill ran through his veins and he could see strange sights. Above the tree tops there suddenly appeared before his transformed vision men and women seated in deep meditation. An air cushion of at least one foot separated them from the branches. But though they were thus afloat in the sky, their posture was steady and motionless. Neal could not believe his eyes. In heaven anything was possible.

The damsel, who introduced herself as Devyani, escorted the guests into the forest. It was swarming with life. On entering it they paused to take a look at the flora and fauna around them. The strangest thing that struck them at first sight was that not a single object was touching the Earth. Instinct prompted both of them to look under their feet only to discover that they too were not walking on solid ground but floating one foot above it. Had Devyani not been quick to lend a hand to each to them they would have fainted out of fright.

"Don't be alarmed", said the holy maiden in a persuasive tone. This place is Lord Siva's abode. He has made our little colony a gravity free zone. The Earth's pull has no effect on us.

"Why is it so? What is so special about this place?"

"With all their extra-ordinary intelligence human beings have failed to understand that the Earth's magnetism is more a mental and spiritual phenomenon than it is physical. The force of attraction and repulsion the Earth generates works more acutely on the mind than on the body. It permeates the whole environment."

"What has mind to do with the Earth's gravity or magnetism."

"Its root is the ego principle, or love of "self" which takes millions of forms. Its chief trait is that it splits the objective world into 'mine' or 'not-mine'. 'Mine it' attracts, 'not mine' it repels. It makes society what it is today, a hotbed of wars, intrigues and wanton

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killings, induced by overblown egos that breed universal hatred of every one but one's own self.

"On the other hand the people who live here are completely free from the human emotions of attraction and repulsion".

"Is that why I did not feel any sensation when you embraced me a moment ago?" Neal asked.

"Yes.

"In other words you are robots or machines, not human beings."

"I am not surprised by your comments. This is how a person just arrived from Earth normally sees us."

"What else can you be if you act like human beings without having their feelings and emotions?"

"Feelings and emotions, like love and hate, are the stuff of what you earthlings call life. They are the tools with which Brahma operates this giant biological machine of Nature. You are its dummies. You prance about the stage of life like shadows of invisible beings operating from an ethereal plane. The power of Mother Nature that flows in your veins is channeled through these emotions of like and dislike just as the force of gravity works unseen in the myriad rivers around the globe. Our emotions bind us to the gross body in the same manner as the magnetic pull of the Earth keeps all objects of the world confined to the ground. Their substantiality is a manifestation of our own ignorance which makes us perceive energy in high motion as a solid object. You may call it an optical illusion, a product of our imagination tailored to suit our desires. This is exactly how you can experience reality in a dream.

"What is different about your body? Why is it not subject to the laws of gravity though it is made of the same flesh and bones as mine?", asked Neal.

"You are wrong there, my friend", said the kindly young woman. "I am not a body though I may appear to be so to you."

"Then what are you?"

"We are bodies of light, not flesh and bones."

Neal looked at Nora and said "Devyani, I see no difference between you and my wife Nora as she stands before you. In fact you two look so much alike that you could be mistaken for twins. And yet, she is a full-blooded woman of flesh and bones."

Devyani laughed and pointed a finger at an object some distance away across the river. They could see standing on the other bank two figures resembling Neal and Nora.

"Who are they?", Nora asked.

"They are you two in flesh and bones."

"Then what are we here in this forest."

"Here you are bodies of light like me standing in your astral body." The two streams, one cold and the other hot, flowing together as a single river, which you have just crossed constitute the mighty current of Time. You and Nora could not have forded them to come over to this bank in your physical bodies of flesh and bones. You would have been frozen to death in the first half of the river which marks the glacial era".

"How could I leave my physical body behind before crossing the river without being aware of it?"

"Cognition is a function of the lower mind which has stayed behind with your body as it cannot operate without it."

"How can I be talking to you without a mind?"

"Here in Siva's heaven words flow from our lips without volition or conscious thinking."

"Which is the real me then?",

"Neither."

"How can that be? How can I speak my own mind without being

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myself?"

"That's it", said Devyani, "You are you and nothing else."

"Then why do I look like a woman?"

"Because you choose to be a female."

"Does this imply I can take any form or shape I like at will?"

"Yes, of course. As I told you it is only an appearance. The reality is different."

"Can I become a fairy in heaven?"

Nora had not completed her question when, in an instant, a silvery white robe in the form of an eagle's wings appeared on her shoulders. She rose into the air. Before Neal could grasp the significance of what was happening and rush to stop her she had risen beyond his arm's reach.

"Nora", he shouted. "Where are you going?"

"Don't worry, Neal, your Nora is safe. Her own desire to be with you will bring her back soon."

"I wish I had this magic wand too. With it at my disposal..."

Here Neal found his mouth gagged by his companion.

"Stop Neal, stop", she cried, at the same time hitting his chin with her fist to seal his lips. "You have seen what happened to Nora the moment she pronounced her wish to become a fairy. Here in this holy forest you have only to express your wish and it will be instantly fulfilled. Hallowed by Lord Siva's eternal presence this whole icy wilderness of snow, mountain and forest is pervaded by this wish fulfilling Light. I do not want you in your foolhardiness to express a desire that might take you astray, into a lower plane of awareness."

"If this divine Light can give you whatever you want why do you live like destitutes without a shred of clothing on your bodies? Are you not ashamed of moving about naked amongst all sorts of people?"

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You do not seem to have a roof to sleep under at night. God alone knows what you eat. I am curious to know how you live."

"We live in Bliss, walk in Bliss, sleep in Bliss and wake up in Bliss. Why should we wish to cover our beautiful bodies with clothes?"

"And what do you do here?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You mean, absolutely nothing."

"Yes, unless you consider sitting an activity."

"Don't tell me you just sit all day."

"Yes, that is what we do."

"Just sit?"

"Yes, just sit."

To calm down Neal's confused state Devyani pointed a finger to the tops of trees and drew his attention to the birds perched on them.

"Do you see those birds? Well, they have been sitting there since the beginning of Time."

"Frozen to the branches?"

"No, they fly around the place when they feel like it, hover above the peaks over there for a while, and then come back to their roosts. We spend our days and nights in much the same fashion."

"Can you fly over those mountain peaks like those birds?"

"No."

"But you can if you wish to."

"Yes."

"Then why don't you?"

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"Because we do not wish to fly."

"Why not?"

"Why should we wish to fly over those mountains?"

"Look, you said you live like those birds. But at the same time I find they can fly to wherever they want while you are tied to this beastly hole."

"We don't compare and compete as you humans do on earth. We just live."

"Then how else can you use your minds? Don't you get bored just sitting in a corner?"

"We watch trees, rivers and mountains."

"Is that all you do?"

"We breathe."

Neal laughed a wry laugh. "I know that. All of us breathe."

"But you are never aware of your breathing. You do not notice when you breathe in and when you pause and breathe out, each time you do it"

"Each time, round the clock?"

"Yes, each time, round the clock."

"Won't it be sheer waste of time?"

"Try it out for a few years and you will know."

"I know it already. It will drive me to the roadside to live the life of a roofless, destitute, a starving beggar with no means of livelihood to support me."

"In short, like us", said Devyani laughing.

"Neal thought the woman was crazy and found it difficult to relate to her. He wished his Nora was back with him.

He had forgotten he was in heaven where he had only to express

a desire for it to be fulfilled.

In a moment Nora flew in fluttering her wings. She hovered over their heads before coming down and stopping at their level with her feet above the ground, near Devyani.

Neal floated towards her to greet her. "I am so glad you have returned. I thought I had lost you for ever now that you had become a fairy of heaven", he said.

"You wished and I came. For me heaven is where my Neal is."

It was true. In his heart Neal had been pining for her. Devyani meant nothing to him. He had never hoped that his silent wish to get his sweetheart back would be answered so readily.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked Nora.

"Nowhere. We stay where we are unless we are sent away. To prove my assertion I declare here and now that whosoever granted my wish to have the wings of a fairy can take them away and leave me in peace with my husband. I ask for nothing more."

Instantly the white garment covering Nora's back together with its attachment of two wings lifted itself off her body and flew away like a bird.

Devyani made a move to go away. Neal caught her hand and asked her to stay to "clear the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"The mystery of there being no emotions like love and hate in heaven. Don't you love any one here as a woman loves a man on earth?"

Hardly had Neal uttered these words when a weird cloud like form descended before them from the sky. It resolved itself before them as a creature resembling a man. Its whole frame started trembling, height doubled, limbs swelled, belly bloated like a balloon and colour of the skin turned blue. The outline of a giant was taking

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shape before Neal's eyes. Some distance away he could see a dozen similar grotesque figures, seated in meditation.

Devyani cosied up to the new arrival. He picked her up in his arms as if she was a baby. More dainty looking maidens appeared from nowhere and gathered around the other males.

"He is my lover, one of Lord Siva's 'ganas'," Devyani told Neal.

"What is a gana? What does he do?"

"I told you we do nothing here. We just sit."

"How could you ever fall in love with such a hideous looking person? You are so delicate and beautiful like a goddess while this man looks a naked monster, more repulsive than a rakshasa."

"In this land of Lord Siva we are not tempted by the outward looks of a person. We can feel the beauty of his soul."

As Devyani's musical words touched his ears, Neal could feel a strange change creeping over him. He forgot who he was, even the fact that he was a man. All that was left of him was a vague awareness of floating freely on a gentle air current. For all he knew he was a non-person.

Then came a new awakening. He found himself standing with Nora before the golden dome in the center of the forest that he and Nora had seen from a distance before crossing the stream and meeting Devyani. What they had taken to be a king's palace was, in fact, a conical formation of pure ice with its top dazzling in many colours and producing a golden halo around it.

On the peak of this magic mountain they could see a vision of Lord Siva in his traditional meditative posture with a snake curled round his neck and the holy Ganga pouring over his head before flowing down to Earth. The Lord opened his eyes briefly and, before closing them again, said:

"My son Neal and daughter Nora, ask of me whatever you want, and it shall be given unto you."

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Devyani dropped down from her lover's arms, stood erect and joined Neal and Nora in offering silent prayer to the deity with folded hands. Facing Nora the Lord said,

"I know your old association with me as Ravana's dearly loved sister, Sarupnakha, has directed your steps to my icy hermitage. You have wandered for twenty years in these hallowed mountains purifying your souls, shedding all attachments, and finally even your earthly body which you have left behind on the other shore of the river of Time that you had to cross to come to my abode. Yet, you are destined to spend some more time on Earth.

"The moment has come for you and your husband to go back to Lanka and discharge your duties to humanity. Vibhishana, the king, is dead. Ravana's Queen, Mandodari, is the ruler of the Empire now. She needs you. To fulfill your mission on earth I grant you eternal youth and beauty. You may live as long as you wish to. Heaven's gates are always open to both of you."

After making this enigmatic observation the Lord's visible form disappeared from their sight.

"Let us go", said Nora prodding Neal in the ribs.

"Where?"

"To Lanka. Did you not hear Lord Siva telling us that King Vibhishana, our tormentor, is dead and we are needed in the Rakshasa kingdom?"

"The Queen might still want to behead me as a traitor."

"She can do so only over my dead body. Whatever happens we have to face it. The Lord's command cannot be flouted."

"Think it over with a cool mind," said Neal

"As Devyani has already told you, in Lord Siva's domain Thought does not exist. The faculty of thinking is purely a human invention.

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Here the Lord commands and we obey."

"Why is that so?"

"Because we are bodiless spirits here. Thought is a product of sensations experienced by the body as pleasure and pain, heat and cold and so on. Lord Siva's bodiless realm is free from all such dualities which afflict even the gods in heaven."

Neal was still not convinced. He knew that the Lankans held him responsible for the slaughter of a thousand rakshasas in Kontuk. Even if the Queen forgave him the people would very probably lynch him. On the other hand there was this command of the Lord to both of them to return to their homeland to complete their assigned period of life on earth.

While he was plunged in this suspense a voice spoke. It was emanating from the golden dome.

"Do not doubt the Lord's words, my son. Do as he tells you whatever the consequences. You cannot avert destiny."

Neal was awe struck and turned to Nora. "Who is this man speaking to me from inside the mountain?" he asked.

Before Nora could speak, Devyani answered him:

"In Mount Kailash every stone is Siva himself and speaks his voice."

* * *



11

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“Wake up Neal, we have arrived.”

Neal opened his eyes. Nora was leaning over him. Apparently she had just woken up after the night's sleep and was lying by his side. It had been her custom for forty years, since the first day of their living together, to raise her head and shoulders and bend over him to wake him up. He could feel her elbow touching his arm and knee prodding him in the leg. Her loosely flying hair was covering his face. Removing it gently he gazed into those peerless eyes of his better half to drink deep with his eyes the elixir of life oozing from them. It was a heady wine which had a new flavour each morning and had sustained him all these years. For Nora too it was a moment of joy reserved only for those like her who had spurned all

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worldly possessions and power, making a sacrificial offering of them to the holy fire of pure love burning in their hearts. The thrill that passed through her body as Neal opened his eyes and gazed fondly into hers was compensation enough for all her sacrifices.

“Arrived where?” he asked, “are you dreaming? Have we not been sleeping as usual under the sky on a bed of grass? We couldn’t have travelled in our sleep.”

She brought her lips close to his ear, so that he could feel the pressure of her warm body, and whispered, “We have been traveling all night, my dear.”

Neal sat up only to discover that what he had taken to be a grassland they were wont to sleep upon during their ascetical wanderings in the Himalayas, was in fact Nora’s magical flying carpet which she had rigged up in the night after he had gone to sleep. It was still the hour of twilight. Through the transparent walls of their aerial capsule he could see the grey sky around it. There was no sign of the mountains and snows which had been their habitat for two decades. Below them was the Sea. In the far distance he could see a forested hill. They were moving towards it.

“We are approaching Lanka, darling. I thought I should save you the suspense and anxiety which you would have felt while traveling to Lanka as directed by Lord Siva. But you need have no worry. Be of good cheer. Before leaving Siva’s retreat I secretly sought a boon from him.”

“What was it?”

“That you and I live or die together. We must never be separated.”

“And he granted it?”

“Yes. He said ‘amen!’”

“I could ask for nothing more than sweet death in your arms.”

“It is the same with me, my dear” she said hugging him. “But

why should we harbour such morbid thoughts on this beautiful morning. The traitor Vibhishana who sentenced you to death is dead. Mandodri rules Lanka. Lord Siva says she needs me. How can she raise a finger against you while I am there?"

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I am her sister-in-law and Ravana's sister, the famous Sarupnakha. He loved me as much as he loved Mandodri. In fact he loved me even more since he had a hundred wives but only one sister. You should never forget that it was to avenge the insult and injury inflicted on me by Ram and his brother Laxman that Ravana fought the Lanka war and sacrificed his life. My name will go down in history as the woman who launched the first great war on this continent.

"All the more reason for the people of Lanka and their Queen, Mandodri, to want to hang you since, according to your boast, it was you who wrought this catastrophe upon them.

Without waiting a moment Nora took out her nose ring and earrings.

"Do you see these scars?", she asked Neal placing her finger on the dark lines which had become permanent marks of injuries sustained years ago.

"Yes, he said."

These are mementos of the most horrifying experience of my life, when on Ram's orders, Lakshman chopped my nose and ears. When Lanka's royal surgeon, Ayurvedacharya Manvantri, joined the broken parts I asked him to let these marks remain as a lasting reminder of the cruelties that great potentates routinely inflict upon their meek subjects in the name of justice and dharma."

"Why are you showing these scars to me? They are merely additional evidence of your guilt in provoking Ravana to fight Ram."

"It is not as simple as you think Neal. These marks are evidence of the racial hatred the Kshatriyas routinely harbour towards other

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races.”

“Why is that so?”

“Because of their White-colour. They believe the White ‘Varna’ or race alone has the right to rule the world.”

“Do you believe that Lakshman’s attack on you under Ram’s orders was an instance of racial hatred?”

“What else? Afterall my only fault was my telling Ram that I loved him and wanted to marry him. Do you think he would have inflicted the same punishment if a beautiful princess, daughter of a Kshatriya King, looking like a white lotus flower, had proposed marriage to him? “Would Lakshman have dared to disfigure her face? Would the world have ever forgiven Ram for permitting such barbarity in his presence? There was nothing improper in my conduct in asking a married man to take me as his wife. Don’t forget Ram’s father, Dasaratha himself, had three wives and Ram worshipped all of them as his mothers.”

“But you were different”, said Neal interrupting her. According to the Ramayana which we heard being recited and learnt by heart by disciples in some of the ashrams of saints we visited in the Himalayas, Sarupnakha was a devil incarnate, hideous like a witch and black as charcoal, in short a woman who was in every respect what you are not. Why should sage Valmiki have drawn such an outrageously false caricature of Sarupnakha?”

“Don’t forget that Valmiki is essentially a bard who would go to any extreme to sing praises of his king. To him Ram was God incarnate who could do no wrong. Valmiki’s description of Sarupnakha, that is me, as black and, therefore, a hideous looking woman who deserved the treatment she got from Lakshman, is a reflection of the Kshatriya obsession with the colour of skin. You must know that the self-righteous Kshatriyas are the most barbarous racists ever born. Nor will there ever be their equal on Earth in persecuting whole races of natives and relegating them to the status of “untouchable” animals merely because of their colour. Describing me as a mem-

ber of a Black race was Valmiki's way of justifying the acts of Ram and Lakshman in chopping my nose and ears, as if a Black woman of another race had no right to fall in love with a fair skinned Kshatriya. For this crime she deserved to be mutilated in the face.

"While describing me as an ugly witch Valmiki forgot that, according to his own statement, we rakshasas can take any shape we like. Ravana appeared before Sita as a monk and his accomplice, marichi, lured her by turning into a multi-coloured chameleonic deer. Why should I have chosen to look ugly in the presence of Ram if I wished to lure him to marry me? I am sure history will not forgive Valmiki for spreading this canard about my looks."

"May be Valmiki did so with good intent", observed Neal with a thoughtful look.

"What good intent could there be in it?"

"Perhaps he wished to highlight the racism of the Kshatriyas."

"You could be right", said Sarupnakha and added, "we Rakshasas too are of Aryan origin but we are treated as a race apart since we are dark skinned and have the temerity to challenge Kshatriya kingdoms in the North.

"Thus you will observe that while I happened to have triggered it, and though Ram's army consisted solely of the brave Vanaras, the war between Ram and Ravana was essentially a showdown between the fair coloured Kshatriyas and dark skinned Rakshasas, the two main branches of the Aryan race. The people of Lanka are aware of this. They knew that in trying to avenge me they were fighting for the honour of our entire Rakshasa race. I am the heroine of their hearts. They adore me. So does Mandodri."

"This should assure you", Nora added, "of your safety in Lanka. The death sentence passed on you by king Vibhishana has no validity today. The whole country knows he was a lackey of our enemies in Ayodhya. Don't forget he wanted my head too. We are both equally safe now.

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Before Neal could respond to Nora's assurances about his safety their dialogue was abruptly interrupted by an unexpected obstruction. They had just crossed the narrow strait separating India and Lanka when their flying carpet was stopped by a giant eagle who stood in the way. It looked like a mass of white feathers, beak and all, with its thin talons sticking out underneath its body and its sharp eyes peering at them through woolly brows.

Nora understood. "Oh! the sky police! Having lived so long away from home I had forgotten it altogether."

She raised her right hand and speaking in a solemn, stately voice declared. "O great bird! Know that I am Sarupnakha, the only sister of the valiant Ravana. I have come to meet and pay my respects to his widow, the peerless beauty Mandodri, the beloved disciple of the holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the adored of the gods in heaven and darling of the citizens of this mighty empire."

The bird stood impassive and silent for almost a minute. Then it opened its beak to make a statement which startled Neal and pleased Nora.

"Your highness is welcome to the Kingdom. Her Majesty has already been informed of your imminent arrival at this hour by a message from Lord Siva in Mount Kailash. She has deputed me to receive and welcome you and your husband and escort both of you to Vanaloore, our new second capital on a nearby island where Her Majesty is currently in residence."

Soothing musical notes tickled their ears. They looked around for its source. In front of them, in the backdrop of the rising Sun, stood a pretty young woman.

"Welcome to your ancestral home, sister", she said and disappeared.

"Who is this maiden?" Neal asked.

"It was a vision of Mandodri, my sister-in-law. Who on earth could possess such divine charm?"

"Ravana died about fifty years ago. Mandodri should be an old woman by now," Neal said.

"After her husband's death, Mandodri extracted three boons from Brahma, that she would die only when she desired to leave the Earth and ascend to heaven, that she would always remain young and that her beauty would never fade."

The Lord granted her wishes but with a rider. "You will not marry nor bear children any more," he told her.

"This reminds me that you too enjoy a boon from Lord Shiva guaranteeing you beauty and long life, and see how beautiful you look! Are you sure Mandodri will not feel jealous of your charms and see a rival in you?"

"You naughty man. You flatter me by describing me as more beautiful than Mandodri. Wait till you are ushered into the Her Majesty's palace. You will be stunned. On any normal day her retinue looks like a beauty parade in heaven."

The vulture from Lanka's sky police snorted. It was reminding them that they had tarried too long and must get moving. Her Majesty must be waiting for them. Nora gave the bird a signal by waving her hand that they were ready to go wherever it might take them. The Eagle came gliding below their flying mattress poised in mid-sky, and lifted it on its back by giving it a gentle thrust. Nora told Neal in whispers that their carrier was not a real bird but one of the thousands of wooden contraptions that roamed as sentinels of the sky over the Rakshasa kingdom. These artificial creatures were fitted with eyes and ears through which Mandodri's spies on the ground could watch the slightest movement on the borders of her kingdom. Mandodri had named them gnats because they could spray poison on intruders who attempted to enter her empire by sea or land.

After flying over the sea for about an hour they reached the island city built by Mandodri as the country's second capital. But their bird-shaped glider did not seem to be in a hurry to take them to

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their destination, the Queen's palace. It made several spiraling circles around dark, green hills lowering its height gradually till they could see the golden spires and domes of the green mountainous city spread over several hills and glades. It presented a contrast to the forbidding, densely forested terrain they had been overflying across India. Nora was in an ecstatic mood. For all her dedication to an ascetic's nomadic life in the Himalayas and North Indian jungles out of her love for Neal, her heart lay here in this glorious Empire, the epitome of regal splendour, glamour and luxury. She had grown up here as the most adored darling of the realm, moody and vain, the favourite of her brothers, a princess who had won the hearts of the citizens by her adventures and romantic escapades. Neal could see the old halo of the imperious princess that she had been in her younger days returning to her cheeks. The plane circled over a river linked to a network of ornamental canals running along high-streets on which gorgeous horse-drawn chariots were driving at break-neck speed with their richly dressed masters and mistresses seated inside on gilded couches. The winding roads were flanked by low-lying hills dotted by spiraling mansions built in the midst of gardens, meadows and parks. The entire landscape was marked by a profusion of flowering trees and plants and interspersed with swimming pools and running fountains. The sky was overcast with birds of every size, shape and colour.

In the far distance on another part of the island they could see large clusters of tall buildings. For Neal it was a disturbing sight since he had never seen an urban settlement before, leave alone a huge city of the kind they had just entered.

The eagle-borne plane landed on its talons on a grassy plain in the center of a large park which had been laid around a small lake. It was a breath taking sight designed for the eyes of gods. Cranes and swans sported in the crystal water of the pool. Lotus of various hues blossoming on floating beds glittered upon its surface like stars in the sky. Long avenues lined with flowering trees ran alongside blossoming shrubs over the hills and dales.

In the midst of this divine retreat in an isolated part of the metropolis the only natives to greet Nora and Neal were birds who hovered over their craft singing myriad tunes the moment they landed. The birds settled down on the grass or branches of trees to take a good look at the visitors. Neal wondered whether the birds were real or, like the eagle-shaped gnat which had brought them there, magical beings whose eyes were scanning their moves and transmitting the images to the Empress and her monitors.

Nora looked pleased to be back home. She kissed its sacred earth, walked a few steps with Neal to the lake and sprinkled its holy water upon her head and face, a ritual which Neal dutifully emulated.

In another minute they heard the loud clatter of horses' hoofs behind them. They turned around and were relieved to see four horses carrying a shiny chariot approaching them at a trot. The vehicle stopped in front of them. To Neal's disappointment it had no coachman or passenger. Nora took Neal's hand and squeezed it in her palm as a loving gesture before leading him up the two-step ladder suspended from the ornately cushioned and furnished cabin of the chariot. They sat side by side like true lovers. Evidently Nora had begun the first act of the drama they had to play in her native city. Whoever might be watching them, through the empire's invisible eyes which were spread everywhere in Lanka, should know how devoted she was to her husband.

She leaned towards a knob in the cabin wall near her seat. It was connected to the horses' necks by two ropes. She tugged the reins alternately several times at varying intervals, applying a different force to each pull. In Lanka this was how instructions were given to horses in a morse-like code to take the traveller to his destination. A five-minute drive over a hilly road led them to a tall mansion of gold-plated wood built on a foundation of white marble. The chariot stopped in front of its gleaming gem studded steps and after disgorging its passengers moved away to a parking green some distance away.

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Groups of peacocks and deer roaming on the hill stopped to watch them till they reached the steps of the spacious villa. Nora walked in with a grave expression becoming of the occasion and stood on the landing of the portico-shaped ornately carved entrance. Immediately the door opened on its own, a privilege reserved only for members of the royal family, and shut behind her the moment she entered the house with Neal. Did the Vedic scientists who had designed the house have knowledge of the human gnome and DNA which could help them identify royal blood? If not how did the doors recognize Nora as a princess of the realm? It was a mystery whose answer, she later told Neal, lay buried in an intricate mix of astronomical, astrological and mathematical formulae that Vedic scientists had worked out over the ages. For the moment the automatic opening and shutting of the door worked on Neal's jangled nerves like an electric shock. He felt he was entering a house of witches after entrusting his fate to the gods. He viewed the beauty of the landscape as a trap laid by Maya, the enchantress, to snare innocents like him into its hellish domain.

Nor was he mistaken. The first person to greet them was the last they had expected to meet so suddenly. It was none other than the Empress herself. Neal recognized her from the fleeting but unforgettable likeness of hers he had seen that morning in her image flashed in the sky when they flew into Lanka. The real queen standing in the center of the room was a far more striking personality than the image. He forgot where he was and stood transfixed in the entrance, like Alice in the story of 'Alice in Wonderland' where oddities were happening at such a fast rate that the girl's normal mind had ceased to function.

But Neal's condition was nothing compared to the state of complete transfiguration in the countenances of the two women on their first meeting after an interval of nearly half-a-century. They were like Ravana's two eyes in his life-time. After his death they shared in common their hatred for Vibhishana, the king's brother who turned traitor and whom the whole country held responsible for Ravana's defeat and death for which he was later rewarded by Ram with the

throne of Lanka. For almost two minutes they stood rooted to the ground facing each other at a distance of about twenty feet in a bare hall. The absence of furniture or draperies in the large empty room lent it the aura of an invisible presence, who could only be Ravana, overseeing the suspenseful scene.

As if this was not enough, a ray of bright sparks resembling a tungsten flame shot out from the Queen's eyes and entered Nora's forehead. Neal almost fainted fearing that this was the last he would see of his beloved wife. He thrust his arm behind her neck to save Nora from falling under the kinetic blow of Mandodri optical missile. But before his hand could reach her, a similar ball of flame emanating from her hit the empress. It was instantly absorbed in her brain. The faces of the two women lit up with a divine glow. Neal withdrew his hand and stood one step back to watch the awesome spectacle.

"Don't be alarmed, my son," said the Queen to Neal with a gracious look which had the merest trace of a smile. "What you are witnessing is the customary greeting amongst heavenly spirits roaming the earth for the good of humanity. Sarupnakha and I are two such divines. What you have seen is an exchange of gifts between us in the form of packets of cosmic energy of which a true Yogi is an eternal reservoir. True to his title of 'Yogi' he lives in a state of permanent union with the cosmos. This is why holy men seek each other's company and the laity pine for a glimpse of them or a touch of the helm of their garment."

Neal felt spiritually elated by Mandodri's gentle speech as if a sprinkling of the energy passing between her and Nora had fallen on him and entered his body. It made him feel at home in those mystic surroundings. A wave of self-assurance was surging from his heart to the brain. He was no more an alien seeking refuge in a foreign land. A breezy sensation in his chest was indication that perhaps the queen had been transmitting a fraction of her cosmic energy to him directly through the heart.

Mandodri asked them to move close to her. "I would not have

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hurried you to meet me so soon, before you had time to bathe and refresh yourself in the apartment I have assigned to you in the royal guest house. But I thought it my duty to accord a personal reception to the woman Lord Siva has chosen to help me in ruling the empire and succeed me when I am gone. That moment may come soon as I am anxious to join Ravana the Great in heaven. However, before I do that we have to avenge our defeat by bringing the proud kshatriya kingdom of Ayodhya to its knees.”

Before concluding the meeting she added that she would ask the royal astrologer to fix a propitious hour when she could officially welcome Nora to her court and ask her to take over the onerous responsibility of governing Lanka as her deputy.

The Queen struck a gong hanging on the wall behind her along with its hammer. Immediately a door opened in the wall to her right. Two beautiful girls, scantily clad, came out of it and bowed. The only garment on their shiny bodies was a bikini type silk suite complemented by garlands of colourful flowers and leaves. But the paucity of clothes was more than made up for by the profusion of diamonds and jewellery they wore. Their anklets of silver tinkled as they walked. Their gem studded waistbands, necklaces and wristlets glittered, enhancing the glow of their smooth pink skin while the tiaras on their foreheads suggested the presence of royal blood in their veins.

Mandodri introduced them to her young guests as princess Malini and Himani, twin daughters of Ravana’s cousin Marawana, a trusted senator at the court. Malini and Himani took charge of the royal guests and escorted them out of Her Majesty’s presence through the open door.

Nora and Neal were amazed at the achievements of Lanka’s Vedic science when they were made to sit in a small wheel-less buggy. Fitted like a bonnet on its front was a polished block of luminous stone. The small carriage flew at great speed through a well-lit tunnel which opened at the other end upon a lush green valley turned into a garden of paradise. Between its well trimmed green slopes ran a

winding river. Lotus pools, flower beds, natural and ornamental trees, and a profusion of birds made it look like Lord Indira's heaven.

Overlooking the scene from a rocky prominence, stood the royal guest house called the Moon Palace. It was like a high-ceilinged covered plaza, replete with long galleries and tall arches constructed along virtually wall-less spacious halls whose roofs were supported by well rounded and polished Asokan pillars. The architect had taken full advantage of its hilly location by making it a pagoda type building with a maze of terraced floors and roofs. The entire house was without doors. The only privacy or exclusivity available to the residents and guests was provided by the terracing, each successive hall being situated three to four feet higher than the one before it as one walked up the building from the entrance. A profusion of furnishings and decorations from floor to ceiling, not excluding the exquisite carvings and images sculptured on the columns and arches and the statues placed beside them, made the place look like an elegant museum. Each hall was fitted with cushioned sofas and mattresses on which guests could sit or sleep. Musical instruments lay scattered all over the place for their entertainment.

Their charming guides took the royal guests to the room above the lobby where they were greeted by four waitresses. They were holding in their hands bouquets and mugs of wine placed in trays. After accepting the flowers Nora and Neal sat down on a sofa in the center of the spacious room.

"No intoxicants please," Nora said raising her hand to dismiss the waitresses. "We are Yogis just arrived from the Himalayas."

"But how can you refuse, your Highness? We have made it specially for you from the finest grapes, fruits and herbs of Lanka. It is called 'heaven's delight'. On drinking it you will feel you are in paradise", said the chief hostess of the Palace. She had been watching the proceedings from behind a pillar and had come forward to intercede on behalf of her assistants. Nora did not wish to be rude and graciously accepted the drink. Neal followed her example. More girls came with fruits, cookies made of palm, coconut and jaggery,

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and other dainties to suit every taste.

The chief hostess, a sprightly girl looking no more than twenty, sat down on the floor before them, picked up a sitar and started playing a soft tune while the two guests helped themselves to the food. They had not eaten since the previous day's spartan lunch at a hermitage in the Himalayas where they had been accustomed to taking one simple meal in the whole day. A bevy of Lanka beauties were performing a tribal dance on an open terrace adjoining the hall to entertain them.

Half-way through the dinner Neal noticed that the chief hostess was eyeing him with interest. So were the other girls in the dance group. Nora had a similar expression on her face.

"Why is everybody looking at me? Do you see any thing funny in my face?" Neal asked her.

"Yes, your face is glowing like hundred candles. It is the drink, I suppose. Do I also look drunk?"

"No, I see no change in you", he replied.

"Let us leave the wine alone," she said putting aside her glass.

Neal agreed.

"May be both of you would like to have a bath to refresh yourselves after such a tiring flight across the world, all the way from the Himalayas," the chief hostess suggested.

"We would love it," replied Nora.

The young woman took them through a long corridor to a gallery of pink marble on the lowest terrace at the other end of the building. It was a cave-like structure carved out of the rock to divert a natural underground stream into its large swimming pool. Water flowed past gleaming bath stands on the other side of the pool to maintain a continuous supply for bathing and swimming.

As they entered the bathing hall two waitresses in bikinis came forward to help them undress, a necessary preliminary to the bath.

Neal was taken aback. The very idea of having to strip before those girls was obnoxious to him.

"Don't you have private baths in this place?" he asked.

"I don't know what you are fussing about Neal," said Nora. "To tell you the truth I have never heard anything so ridiculous as privacy of the human body. The very idea is so appalling. Man is one whole. You cannot split him into two parts, one private and the other public."

"It seems so obscene, more so in the presence of young women", Neal protested.

The obscenity is in your mind. We rakshasas are free from such thoughts. I am reminded of the amorous scenes in the great Ravana's palace. The king used to sleep in the same hall with his hundred wives. There they indulged in night long revelries whose tell tale signs were visible when they woke up in the morning in their loosened dresses with faces that looked plastered with liquor."

Half-drunk as Neal was he needed no further persuasion not to hinder the bath attendant assigned to him in the performance of her duties, while the other girl looked after Nora who was no stranger to these proceedings.

* * *

After the introductory morning session of wine drinking and bathing in the nude in mixed company, they needed no further cultural orientation to life in the capital city of the greatest and mightiest empire on earth. Neal had slept the whole afternoon on a mattress in the hall assigned to them to shake off the stupor induced by the heady liquor. Nora had, likewise, dozed off on an adjoining couch, her hand resting on Neal's chest.

It was evening when they woke up. But their room was not dark since the adjoining halls were brightly lit by chandeliers suspended from the ceiling. One of the two waitresses who had apparently been waiting in the corridor walked in and pulled a silken string

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hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room to remove a leather covering from a chandelier. The room lit up with the glow of a thousand bulbs. She explained that inside the chandelier were strung hundreds of multicoloured pieces of Lanka's new discovery, the luminous energy stone. It was their principal asset which had transformed the nation in a variety of ways within two decades.

Then followed a ritual which completed Neal's orientation, physically and mentally, to his new world. They were taken to another hall where about a hundred men and women were collected. In a few minutes Her Majesty arrived. She was accompanied by her herald, trumpeter and a long retinue of ladies in waiting who stood on mattresses placed along the semi-circular periphery of the pavilion, where it looked out upon a lush green hill. For partners they were joined by boys from the Sun Palace where the Queen lived.

The evening's proceedings began with the customary musical recitation of Vedic mantras in propitiation of the gods. Chief among the deities being adulated were the Queen herself and her late husband, Ravana the Great.

Of the night's revels that followed Neal had but a fleeting recollection, his senses having been numbed by strong intoxicants to which he was unused, soon after the start of the orgy of dancing, drinking, eating and uninhibited romancing.

The Senators had imbibed gallons of wine before the arrival of the Queen though upto that point they had looked quite sober. After formally closing the day's business, which was confined to introducing Nora to the gathered courtiers, the Queen came down from her high pedestal and started dancing with one of the boys from the Moon Palace who had been serving drinks and dishes to the senators. Neal was not surprised since he had already been told by the chief hostess that the attendants at the palaces were all sons and daughters of Senators and Ministers. (He was to learn later that this was Mandodri's way of keeping the town's gentry and laity completely ignorant of the goings on in royal circles. Self-service was the rule in the sprawling state complex which only Rakshasas could

enter).

Her majesty's gracious initiative was a signal to the rest of the distinguished gathering to break loose. Nora suggested to Neal that it was only befitting that they should join in the merry-making. He noticed that the dancers were following no standard style but were merely tilting and swaying their bodies as they went prancing about the space between the mattresses, rubbing shoulders or bumping into each other. In this lax atmosphere it was not difficult for him to make a pretence of dancing with Nora. Little did he know that he was merely participating in the preliminaries. The house was warming up for bigger things.

While they danced, drinks were being poured by attendants into the gaping mouths of the participants like water from a tap. With flushed faces and lusty eyes they ogled at members of the opposite sex. Though he had been guarded in imbibing the wine and chose only the lightest drink, the binge was beginning to effect his legs' capacity to bear his body's weight. Nora noticed the unsteady state of her husband. Quietly she procured through a waitress an antidote on a leaf which she adroitly slipped into his mouth without any one noticing it. She wouldn't have liked her chosen lover to appear to be a chicken to the courtiers. He regained his balance but only for a while.

A brief interlude followed. By then piles of food had been stacked by the attendants between mattresses all over the hall. The whole gathering fell upon it with gusto. Neal was not hungry but he had to make a show of relishing the rich fare, including more wine. As a result, by the time the feast was over he was sloshed and had but a dim recollection of what followed before he passed out. Yet the revelries of the night remained a memorable event of his life. Though over the years he got used to such debauchery in royal quarters, his first taste of it that day remained planted on his mind for decades. He could always recall images of voluptuous males and females of the Rakshasa clan screaming joyfully and chasing each other in a wild spree before dropping and rolling together on the mattresses.

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Not to be left behind, Her Majesty was necking and caressing the young man she had danced with earlier. Within moments sleep overpowered Neal and he could see no more of this bizarre spectacle in which every body seemed free to mate in public with any member of the opposite sex present in the hall.

It was not morning yet when Neal was woken up by Nora. He found himself lying on a mattress in the council hall which had been the scene of the night-long orgy. Nora told him that the party had gone on till about an hour ago when all the participants had left and she had dozed off for a wink by his side.

"You must wash up and dress at once. We have to meet the Queen almost immediately. Her Chief of Protocol was here a moment ago. She informed me that Her Majesty's royal astrologer has advised her to meet us now", she told Neal peremptorily.



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An hour later Nora and her husband were ushered in Her Majesty's court. Mandodri was seated on her glittering throne of gold in a large hall resplendent with furnishings and decorations collected from all over her empire. The Queen looked fresh like a white lotus that had just opened its petals to greet the first rays of the Sun. There was no trace on her face of a hangover of the nightlong revelries that had just concluded. She beamed a benign smile at her new protégés and asked them to move closer to her. They walked up to her throne and sat on the carpet near her feet.

"My children I have called you back from your exile with a special mission," she said and added. "As I have already told you Nora, I want you to succeed me to the throne of Lanka since you are the

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only surviving member of the Ravana family. You have the same blood in your veins your brother had. It was to avenge you that he provoked the war with Ram by abducting his wife, Sita. Be sure he is watching us from heaven and will be most pleased that his lineage is being preserved."

"But have you thought of who will rule the Empire after me?" Nora asked.

Mandodri was too clever not to understand the hidden meaning behind Nora's untimely query. Obviously Nora wished to know whether Sura, her son by Neal, a Vanara, would be acceptable to the Rakshasas as his mother's successor to the throne of Lanka.

Mandodri was non-committal.

"That event is too far off to be thought of now. Before inviting you to Lanka, I have had your horoscope examined by our Rajrishi. He has assured me that you will live for another four hundred years."

Nora smiled and kept quiet. The queen then turned to Neal.

"I have an equally important mission for you, my son. You are a brilliant leader of men and have done great service to the empire. I do not want you to waste your life as a hanger-on of your wife. A man must be a man first, the master in his own home, even if his wife is the Queen of the realm."

"I want him to be my chief adviser in all matters. He has more brains than I have and I..," said Nora interrupting the Queen. She stammered and left her sentence incomplete.

"And you love him dearly, more than anything in the world," said Mandodri reading Nora's thoughts.

Nora blushed and said nothing.

The Queen continued:

"I am glad you have given me this opportunity of imparting to you your first lesson in governing an empire. If I were to name one thing that I have learnt from Ravana the Great as his Chief Queen, it is that statecraft and love must never be mixed. The Rakshasas will

never accept Neal, a mere Vanara, as their de facto ruler.”

“What is wrong with a Vanara? After all he is my husband and, according to your own definition of a husband, my master. If the Rakshasas can accept me as their queen they should have no qualms about Neal being my chief adviser.”

Mandodri smiled. “It is not so simple, my child. A king, even a sovereign like Ravana, is king only in name. His Empire is ruled by powerful Ministers, military commanders, high priests and other potentates holding hereditary rights to their positions. Do you think I hold any real authority over them? They listen to me sometimes because I heed their advice all the time. Only on rare occasions do I open my mouth and they have to obey. But it is they who run the country in my name. I just sit and watch.”

To avoid further embarrassment Neal spoke up. “I shall be happy to undertake whatever your majesty desires me to do,” he said.

“That is the right spirit my man. In fact the position I have in mind for you is more challenging than Nora’s new assignment. I want you to be the Governor of Vanaloore. This island city is a kingdom within a kingdom. You will be the supreme authority here.”

“What is so special about this island?” Nora asked. Mandodri paused for an answer, perhaps to produce the dramatic effect her revelation had on the minds of her captive audience.

“Its original name is Suryadweep”, she said.

Both Nora and Neal gasped for breath on hearing the name “Suryadweep”, so great was their shock and surprise.

“I knew you would be amazed. This should show you that Lanka is in the ascendant now. Nothing can stop us. Conquest of Suryadweep for its hidden energy source, the luminous stone, was my first act on capturing the throne of Lanka after killing the traitor Vibhishana.”

“And where will I live?”, Nora asked.

“With me in Lanka, the seat of the Empire. You can visit your husband occasionally. It is only an hour’s flight from Lanka.”

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"I thought you ruled the kingdom from here."

"No, I come here now and then on my flying chariot, the Pushpak Vimana, given to me by Lord Brahma to watch the progress of our major projects in Vanaloore. Neal's name will go down in history as one of the great pioneers who ushered into the world a new era of Vedic science. Our scientists call it a technological revolution."

"Can I spend a few days with Neal and see what this new city of the future looks like?"

"Yes, by all means. In fact you can go to the Governor's palace now."

* * *

"Neal, I smell a rat. I am not going to leave you alone here in Vanaloore while I reside in Lanka."

"But Nora..."

"Shut up", she said squinting her eyes towards the gate of the Governor's mansion where officials of the empire were waiting to welcome them.

Nora had ordered the driverless horse coach that had brought them from Mandodri's palace to halt when they were about fifty yards from the gate. Walking the remaining distance gave her a chance to convey her intentions to Neal in secret. She knew that the buggy as well as the Governor's house would be bugged by the queen's listening devices. This was the only place where she could alert him against possible dangers to his life.

They walked quietly to the gate and were led into the palatial house by Chandu, the Chief Administrator of Vanaloore, with full ceremony. Priests chanted Vedic Mantras, women sang welcome songs and garlanded them while strains of Indian classical music flowed from inside the building.

As soon as these formalities had ended Neal asked Chandu to brief him on the nature of his new job. But before Chandu could proceed, Nora, who had strayed into the adjoining entertainment hall, returned and asked him about the men whose portraits she had

seen on its walls.

"They are the former Governors of Vanaloore, your Highness."

"Why have they been replaced? In Lanka such posts are hereditary. One dies with his job."

"You are right madam. They died in their posts."

"All four of them?", she asked incredulously.

"Yes"

"Over how many years?"

"Nineteen."

"Which of them ruled for the shortest period and for how long?"

"It was a Vanara called Kona. He had been governor for just one day when he tripped on a banana skin at the head of the marble staircase leading to the roof of the fort. He tumbled, rolled down and was dead by the time he touched ground."

"Kona!" Exclaimed Nora and Neal in unison.

She quickly recovered her sangfroid and stopped Neal from speaking about the dead Vanara with a cold stare.

After this revelation it was hardly possible for Neal to concentrate his mind on Chandu's exposition of his job. It was now obvious to him that Governorship of Vanaloore was Mandodri's death trap for inconvenient persons of importance she wanted to get rid of without being accused of murder. He could visualize what might have transpired between the Queen and the slain leader of his tribe. She must have sought the cooperation of the Vanaras for her project by offering them tempting inducements. Making Kona governor of the new city would be part of the deal. But she could not forget he was the same man who had wrought the massacre of a thousand of her best soldiers. So he must die in an 'accident'.

Neal remembered that it was he who had tipped off Kona about the Rakshasas' plan to invade Vanaloore. Thus he became the primary cause of the disastrous rout of the demons during their first

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assault on the island. Awarding the same punishment to him and Kona would be merely an act of poetic justice on the Queen's part.

Putting a brave face on this frightening scenario Nora kept up a lively discussion with Chandu in which Neal was a casual participant. They were startled when Chandu told them that Vanaloore was now a city of twelve million people.

"Did you say twelve million?" she asked.

"Yes".

"You must be wrong," said Neal who had spent his childhood and youth on this island. "This is many times the population of Lanka, and perhaps more than the head count of the whole world. I know my Suryadweep. This small territory would not have standing room for so many people."

"We keep count of those pouring into the island on a daily basis."

"Who are these new immigrants and where did you find them?"

Most of them are Vanaras living in the islands around Vanaloore."

This seemed to be another outlandish statement which Neal could not allow to pass unchallenged.

"Vanaras! I never heard of Vanaras living on any other island near ours."

"Your Highness will forgive my impertinence. It is obvious that your countrymen never ventured outside your own little Suryadweep which we have renamed Vanaloore to remind posterity that it is the original homeland of the Vanara race."

"You are right. We never felt the need for exploring other islands since we were quite happy in our Suryadweep."

"Yes, and perhaps your people would have continued living in the same primitive state for several thousand years had we not discovered them and brought civilization to their door," said Nora taunting him.



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"But surely they could not be so many as Chandu says", Neal protested.

"This part of the ocean is a huge archipelago several thousand miles long and almost equally wide. It contains more than five thousand islands of different sizes"

"Are all of them inhabited by Vanaras?"

"Not all but most of them."

"Who are the other races living in these parts?"

"Bantas, though they are not so numerous."

Chandu explained that the Southern part of India across the strait from Lanka, called Kishkindha, was also a stronghold of Vanaras. Their King Bali had once defeated Ravana in man to man combat. They were fiercely independent then but no longer. Kishkindha is part of our Empire now and a large number of the immigrants have come from there."

"What is there so unique in Vanaloore that such a huge mass of people should flock to this place? What is their chief attraction here?"

"They did not come on their own. We had to drag them out of their shells."

"Why?"

"Because we needed cheap labour for our various projects, -- your Excellency."

"And they agreed to work for you?" Neal asked. Knowing the fun loving temperament of his people he was surprised that they should have agreed to work on alien projects."

"No. They resisted as long as they could. We had to flush them out."

"How?"

"By poisoning their water and destroying the fertility of their lands."

"Why do you need so many people?"

“All great civilizations have been built on the cheap labour of conquered people taken slaves and declared a low caste or low breed race. Thanks to the discovery of the tremendous reservoir of energy in the Luminous Mountain our empire today is poised on the threshold of a revolutionary leap that would make it superior in every respect to the abode of the gods in heaven,” Chandu said with unconcealed pride.

Heart breaking as they were, Chandu’s revelations about the tragic fate of his race aroused Neal’s curiosity to know more about their new lives as slaves of the Rakshasas. Though a Rakshasi Nora’s heart was with the Vanaras. She had spent most of her life away from her country. Her wanderlust had led her to many quaint places. She was a fairy of the forests, a jungle queen. She had always felt at home with the simple free living dwellers of trees and caves. She sensed Neal’s concern and suggested that as a preliminary introduction to his new job they might take a quick look at the city.

For Chandu Nora’s request was a royal command. He was not too happy, however, at the rider she added to it as an after thought.

“May be we shall be able to get a more intimate glimpse of the city if Neal and I visited it incognito as ordinary citizens without attendants and not in our royal robes” she said.

This was a most unusual request for a princess to make, specially when she also happened to be the future Queen of the realm. But as princess Sarupenakha she had been known in palace circles for her whims and fancies. Stories about her eccentricities were a legion, told and retold throughout the country.

Chandu obliged. He gave the couple a large bag containing over a thousand gold coins of the empire’s currency, bearing the image of its founder Ravana, and took them to their living quarters. They shed the bejeweled and star spangled robes of authority and donned silk garments, worn by the empire’s aristocracy. Nora chose a long-skirted pink frock, a gold necklace with diamond ear rings to match and high-heeled shoes. She advised Neal to put on a blue robe over

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a white tunic and black trousers and completed his attire by putting a gold chain over his neck. Thus equipped they resembled rich tourists from Lanka.

Chandu took them through a secret passage to the back door used by servants of the house and after a short walk through a mango grove ushered them into a busy street of Vanalooore.

Within moments they were caught in the whirl of the big city. Chandu had advised them that to receive courteous attention from the people they met they should introduce themselves as visitors from Lanka. The first to accost them were a throng of coolies carrying palanquins, called 'palkis'. The palki was the principal mode of travel for the gentry of the town. The street was overflowing with them. Space was the most precious commodity. Everyone seemed to be walking on every one's toes. These unique vehicles were tastefully painted with drawings of animals, chiefly snakes, dragons and tigers, presumably as symbols of energy, the city's chief product. Each consisted of a box shaped cabin with one or two seats, fitted with removable curtains on both sides. The box was suspended from poles placed on the shoulders of four bearers, all Vanaras.

The first object that attracted Neal's attention was the peak of the luminous mountain miles away. Apparently they were at the other end of the island, close to the spot from where the Vanaras had fled to seek sanctuary on a neighbouring island nearly forty years ago.

"Can you take us there?" Neal asked the coolies.

"To go there you need an express service", one of them said.

"What is an express service?" he asked.

"Its carriers run in relays between stopovers. You get new runners at each halt. It takes one-fourth the time of the normal walk and will cost you four times more."

"We will take the ordinary service", said Nora.

As soon as they sat in the preferred palanquin and got going

Nora pulled down the curtains so that they couldn't be seen from outside. They were alone now. Huddled together on a small seat, they at last found an opportunity to hold each other in a tight embrace and release the accumulated tension of the suspenseful hours they had spent since their arrival in this weird island.

"We must run away from here", Nora whispered in Neal's ears.

"Why we? I alone should go. You should remain here. I shall come back to you when you become the Queen," Neal protested.

"Love does not wait or find excuses. Do not forget the boon Lord Siva granted me while sending us here. We live or die together", she replied.

"But where shall we go?"

"Nowhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you not seen that for a person to hide himself no place can be better than this city. Imagine you are lost in a forest. Can you find your way back by identifying the trees along the path you came by?"

"No", he said.

"It is the same here. This place is a jungle. Human beings are its trees, shrubs and wild grass. You are a born Vanara. It is the easiest thing for us to get lost in this vast wilderness of Vanaras. Searching for us here would be like looking for a needle in haystack.

"What about you?"

"I am your wife. It will be natural for me to play my part. In this place everybody knows me by my real name, Sarupnakha. But no one knows me by face since I have always wandered in the forests under my nickname 'Nora'.

Her words could not calm Neal's jitters. "Chandu is a smart guy", he said. "What if he has sent his spies after us to keep watch on our movements. Afterall he is not so foolish as not to be aware of the

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Queen's real objective in making me the Governor. I am a marked man and he knows it." Neal warned her.

"I had not thought of that. Thank you for alerting me. We shall know the truth presently."

"How?"

"Wait and see."

In one quick move she flung the curtains one by one on the roof of the box. Walking alongside the palanquin was a man on one side and a woman on the other. They tried to slink behind on being seen by the passengers of the palki. Nora gently tapped the shoulder of one of the palki coolies in the front with a stick kept inside the cabin and asked him to stop. The box was lowered to the ground. They got down and accosted the suspicious looking duo.

"Do you live in this city or are you new here?", Nora asked the woman.

"We have lived here for several years."

"Can you help us? We have just arrived and would like you two to show us around the town. On our own we might get lost."

They hesitated for an answer "I shall pay you handsomely for your service", said Nora jingling before them the bag of coins Chandu had given us."

The woman touched Nora's feet and said. "We shall be only too glad to be of service to your Highness. We do not need your money."

Nora perked up and said, "You seem to know who I am."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"How?"

"We were at the Governor's palace in the group that received you at the entrance."

"How do you happen to be here?"

"We are returning to our homes," said the young man, her companion.

The man was obviously trying to be smart. Nora assumed a tone of authority with him and asked.

"Why are you returning home at this hour? Don't you work at the palace?"

The boy melted and, like his companion, touched Nora's feet before speaking.

"You are our future Queen, Your Highness. I shall not lie to you. Only save me from my master Chandu. He will kill both of us if he knows we have told you the truth."

"Don't worry, I shall not betray you."

"The truth is madam, we have both been asked to follow you and report your movements to our Master."

"Are you the only persons sent by Chandu after us?"

"We don't know Your Highness. There may be others on the same mission in this crowd of people you see going about in palkis or on foot."

"Don't you recognize your own colleagues?"

"We work in the kitchen and were hurriedly summoned by the Master to follow you secretly. He may have sent others from his police or army. We don't know them."

Nora's instinct had proved right. She had assumed that if a spy was chasing her and Neal he would like to hear their conversation inside the covered box. By throwing the curtains up in a flash she had caught the eves droppers in the act. Besides being taken by surprise they were novices in the game. The woman was easily overawed by Nora's personality and had instinctively addressed her as "Your Highness", thus giving herself away. Fortunately Nora and Neal had been conversing in whispers inside the palki. Chandu's agents could not have overheard them.

Neal suggested to Nora that perhaps time was on their side. Being late starters other spies might be trailing them from a distance and would take time to catch up with them without making them-

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selves conspicuous. "We should dodge them before they come too close." he said.

"Quite right", she replied.

Taking out two gold coins from her purse, she gave one to each of Chandu's spies with a gracious smile and said,

"Take this for your pains. Follow us at a distance and watch out for any more spies who may be trailing us."

They bowed while Nora and Neal took their seats in the palki and resumed the tour of the city. After pulling down the curtains over the windows Nora brought her lips close to Neal's ear and whispered. "There is something we must remember while in this evil kingdom. If we are to come out alive from this abode of the Devil, we cannot afford to be loose-tongued here. Every word you utter anywhere in this domain, in the sky, on land or under water, in the privacy of your toilet or in a remote park, is heard, recorded and reported."

"They say walls have ears. Here it has come true," Neal quipped.

"Here even the air you breathe has ears. So watch out."

"I am scared to death by your warnings and wish you had not brought me here. For all I know, I may not leave this place alive."

"Don't worry my sweet darling. We will. There is always a way," said the queen of his heart who had courted death all her life and thrived on it.

They noticed, as they went along, keeping the windows of the palki uncurtained, a conspicuous looking building of wood to their right. It had a large door behind an ornamental archway opening on the road. Nora stopped the palki, caught Neal's arm and hurriedly dragged him into the house.

"You two wait here and watch everyone who enters," she said in a whisper to the female spy. The maid and her companion nodded assent. It suited them since standing there they could act as double agents for both Chandu and Nora. On entering the place Nora and Neal found they were in luck. The room they had stepped into was

a spacious lobby serving three adjoining halls. One of these was occupied by elegantly dressed men sitting in rows on thick cushions and eating food from silver plates placed in front of them on low stools of ivory-carved wood. Several others were moving about in the aisle in the middle in search of seats. Here they thought were the top elite of the town with nothing to do but eat and drink. On entering it they were overwhelmed by the unique smell that pervaded the place. It was mixture of the fragrance of perfumes and cosmetics used by the voluptuous diners blended with the pungent odour of strong alcoholic drinks, meat, fish and other delicacies being consumed by them with gusto. Scores of liveried waiters, waitresses and cleaners were scurrying about the place performing their duties unobtrusively.

They walked into the Central hall which was larger and more crowded than the other rooms. Near the middle of the wall at the far end sat on a dais a bulky man in an embroidered silk gown which reflected the brilliance of the large diamond necklace resting on it. From his bushy moustache and the jewellery and robes that adorned his person, they took him to be the landlord of the eating house. Clients were jostling to reach the podium to give him gold coins which he counted before dropping them in the relevant box, while his assistant noted down the name of the client and the amount paid by him in a thickly bound red ledger.

More by compulsion than design Nora and Neal were sucked into the melee and pushed towards the bursar's table. Nora pointed a finger at one of the four figures drawn on his desk as a preliminary to inquiring into the cause of the commotion in the room. But before she could open her lips he took the bag of one thousand gold coins from her, poured it into a box placed in front of him and after making a few quick calculations asked one of his deputies to hand her another bag containing four thousand gold coins.

Nora and Neal were dazed by this staggering windfall. They were not aware that they had entered a gamblers' den and the four pictures on the bursar's table represented four businessmen on one of

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whom a bidder had to stake his money. Nora had unwittingly put her finger on the winner.

Nora took the bag and found herself jostled into a corner. Neal struggled with the throng to stick close to her. Immediately, as if from nowhere, a burly Rakshasa pounced on Nora from behind, snatched the bag from her and ran out of the room through a nearby exit.

She uttered a sheriek.

The culprit tore through the crowd and disappeared into another room in the rear. Prompted by his natural Vanara instinct, Neal sprang over the heads of the people around him, using their shoulders as props, and pursued the villain. In one quick sprint Nora came tearing through the crowd like a tigress and caught up with him. They were just in time to see the rascal vanishing in a lane. He was a man of heavy build and Neal was able to see him entering an imposing two-storey mansion as he turned into the corner of the street. Nora and Neal rushed into the house but were blocked by two guards. Neal was in a rage Silencing the burly guards for a few hours by knocking their heads against each other was for him a moments' job. They fell on the ground unconscious. Nora, meanwhile, pursued the robber who could be trailed by following the heavy thud of his boots as he clambered up a flight of wooden stairs inside the house. Nora dashed up the steps behind him closely followed by Neal. They reached the landing of the room the thief had just entered before he could slam its door in their face. Neal collided with him in the chase. The man was thrown to the ground. Nora hurriedly shut the door from inside and barred it with the log of wood suspended adjacent to it by inserting it into a hole built for the purpose in the opposite part of the door frame. Had the goon reached the sanctuary of his room a few moments earlier he would have used the same wooden bar to prevent the entry of his pursuers.

He was now in their hands. In one last desperate bid to secure his loot he ran to the opposite wall to pick a sword hanging there.

Nora ran after him and bumped into his back, pushing him against the wall with full force as he took the sword in his hands. His leg struck the naked weapon opening a gash above the ankle. The rakshasa fell flat on his stomach dropping the sword and Nora's bag of gold coins which he had been clutching in his left hand all along. Neal jumped on his back and pummeled him with his club like fists reducing him to pulp to render him incapable of pursuing them. Blood was dripping on the carpeted floor from his wounded leg.

Nora, meanwhile, was peeping out of the windows on two sides of the room. She saw that the one in the rear opened upon a patch of soft grass growing under a coconut tree whose top was within her arm's reach.

She picked up her bag with the gold coins and moving close to Neal said, "We can jump directly on the ground or slide down this tree."

"Wait till I have finished with him." he replied.

"Don't kill him. It will be better to make him talk. May be we can pump out useful information about this town from him," she said.

Neal turned the rakshasa on his back. His eyes were open and he was smiling. As a precaution Neal took away the sword lying near him and held it tightly in his hand.

"Is this your house?" Nora asked him.

He sat up, took out the black silk scarf he wore round his neck and tied it tightly above the wound in his leg to stop the bleeding. Then looking up at Nora he said,

"Yes, this is my house. I am Konje, as everybody knows, a respectable citizen of this town. Who are you?"

"Are you not ashamed of yourself?" she said ignoring his question.

"Ashamed of what?"

"Committing such a mean act."

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"What mean act?"

"Snatching a bag of coins from a lady."

"What is mean about it?"

"Is there no law against robbery in Vanaloore? Suppose I report you to the police."

Konje laughed.

"If you ever commit the folly of going to the police, do not go with your coins. They might be tempted to keep the money. And that would be the end of the matter once you name me, Konje, as the accused. The whole world knows me."

"We can appeal to the courts", Neal said.

"All our judges are pure breed Rakshasas. They have been appointed to administer Rakshasa law to protect Rakshasa interests. I can see that you are a Vanara not protected by any law."

"Other races do not matter to you."

"No, they don't. There would be anarchy in the empire if our judges started entertaining claims of equal treatment before Law from the lower castes or races or other demands from them for parity in any form.

His sangfroid baffled the princess. "What if we report you to the Queen or the governor?" she asked.

Konje made a grimace as if to suggest that was their business. Then, by way of warning he added,

"You are new to this place. Let me tell you something. Vanaloore is a fast growing city. It is not a nursery school or a temple where you can put everything in order from the start. It needs all kinds of people to make it grow. If the authorities were to take note of such petty unproven accusations against respectable citizens they would have to convert half of Vanaloore into a prison and all development work would come to a halt."

"But we have witnesses to prove your guilt", Neal protested.

"Who are they?"

"You were seen grabbing the money and running away with it by dozens of people."

"Go and ask them now. They will all say they never saw me or both of you anywhere near the building the whole day. Suppose you had access to the Queen or her puny protégé, the Governor, and complained about it they will merely shrug their shoulders. In their hearts they may believe every word of what you say but they will never admit it."

"Why?"

"Because this city has been built and raised to such eminence in the world by people like me. Her Majesty needs us, not you. You are an encumbrance."

For a moment Neal was tempted to return to his governorship at the risk of his life, if only to chastise such impudent rascals. But the rakshasa's bursting confidence and mischievous looks subdued him. Instinct told him this was not the place for him. They must run away from it at the earliest. Only scounders or unscrupulous adventurers could thrive in Vanaloore.

They were interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Neal thought of taking Nora's advice and leaping through the window.

The knock was followed by a woman's voice.

"My Lord! My Lord! Open the door", she was saying

"Come, let us be friends", said the host in a conciliatory tone. "In a growing city like Vanaloore such petty business misunderstandings keep happening all the time. They should not be allowed to come between us. Be good enough to open the door to my wife. She will collect a crowd if you don't. I assure you upon my honour that no harm will come to you." He added raising both hands to confirm his oath.

Nora walked to the door to admit his wife. Upon seeing her husband sitting incapacitated with his hair ruffled and blood trickling on the floor from his wound she rushed towards him and fell in his arms:

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“Oh my Lord! What is this. Have these people beaten you?”

“No, my darling Myra, I hurt myself by accident. It was only a minor scuffle between friends,” Konje replied dismissing the idea that any one in Vanaloore could dare to beat him up.

She eyed the intruders reprovingly. Despite her apparent dislike for them, Neal had to admit to himself that she was stunningly beautiful. She was the kind of woman to win whose favours one could be forgiven if he looted a bank, what to speak of a lady's bag of coins. The Vanara was man enough to see her husband's crime from the angle of human nature. Man will be man. With such a glitzy wife to support and impress perhaps no man with blood in his veins could help doing what Konje had done. For all Neal knew he must have been doing this sort of thing all the time to keep his wife decked in jewels.

The woman's angry looks held Neal spell bound for some time. She was like a boa constrictor eyeing its prey. Her smooth shiny face, penetrating eyes, sharp nose, virtually transparent bodice and skirt worn carelessly over a slim, shapely and largely uncovered body were no less alluring to his eyes than the ornaments of gold and diamonds with which she had adorned herself from head to foot.

Konje broke the spell by resuming the discussion. “You appear to have just arrived from Lanka where wealth flows from all quarters of the earth. Every Rakshasa living in the capital of the country, howsoever low his rank, is floating on a sea of gold. But do you know how Lanka happens to be so rich?”

“We have become what we are, the leaders of the world, through our intelligence and hard work in exploring the secrets of Vedic sciences,” Nora replied.

“Nothing of the kind. You are what you are through your power to kill and rob people of other nations. Your strength lies not in hard work but in your weapons.”

“How does that explain your robbing me today? I am not an alien. Why can't you live on honestly earned money?”

"There is no such thing as honest money." Konje retorted. "If you want to be rich you have to take other people's money by using force of one kind or another. How else could I have bought this large mansion for Myra, my youngest wife, and maintain seven more houses for my other wives? Mere hard work may buy me my daily bread and help me keep body and soul together. It can do no more. To be rich you have to rob people. There is no other way. This is the first lesson my father gave me when I joined his business. Do you think, young lady, this bag of gold you are carrying is honest money?"

"Why not?" Nora asked in a defiant tone.

"Because every bit of it comes from the labour of slaves whom you capture, starve, kill or maim so that you can flaunt your wealth and live in luxury."

"Do you have eight wives? Neal asked Konje.

"Yes, and why not. Ravana had a hundred of them and was able to keep all of them satisfied."

"Does one acquire wealth merely to have several wives?" Nora asked.

"Women, wine, music and dance are what we fight and live for. This is the Supreme Law governing human nature. Even the gods are not exempt from it. In fact heaven is where these essential ingredients of a good life are found in plenty."

"What about the women?" Nora protested: "Don't they have a similar desire for more husbands?"

"And who prevents them from satisfying it? Our Queen is very wise and liberal. One of the first things she did on ascending the throne of Lanka was to permit women to have as many husbands as they liked."

"Do your wives have other husbands?"

"Yes every one of them has married several men?"

"Do you know who they are?"

"Yes, of course. They are all members of our Kosha."

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"What is Kosha?"

"The place where you met me."

"You mean where you robbed me."

"You may put it that way though it would be a harsh way of describing a normal business transaction."

"When I first entered it I thought it was an eating house where people come, eat, pay for the food and walk out."

"Nothing of the kind. It is the city's gambling center. The people you saw eating there are its regular members. We hang around the place all day and, for our pains, are served free meals."

"What do you do there all day?"

"We rob each other."

"But you said you gamble".

"What is gambling but constant money transfer between the players on the mere throw of a dice?"

"I didn't see any dice though money was being poured at a hectic pace into the landlord's box," Nora said.

"The dice in this case is the name of the businessman we put our money on. We have to choose one of the several Shaks engaged in the luminous stone industry and earmark our money to him."

"What is a Shak?"

"The literal meaning of Shak in our language is a 'big belly', or a creature who can devour almost anything. Here we apply it to people with pots of money.

"How did the Shaks acquire pots of money in the first instance?" Neal asked.

"By gambling at the Kosha of course, though they like us to believe that they earned it through their hard work in business."

"And they burn it up on women, wine, music and dance," Nora quipped.

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"Ego, young lady. We burn it not so much on women, wine and other entertainments as on the gratification of our overblown egos. God has provided these objects of pleasure in plenty in the remotest village. In the ugliest ghettos of Vanaloore inhabited by those uncouth Vanaras you will find people making love and drinking and dancing with gay abandon."

"What is the difference then?"

"We do it in style, after the ways of the rich rakshasas in Lanka. Our houses of pleasure vie with Lord Indira's palaces in heaven."

"Not everybody can afford to be that rich," Neal said butting in.

"How right you are my dear", said the lovely Myra chipping in.

Her "my dear" literally floored Neal, so sweetly had she uttered those words.

"For such people there are other places, less glamorous" she explained. "To tell you frankly I wouldn't like to see myself dead in one of those seamy haunts of our new middle class. That is why, for my sake poor Konje has to slog and sometimes risk his life so that we could make both ends meet in a civilized manner.

"You mean he has to rob people to keep his place in the top wrung of the social hierarchy".

"Precisely," said Konje. "That is where real action lies and you feel in your veins the thrill of being alive."

While talking with her visitors Myra had been from time to time turning her gaze towards the bag of gold coins in Nora's hands.

"Is that our money she is holding, my dear Konje", she asked her husband.

"It was ours for a short while but is no longer so", he said sighing.

Wisdom dawned in a flash on the wily socialite. "It seems she has outsmarted you. I don't care whom it belongs to, we can still take it back from her. I am sure she won't mind," she said persuasively while at the same time advancing threateningly towards Nora.

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In one swift move Neal snatched the bag from Nora and rushed to the window. He was on the point of leaping out upon the grass below when Konji thundered.

“Stop, the money is yours. No one will take it from you in my house.”

Myra turned her wrath on the wounded man. “You and your scruples. What are you getting in the bargain? A broken back and bleeding leg.”

Then changing her tone she said, “Oh dear, how much have you to suffer for my sake. Only last year I had to nurse you for a week when you and your guards fought with the former owner of this house to drive him out of this place. But for this valiant act of yours we would still be living in Sharpers’ Street, a thoroughly middle class colony.”

“Not we, only I would have been living there. Don’t forget we moved to this place only after you gave me your ultimatum that you would leave me unless we shifted to a more respectable area. You left me no choice but to act at once.”

“Yes, I remember that. But why are you blaming me for it? Was it wrong on my part to prod you into action along the path to prosperity?”

“Not at all, my dear. Every beautiful woman is ambitious. But only a few have the drive and verve to risk their all to attain what they want.”

“Women like me are not so selfish as you seem to suggest. I did what I did not for myself alone but for you, my husband, and my child. We can now send him to the best academy in Lanka for his education. See how quickly we have moved in the eyes of those who matter. Everyone from the Chief Administrator to the two richest businessmen, Taurus and Pamovana, the Queen’s favourites, come willingly to our house when we invite them.”

“They come to have a glimpse of you. You are the main attraction for them, not the house,” he said taunting her. He reached out

his hand towards her. She moved forward and grasped it. They kissed and were supremely happy.

* * *

The visitors thought they had overstayed their welcome. It was time to move, but how? It might not be safe to walk out through the main door. Neal peeped out of the window above the staircase landing near the door. Down below in the front ground he saw a number of well dressed couples standing quietly in the shade of palm and coconut trees, apparently waiting for somebody. More were slowly trickling in. He showed them to Nora. She started at the sight and turned to her hosts.

"Who are those people gathered on the lawn of your house?" she asked Konje.

"Oh! Have they arrived?" he said lifting himself slowly on one foot with Myra's support while writhing with pain from the wound in the other leg. Replying to Nora's query he said, "they are my friends and relatives who have come to mourn my father's death."

"When did he die?", she asked in a sympathetic tone.

"Last night. We are going to cremate him this afternoon."

"But you do not look sad at his death? Instead you have been going about your business in the gambling house as if nothing had happened, even snatching my bag from me like a professional bandit. Could you not cremate him in the auspicious hours of the morning and then attend to your work? In fact the mourners down there in the garden look more sad than you."

"They have to look sad. That is why they have come here. In other people's funerals I have to look equally dumb. That is the formality we have to observe. But tell me what is there to mourn? The old man lived a lusty life and passed away when his time came. His soul will be more pleased when it sees an impressive procession of Vanaloore's top elite in his funeral procession. If I had cremated him in the morning no one would have come. They would have been busy in the gambling house. We would have looked

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paupers. In this city a man's reputation is made or marred by the size and quality of the gatherings at marriages and funerals held in his family."

Myra, who had a different view of the old man, could not restrain herself from venting her anger. "If you ask me the man was a scrounger and a scum. I was ashamed to call him my father-in-law. I do not know why Konje is organizing this elaborate and expensive funeral to honour him," she said.

Konje tried to shout her down. "You must not speak such harsh words even against your enemy who has just died, leave alone my father."

"Why not? What has he done for us? But for my keeping secret watch on his wealth, earned from the thriving slave trade of Vanaloore, we would have been paupers today."

Then addressing Nora, she said, "Do you know my dear he died without leaving a clue to the places where he kept his accumulated wealth? He did not trust even his only son about it."

"Is that true?" Nora asked Konje.

"That is true. He never trusted me in money matters. But he did it with good intentions, wanted me to learn to stand on my own feet. He would have been so happy if he had seen me bringing home your bag of gold coins."

"As if you would ever show it to him," his wife quipped. "You wouldn't show it to me either though you say you love me more than anything in the world."

Neal who was listening to these sordid revelations aghast, asked "Why is that so? What is wrong with your family?"

"It is good, Sir, that you asked this vital question about our Rakshasa culture. Its most fundamental principle which has made us the mightiest power on earth, is that the right hand must not know what the left is doing," replied Myra sarcastically throwing an accusing glance at her husband.

"You mean there is no place for intimate relationships?" Neal

asked.

"There is, and plenty of it. Intimacy implies absence of misunderstandings. The less you tell about your actions and private thoughts and activities to your wife, husband, parents, children, friends and others, the less would be the occasions for friction and estrangement with them."

"This is strange logic. In our Vanara society everything happens in the open. There is no such thing as 'privacy'. Our motto is 'togetherness'. We follow the policy of 'one-for-all and all-for one'".

"That is why your people have remained uncivilized like animals," Myra retorted. "We call it herd mentality. Rakshasas have risen to great heights of personal accomplishment solely by following the doctrine of 'Each-man-for-himself, let the best man win and may Devil take the hindmost.'"

"How can you be so callous towards people who live with you day in and day out, not trusting even your nearest and dearest?"

"If we have to survive in our competitive environment we cannot afford to trust our own shadow," said Konje joining the debate.

"But how do you manage it? Our whole island of Suryadweep which you have usurped used to be one large family of Vanaras. There could be no secrets or privacy from each other amongst its members."

"Privacy is achieved by creating walls between people. In Lanka each man is an island unto himself," said Myra.

"You are talking in riddles, madam. Anyone with two hands can make walls." Neal observed.

"Yes, but we build houses with them, sealed by roofs and doors."

"You do it to escape the harshness of nature, its storms, heat and cold."

"No, again wrong. We build walls not against nature but each other. We put our wealth behind these walls or hidden inside them to secure it from our husbands, wives, children, rivals and others."

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"They can still grab it."

"Yes, they can try to grab it if they know what we have and where we have kept it. It must be a secret to observe which we have to create another wall. It is an art and science you Vanaras will not be able to learn in a hundred life times. Your brains are not constructed that way."

"What kind of wall is it? I am sure I have never seen it."

"You couldn't have. That's why you cannot make it. You need a rakshasa's mind to do that." said Myra with a laugh. "The first thing a rakshasa learns in his mother's womb is the art and science of building these invisible walls."

"Is it some sort of magic?"

"No, it is in the brain. You have to wall the mind."

"Wall the mind?"

"Yes, wall the mind and seal it, so that no one, not even a mystic dreamer or a crafty king can penetrate it. Do you think I can ever get behind the steel-curtained walls of my husband's mind?"

"How can he stop you? Afterall you are the mistress of his heart."

"Yes, of the heart, but not of his wily mind. Here we learn from childhood the art of not telling even the smallest things about ourselves—our thoughts and actions—to our closest relation or friend. It becomes a habit. The mind of each Rakshasa is a castle no one can penetrate. Therein lies the secret of his strength."

"What you are telling me, Myra, if I may call you by your name, amounts to saying that a Rakshasa has two faces, a false one which he shows to the world and the real one that he keeps hidden behind what you call this wall of the mind."

"Yes, you are right Neal. In doing this we are only trying to follow the Law of the Lord who made man in his own image. God thrives on secrecy. He will never let you know what He has written in your fate for tomorrow or a year hence. Therein lies His power. If His mind was open to all and sundry no one would worship Him."

"In other words secrecy is power."

"Yes, and Lanka is Power at its best."

"And worst too," Neal retorted.

Trying to change the subject from the murky side of his elite tribe, Konje said to his guests, "You are rich tourists from Lanka. You are welcome to join us and see for yourself the elite of the town I have lined up for my father's last journey. There you will meet the city's most important personalities."

Nora thought it was a good idea and accepted the proposal. Neal lent Konje a hand as he hobbled down the staircase with a limping leg. In the center of a large room on the ground floor, identical to the one they had just left in the upper storey, they could see through a door the dead man's body draped in a white cloth and laid on the floor between four ornately carved wooden pillars which supported the roof. By then over a hundred well dressed mourners had collected outside. A palanquin entered the arched gate and was set down on the pathway by the bearers. It contained black hoods and gowns. These were distributed among the guests. While hurriedly donning a gown Nora suggested to Neal that they should cover their foreheads and cheeks with the hoods so as not to be easily recognized. They had barely put on their disguise when a fleet a palkis stopped outside the gate. From the middle one emerged Neal's deputy, Chandu, the Chief Administrator and number two boss of Vanalooore.

To avoid him Nora caught Neal's arm and together they walked silently behind the palki that had brought the costumes to mingle with the sundry group of mourners and attendants who crowded the walkway upto the gate.

"Your Highness!" said a voice in a soft whisper close to Neal's ears. It gave him a start. Prompted by his Vanara instinct, he jumped almost six inches from the ground.

Nora, who could handle such situations better, accosted the stranger with stately calm and bowed to him.

"Please come with me", the stranger said softly. Nora and Neal

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followed him to the gate. It was too late. The words "your highness", though spoken in a whisper, spread like an electric current through the crowd. Within moments the exclamations "Her Highness!, the princess!, our future Queen! His Excellency the Governor!" And the like were heard from all over the lawn. The runaways found themselves caught, tapped and exposed. Their guide who was apparently trying to save them from this embarrassment by quietly whisking them away from the scene, changed his tactic with surprising alacrity of mind and advised them to stop, remove their black gowns and face the gathering.

Raising his hands by way of calling the meeting to order he introduced the couple to the mourners with a brief speech. "Friends", he said, "the princess and her husband, Prince Nealana have been called by our gracious Queen to assist her in ruling the Empire. She has appointed His Excellency Nealana, Governor of this city."

Forgetting the solemnity of the occasion, the crowd broke into a loud applause.

"Before assuming his duties" continued the speaker, "His Excellency expressed a desire to go about the city incognito and mix with the people at a personal level so that they could talk to them freely about their problems with the administration. Their experience, I am ashamed to say, has not been very flattering for our great metropolis."

At this point his oration was interrupted by the host, Konje, who was hopping on one leg towards them, his arm placed on a shoulder of his beautiful wife, Myra. Both were weeping and wailing as they fell prostrate at the feet of the royal couple. Konje let out a heart-rending cry and pleaded,

"Forgive me Master. Have mercy on this orphan. As you can see only today I have lost my father. In my distress I lost my head and did crazy things. You two are my father and mother now. Think of my poor young wife. She will be widowed and ruined. And our children! What will become of them!"

His wife joined in the pleadings. "Have mercy on me, my prin-

cess. Next to Her Majesty you are mother of all the people here. You are a woman. You can understand my feelings. I admit my husband has done you wrong in robbing you of your gold, for which death is the only punishment. I admit that he deserves to be beheaded for his crime. But he did this in ignorance and in a fit of madness.”

These lamentations would have gone on had not Nora bent down and, in a spontaneous expression of magnanimity, lifted Myra off the ground, kissed her and comforted her with words suited to the occasion.

“Be at ease, sister, and attend to your guests. We are here to pay our respects to your departed father-in-law who, I am told, was one of the pioneering builders of Vanaloore. He was responsible for capturing and bringing thousands of Vanara slaves from neighbouring islands to build this magnificent city. In honour of his great services to the Empire I am pleased to give you this bag of gold to build a suitable memorial to the departed leader of the Rakshasas, so that coming generations may be inspired by his example.”

A thrill ran through the crowd as Nora made this announcement. The leading personalities of the town present on the occasion vied with each other in showering praises on her in the most servile terms. Glowing tributes such as “our gracious princess, a goddess come to earth, a picture of royal mercy, a true inheritor of the mantle of Ravana the great”, and so on, poured forth from their lips in profusion.

Konje, meanwhile, sprang to his feet. Snatching the bag of gold from his wife he placed it at the feet of the princess and cried, “Oh most exalted queen, my goddess, my princess, my honoured guest, you have to choose between this bag and my head. If my wife or any member of my family so much as touches this gold I shall this moment sever my head from this body and with my own hands place it at your feet. I may be a lowly criminal, but I shall never be so mean as to touch a single coin of the royal treasure. Through generations my family has served our sovereign monarchs of the Ravana dynasty with utmost sincerity and devotion. Our life is yours, every moment.”

Gambling House Windfall for Princess

Neal stopped Konje from going on with this rant by embracing him warmly and extolling his loyalty to the crown. Nora took back from the rakshasa the bag of gold coins and calm was restored.

For the guests the funeral ceremony had gratuitously turned out to be far more entertaining than they had expected it to be. It was the event of the decade that would be told and retold by several thousand tongues throughout the city during the next few days and go down in its annals for several generations. Suppressing their excitement over these rare happenings, which for them had an aura of the supernatural, they stood in silence with their heads slightly bent but not so low as to prevent them from viewing the drama being enacted before them.

Little did they know that the climax was yet to come. Before the formal funeral ceremony could begin with the sounding of bugles and drums by a band of musicians, who stood outside the gate awaiting a signal from the master of the mansion, there appeared in the doorway of the house a spectre which held everybody in thrill.

It was the ghost of Konje, Konje's father, whose body lay draped in white in the adjoining room. Instantly, the crowd let out a long moan which was the Rakshasas' traditional manner of greeting an apparition.

"Oh my God! He is still here to haunt us," exclaimed Myra on sighting her father-in-law's ghost. "I had thought we had got rid of this meddling menace at last!"

Konje walked respectfully, met the advancing figure of his father half-way and prostrated before it.

"Rise my son", said the resurrected Konje in a hoarse voice, stretching his right arm in front of him by way of benediction. "This is the greatest day in the history of our family. I have been watching your every move since my death last night. The unexpected appearance of the princess at our house, and that too on the occasion of my funeral, has stirred my soul to its very depths. It is too great an honour to be missed. I have assumed this earthly form for a brief moment to receive Her Highness in my capacity of the head of this

House, before I finally depart from the world, and also to offer my gratitude to the princess for sparing my son's life despite his grave misdemeanour."

Konje who had risen to his feet said with a respectful bow. "You are most welcome father now and at any other time. Please forgive Myra for her discourtesy. She is a child. But how did you know what was happening here? I thought your soul had already ascended to heaven."

"Attachment, my son, attachment. All my life I have nursed but one passion. It was to see my only son rise to great heights. At no moment in all these fifty-five years since your birth has my mind strayed from you. Now, since my death, I find myself hovering around you bodiless and helpless. Believe me I do not like it any more. As for Myra, I bless her with all my heart. I hope she will keep you happy like your other wives, all of whom have treated me like their own father."

With these remarks the apparition fell prostrate at Nora's feet.

"Save me. O, princess! I know you have the powers to release me of the agony of my worldly longings."

Nora smiled and fixed her gaze on the fallen figure. Rays of light started shooting from Ronje's head and soon enveloped his whole body. Within a few seconds it was immersed in a coffin-shaped barrel of red flames which was shedding its luster over the entire scene, including the mourners and plants and walls of the house. The spectacle lasted but a minute before the mysterious flames disappeared along with the spectre they were shrouding.

Cries of "hail princess!" rang out from the gathered spectators who had been trembling with horror over the inauspicious appearance of the ghost.

From inside the house was heard a loud wail. It was Konje. He had peeped in to look at the corpse of his father which he believed must be there as he had left it earlier, since what they had seen outside the house was only a ghost. The body was gone.

The announcement of the miraculous disappearance of the late

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Ronje's mortal form from inside the house was greeted by moans, gasps and sighs by the mourners. If what they had seen of Ronje prostrating before the princess was only his self-confessed ghost, where was the body? If it was Ronje in person, how could the dead man return to life and walk?

They gazed at the princess with awe and reverence. Used to the worship of their kings as incarnations of the gods, they considered themselves blessed in having witnessed this proof of their divinity with their own eyes. Enshrining the holy image of their new goddess, who had appeared among them as their own princess, they walked back to their homes with bowed heads.



13

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The kindly stranger who had saved Nora and Neal from a most embarrassing situation with the astuteness of a statesman, introduced himself to them as Taurus, a city businessman. They readily accepted his offer to take them round the city, hoping in their hearts that this tour would somehow show them an escape route from Vanalooore.

Taurus took them to the central square facing the city's landmark, the great Ravana temple. Its centre piece was a pool with a fountain which served as the regulator of the city's water supply. They could see on one side of it steps leading to a deep aquifer from which several underground water channels branched off in different directions. Taurus explained that their Vedic scientists had developed techniques of generating anti-gravity forces with the unlimited energy released by the luminous stone. Small blocks of it were fixed at regular distances in the ceilings of the tunnels to propel the

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water towards specially constructed wells in every street. Nearly a million low paid Vanaras had been employed by the administration to draw water from these wells in copper pitchers and carry it to the citizen's homes at fixed hours.

"What are these men paid for this service?" Neal asked. Being a Vanara himself he was curious to know more about the fate of his kinsmen captured and enslaved by the ruthless rakshasas.

"They feed on the left overs from the residents' kitchens dumped after dining hours in a bin placed outside each house."

"How revolting?", Nora couldn't help remarking.

"On the contrary, they revel in it. Your Highness should see them standing expectantly outside the homes of citizens at the appointed hour and gleefully pouncing on the trash boxes as soon as they are filled. They are much better off than their brethren, who carry palkis on their shoulders all day. They cannot afford such dainties as the water carriers get in the left-overs from the rich men's plates."

"What do the palki owners earn?" asked Neal.

"They are not owners but bearers of the palkis which are owned by the rich traders of the town. Konje is one of them. He owns nearly ten thousand of Vanaloore's two hundred thousand palkis operated in two shifts." Since each palki is borne on the shoulders of four bearers, we have nearly a million Vanaras gainfully employed as bonded slaves in this job."

"What does Konju pay them for their labour?"

"He does not pay them. Each palki-bearer pays him two Mandodris out of the three or four he earns during the month."

"What is a Mandodri."

"It is a silver coin named after Her Majesty. Hundred Mandodris make one gold Ravani, the gold coin of the realm."

Taurus's disclosure made Neal realize the true value of the gold coins Nora and he were carrying with them. One gold coin could pay a month's wage of a hundred Vanaras. And the bag contained about four thousand Ravanis, or the equivalent of a month's wage

of nearly half-a million Vanaras.

It was a tantalizing scenario for Neal, a mere Vanara. In the scale of values of the new rulers of Vanaloore, a Vanara's worth was barely one or two silver coins a month. He figured that he would have to be reborn on earth nearly three hundred times, and in each incarnation slog all of his life, to be able to earn the equivalent of the gold coins he carried in his bag. This realization drew an invisible wedge in his mind between him and his dearest wife, Nora. Being a Rakshasi she could perhaps be entitled to earn this whole amount within a month or may be even sooner. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. Perhaps he could ruminate upon it at a more opportune moment.

Behind them, on the other side of the central square and facing the Ravana temple, lay a sprawling garden spread over several hundred acres. It seemed an oddity in this congested city. A thin fence of low height separated it from the road. Tall tropical trees grew along its boundary line. Beyond them lay flower beds of every description and colour. Further on they could see lawns on which several hundred men and women were playing games resembling somewhat our modern hockey and football. Many of them were engaged in wrestling matches, Kabaddi and similar ingenious sports.

"Who are they?" Nora asked.

"They are my employees", said our distinguished guide.

"All of them?",

"Yes", he said with a deep bow indicative of his characteristic humility which had perhaps helped in taking him to his present position in the Empire. "The fact is that by Her Majesty's grace I operate hundred such units," he added.

"That would make nearly a hundred thousand people in all your factories."

"Yes madam."

"And you pay them for playing games."

They are our night workers. We give them time to flex their

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muscles and refresh themselves in other ways to stay fit.”

“How long do they have to work in a day.”

“Oh! about twenty hours.”

“And when do they sleep?”

“They sleep on the job. You see we are very liberal in the matter of allowing our employees to rest so long as each contributes his minimum share of the output allotted to his or her unit.”

“I see a lot of women here. Do they have the same work to do.”

“Yes, more than half our work force is made up of intelligent females. Here we make no gender distinctions between the young men and women employed by us, as you can see before you on our playing fields. They work and play together. See how that girl over there is tackling her antagonist, a young man twice her size, in the wrestling arena. Our studies have shown that mixing them up in this manner increases their productivity.”

“To produce more children I suppose,” Nora quipped.

Taurus was not the man to be embarrassed by such a remark. He laughed and said. “I admire your wit, madam. You will see for yourself in a short while what I mean by the word ‘productivity’.”

As they reached the gate of the compound a large box-cart shaped carriage with wooden wheels and a seating cabin for four was waiting for them. It was driven on rails, also made of fine teak wood, and powered by a large luminous stone mounted on two wheels in front of the cabin. Cutting a half-circle around the games fields it took them to a cave like opening in a rock. The vehicle picked up speed as it went down a spiral ramp through a serpentine tunnel. After negotiating several sharp curves it emerged in a huge hall shaped cavern which opened on a lake. Its front was wide enough to allow four elephants to walk in side by side.

The place was humming with activity. Scores of young men and women in fanciful dresses were engaged in their allotted tasks. The hall was divided into two sections, one for work and the other for rest and relaxation. The latter was equipped with cushions, drinks,

musical instruments and other appurtenances of leisure. They entered it first and saw young men and women chatting, playing games of dice or cards, sleeping or simply kissing and making love. In Rakshasa culture not a shred of privacy is needed in these matters. The lovers, like the rest of the group of merry-makers, did not seem to take any notice of their boss while he was conducting the visitors through that part of the hall in a businesslike manner.

“Don’t these people go home after work?”, Nora asked feeling a little embarrassed by what she had seen as they came out of the recreation section of the hall.

“This is their home. They will feel lonely and bored if we gave them separate rooms or apartments in the city. Besides it saves the time that they would be wasting commuting between work and home.”

The operational part of the hall was packed with people working on various segments of the project the factory was handling. Neal estimated that not more than a fifth of the work force was in the rest section. Did this mean that on an average an employee spent about five hours resting and the remaining nineteen hours in the workshop, he asked Taurus.

“You will make a good manager, young man. You have a natural sense for gauging workers’ productivity. Yes, these men and women do spend three fourths of their day on the job. As you may have observed we make no difference between man and woman, day and night. They are working for the war their nation must win against its arch enemy, Ayodhya.

“Don’t they get bored and tired working round the clock the year round.”

On the contrary, theirs is the best life in the whole of Lanka. We send them out to enjoy themselves for two days every week with their pockets jingling with gold and silver coins. They are the darlings of the market.”

“What do they do in the market?” Neal asked.

“You should reframe your question, my friend, and ask me “What

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do they not do during those two days? They strut about the city as its masters, filling up the thousands of eating houses, hundreds of theatres, countless numbers of gambling dens and dance halls where they dally with beautiful young boys and girls hired for their pleasure. They visit garment shops, fanciful barber shops, fashion stores, beauty saloons and many more types of establishments that vie with each other for their patronage.

“What makes them so rich?”

“They are the most talented youth of the empire, trained in the star academies in the Lankan Capital. Naturally their wages are commensurate with their talent. For two whole days and nights they do nothing but splash and splurge their money on all kinds of luxuries, pleasures and thrills the city has lined up for them. At the end of these orgies they come back to their jobs refreshed and rejuvenated like a fully overhauled and lubricated machine.

How much do you pay them?

“Twenty Ravani’s a month.”

“That would be two thousand silver coins, the monthly earnings of two thousand Vanaras”, Neal said.

“Naturally, after all the Vanaras are but beasts of yesterday. During the days of the great Ravana the rakshasas would eat them up like animals. The Queen has changed all that and ushered them into the pale of civilization. They have no use for money.”

“Are the scientists in your plants all rakshasas?”

“Not all of them. We have quite a few Vankshas as well.”

“What is a Vanksha”

“They are the progeny of inter-marriages between Rakshasas and Vanaras. It was the Queen’s idea to breed this race.”

Nora and Neal exchanged meaningful glances. Both had but one thought in their minds. Their Son, Sura, would be treated as a Vanksha, not a true Rakshasa, they inferred.

“Why did Her Majesty have to do that?” Nora asked.

Vanaloore Shining

“After the great Lanka war our nation found itself bereft of most of its adult male population. All able bodied men had to fight and nearly all were killed by Ram’s Vanara soldiers. When, after overthrowing the traitor Vibhishan, Mandodri ascended the throne of Lanka she was concerned about the future of our once valiant race. She feared it would perish or get wiped out by another invasion from the North. The country was left with a large population of children of both sexes who would grow up in their due time into a new force of pure rakshasas. But the kingdom urgently needed a large army of strong men to defend itself from a fresh invasion by its enemies. Besides, the widowed Rakshasis were desperate to find new husbands. Their need was immediate.

“To remedy the prickly situation she made a deal with Angad, the new ruler of the kingdom of Kishkindha in South Bharat, across the strait from Lanka. He was the son of Bali whom Ram had killed unfairly by shooting an arrow at him from behind a tree when the king was engaged in a face to face combat with his younger brother Sugriva. Ram installed Sugriva as Bali’s successor. As a quid proquo Sugriva threw himself with his whole army into Ram’s battle against Ravana. Eventually, long after Ram had returned to Ayodhya, Angad overthrew his uncle and became king of Kishkindha with the help of our Queen. Thus history had taken a full circle, as it usually keeps doing.

“Under the agreement between the two nations, the widowed women and young virgins of Lanka would visit kishkindha in search of Vanaras they could marry so that the Rakshasa clan could be revived. The Vanaras they selected would have to be sent by Angad to Lanka to be baptized Rakshasas. The hybrid offspring of these marriages are called Vankshas.”

“Has the Queen’s plan been a great success”? Neal asked.

“Their number in our empire is considerable. By now this new race has grown to about a million,” Taurus replied.

He added that he had found the Vankshas more hard working than Rakshasas. They had proved to be talented fighters, scholars and leaders of men in every field. Impressed by their accomplish-

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ments the Queen has declared them a separate caste, next only to the ruling rakshasas and above the Vanaras and Bantas. In fact the Queen treats Angad as her own adopted son, he is so cooperative in every matter."

"In other words Kishkindha is now a colony of Lanka."

"You may put it that way if you like. Without our support and civilizing influence they would still be living like apes after the fashion of their kinsmen in the archipelago. They are a caste apart now."

"So you have four castes now", Nora remarked.

"No, six"

"Which are the other two?"

"Vankshas are of two types and so are Vanaras. The race of Hanuman, Bali and Surgriva living in Kishkindha are treated by us as a separate caste below the Vankshas and given good positions in the middle wrungs of the social hierarchy. On the other hand, Vanaras of the Indian Ocean islands near Lanka, who are far more numerous constitute jungle tribes whose life style is closer to that of animals than of human beings. They have no religion and if we are not eating them up for our food it is merely because they can be more useful to us as manual labourers in building our great civilization. We use them in hazardous jobs like boring tunnels and digging up mountains for the luminous stone and all other menial tasks.

Taurus's contempt for the Vanaras was typical of the Brahmanical Vedic culture of which he was so proud. Perhaps this quality of looking at the non-Aryan races as an inferior species akin to animals had made him the richest tycoon in Lanka. Who else but such a clear headed employer could extract from the poor masses their maximum labour against minimal wages? According to his definition Vanaras like Neal, hailing from the Vanaloore archipelago, were like draft cattle fit to be slaughtered for their meat if they could not be useful as slaves to carry heavy loads.

Nora was disturbed by these remarks of her distinguished host. But she had no time to react. The same instant some one struck a gong at the far end of the hall. At once there was a virtual stampede

behind them. On hearing the gong Taurus's blue-eyed boys and girls, whom they had met in the rest hall, had sprung to their feet. Instantly giving up their games of dice and cards and other enjoyments, including kissing and love making, they were rushing out while an equal number of their colleagues from the other segment of the hall were pushing their way in. It was now their turn to relax and they didn't wish to waste a minute more in the work arena.

The visitors were standing in their way. A girl brushed past Nora pushing her upon a thick mattress lying alongside the wooden partition wall separating the work and recreation areas. Neal did not notice her fall till she let off a scream. He was sandwiched between two streams of young people, one coming out of the rest room and the other going into it. He tried to push his way towards Nora. A strong gust of wind threw him back. The cushion on which she was lying had got automatically inflated with air and was rising towards the ceiling. In her struggle to sit up and jump down to the floor the bag of gold coins dropped from Nora's hands. Taurus picked it up. Neal's thoughts, however, were not on the bag but his wife. She was beyond his reach. The flying carpet which had lifted her off had stopped midway between the ground and the twenty feet high ceiling. Nora was looking helplessly at Taurus who had taken out a crystal ball from his pocket and was looking intently into it. By then they were alone, the two-way movement of workers having stopped. Taurus raised his right hand and beamed the crystal towards Nora. The mattress moved and started descending waywardly like a kite floating in the air. As it came near him Neal rushed towards it, lifted Nora in his arms and kissed her a dozen times before putting her down on her feet. She heaved a sigh of relief. Taurus promptly returned the gold coins to Nora with a bow.

Neal was surprised that this dramatic episode had caused no commotion in the hall. None of the over two hundred employees spread out between the numerous work stations in the huge lab was taking notice of their boss and his companions. Taurus led the couple to a large settee fitted with bolsters in the center of the hall overlooking the lake and asked them to sit down. They hesitated for fear that the sofa might fly off with them through the gate and spirit them

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away to an unknown place. In that weird place anything was possible and the wildest suppositions could come true. The tycoon understood their apprehensions, smiled and sat down first. The seat did not move. Neal caught Nora's hand as both of them took their seats besides Taurus.

A waiter shimmered in unobtrusively from behind and placed on the table before them mugs of wine and a plate of fried potatoes. Taurus picked up two glasses and gracefully handed them to his guests before picking up the third for himself.

"I am sorry for this accident. Please do not be alarmed by it. This drink will restore your nerves and cheer you up" he said raising the glass to his lips. They sat in complete silence for several minutes, savouring the delicious wine and looking around for an explanation for the magical flying mattress. In the work area of the hall the technicians and scientists were busy working with a variety of implements upon scores of devices produced by them by using Vedic science and technology. Placed here and there for common use were small furnaces and large tubs of water.

His nerves being frayed with the recent fright and befuddled by wine, it took Neal some time to realize that the devices the scientists were working on were not resting on hard floor or table but were just floating in midair before them. He drew Nora's attention to it. She too was alarmed and thought her eyes had deceived her since she was still overwrought by her recent traumatic experience. Or, worse still, she feared that she might be under a trance induced by the drink which could have rigged up before her eyes this optical illusion of objects suspended in mid air.

Observing their bewilderment Taurus hastened to put their minds at rest about it and said,

"Your visit has, purely by accident, given a new impetus to our research. Till today we were not aware that the air pad which made you levitate midway between the floor and ceiling of this hall could be activated by merely putting a slight pressure on it. Hitherto we have always used a mechanical lever to start it off."

"How will a little levitation help you to defeat Ayodhya in a war?"

"It is a good question. A little imagination will show you that if today you can rise five yards above the ground, some day you should be able to rise a hundred or two hundred yards, or even higher."

"Suppose you can achieve that, what next?"

"The natural corollary to this would be to lift a whole army to that height and make it fly."

"How?"

"By taking advantage of favourable winds or simple propulsion like the shooting of an arrow from a bow. It works like a catapult."

"Why can't you march your army on land?"

"Again a good question? I shall answer it by a counter question. Did Ram bring an army from Ayodhya to fight Ravana?"

"No, he never expected this war. It came upon him by accident."

"That is not true. Ram was deputed by the gods to destroy our great empire. He did not have to travel two thousand miles to the South merely to spend his exile in a forest. Chitrakoot, where he first stayed would have been as good a place as any other for this purpose."

"What is your theory about his not coming with an army?"

"Because it is an impossible task. Not all the treasures of Lanka or Ayodhya would suffice to take an army large enough to defeat the enemy over two thousand miles of mountains, rivers, dense forests and other hazards. Think of the food supplies, arms, elephants, horses, chariots, mules, tents and other paraphernalia it would have to carry with it. It may take them years to reach their ultimate destination, exhausted and depleted by accidents, epidemics or even starvation. On the way they will have to fight pitched battles with hostile tribes and kingdoms owing allegiance to the rival super powers. Some of them may be fiercely devoted to their independence. No force on earth can cross their territory or conquer them. They have to be left alone.

"Our plan looks simple in theory but it may take us years to implement it in practice" said Taurus, adding, "if we can find in the

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bowels of the earth enough anti-gravity thrust to throw an object to a height of a thousand miles above the ground on a parabolic route, it would fall in a spot as far away as Ayodhya in a matter of minutes. Our scientist are busy discovering the hidden sources of such energy in the Earth. The luminous stone is one of them.”

“Suppose you are able to find a source of the required anti-gravity thrust, how can you be sure that your missile or army thus dispatched will land in Ayodhya?”, Nora asked.

Taurus picked out two tiny crystal balls from his pocket and gave one each to Nora and Neal.

“Look hard into this ball in your hands and concentrate your mind on the face of a dearly loved friend or relative far away.”

The couple stood in silence for about two minutes fixing their gaze on the glass like surface of the tiny pebble shaped stones. Slowly the image of their son, Sura, began to form on the screen. Call it coincidence or natural instinct, both Nora and Neal had chosen to recall the image of the same person. Blood will tell. Who else in the whole world could be more dear to them than their only child?

Sura was sitting arm-in-arm with a pretty girl in a secluded grove. He wore shorts and she only panties, the normal attire of the inmates of Saint Suratsva's hermitage where clothes were seen as an encumbrance to natural living.

The crystal was projecting an enlarged picture of the scene in the space around it. At first look they could see only a vague outline of the spot where they sat. A little mental effort opened a larger canvas giving a fuller view of the surrounding landscape. Taurus saw his guests absorbed in contemplating the scene and gave them time to have their fill of live images of their beloved son.

Gently breaking he spell he said.

“Can you now see the connexion between this crystal and the ability of our warheads to hit enemy targets?”

Nora replied that she couldn't visualize how the dumb device could guide an explosive placed on an unmanned rocket to its pre-determined goal.

“These crystal balls when fitted to the missiles will take them to their designated targets,” Taurus explained.

They heard the faint ring of a bell close by. Taurus hurriedly pulled out a chain he wore under his robe and switched off the small device attached to it like a locket.

“Vaastu!” he exclaimed. It was time for him to move on. The rules of Vaastu, his God, were very rigid on this point. The warning alarm in his pocket was buzzing loudly.

“Come, you must be hungry. I should apologize for not thinking of this before. Let me take you to a place where we can get a nice meal.

Taurus led his guests to the box cart which had brought them to the hall. It took them down a winding path which ended in the wide-mouthed cave below. On entering it they were blinded for a moment by the light coming from a brightly lit subterranean passage at the opposite end of the cave dug several hundred feet deep under the hill. The entrance hall had a pleasant look. The rock had been cut, polished and carved with sculptures of rakshasa deities, chief among them being Ravana and his Queen, Mandodri. Murals of beautiful women in scant or no clothes adorned the walls. Along the side walls of the cave were placed colourfully upholstered cushions and mattresses. Attendants brought three mattresses and placed them before them in a straight line upto the door of the tunnel. Taurus sat down on the mat in the front and asked the princess and governor to occupy the other two.

Neal thought this was the place Taurus had chosen for their dinner. He expected other attendants to arrive any moment through the passage with trays laden with food. But soon he felt a vibration under the seat of his pants. The mattress rose a few inches above the ground. It was shaking violently. Taurus lay down on his mattress and following his signal Neal and Nora did the same. Within moments they were frozen to their seats as if tied to it by a seat belt. The mattresses moved forward with a jerk and shot into the passage like bullets. After a short flight the carpets slowed down and they were able to observe their surroundings. They noticed that they were

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moving in the exact center of a brightly lit and polished cylindrical tube. Within minutes their unique vehicles disgorged them into a medium sized room with no adornments apart from the customary sculptures of Ravana and Mandodri to greet them. They alighted with ease.

Nora could not conceal her shock and surprise at the this new underground mode of transport the Rakshasas had built and asked Taurus about it.

"This is our latest weapon against Ayodhya. If we fail to develop the aerial mode we shall build a secret tunnel across India to carry our army all the way to Ayodhya at lightning speed. This is the biggest miracle wrought by the immense energy placed at our disposal by the luminous stone. Already about two million Vanaras are working night and day boring an undersea tunnel between Lanka and Kishkindha. An equal number are engaged in drilling experimental tunnels in Vanalooore."

"Any casualties?" Neal asked.

Concealing his annoyance Taurus replied in his cool, matter-of-fact way that so far they had lost about half-a-million Vanaras. "A small price to pay for the glory of the nation," he added.

Bowing gracefully before the princess he led his guests out of the tunnel which opened upon a neatly manicured lawn. Facing them was beautifully designed mansion.

* * *



14

Backlash

“This is my house”, said Taurus.

The brief announcement startled Nora. Why had Taurus brought them there? It was the first question that arose in her mind. What was he upto? While showing her the utmost courtesy and humility, he had quietly taken control of her movements. How would she and Neal get out of his clutches and be free to roam about the town on their own to work out their escape from Vanaloore? She could not repeat a Kontuk type flight from there by rigging up an aerial craft and flying off with Neal. Mondadri’s sky police would intercept them in a jiffy. She would have to wait and watch out with patience for an opportunity to dodge her Majesty’s surveillance network.

The size of the house, if indeed it was the residence of Vanaloore’s richest and most powerful citizen, was a disappointment. It came to

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her like an anti-climax to a great drama. The house was smaller than Konje's. They could see no guards, attendants or maids in the verandah of the two-storey mansion. The entrance gate, an ornate archway of teakwood built in the style of the times, had no watchmen. It opened on a lane which separated the house from a large park. A low hedge on either side of it separated the house from similar other villas in the lane.

Taurus took them to his sitting room on the ground floor. But for the mattresses spread along the walls the room was bare. It had no frills or adornments on the floor or walls. The passages and openings between the rooms were doorless. Shutters were provided only on the door opening on the Verandah.

A tall, strikingly handsome lady walked in. In her hands she carried a gleaming silver tray loaded with food. Behind her was a pretty young woman. She had a fruit basket in one hand and a small tray, with mugs filled with wine placed in it, in the other. Neal noticed that her face was flushed with excitement and feet were trembling. Taurus introduced them as his wife Noori and daughter Sundari.

The maiden stooped in front of Nora and touched her feet. "Welcome to our humble abode, Your Highness, Princess Sarupnakha."

Everyone in the room was taken aback by Sundari's observation made in all innocence. How did the girl know that the visitor was princess Sarupnakha? For a moment Nora looked flustered, then recovering her poise Nora said, "I have been in this town only a few hours young lady. How could you recognize me by my face?."

The girl ran into the house and came back in a jiffy bearing her favourite pink frock. Painted on its entire front was a life-like image of Nora. Sundari held it out in her hands for everyone to see.

"You can buy this in any garment shop in Lanka. Your Highness," she said. "Your true identity was discovered when you flew away from Kontuk on a craft no ordinary princess could have assembled."

For Nora and Neal it was a staggering revelation.

"I am a student at the Royal Meghnath Academy in Lanka," said

the girl. "I study dance, music, poetry and Mathematics there and have come home to spend my three-month annual holiday with my parents. I can assure you that princess Sarupnakha is the icon of every young woman in Lanka."

Far from being thrilled by Sundari's eulogies describing how Sarupenakha was venerated in her homeland, Nora felt cornered. It meant that she could not remain incognito in Lanka or Vanaloore as she had planned. It also raised other suspicions in her mind. Turning to Taurus she said, "Tell me, your honour, did you and Chandu turn up at Konje's house to attend the funeral or just to follow my movements?"

The aristocrat made a courtly bow and said, "Her Majesty's commands, Your Highness. She takes no chances. Your safety is a matter of the utmost concern to her."

"The safety of my husband is of the utmost concern to me," she restored.

"What makes you think he will not be safe in Vanaloore? Who can be more secure than the Governor of this great city?"

"That you should know better having lived here for so long."

"Do you doubt the Queen's word?"

"Let facts speak for themselves."

"If you are referring to the unfortunate mishaps that cut short so tragically the careers of past incumbents in that office, you are being unfair to Her Majesty and also perhaps to yourself. Accidents do happen. Sometimes they come in a row leaving behind the impression that they were the work of a human agency."

Nora spoke up in a spirited tone of defiance. "Am I to understand that we are your prisoners?"

"Not at all. You are free to roam where you like. The empire is yours. The inadvertent remark of my daughter about how your image was planted in the heart of Lanka's youth, should serve to warn you that you cannot roam about in this city in complete anonymity. While there are no impediments to your movements you will natu-

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rally be watched with great affection and admiration by the gentry of this town as their future Queen. They will recognize you from your images that adorn their homes and clothes."

Taurus could see that his frank statement had ruffled both his guests. He quickly changed the subject and said, "do please sit down and have a meal with us before you leave. I can assure you that it will give me, my wife and daughter the utmost pleasure to extend whatever help we can to enable you to acquaint yourself closely with this town."

"Thank you, Taurus. Now we know that wherever we are we cannot escape your watchful eye."

"It is my duty, Your Highness. I look forward to the day when you ascend the throne of Lanka and accept me as your most trusted servant."

"What will I do with a kingdom if the man I love is not by my side, or worse still if I lose him for ever?"

"Your Highness is labouring under an emotional stress. Your fears will vanish once you see the great future that awaits you. You have wandered in the guise of a commoner for too long and have forgotten who you are. You were born a princess. Fate has now cast upon you the role of the future Queen of the mightiest nation on earth. More than being the devoted wife of one person your duty lies in being the protecting mother of Lanka. Think of what will become of the millions of its citizens without a legitimate monarch when the present Queen decides to join her husband in heaven. They will split into warring tribes, fighting, killing and devouring each other."

"Don't forget I am a woman first. A Queen who sends her husband to the gallows to win a kingdom is a witch who deserves the worst tortures of hell for a million life-times. Don't ask me to commit such an offence. You are offering me absolute power over the lives of millions of citizens but taking away my right to lead an honourable private life with my husband by my side. Why can I not take Neal with me to Lanka?"

"The rules of our great Dharma apply to every one, be he king or

citizen. According to Aryan Law only a Brahmin or Kshatriya can rule the nation. The presence of a person of a lower caste near the throne will pollute not only the monarch but the entire kingdom. Your nation demands that you live separately from your husband who happens to belong to the lowly Vanara caste and whom you married under extra-ordinary circumstances. I shall guarantee the absolute safety of your husband, our new Governor. We shall make him happy in every respect. As the Queen you shall have the power to hang me if I fail in my promise.

“Meanwhile, you should also think of the great things you can do as our Queen’s helpmate.

“You are the natural inheritor of the great Ravana’s legacy which is the only force that keeps our nation united. Through you we shall fulfil our ambition of conquering Ayodhya, our only remaining enemy on earth. We shall root out its dangerous ideology of Ram Rajya or a government of equality and justice which binds the king not to take any major decision without the consent of the populace. Such pernicious ideas have to be crushed to preserve our Rakshasa culture before which even gods bow and tremble. You cannot have good government without a strong king who is ruled by his own judgement and whose powers cannot be defined. His decisions are inspired by a divine power. They cannot be challenged or tested before an earthly judge called the will of the people. We have to smash this heretical system in its home, Ayodhya, before it pollutes our own peaceful and orderly environment. A king who has to banish his Queen as Ram did because the people doubted her chastity is a slave not master of his subjects. He doesn’t deserve to be called a king.”

“You are speaking lightly of Ram because you have not seen his valour in battle. You were too young then. Ayodhya has secret weapons we cannot match. Nor is it easy to reach Ayodhya with sufficient force.”

“You leave that to me madam. I have shown you on purpose some of our achievements so that you may be persuaded to accept the Queen’s offer. This tunnel you came by is a secret known only

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to a few. Our ultimate objective is to send our army to Ayodhya in a day through a similar secret underground passage. I have already explained to you our plans to send at least part of our force by the aerial route."

"The tunnel is built of the luminous stone. Where will you get so much of it?"

"We have surveyed this archipelago. It is an inexhaustible source of this stone. I have calculated that we shall need ten million people to complete this entire project in fifteen years."

Neal who had been a silent listener to this dialogue intervened,

"Where will you get those ten million people to excavate the islands for this stone and build a two thousand miles long tunnel."

"The Vanaras and Bantas, of course. I can appreciate your concern about your kinsmen. But think of the opportunities it will open up for all of them. I shall not conceal from you that about a third to half of the work-force will perish in calamities that cannot be averted in such gigantic projects. But losing four of five million slaves is a small price to pay for such a historic accomplishment. Besides, those natives who survive will share the spoils of war. Their progeny will prosper."

The Vaastu alarm, Taurus's perpetual pursuer, rang again and he walked out of the room instantly in the middle of his statement, leaving behind him an unfinished meal.

The delicious food cheered Nora and Neal. Noori said she and her daughter had prepared it with their own hands. They did not keep cooks or servants.

"Why?" Nora asked with surprise. It seemed odd that the richest man in the empire kept house without servants or domestic assistance of any kind.

"We are great believers of Vaastu, Your Highness," she said. "You must have observed how my husband left us in the middle of the meal since the half-hour allotted to him to stay in one place in day-time by the laws of this great science was over. He cannot come



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back till he hears the next alarm ring."

"It sounds like a game of chess being played by an invisible hand in which your husbands is a mere pawn." Neal quipped.

"Exactly, Your Excellency", she said addressing him as the governor should be spoken to. "What is life but a game of chess in which we are all somebody's pawns. The person who has understood this secret wins."

"Why should Vaastu prevent you from keeping servants?"

"Vibrations from them can disturb our minds without our knowing it and unbalance nature's energies working within us. These vibrations are hidden forces in our psyche which, when left undisturbed, can take us to great heights of political authority and wealth. At first Taurus did not believe in this science. He used to call it hocus-pocus. But after seeing its initial results he became an ardent convert to it. You can see for yourself how we have prospered under its protection."

While they were eating and talking a smartly dressed young man dropped in. Sundari got up, ran into his arms and kissed him. She made him sit down next to her on the mattress so that he could eat from the same plate with her.

"He is Paras, my lover", she said proudly.

"Have your parents fixed your marriage so early?" Nora asked.

"They haven't. I have done it on my own."

Nora looked inquiringly at Noori who kept quiet, avoiding the eye of the princess. They ate in silence while the lovers chatted away as they dined and drank with gusto. The meal over they shimmered out of the room just as Taurus was entering it to swallow the remnants of food on his plate which he had to leave hurriedly under Vaastu's command.

"It is all his doing Your Highness," Nuri said pointing an accusing finger at her husband. I had warned him against sending Sundari to the RMA."

"What is RMA?" Nora asked?

"It is the short name of the Royal Meghnath Academy in Lanka. It is named after Ravana's valiant son Meghnath, who very nearly killed Ram's brother Lakshman in the Great War. It was there that she met this young man, fell for him and without consulting us decided to marry him."

"Whose son is he?"

"Chandu's"

"Chandu, the Chief Administrator of Vanaloore, the defacto ruler of the city?"

"The same."

"Then what is wrong with this match?"

"The trouble is," said Taurus before his wife could reply, "he is a Vanksha. We would have preferred a pure rakshasa to marry our daughter. There is so much at stake. The man who marries Sundari will be her partner in running my business. No member of the Vanksha caste has ever made it to such a high position in Lanka."

"If his father can be the Deputy Governor of Vanaloore why can his son not be your deputy?"

"Chandu holds his office at my pleasure. I can have him removed if I choose."

"I thought he is Her Majesty the Queen's nominee."

"Formally, yes. But in fact it was I who suggested his name to Her Majesty to appease Vanksha and Vanara sentiments without hurting the Rakshasas. Fortunately he is a Kishkindha Vanksha. His father was a Vanara, a cousin of Hanuman and Sugriva who married a rakshasi in the intermixing of the two races that followed the Lanka war. But all the same he is a Vanksha. Her Majesty has very graciously left it to me to suggest what is good for Vanaloore. She recognizes that the task of transforming this archipelago from a wilderness to an urban paradise can be best handled by a dedicated and trusted entrepreneur like me and not by a government agency."

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You can see the results yourself. Within twenty years I have metamorphosed millions of tree-dwelling and fruit-and-root eating Vanaras into civilized human beings. If I can assure you of your husband's safety in my hands as the Governor of Vanaloore it is because of the Queen's complete trust in me."

"Or complete dependence on you", Nora quipped. Taurus greeted her remark with a dignified bow.

"Does this imply that the four Vanaras who preceded Neal as Governors were eliminated under your orders."

Taurus smirked for a moment. Then said,

"Men in my position never resort to murder to get inconvenient people out of the way. We have other more sophisticated means to be rid of them."

Nora chuckled and said "Now that Chandu is going to be your daughter's father-in-law you cannot get rid of him if you wish to."

"You are right Your Highness", said Noori supporting the princess. "These Vankshas are the most unscrupulous people in our empire. They have no morals or values, nor sense of loyalty to Queen or country though they pretend to be patriots. Send them to Lanka, they will swear by Her Majesty. Bring them back here, they will pledge their lives to Taurus against Lanka if he wants them to. If he sacks them they will go straight to the Vanaras and instigate them to rebel against us. All they want is gold. They must have it by hook or by crook."

"Surely Sundari's lover, Paras, must be different. After all he is a student of RMA, Royal Meghnatha Academy, the highest seat of learning in the empire," said Nora.

"On the contrary this is where they are taught all the cunning ways of picking other people's pockets. I am strongly of the view that instead of RMA it should be called "RADT".

"What would RADT stand for?" Nora asked.

"The Royal Academy for Dirty Tricks. Teaching the art of money making, by fair means or foul, to its chosen pupils is its sole objec-

tive. My Sundari was a plain, simple girl before she was sent there against my wishes. Today she talks of nothing but money and jewellery and how so and so made his money by outsmarting so and so at the Gambling House or how X lost all his money by trusting Y and so on. She thinks she knows more than her father about how to make more wealth by an intelligent choice of stakes at the Gambling House.

Taurus who was listening quietly lost his cool. "Will you shut up Noori? Enough is enough. RMA is my life's greatest achievement. It is the pride of the nation. Her Majesty has awarded the Ravana Shield, Lanka's highest award, to me for founding it. We take care to enroll the most talented sons and daughters of the cream of our Rakshasa community, meticulously keeping out the lower castes. Of course, a few Vankshas like Chandu's son manage to get smuggled into it by pull or push. I could not refuse Chandu when he pleaded for his son's admission. I did not know it would come to this and through my kind act for an upcoming Vanksha I would be robbed of my daughter, my only child."

Nora was in a light mood now. She smiled. "Perhaps you deserved it. There seems to be an element of poetic justice in it. Honestly Taurus, being such a great businessman and nation builder, how could you be proud of being the founding father of an institution where all they teach is how to make money by gambling and fraud?

"That is not true. Noori is exaggerating," protested Taurus. "Of course we emphasize that money is the most important thing in life and you cannot be rich without outsmarting your rivals, regardless of the means that may have to be adopted to achieve your objective. You cannot make an omelette without breaking the egg. But this is merely the conceptual framework of RMA. Our merit lies in what we teach. I wish Noori had the wits to understand what else Sundari has learnt at RMA."

"What else?" Noori shot back "I would be glad to know it from you since this shady school for sharpers is your brainchild."

"At RMA Sundari studies poetry, music and mathematics — our

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principal sciences”.

“How can you call poetry or music a science?” asked the princess.

“They are the highest achievements of our Vedic science. Before we discovered the luminous stone, we derived practically all our great powers from mantras which are shlokas or Sanskrit couplets of infinite potency. There is absolutely nothing that a great saint cannot accomplish on the material plane by chanting the right mantra the right way. He can make a man a monkey, snake or worm and Vice-Versa. Likewise music connects us to prana, they very source of life, through our breath, and brings out its hidden potencies which can turn day into night, make an oasis in a desert and so on. Mathematics, again, is the most priceless possession of Aryan scholarship. It is, among other things, the mother of our Vedic astronomy through which we divine the movement of the cosmic forces known as stars or grahas. It is a pity Nuri has no time for a deeper study of these intricacies in the domain of knowledge so that she does not have to make such irresponsible and ill-informed statements.

“It is your duty to tell me. But you have no time for me. Your daughter is the same”, she retorted with a contemptuous look at her husband.

Taurus was saved from further exhibition of his conjugal bliss by another buzz of the Vaastu alarm in the pocket of his jacket, warning him that it was time for him to move from his present location.

Having accepted Taurus’s invitation to spend the night under his roof, as he put it, Nora and Neal were now free to roam at will. It was evening by the time they had finished the meal. Tropical twilight being short, night had descended on the city when they walked out of the house and crossed the road with the intention of roaming for a while in the open ground facing it.

Nora picked up her bag of gold coins and, walking along with Neal through an opening in the shrubbery that fenced the lawns of Taurus’s house, they crossed the road and entered a cluster of trees planted in four rows, parallel to the green boundary of a large park

called the Queen's Garden. She halted as they reached the last row and pushed Neal behind a tree so that they could not be seen from their hosts' mansion. Here she placed the treasure in his hands and slapped him hard on both cheeks. She followed it up by hitting him on all sides with outstretched palms. It was an experience without a precedent in their entire married life of twenty years.

"What are you doing?", he asked seeking an explanation for this unprovoked violence while her blows rained on his back, chest, hips, arms and legs.

"Keep quiet", she said as she slipped her hands in the pockets of his tunic and, finding nothing, pulled them out.

"Are you searching for something?"

"Yes", she replied. "Now you hit me with the same force which I used to beat you, sparing no part of my body."

Neal refused. "I have nothing to search on your person. I don't suspect you of anything", he said feeling highly peeved at her odd behaviour.

"Don't quibble you fool. Do as I tell you. We have no time to lose."

It was then that it dawned on Neal that Nora's action could well be a standard Vedic ritual to exorcise evil spirits.

"Taurus is a great necromancer. Ghosts and witches dance to his tune. He may well have attached one of them to us. In our Aryan society it is impossible to be so rich and powerful without the active aid and connivance of these spirits of the netherworld," Nora explained.

"I understand", Neal said and complied with her wishes.

"Hit harder", she squeaked not finding his slaps on her flushed cheeks good enough for her purpose of scaring away Taurus's ghosts.

Neal had never hit a woman in his life and now he was being asked to beat the only person in the world he truly loved. But this was life, he told himself. When she had her share of the beating

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ceremony she stopped him and looked about her. He noticed her gaze stop at an object in the tree under which they stood. In one of its branches, hidden behind the foliage, sat an eagle.

“There is an eagle there”, he remarked.

“Keep quiet and come with me,” she said taking his hand and walking towards the centre of the park.

There is an old saying, “as is the king, so are his subjects” Vanaloore was a metropolis that lived in the night. Nora and Neal had already had a foretaste of its life-style in the orgies they had seen at Mandodri’s palace the previous night. The entire vista before them, as far as the eye could reach in any direction was lit up by luminous stones selectively placed at short distances and radiating beams of different colours over the park. They could be seen dazzling in the street and from the top of the buildings. Variegated strains of dance music were flowing from the houses. Men and women in colourful dresses were walking in and out of these villas or traveling with carefree looks in open palanquins which had no lids. It was a very different habitation from what they had seen in the morning in the vicinity of the Gambling House and Konje’s residence before they were whisked away in a closed coach by Taurus to his luminous energy complex. The whole scenario seemed to have been designed by a master architect to display Rakshasa power.

The very air breathed royalty. To complete the picture could be seen in the distance, with its face turned towards Taurus’s villa, a towering statue of a handsome woman showing her standing in a lotus shaped palanquin carried by eight Vanaras. In her right hand she held aloft a bright torch. The entire edifice which was taller than the two-storey mansions on the street had been sculptured in marble. Placed around it along the stone railing which encircled it, were large blocks of the luminous stone, tilted up to beam lights of different colours upon the statue. Brightest of them all was the torch shaped luminous stone in the woman’s hand. The stone she held had been crafted to spread its radiance into the sky and be visible from every corner of Vanaloore. On a closer look they recognized the lady’s

face and realized that the park's centre-piece was a statue of Mandodri, Empress of the realm.

"Don't look towards me. Keep your head straight", Nora told Neal in a low voice as they moved towards the statue through a green lawn along a zig zag path between flower beds.

"We are in serious trouble Neal. This man Taurus is the eyes and ears of the Queen. They are watching us everywhere and all the time. We cannot see them. There seems no way for the time being for us to escape the clutches of this iron lady."

Neal was still weighing in his mind the full import of her remarks when a vision floated before their eyes of two strangers emerging from behind the statue and walking around it in their direction. Nora and Neal could only glimpse a faint outline of the visitors, their view being blurred by the blinding aura of light that was focused on the statue on all sides and was being reflected back by it over the entire area surrounding it. It was not till they had come very close to them that they recognized the couple to be none other than Taurus's daughter Sundari, and her lover, Paras.

"There they are, Taurus's eyes and ears," Nora muttered in a whisper. Neal nodded in agreement. The same thought had struck both of them the moment they identified the young lovers.

Sundari came forward and bringing her mouth close to Nora's ears said in a soft voice, which Neal could hear nonetheless, "Look Your Highness. We have very little time for talk. I wish to tell you something that urgently concerns both of you. Will you walk silently behind us?"

Her transparent innocence impressed them. They followed her without uttering a word. She took the path she had come by, skirting the statue. When they had done a half-circle around it so that they could not be seen from Taurus's house, Sundari stopped suddenly, bent down and lifted an iron lid from the ground behind one of the luminous stones. Putting it aside she dived into a dark staircase and extended her hand to Nora, asking her and Neal to follow her. When they had reached the bottom of the pit she took out a

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crystal ball from her pocket. Its light barely enabled them to see their surroundings. Apparently they were standing in a cellar underneath the statue. Neal noticed that Paras was not with them. Sundari explained that he was guarding the entrance.

“Suppose they are spying on us and decide to shut the lid over us we would all suffocate here,” she added by way of an explanation.

“Who are they?” Nora asked puzzled by Sundari’s strange behaviour.

“My father and his cronies. Who else could they be?”, she replied, looking jittery but determined.

“Surely, Taurus could not do this to you, his only child. What else is there in the world for him to live for,” said Nora, completely bewildered by the girl’s revelation.

“You do not know my father. He is a demagogue, a Vanara hater. He has reached his present position by his fanatic adherence to the Brahmanaical theory of a pure Aryan race which, he believes, loses its luster the moment it is polluted by contact with the lower caste. Have you not seen our spartan life style? Though the richest tycoon in Lanka, he lives like a rishi, touches no food other than what is cooked by my mother, spends hours practicing pranayama to acquire occult powers or siddhis and never goes to see the Queen even if she has summoned him without first consulting his astrologer. Lanka is his first love and the Queen the second. To humiliate the Vanaras and conquer Ayodhya are the only aims of his life. Ram had defeated Lanka with a Vanara army. Taurus will use the same Vanaras against Ayodhya and then treat them as untouchable bonded labour. He firmly believes in the Aryan theory that the world was created by the Creator, Brahma, for the enjoyment of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The Lord of the universe made the other races as sub human species only to serve the pleasure of the ruling classes.”

Sundari was trembling with anger and fear as she spoke in a faltering voice. Often the words got choked in her emotion charged throat. She gasped for breath before resuming her story. During one of these pauses Nora asked:

“Why are you telling us all this? Is it only to warn us or have you something else on your mind?”

“You are a royal personage, Your Highness, while I am a mere commoner, and a student at that. But by a quirk of fate it so happens that you and I are sailing in the same boat.”

How?

“Your husband is a Vanara and so is my lover Paras from his father’s side which is all that matters to our Vedic Law, though his mother is a Rakshasi. I know now that my father proposes to eliminate both of them. Fortunately, Paras is not aware of the old man’s intentions towards him.”

“How do you know this? Only a little while ago he vowed to me in your presence that he will ensure the safety of my husband.”

“My father believes that vows are made to be broken. Only fools honour them, he says. He could take an oath in the temple of Lord Ravana and then violate it the moment he came out of it, if it suited his strategy. One does not acquire so much wealth and power by sticking to principles. The Gambling House, through which the rich rob the poor of all their wealth, could not be run on scruples, much less on principles. Scruples are for the timid not for those destined to lead a nation to victory. Could Ram have conquered Lanka and killed Ravana had he not first killed the Vanara king Bali by stealth against the rules of war and chivalry and then seduced Vibhishana by offering him the throne of Lanka for betraying his brother. My father always cites these examples when I taunt him for his devious ways. Have you seen the Gambling House?” she asked.

“We have been there this morning and, quite accidentally, made some money too,” replied Nora.

“My father owns it.”

“What?” both, Nora and Neal screamed in utter disbelief?

“Yes it is a secret known to a few. He makes all his money there to expand his business while people think he has earned it from his trade. The citizens of Vanaloore put their bids on his projects. Her

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Majesty also keeps transferring a lot of gold from the royal treasury into the gambling business, the sole beneficiary of which are my father and the idle rich who call themselves men of business. The Queen is indulgent towards them because Taurus has promised her victory against her arch-enemy, Ayodhya."

Nora and Neal looked ceilingward, aghast at such startling revelations about the dark side of the Empire.

"So, now you know what kind of a character my father is and how he has come to be the most powerful man in the kingdom."

Being a stranger to statecraft Neal nodded in disbelief. It only heightened his urge to escape Vanaloore at any cost. "Have you any definite information about his plans? How much time do we have to escape from his clutches? Since you are equally concerned for Paras perhaps we can work out a joint plan to flee Lanka," he asked Sundari.

Just then Sundari espied a flicker of light in a corner of the basement they were occupying.

"Oh God! We are undone", she said rushing to the object. She covered it with her palm and picked it up. It was a crystal ball.

"Someone has activated it just now. It means they know our exact location", she said catching Nora's hand and rushing up the ladder with her and Neal. Paras was not there. She panicked and pulled out her own crystal ball from her wallet to locate him. She was barely able to see his face but it gave her no idea of the spot where he might be. She could see him smiling. It meant he was safe. But where? Fortunately the suspense did not last long. They saw him jumping down from a nearby tree.

"I thought I would be safer up there. My being seen here could arouse suspicion" he said.

"You did well, darling, but we have already been spotted."

"How?"

"Through this", she said showing him the back of the crystal ball, keeping the front firmly covered by her palm.

"Give it to me." Paras said. She transferred it carefully to his palm. He threw it with full force at the statue. The ball exploded into flames without producing any sound.

"It is highly combustible", he said.

"Taurus may still be watching us", Nora said.

"You bet he is. Do you see that eagle sitting on the tree next to the one Paras was perched on? It is passing on all it sees to him."

"How?" Neal asked with a voice numbed by anxiety.

"It is very simple. Our Vedic science has developed a technique of seeing through the eyes of any man or animal pictures forming on his mind's screen. What this eagle is seeing is being passed on to another trained eagle who always sits on a tree in front of our house. If it notices any suspicious activity it flies up to the verandah to reenact the whole scene in its eyes for my father to see."

It was a staggering revelation. Nora nudged Neal's arm. "That bird has seen us," she said pointing to the tree where they had performed the ritual of thrashing the devil out of each other's bodies.

Paras was in a rage now and, giving vent to his feelings, said, "Taurus is a maniac, a Vanara hater. He suspects a snake under every seat he sits upon. Have you not seen how he keeps hopping from place to place every half-hour? To him every Vanara is a spy of Ayodhya. He spies on them through the crystal balls he has distributed among them. They are simple people and feel elated by his generosity in throwing this crumb of Vedic science at them, not knowing the sinister purpose underlying the gift."

"He was bragging about it to us" said Nora.

"Yes, he publicizes it as a sign of the march of Aryan civilization among the primitives."

"He cannot live without the Vanaras. Their virtually free labour and his ill-gotten wealth from the Gambling House are the principal pillars of his demagoguery," added Sundari.

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"What is that?" Nora exclaimed pointing her finger at a cloud like wall moving towards them in the distance from the far end of the park ground.

"That is the part of the city where Vanaras live. It is poorly lit. The moving wall could be the dust raised by Vanara children while playing on open ground, or smoke from cooking ovens or a mixture of both," Paras explained.

Soon the mysterious mass entered the brightly lit civilized part of the vast park and became clearly visibly.

"They are Vanaras!" Screamed Paras. "I wonder why they have come? They are not supposed to enter this place. It is the Queen's park."

"And in such large numbers!", added Sundari. "I have never seen so many of them marching together."

"They are so silent. Perhaps an important member of their community has died and they are mourning for him," Nora said.

"Yes, but why here? They can gather on their own grounds along the river bank" Sundari observed. With all her fondness for Paras, a half-Vanara, she was essentially Taurus's daughter. She could not stomach the idea of those low-caste natives violating the sanctity of retreats specially built for the recreation of the ruling race.

They were observing the crowd from behind a tree. When it came too close for comfort Nora thought they must get out of the park. But Sundari had other ideas. Her mystic source had warned her that Paras faced a threat to his life and must leave the island immediately. Her information could not be wrong since she had acquired it by using the most advanced technique of mind reading she had learnt privately from a guru at the RMA in Lanka. It was the highest achievement of Science requiring rigorous physical and mental disciplining of one's power of attention. While they were having their meal together at Taurus's villa Sundari was quietly reading her father's thoughts. Apparently he was conceiving some devilish plot to remove both Neal and Paras from the scene that very night.

"We cannot go back home. That is certain", she said with an air

of finality in response to Neal's suggestion that they should leave the place before the mob arrived.

"Quick, let us climb this tree and wait up there till they are gone. A mob can do anything," Neal said.

"Not this mob", said Paras cheerfully. "I know them. They never attack unarmed persons. If they are angry they randomly destroy property in the city till they cool down and go home. You three stay here. Let me go and find out why they have come."

"Are you sure you will be safe with them?" Sundari asked, concerned about her lover's safety.

"Any day safer than in your or my home."

"That is not saying much", she retorted.

He laughed and walked away to meet the advancing phalanx of Vanaras. A man in the crowd, apparently its leader, saw him and waved his hand to hail him. He broke ranks and advanced to meet Paras.

Sundari, meanwhile, was watching their meeting on her crystal ball.

"Come", she said cheerfully. "The Vanara leader has offered to shelter us if the need arises.

"How do you know?"

"I can read the lips of both of them on my crystal ball."

"Won't your father have the place raided?"

"He dare not do any such thing in the open. He is a master of secret operations. In fact one of the jobs assigned to him by the Queen is to oversee the Royal Secret Service by equipping it with the relevant crime detection and espionage techniques of Vedic Science."

On a signal from Paras they moved forward to join the procession. He introduced them to Arana, the Vanara leader. Arana asked them to stand aside and watch the proceedings from a safe distance.

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The mob stopped in front of the Queen's statue and started pelting it with the pebble-sized crystal balls that Taurus had liberally distributed amongst the Vanaras. To Neal it seemed to be an act of lunacy to discard such a precious possession. Within a few minutes the space between the statue and the luminous stones that circled it was filled with piles of these crystal balls. Some of them had exploded as they hit the targets. Some others were emitting flames. The processionists kept moving past the statue to make room for others behind them. It was a sea of humanity. They seemed to be heading towards Taurus's house. Sundari sensed their intentions and fearing violence against her father screamed.

"I must rush. My place is beside my father. She ran towards her house skirting the surging mass. Paras ran after her. Nora said to Neal, "we cannot stand by as idle spectators in this moment of crisis." She caught Neal's hand and together they ran past the outer fringe of the crowd till they had caught up with their companions.

By the time they reached near Taurus's house he had already come out and was standing at the entrance of the Queen's Park, apparently unperturbed by the commotion.

Sundari ran upto him and folded him in her arms.

"Oh Father! You must not stand here. They seem to be in a violent mood."

"Don't worry my child. I know them. They are also my children. They cannot hurt me. They know how much I have laboured to lift them from the animal state and make them civilized human beings."

The marchers saw him and on a signal of their leader, Arana, stopped at a respectful distance of about twenty feet from him. Arana raised his hand and shouted:

"Give us our freedom."

The crowd picked up the refrain and with raised hands repeated,

"Give us our freedom."

"Are you not free here?", Taurus asked.

"No, we are your slaves."

"What nonsense! You are workers and get your due wages for the work you do."

"We do not want to work for you or any one else. Send us back to our native islands."

"To starve?"

"That is our business. It is better by far to die of hunger as a free man than survive only to slave for blood suckers like you. We want freedom. We want to go home."

A million voices echoed the refrain. "We want freedom, we want to go home."

This non—stop nerve-shattering chant by the formidable mob went on for about a quarter of an hour. Taurus stood alert and listened in silence. His ears seemed to be made of steel. Neal thought his ears would have burst under the din had he not sealed them with his fingers.

Arana raised his hand again and the slogan shouting stopped. He and a few other leaders of the Vanara community advanced to meet Taurus.

"What is this fuss about freedom, Arana?," said Taurus softening. "If you are short of food and water you could have come to me in a small group. What will you achieve by holding out such empty threats? You know very well that all of you have nowhere else to go. Vanaloore is your home"

"We are fed up with your promises, Taurus. If we have to starve we might as well starve in our own native place. We wont be slaves there. There is little corn left in your granaries. We have neither food nor water.

"Why should you demand corn? You are no longer a herd of cattle to live on corn. There is enough fish in the river and the ocean for you to eat. Occasionally, you can catch birds and other game not reserved for the rakshasas."

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"All the fish in and around Vanaloore have been eaten up by your people or rendered unfit for human consumption by the poisonous chemicals flowing from your luminous stone filtration plant in the hills. The fertile lands which gave us the natural grown corn, fruits and roots, our staple diet for thousands of years, have been destroyed by you in the process of cutting down our forests, reckless digging of lands and poisoning of water resources."

"Noted", said Taurus. "But why complain about water? The whole river is there for you to drink from. We have not taken a drop of water from it."

"How could you gentiles touch its water after having poisoned it. Its toxic level has gone high beyond even our tolerance. People are being maimed. Children are dying. Half the population is sick."

"Surely, it cannot be so bad. Your people will get used to it. Over time the human body can adjust to any environment. As you know there is nothing we can do about it."

"Yes, you can if you wish to", thundered Arana.

"What can we do?"

"You can take all the sullage from the filtration plant through a direct channel to the sea and leave the river alone. Our men will be prepared to work on the project without wages."

"This is impossible. It will still be too costly."

"Not more costly than your underground luminous stone tunnels to enable a few of you to travel fast. Spending colossal amounts to speed up the journeys of a handful of people, underground or overground, while millions are starving cannot be called a civilized act by any standards."

A loud flutter of wings in the sky attracted everybody's attention and broke up the conversation.

"The Queen, The Queen", everyone shouted. Even the rebellious crowd started cheering on hearing the name of the sovereign, such is the hypnotic charm of the Crown on the common man. 'Pushpak', the Queen's personal flying chariot, gifted to her by Lord

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Brahma Himself, was hovering over their heads. Originally owned by Lord Kubera, son of Brahma, it was the only flying craft in the three worlds and was worshipped as a sacred object. Merely sighting it was considered a good omen. Everybody, even the angry Vanaras, stood silent with folded hands waiting for the Queen to land. They saw this event as a visit by one of the great celestials like Brahma or Indra and deemed themselves blessed for being present on the occasion. Taurus looked at the plane with wonder and surprise.

“Why should the Queen come here now? I hope your men will not misbehave while Her Majesty is here” he said to Arana.

The leader of the rebels gave his solemn word. “I would sooner die than let a hair of Her Majesty be touched”, he declared solemnly.

Paras waved to Sundari who was looking at him. She quietly slipped away from her father’s side and joined him. Nora and Neal kept standing under a tree near the fence, away from both Taurus and the Vanaras.

The crowd retreated hurriedly to leave space for the Queen’s aircraft to land. It was designed to resemble a bird with flapping wings and two talons upon which it landed vertically like an eagle. It needed considerable open space for its wings which remained outstretched till this automated flying machine had touched ground.

The landing of Pushpak was an anti-climax to its dramatic appearance in the sky. With a seating capacity of about ten it carried only two passengers and none of them was the Queen. Instead there emerged from it Chandu, the Chief Administrator, and his wife. Nora and Neal heaved a sigh of relief. Mandodri was the last person they would have liked to acost at this point. Nora could not possibly lie to her face to face about the real reason of her presence with Neal at the house of Taurus. But the crowd was visibly disappointed. It let off a loud moan.

Ignoring Taurus, who had advanced to the door of the plane expecting the Queen to alight from it, Chandu and his wife headed

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towards the rebel leader, Arana, who embraced him and said,

“I am at your service, Master”

Chandu turned to Taurus and said, “Taurus, your game is up. You wanted to kill me and my son because the boy had the audacity to woo your daughter. I have thwarted you. We are leaving now. Her Majesty has very graciously loaned us her Pushpak to take us to safety. Sundari, our darling daughter-in-law, the apple of my eye, is going with us. While sending my son to study at RMA in Lanka I had hoped he would succeed in captivating Sundari with his charms so that our two families could jointly rule this country. But evidently, such an arrangement hurt your racial pride and you decided to eliminate both me and my son. Fortunately we were warned about your dirty plan in the nick of time by none other than your own daughter.”

Chandu would have gone on ranting in this vein had Sundari not interrupted him with a question that left him dumbfounded.

“Was it at your behest that Paras befriended me?” she asked. Her face was flushed, eyes blazing and fists clenched.

Chandu was taken aback. He had not realized that his boast of being the hidden hand behind the Paras-Sundari romance would instantly kill Sundari’s love for Paras and turn her against both father and son.

He responded to Sundari’s query with silence.

She turned her gaze on Paras who hung his head in shame but did not speak.

Sundari stood stunned, dazed and silent like some one suddenly hit on the head by a stick from behind. Her eyes were fixed on Chandu who stood rooted to the ground, trying to meet her penetrating gaze but trembling inwardly.

“You are shit, both father and son” she said haughtily. With firm, slow steps she walked away to join her father who had been watching Chandu’s histrionics and his daughter’s diatribes with stoic calm. He welcomed Sundari into his arms.

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Chandu was unabashed. "Please yourself, you slut. My purpose is achieved anyway," he said and, addressing the Rakshasa chief, continued, "You have before you, Taurus, a demonstration of my real power, this sea of humanity. Let me see how you manage them without me. They are my men (here he thumped his chest with his wrist). You are powerless without them. Your workshops will come to a halt turning your war plans against Ayodhya into pipe dreams. Without power from the luminous stone, produced by my brave brethren, Vanaloore, the shining city, known for its dazzle and night life throughout the world, will turn into a dismal darkness. You think you are the real power behind the throne. You are wrong. No one can run Vanaloore but Chandu. Her Majesty is aware of this. Sooner or later she will have to choose between you and me. And I know her mind. She cannot but call me from wherever I am and dump you in the sea."

He was not finished yet. The silent crowd was becoming restless. It had met with a double disappointment. Their hopes of seeing the Queen had been dashed. And now they were waiting in silence while the dignitaries standing far away talked among themselves in a language they did not understand.

Chandu climbed to the door of the Pushpak and standing there addressed the crowd in a loud voice asking them to stand firm and united against their enemies and exploiters, the Rakshasas. His long rabble rousing speech was lustily cheered by the crowd every five minutes or so.

Before Chandu turned around to take his seat in the Pushpak Taurus hailed him and said in a slow measured tone:

"Take a last look at what you are leaving behind, Chandu, this island, these millions of Vanaras who have loved and obeyed you, these beautiful mansions and all the pleasures of this city. Be assured you will never see them again. My long arm will catch you wherever you are.

"This mass of humanity behind you, of whose loyalty you are so sure, is pledged to no one but their own hunger for food and water to satisfy which their need for me is greater than mine for their labour.

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Today you have used them for your selfish purpose by inciting them against me. Tomorrow will be another day when you will be gone out of the island and also out of their minds as a proclaimed deserter. They may sulk for a while but ultimately they will come back to me. They have nowhere else to go. I have cut all their avenues of retreat. Their original homes, the islands from where I have brought them, are a picture of devastation like a land churned up by an earthquake. I have plundered them for my projects and also to flush these people out of their habitats. What has happened has happened. This is how history moves forward. You cannot reverse it. You can go now."

A burst of crackers in the centre of the park attracted their attention. The simmering incandescence of the crystal balls, produced by the impact of their hitting the queen's statue at a high velocity, had given rise to small flames culminating in the blast. Splinters started shooting in all directions from the blazing inferno around the statue.

The section of the milling crowd adjoining the fire panicked. They pushed and jostled to get out of the jam. Screaming for help they ran helter skelter. Hundreds were killed in the resulting stampede. Within minutes the vast compound of Queen's Park was empty but for the corpses of the dead vanaras, crushed under the tread of their own compatriots, lying here and there. The trees and earth around the monument wore a scorched look.

The climax came when unable to withstand the intense heat, enough to melt iron, the huge blocks of luminous stone placed all around the statue to illuminate it, exploded like bombs almost simultaneously. It was a sight for the gods when these boulders flew into the sky along a parabolic curve and blew up, producing loud blasts and emitting flashes of multi-coloured flames before falling upon the ground. The earth shook with the impact of the continued boom of the mighty explosions, which resembled a shower of meteors, lasting several minutes. Battered and shaken, the Queen's statue tumbled and fell producing a deafening noise as it hit and demolished the railing.

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It was hell let loose. The flaming rouble flew in all directions like burning torches. It ignited the trees. Soon the few remaining spectators of the holocaust found themselves in the midst of a forest fire. Within an hour or less it would reach the wooden mansions on Queen's street and from there spread to the rest of the city, reducing Vanaloore to a heaps of ash. Being made entirely of wood the buildings were highly inflammable. The night sky above them, as far as the eye could see, was covered by a dense haze obscuring the moonlight. It thickened to form a glowing red cloud raining burning branches and leaves of trees upon the ground.

Taurus who had been standing like a statue watching the holocaust moved towards his wife and said to her, "Nuri, will you please go to the house of sage Rajrishi Vipaschit and request him to come and save us from this calamity."

Nuri ran. It was amazing to see the middle aged Rakshasi sprint like a deer. Her graceful profile, revealing her tall and well curved frame, oval face, pink with rage, flying hair and sharp, penetrating eyes gave her close resemblance to a Greek goddess. No wonder she had won the heart and hand of the richest and most powerful man in the empire.

Nuri did not have to run long as the Rajrishi (Queen's sage) lived only three houses away. The saint came immediately, walking swiftly alongside the athletic woman.

Taurus touched his feet and prayed for relief from the havoc for the millions living in Vanaloore.

"Don't worry my son. It is all writ in the stars. The Earth is passing through the Ashtagraha Katu, the period of conjunction of the eight planets listed in our Vedic almanac when such occurrences are natural. But we have remedies."

The holy man removed his saffron garment, a dhoti tied round his waist to wrap his whole body, stepped out of his sandals and, wearing only a loin cloth walked towards the fire. He had a rosary in one hand and a flat bottomed wooden flask with a handle, called 'Kamandal', filled with water, in the other. Walking along a zig zag

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path between the flames the royal sage stopped near the center of the inferno, whose outer fringe was fast moving towards the residential area. The Rajrishi put the rosary round his neck and with his free hand sprinkled water from the flask on the blaze. The flames rushed towards him and set him alight. The few observers of the scene standing with Taurus were horrified. In less than a minute there was no trace of the earthly remains of the saint's body at the spot where he had stood.

Then a miracle happened. The sky shook and thundered. They could see a mass of dark clouds rolling towards them from the North. Within minutes they were enveloped by dense darkness alternating with incessant flashes of lightning. This was merely a prelude to stormy winds followed by rain which poured like a noisy cataract over their heads. They rushed into Taurus's villa for shelter. It was as if a dozen cloud bursts had struck at the same spot in rapid succession. They could see nothing but thick sheets of water pouring in front of them making them feel as if they were sitting at the bottom of an ocean. Queen's Street had turned into a river.

"It is the Deluge", Nuri mumbled.

"A curse of heaven for our sins", said Chandu's wife.

Upto that day the two women had been good neighbours, friendly and amiable but observing their distance of race and rank.

"The desecration of the Queen's Statue is a bad omen for the kingdom", Taurus observed.

Apart from these mumbled remarks everybody sat in suspenseful silence in a room adjoining the verandah, watching the spectre of intermittent light and darkness displaying white streams of water which glared like the teeth of a demon thirsting to devour them. Hours passed. Nobody stirred. Nor did any one think of food. The flood was flowing over the verandah floor. Soon it would enter the room.

"Let us move to the upper floor", Taurus suggested.

His will was Law now. They all followed him. The upstairs room was brightly lit by luminous stones. It was a hall furnished with

cushioned couches and mattresses. A few large flower vases were placed on the floor to break the monotony. Walls were decorated by strange mural designs. A closer look revealed that these were drawings of weapons being manufactured in Taurus's plants. Nuri covered the two lights in the room with thick black cloth and it became dark. They could now see the prospect outside through the open doors. Flashes of lightning showed that the balcony had turned into a pool of water from the sprays of rain blown into it by the wind. In this never ending wait every minute passed like an hour.

At last the rain god relented. The roar of the torrent took the welcome form of a patter of rain. They were overjoyed. Nuri and Sundari sprang into action and scurried about the house for a few minutes before returning with trays loaded with food and drink. There was bonhomie all round as if the bitterness of the evening had been a mere nightmare or a bad dream. They drank with moderation, keeping in mind the enormity of the task that awaited them of restoring normalcy to the stricken town. The food was refreshing.

By the time they had eaten and come down to the verandah on the ground floor the sky had cleared. The Moon was back, shedding its silvery luster made brighter by its reflection upon the filmy layer of water covering the earth. The flood had withdrawn. Queen's street had a washed and shiny look. They came out of the house and walked into the park. Pushpak, the Queen's aircraft, stood upright and undamaged. Being a gift from heaven it was beyond the reach of the elements. The grass at their feet was green again. So were the trees. They looked fully restored to normal health with all their deep green foliage back in place.

The fire around the Queen's statue had died down but the place was glowing with an aura of pink light for which there seemed to be no earthly explanation. They could see no apparent source for this luminosity. They all walked towards it. After they had stood in silence near the fallen statue for some time a halo started forming in the air before them encircling a lustrous personality. Taurus recognized him as Lord Indra, the rain god, in all his regalia. While they were gazing at him with awe and reverence, to his right appeared a similar august personage. Taurus worshipped him as Agni, Lord of

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fire.

Neal thought it odd that the two antagonists, gods of Fire and Water, should appear together in their divine form before them. A benign smile played on their lips while their eyes were half-closed. Soon a third figure stood facing the two deities with its back turned towards the spectators. It was a youth. A saffron cloth was tied around his waist covering him upto the knees. The rest of his body which was bare shone like a lamp shedding a pink glow. The gods raised their hands in benediction, blessed him and vanished from view. The youth turned towards the small group of people who were watching the scene with awe and reverence. The divine personage was none other than sage Vichaspit looking a few hundred years younger than his age when they last saw him a few hours earlier.

This metamorphosis did not surprise them in the least. To their eyes what they were beholding was a new incarnation of a person whom they had seen making an offering of his body to appease the fire god only a short while ago.

The sage raised both hands. "Go, my children, live your normal lives as willed by Brahma. Today I have reached the successful end of my life's journey and achieved what I was born to accomplish. This is my last incarnation. Lord Vishnu is inviting me to his abode, Baikunth."

They watched him spell bound as he walked around the broken statue, stopped and looked at it intently for a while. The fallen parts moved effortlessly and were joined together by an invisible power. Within minutes the sculptured image of the Empress was standing in all its majesty in the lotus shaped palanquin borne by eight Vanaras

The sage lifted his hands once more to bless them and was about to rise in the air like an angel to fly to heaven when Sundari ran upto him in a fit of inspiration, fell at his feet and cried:

"Stop O sage! Don't go yet. Before you leave us for your heavenly abode please tell us the meaning of this evening's happenings and why Lord Vishnu has thought it fit to enact them? First came the

great conflagration, which could have burnt down this whole city, and then followed relief from it through your grace in the form of the torrential rain."

Sage Vichaspat knelt down, lowering himself to let his feet touch the ground, gently lifted Sundari and gazed into her eyes for almost a minute before speaking.

"I wish I could answer your question, my daughter, but Lord Vishnu's Maya is beyond my comprehension. He alone knows why he brings these calamities and why, in a moment of compassion, sends the remedy to rectify or mollify the effect of his own fury. Even the Lords Brahma and Siva, not to speak of the lesser gods in heaven, are subject to the sway of His Maya. Perhaps He combines His terror with His mercy to strike fear in the heart of man so that humanity may shrink from vice and tread the path of virtue.

"Though I am as ignorant of the Lord's real motives as you", the sage continued, "this much I do know from my own experience that man is the only species to whom God has given nearly all His powers to choose between misery and happiness and pursue his objective to the very end. Ram as Prince of Ayodhya, and the proclaimed leader of Vanaras, and Ravana as King of the Rakshasa empire of Lanka are two illustrations of how far man can go in each direction."

"But holy father, if as you say there is absolutely nothing that man cannot do with the special powers God has given him why has he opted for misery? Your statement would imply that what happened in this park during the last few hours was our own doing." Sundari observed.

"Yes, my child. You have understood me right."

"How, please father explain. I am a simple ignorant babe. Only you can clear this mystery for me."

"I cannot refuse to answer your question, Sundari, because you have asked it with all humility. If only man had shown the same humility in using God's powers he would not have been plunged in suffering today."

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"I want proof, father."

"I have already given you proof of it by extinguishing the great fire that broke out here and restoring to life all those who were burnt to death or killed in the stampede."

"You are an exception, a rishi."

"Anyone could have done what I did this evening, including you."

"Me!"

"Yes, you."

"Then why didn't I do it? What is preventing me from invoking this secret power of the Lord?"

"The complete absence of Love in your heart."

Sundari started on hearing the Sage's blunt observation about her.

"How can you say that about me, holy father?", she asked, adding "my heart is always overflowing with love. I love my father, I love my mother and, though he has betrayed me, I still love Paras, my erstwhile lover."

"Love is an ocean without boundaries, my child. It does not recognise the individualities of the lovers. One has to merge and get lost in it completely. It is eternally full to the brim and overflowing with the waters of the mythical Ganga of pure Love, pouring down in torrents from the feet of the Lord Himself."

"I am what I am. How can I obliterate my individuality?"

"You are what all mankind is today. Man has forgotten the art of true love which came naturally to him once upon a time. In it all individualities merged. It is a sense of 'togetherness' with all life in nature which has disappeared from his psyche."

"What prevents me from acquiring this faculty now?"

"The step by step conditioning of your race down the ages."

"How?"

“For thousands of years man has wandered in the pursuit of external pleasures, ignoring the rare vision God has given him to look within his soul, his real self, where lie all the energies, treasures and delights of heaven. What we call heaven is within our intelligence or ‘Chit’ known as our spiritual heart. If only man had devoted his attention to it with the same zeal with which he has directed it on the pleasures and powers of the external world, he would be God Himself.”

“How can man, a puny creature, ever be God?”

“Because God is not a person. His real name is Peace. This is why all our sacred mantras and hymns end with the holy chant “Om(aham) Shanti” (I Am Peace). Any man with his heart full of love for all living things can be that. But man hates the word Peace and has turned his face against it. To him Peace is Death. He seeks glory in War.

“Why can we not make a fresh start now, father? With your blessings anything is possible.”

“It is too late, daughter. Man has chosen Hatred, not Love, as his God. He has travelled much too far on the materialist path, which breeds perpetual violence, to retrace his steps now. And throughout this journey he has taken care to obliterate the footmarks and milestones on the road he has taken. He has lost the capacity to visualize or perceive the silent domain of the spirit within himself where Peace reigns undisturbed by the travails of suffering humanity. Today every man is at war with every other man for material gains in a fiercely competitive environment.”

“But we are told that every man is master of his own thoughts. Materialist forces can control his body but not his mind,” Sundari persisted.

“This is the greatest fallacy invented by the tyrants who rule the world, namely, kings and gurus. They refuse to believe that there is an even greater tyrant sitting between them and God who makes them dance like puppets.”

“Is it the Devil, or Yamaraj, god of death?”

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“No, my child, it is “Thought”. Mankind lives trapped in a steel frame of Thought. It is the common legacy of all humanity. Starting as a tiny stream of self-awareness from the mind of Brahma, the Creator, it has grown into a mighty flood over aeons of Time, hurtling down in all directions in countless thousands of rivers, over which human beings float and toss about helplessly as these mighty currents carry them away to the Ocean of Death.”

Sundari was confused by the saint’s rhetoric and said so. “What rivers are you talking about O sage?”, she asked.

“These are streams of ideas and concepts, my child. Man has given them hundreds of names like family, marriage, race, caste, property rights, religion, nationalism, patriotism, Law, ideologies, fundamental values, humanism, traditions, customs and so on. He reveres them like the holy Ganga. Thought is the common sea where all these rivers join.”

“Holy Father, are you suggesting that Thought is not a product of our minds but an independent entity?”, she asked.

“Yes, dear daughter. It is a creature that was born as a lovely babe and has evolved into a hideous monster who spares no one.”

“How has it grown so big?”

“By feeding on our minds as a cow grazes on a fertile grassland.”

“Does this monster have a name?”

“Yes, ‘Ego’. It started as the basic element of plain self-awareness in all creations of God. While in every other species it remains the same, in man it has assumed horrendous proportions which must ultimately destroy him.”

“In short, you are saying that man has no control over his own thoughts.”

“Yes, my child, you have understood me right.”

“Is this what you call our step by step conditioning through the ages?”

“Yes, my child.”

15

The Queen Relents before True Love

Queen's Park was back to its normal, peaceful, moonlit night. But for the absence of blocks of luminous stone placed around the Queen's statue for its illumination, there was no trace of the tumultuous events those grounds had witnessed in the past few hours. The corpses of dead Vanaras killed in the stampede had mysteriously disappeared from the scene. Close by, on Queen's street, it was business as usual. This is how life goes on. Time pushes the dead past out of sight and, in a short period, out of mind.

The cooing of a nightingale warned the motley group of approaching dawn and brought Neal back to the hard reality that he and his wife were completely in Taurus's hands now. The overlord of Vanaloore could do what he liked with them. Of course, they were safe from the charge of inciting rebellion against the Queen which

The Queen Relents before True Love

Chandu would have to answer with his life. But Neal was aware nevertheless that if Chandu was to be hanged immediately, a similar fate awaited him in the not too distant future. He would have to return to the Governor's palace while Her Majesty would drag Nora with her to Lanka where she would train her to become the future Queen. Putting Neal out of the way forever would be the next step. As Nora's husband he was a disgrace to the Royal family and must be quietly eliminated like his predecessors in the Governor's office. It was only a matter of time. Once it became known, their previous day's effort to escape Vanaloore would only speed up the process of his extinction.

Apparently the same thought was haunting Nora. She was looking more grim than Neal. There was nothing they could do about it. They couldn't talk in private about the fate that awaited them. If the experience of the past twenty-four hours had proved anything it was that Taurus had his eyes and ears everywhere all the time.

It was with a sad heart that all five fugitives retraced their steps towards Taurus's house with him to await their hour of reckoning. Being absorbed in brooding over their busted plan of escape they had no time or inclination to observe each other's diverse moods. Their mental state was not much brighter than that of death-row convicts being led to the gallows.

When they neared the building they were surprised to find a contingent of policemen in uniform lined up in front of the villa and blocking the exit from the park. The fugitives had not noticed them from a distance because in the moonlight the soldiers' green liveries resembled the hedge behind which they stood. Taurus commanded his hostages to stop when they were barely fifty feet from the police.

"What have you to say now Chandu?" he asked the leader of the Queen's enemies who he thought was directly or indirectly responsible for the catastrophic events of the evening. "The gods are with us. You have seen it with your own eyes. They have foiled your plans to overthrow Her Majesty's government in Vanaloore and abduct my daughter. If I want I can put an end to your tomfoolery this instant. It only needs my asking one of these guards to run a

dagger through your ribs which is what you deserve. But I shall not be hasty. I shall give you the pleasure of wallowing in your own blood and dying slowly.

"We could forgive your bringing those ungrateful wretches in millions to my door to frighten me. But there can be no excuse for your planning to set this city on fire. This is downright terrorism. You thought you could get away with it like your ancestor Hanuman who virtually destroyed our capital city of Lanka by setting its buildings on fire and wreaked destruction the country before attacking it. You Vanaras are born terrorists. Such tactics will not pay any more. We shall make an example of you before your entire community so that they know what fate awaits the blackguards who attempts such a crime again."

Chandu was down but not out. He defended himself. "If extinguishing the flames that burnt this park was the work of the gods, setting it on fire was also their own doing. It was they who must have prompted the Vanaras to return to you those crystal balls since they were of no use to them. It was their way of venting their frustration. They could not have imagined in their wildest dreams that their innocent act of protest would have such cataclysmic results."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you give me credit for intelligence far beyond my capacity."

"Soldiers," Taurus shouted. "Take this man and his son away to the prison next to the gallows. Keep them there till further commands."

"Wait a minute, father", screamed Sundari.

Taurus raised his hands to the soldiers asking them not to move.

"Yes, my darling."

"If Paras goes to the gallows I go with him."

"Why, my dear? You have seen for yourself that he does not love you. He was only play acting at the behest of his father. He is after power and gold, not love."

"Let him hate me, but I still love him."

"If I do not punish them for their crimes it will be treason against

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Her Majesty.”

“It won’t be so if you let them go into exile to some distant land on their own.”

“I shall agree to your demand only on one condition.”

“Name it,” said Sundari.

“You will not leave us and go away with those rogues.”

“Agreed. I was not going any way. My love for Paras cannot change. Nor can my decision not to marry him.”

Paras and his parents were visibly overjoyed at this happy turn of events. So were Taurus and Nuri. They had got their daughter back from the clutches of a scheming traitor of the hybrid Vanksha race.

But this favourable tide in the affairs of his Deputy (for, officially he was still the Governor of Vanalooore) brought no cheer to Neal. Nora was equally perturbed about what Taurus and the Queen might do to her husband. If Sundari’s revelations about her father’s secret plans to eliminate Neal that very night were true, she must act fast but how?

With their heads hanging in shame at their humiliating release Chandu and his family moved towards the Pushpak. Sundari stopped them.

“Wait, Paras, I have not done with you yet.”

The renegades, who had reached the landing of the plane, stopped in their tracks, not knowing what was coming next from their main benefactor who had saved their lives. For them she was a goddess come to earth to protect them from harm.

“If I am deserting you, Paras, it is not merely because of the discovery that you were planted on me by your father. A romance may begin as a fake but it can become genuine by constant pursuit. I am giving you up because I see now that your love for me has not diminished your passion for gold and power. These are precisely the qualities which I hate in my fellow-students at our institute in Lanka, the Royal Meghnath Academy. They are all mercenaries whose eyes are glued to the packets of gold they would earn after graduating from RMA. They do not know the meaning of romance.

I am not talking now of a boy and girl flirtation but of the romance of life itself. They are children who have grown old before they could be young. You can compare them with flowers yellowed and withered by the heat of the Sun before they could bud and blossom. Your types have not tasted the first bud of youth blossoming in your heart-lotus."

"I do not understand you, Sundari. You have never spoken to me like this before," said Paras trying to assuage her feelings.

"There was no occasion for it. My eyes were blinded by love. But you have opened them now by your deceit. You and your father have been playing a game on the chess board of power with me as a pawn. You both knew that if I went with you my father would track you down and call you back on your terms. You wanted to hold us to ransom.

"In other words Paras", Sundari said summing up her observations. "You are a true Vanksha, a slave who will always remain a slave. You ape the ways of the rakshasas without having their courage and spirit of sacrifice."

"What can we sacrifice? The rakshasas own everything", said Paras.

"Yes, they can also give up everything for their cause, be it nation, love or just a principle. Look at Her Highness, Princess Nora. She has sacrificed the kingdom of Lanka to save her husband. Look at our sage Vichaspit who had been living in our midst for several hundred years. It did not take him a second to invoke the protection of Lord Indra for us by offering his own life. And, finally, look at me, I was prepared to go to the ends of earth with you leaving behind my parents and all the luxuries and power I would inherit. I am still prepared to marry you if you agree to leave this materialist and mercenary world and come with me to the Himalayas to lead the life of ascetics and roam the universe as free spirits."

Paras looked hesitant to respond. Without much ado his father hustled him into the waiting Pushpak.

"Wait another moment, Chandu", shouted Nora. "You have forgotten to take Her Highness and her husband, Neal, with you. Was

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that not the original plan? Already, you are behaving like a Vanksha professional at our RMA, always thinking of himself and his gold packet, with not a care for others, living for himself alone."

Nora and Neal were overwhelmed by Sundari's concern for them. For once Neal had to acknowledge the superiority of Rakshasa character. Momentary association with this intrepid girl of the ruling race had shown him the true meaning of friendship, howsoever brief. She had done for them what the best of Vankshas, the new generation of hybrids, wouldn't for their friends of several decades. "Me first", was their life's motto.

"Your Highness has done well to bring this gold with you," Chandu observed as they entered the plane.

"Oh my God!", Nora cried. "Thank you, Chandu, for reminding me of it. I would have died of remorse had I carried this sinful object with me." She hurriedly jumped from the craft. Neal followed her. They ran upto Taurus.

"Please deposit this bag of gold coins in the Royal Treasury." She said handing the treasure to him.

But this is the Governor's money. Neal can keep it," said Taurus.

"He was never the Governor. We cannot take it."

"You can keep the profits you made on it at the Gambling House."

"We made no profits. Some one snatched the bag from us, invested the gold on your business and within moments handed us four times the amount as our winnings. To me it is outright robbery of public money. When a dacoit attacks the victim knows he is being robbed. Here it is all done with a finesse which makes the robber the most respectable citizen and not a criminal as he ought to be branded."

"That is me", said Taurus.

"Well, if the cap fits, please put it on," Nora said good humouredly.

Sundari hailed Paras and said, "Here is another tip for you, Paras, my darling. Her Highness has shown you that we rakshasas are not just great grabbers. We are also great givers."

Sundari came forward, kissed Nora and said.

"Your conduct inspires me to say that if only this world was ruled by women like your Highness and me we would make it a paradise."

Soon after take off the Pushpak was wobbling from side to side. Within a few minutes they were flying over a stormy ocean. The celestial plane was rocking in the breeze in sharp loops like a swing suspended from a tree.

"Chandu was sweating with fear. Paras turned pale but his mother sat calm, resigned to the will of the gods and mumbling a prayer.

Nora was unperturbed. "This is the aerial chariot of Kubera, the treasurer of heaven. He is next only to Lord Brahma, the Creator. Wind cannot harm it, no matter how much the vehicle buffets to and fro", she said.

"The trouble is it is too heavily loaded", said Chandu.

"Father, you have put more bags of gold and diamond in it than it can carry", said Paras pointing to the bundles of ill gotten treasure that Chandu had hurriedly smuggled into the aircraft from the state treasury before leaving.

"No, it is not that my son. I had not counted on carrying two extra passengers."

"You have forgotten Sundari. She was to be on this flight with us anyway."

"That still leaves us with one unwanted addition to our numbers", said Chandu testily. He disappeared behind the wall of gold and returned in a jiffy with an unsheathed sword.

"Neal, think on your feet. I give you two options. Jump down into the sea and with luck swim to the shore, or face being killed by this sword so that I can throw your useless carcass into the sea to be eaten up by sharks. This plane cannot carry you," he said.

"You will have to kill me first", screamed Nora coming between him and Neal."

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Just then a strong gust of wind shot the plane skyward. The next moment it came hurtling down like a ball. The wall of gold behind Chandu toppled. One of the bags fell on his head. He collapsed and was buried under it. The sword fell aside. His wife and son ran to his rescue. Nora quickly picked up the sword and ordered them to stand apart.

“Don’t touch him. Lie on the floor face down.”

They obeyed. She pulled out a long sheet from a heap of costly silk piled in a corner adjacent to the gold bags, and asked Neal to tie with it mother and son together in a bundle to render them harmless. This was quickly accomplished. She was speaking to Neal in a tone of authority, not as his wife but as Her Highness princess Sarupnakha, the Queen-in-waiting, would to a subject.

Chandu was writhing with pain under the weight of the mound of gold resting on his chest. Nora asked Neal to lift the bag so that the greedy Vanksha could sit up.

“Now stand up”, said Nora keeping the sword aimed at him.

“Lift this bag of gold”

Chandu tried but failed. “It is much too heavy”, he pleaded.

“Neal will help you. Pick it up and throw it into the Sea”, she said firmly.

They crafty Vanksha hesitated. Nora pricked his shoulder with the point of the sword. He gave in and with Neal’s help tumbled the sack into the sea.

“Now do likewise with the other bags. Throw them all in the sea.”

“All?”

“Yes, all”.

“What will you gain, Your Highness, by reducing me to a baggar’s life. With this little asset I could spend the rest of my life in reasonable comfort in a foreign land. Now we shall be seeking alms on the street.”

“The wealth you have amassed here is enough to feed ten thou-

sand people for ten thousand years. Not a penny of it belongs to you."

"Have mercy on my wife and child, Your Highness."

"Only a moment ago you were bent upon murdering my husband. Are you not grateful that I am sparing your life?"

"Life will have no meaning for me without money. Leave me at least one of these bags."

"I shall let you have it if you allow me to throw your wife or son into the sea in exchange."

Chandu looked greedily at the pair Neal had tied up in a bundle. They were motionless but listening to each word of the dialogue. The greedy plunderer of the royal treasury was hoping that perhaps one of them would volunteer to sacrifice his or her life so that he could keep the gold. His wife could read his face and admonished him.

"Why are you looking so ravenously at me as if you would eat me up. Remember I am a Rakshasi. You have risen to a high position in the empire because of me." Addressing Nora she added, "Your Highness can see what a lout this man is. If anyone has to jump out of the plane to save the gold it should be him. The money may help my son, Paras, to make a new start in a hostile environment."

The plane was steady now. But it was still not gaining height. At Nora's bidding Neal dropped the last bag of gold from it. No sooner was this done than, to their great surprise, the Pushpak started descending vertically.

"O my God! We are all falling into the Sea", cried Chandu.

"If the plane is falling into the Sea it is because of the weight of your sins. Even the chariot of gods cannot bear the burden of your crimes against the State. As your co-passengers we may have to suffer the same plight. One dirty fish pollutes the whole tank," said the princess.

"Nora ordered Neal to pick up another silk piece and tie up the rascal to prevent him from further mischief. As she spoke she was

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keeping the sword pointed at Chandu's throat. By the time Neal had finished tying him up with his wife and son in the same bundle the plane had stopped its descent and come to a halt. They could sense from the gentle thud it produced that they were sitting on solid ground. Outside, dawn had broken out. Neal rushed to the cabin door to find that the Pushpak had landed on a wide terrace. Not far from it lay the last of the bags of gold they had dropped from the pushpak under Nora's orders under the assumption that they were flying over the sea.

A closer look outside showed that they were sitting atop the royal palace, residence of Her Majesty the Queen Empress of Lanka. This was confirmed by the loud patter of feet on the staircase leading to it. Soon there emerged from it a squad of about a dozen armed soldiers. They hurriedly encircled the plane. Last to arrive on the scene was the ubiquitous Taurus.

Nora asked Neal to remain calm, whatever happened, and jumped to the floor gracefully from the cabin.

Neal followed her. Taurus bowed respectfully to her and motioned them to stand aside.

"Soldiers! search the plane and bring out the criminals."

He was astonished when a little later, in response to his instructions the commandos brought out the trio as one piece, tied as they were in a single cloth.

"Excellent work, Your Excellency," he said bowing to Neal.

"It is all the doing of the princess," said a beaming Neal, looking at his wife with unconcealed pride. "You can see the sword she is still carrying in her hand."

"O God! I am always so forgetful," she said and put down the weapon on the ground.

"The bravest woman on Earth that I have seen!" Taurus observed.

"Thank you Taurus."

"Your Highness and His Excellency Neal may accompany me to Her Majesty while the soldiers untie the prisoners and put them in shape before producing them in the court."

Mandodri welcomed Nora and her husband with exceptional warmth. She was standing at the entrance to her private apartments to receive them and hugged her sister-in-law affectionately.

"I am so glad my child you are safe. I was fearing that the rogue, Chandu, might do you harm once you were in his hands up in the air."

"Obviously he tried to but Her Highness and His Excellency Neal overpowered him", Taurus observed with a deep bow and added, "we found the rascal tied and bound in a bundle together with his wife and son. Her Highness was still carrying a sword in her hand, evidently to watch over them, when she came out of the plane."

"What else can you expect from the future Queen of Lanka?" Said Mandodari with motherly pride.

Then, welcoming the prodigals who had returned to her fold, she said, "You must be thinking I am angry with you. I am not. Instead I am proud of both of you. I have been watching your actions since you left my presence early in the morning yesterday."

"How could you?" asked Nora.

"In an empire like ours which has conquered the world through its overwhelming superiority in science and technology strict surveillance on its principal officers and citizens is a paramount necessity. My eyes and ears are everywhere. How could I let your first day in your respective roles of the Queen-in-waiting and Governor of Vanaloore go unobserved? All eventualities had been anticipated. The palanquin you travelled by, the visit to the Gambling House and Taurus taking you round his plants were all part of one of the pre-conceived game plans designed to watch you. Needless to add all your movements were under our constant scrutiny including your whispered private conversations in places you thought were beyond our sensors. But even the best laid strategies can go awry. We had not calculated for that adventurous thug, Konje, running away with your money and your subsequent dash after him in hot pursuit. Fortunately, Taurus was alert and tracked you down.

"Nor could I have anticipated the catastrophic occurrences in the Queen's Park last night. What followed, however, has been viv-

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idly recorded for my benefit by my sentinel, the Pushpak.”

“Pushpak! It is merely an aircraft, an inert object” exclaimed Nora.

“Not the Pushpak. You are aware perhaps that it is a gift to me from Lord Brahma. When the Lord came to Lanka to console me on the death of my beloved husband, his favourite devotee Ravana, he offered me two boons. In response I asked for being allowed to remain youthful and alive as long as I wished and as a second favour, to have the Pushpak back which Ram had taken away from Ravana and returned to Lord Kubera to whom it had originally belonged. The angels who came to deliver the Pushpak had been instructed to explain to me all its powers and intricacies. It is an intelligent plane.”

“You mean it can think and reason?”, Nora asked.

“No, it can observe, record and react to what it scans and report to me when necessary. Till last night’s tragic events you could name no one, not even Taurus, whom I would consider more loyal to me than this blackguard Chandu. He has been my closest confidant for years and has travelled with me in the Pushpak all over the Empire. Naturally, he was aware of some of the basic mantras, or commands that activated the aircraft into motion. But even he was not conversant with its powers of secret surveillance and the holy mantras which I chant to operate them. Having free access to every part of the palace, including my private apartments, it was not difficult for him to hijack the plane from its hangar in the highly protected area of the roof above the royal stables.

The plane has already transmitted to me a visual record of all it saw or went through at the Queen’s Park and subsequently last night. I established my links with it the moment I learnt from Taurus that it had been hijacked, got from it a full report of all that had transpired during its captivity and commanded it to return.”

Nora was impressed but disconcerted by the awareness that the Queen knew every thing about their secret plans to escape from Vanaloore, including their private thoughts.

“But madam, how can you forgive us for betraying your trust and conspiring with the rogue Chandu to effect our escape. You must also have heard all the bad things we said about you. How do these

reports clear us of complicity with Chandu or of plans of our own to defy your orders and run away from here?", she asked in an feeble voice.

"Do not forget my child, I am the Queen of the realm, not an ordinary human being. As the monarch I cannot be bothered about what my most trusted confidants think about me in the privacy of their minds. All human relationships would crumble if we were to expose them to such scrutiny. At the core of our hearts we are all selfish, "I"-centred, creatures. Fathers, husbands, brothers and even the most intimate lovers will fail the test of absolute fidelity in thought, word and deed. Individualities can never be suppressed. At best they can be harmonized through the primitive method of collective living and collective thinking. Giving each person a distinct identity is the principal gift of our Rakshasa culture."

Summing up her sermon the Queen said, "In brief, my observation of your conduct amounts to this, that your name, Nora, should go down in history as the pride of Rakshasa womanhood. It will redound to the glory of the whole Aryan race."

"Why, what have I done?"

"You have displayed exemplary devotion to your husband. For an Aryan woman, her husband is her God. You have reminded me of my own sacrifices for my late spouse, Ravana the Great, which won for me the title of his Chief Queen among his hundred wives. You have proved that your first love is Neal without whom the throne of Lanka has no meaning to you. In a way I was only testing you and you have come out with flying colours."

"I have decided", the Queen continued, "to let you stay in Vanaloore by the side of your most beloved Neal. You will rule as my representative here with my full powers. This island dominion of twelve million souls will be your training ground for ascending the throne of Lanka when I decide to join the great Ravana in heaven."

"What will Neal do?"

"He will retain his present post of Governor which I have already given to him. Officially, he will be your deputy but I know that in

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practice you two will run this domain jointly.”

“Who will replace Chandu?”, Neal ventured to ask the Queen.

Her Majesty looked to Taurus, her conscience keeper, for an answer.

“If your Majesty desires my opinion in the matter I would suggest the name of Arana, the leader of the Vanaras who headed their demonstration last night.”

Mandodri thought for a while, then asked.

“What is he?”

“A Vanara, your majesty”.

“And, therefore, more dependable. We made a mistake in putting Chandu, the half-caste Wanksha, in this position.”

“My mistake, your majesty.”

“This should be a lesson to both of you, Nora and Neal. Never trust a Wanksha fully though you may appear to do so. They are by nature greedy, mean and untrustworthy”, the Queen observed.

Taurus nodded in agreement.

“Neal took courage to butt in and said, “wasn’t Arana the man responsible for last night’s holocaust?”

“No”, said Taurus. “The fire was an accident. No one had expected it. The demonstration was entirely peaceful. Arana is a junior employee in my plants. Before this he was a palanquin bearer. The Vanaras will be pleased when they hear that their own leader will now rule them. As proof of his efforts to serve their interests we shall give them a few sops.”

“Such as?”

“Better and more powerful crystal balls as a replacement for those they threw away last night. Perhaps Your Excellency can consider installing additional filtration units to further dilute the sullage flowing into the river from our tanks where luminous stones are washed. This should give them cleaner drinking water.”

“What about their demand for food? They say they are starving.”

"Let them starve if they must", said the Queen. What were they eating before we civilized them? Only fruits and roots. Now they have meat, fish and some corn too."

"We cannot give them every thing at one go," said Taurus. "Let it be one thing at a time, bit by bit."

"Taurus is right" opined Her Majesty. "Don't yield too much ground to these low castes lest they forget who they are and get beside themselves. Tomorrow they will start demanding clothing, shelter, education and medicines. Next they will want cash to multiply it in the Gambling House. The poor must not have disposable cash or assets in their possession. This is the first principle of our Rakshasa culture taught to me by none other than the Great Ravana himself. Their loyalty is best assured when all their assets and jewellery, and if possible even wives and children, are pawned or bonded to the money-lender to meet their expenses on wasteful habits picked from us, leaving them to survive on a half-starved stomach."

"Yes, Your Majesty. We may have to squeeze them further if we have to garner resources for achieving our ultimate goal, the conquest of Ayodhya."

Mandodari smiled. "I am looking forward to the day when this happens. That will be the time for me to relinquish the throne and pass it to Nora so that I can join my husband in heaven in triumph, after avenging his humiliation at the hands of Ram. If the Vanaras have to be bled for this noble objective, be it so. They deserve it as their just punishment for siding with Ram in the Great War."

"Arana is leader of a force of twelve million potential rebels. How can you be sure of his loyalty?" Nora asked.

"As sure as I am of my own loyalty to Her Majesty, Your Highness." "Arana is my man. He does nothing without consulting me."

"Were you aware in advance of last night's procession?"

"Yes, fully. That was why you saw me waiting for them in front of my house in Queen's Park".

"Don't the Vanaras suspect him of duplicity?"

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“What can they do? They have no choice. There is not one among them whom I cannot buy with the million allurements the empire can offer them. They all know it. Power is a hydra headed monster who spares no one that comes within its reach. Chandu was one of them before we got him.”

“They still seem to think he is their man”, said Nora recalling his claims the previous night of being their leader.

“Yes, they do, your Highness.”

“Then there is nothing really to rule in Vanaloore. It is child’s play”, quipped Nora, laughing.

“Yes, nothing while Taurus is there to fix everybody. Take him away from the scene and you will be living in perpetual chaos,” said Mandodari.

Taurus bowed respectfully to his sovereign for her gracious tribute to his talents. In their hearts both Nora and Neal reconciled themselves to the position of being his rubber stamps.

A few weeks later the Queen returned to Lanka, leaving the reins of the colony in their hands. They ruled the place for several decades. With Taurus on their side to straighten out every problem, they had little to do except enjoy life and produce children. They had fourteen of them, nine girls and five boys.



16

Why Bangalore?

“Vaastu” said the saint as I and Mary came out of the trance during which we had tasted rich flavours of the extra-terrestrial dimensions of life that our ancestors in the hoary past had routinely enjoyed.

“Tathastu”, intoned his companion.

I opened my eyes and looked at the lady. She bore a strong resemblance to Mandodri, Ravana’s beautiful Chief Queen in the drama Baba had enacted before our internal eyes through his occult powers. On a closer look the holy man seemed to have all the features of Taurus, the evil genius of Vanaloore. I knew that the woman sitting next to me was Mary but when I turned my gaze towards her

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she looked more like Nora.

There being no one else in the room to look at I began to wonder where I was. Mary was eyeing me with an equally quizzical expression. She reached out her hand to feel my arms, legs and cheeks to determine whether I was a ghost or a real human being.

“Are you Nakul?” she asked finally.

“Yes, and you?”

“Mary of course, Can’t you see?”

“I thought you were Nora.”

“And I took you to be Neal.”

We smiled at each other and turned to Baba for instructions. He was not there. How he had disappeared so suddenly remains a mystery to this day.

The lady spoke. “You are back to the Twentieth Century, my children. I notice you are somewhat shaken by these long journeys across several thousand years in Time which took you first to the age of Lord Krishna and then to that of Sri Ram. It only shows you that there is no such thing as Time. It does not exist. The present is all there is. In it you can find everything that has ever been or will be.

“However, that is neither here nor there”, she continued. “What you need is a restorative to cool your frayed nerves. Drink this.”

She handed us a tumbler each of a delicious wine and said “this is made of the juices of some of the finest Himalayan herbs.”

We drank the potion with relish sip by sip. It gave me an oppor-

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tunity to closely observe the saintly woman who sat facing us in a yogic posture with eyes closed. She was strikingly attractive, young, not above thirty, and her face had a natural glow which could not be simulated by any cosmetics designed by man or God. Whether the elixir I was drinking had any influence in making her look an apparition of the Lankan queen is difficult to say.

Mary was not amused by the state we were in. "Where has Baba disappeared without answering the question for which he made us go through this nightmarish hell?", she asked the lady.

"He was called away."

"By whom?"

"By an alarm signal."

"We did not hear it."

"Only he can listen to that divine music which rings in his ears every half-hour to tell him that he must move to another place."

Her statement reminded both of us of Taurus.

"Taurus, a character we saw in Vanaloore, suffered from the same curse. He too could not stay at one place longer than half-an-hour", I said.

"You are right, my son. Baba is the current incarnation of the same man. He was Taurus in the age of Ram and this peculiar trait has stuck to him through all his incarnations."

"And you resemble Mandodri", I ventured to observe.

"What makes you think so?", she asked with a mischievous smile.

I blushed. Perhaps it was the drink I had imbibed that emboldened

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me to blurt out the Truth.

“Your beauty”, I replied.

The lady took my compliment with queenly grace. “You are right again”, she said. “I was the Queen of Lanka then. You were my two favourite aides as Nora and Neal, through whom I ruled Vanaloore, the second capital city of my Empire. In my present incarnation I am known as Meera Ma. It is not an accident or coincidence that the same invisible power which keeps rotating heaven’s ‘Kala-Chakra’, the giant wheel of Time or Destiny, should have thought it fit to bring the four of us together again. Under the laws of Vaastu Yoga which is the foundation of our Vedic astronomy, this reunion between us could happen only under a recurrence of the same concatenation of the heavenly bodies which govern our fates. That we should have met on the very first day of Ashtagraha Katu is a sure sign that if only you follow the signs of the stars, young lady, your wish to become a mother will be realized.”

Mary interrupted her.

“If what you say about history repeating itself in our case today is correct, then two questions have to be answered first.”

“What are they?”

“First, you say Baba disappears from where-ever he is every half-hour. We have been sitting here for hours witnessing that horror movie called Vanaloore.”

Meera Ma interrupted her. “You are wrong. The whole show lasted only five minutes.”

“Impossible”, I protested.

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"I have already told you that Time as we know it in our daily life does not exist. It is a fiction of our imagination. You must have had dreams during an afternoon-nap of fifteen minutes in which you travelled hundreds of miles or spent several exciting days. What you have gone through here is yet another dream-like experience. What is your second question?"

"In Vanaloore", Mary pointed out "Mandodri was the Queen and Taurus her assistant. Here we find that Baba, who you say is Taurus of that era, is the boss and you are his deputy".

The maiden laughed.

"You are too inquisitive, my friend. As you know appearances can be deceptive. The fact is that as in Old Vanaloore, here too I am the boss. Baba is my instrument. He derives all his powers from me. I was Ravana's Chief Queen bequeathed to him by Lord Brahma, as an incarnation of his divine energy that assumes a female form and eternally inspires men of talent, driving them to the peaks of glory. Without me the monk is a cipher. I am still the Queen of every man's heart and mind, be he a saint or sinner, and will always remain so. The whole world is my Lanka and its citizens my humble subjects".

"How did you derive this pervasive energy?"

"I got it through my phenomenal power of one-pointed concentration. It is what Yogis call 'Dhyan'.

"Dhyan on what?"

"On the Supreme Truth, which is another name of Brahma. He and I are inseparable in spirit though my body may go through the travails of gross earthly life. I am constantly meditating upon him.

Why Bangalore?

He is my Kalpavraksha, the wishfulfilling tree."

Without going further into the nuances of her mystical claims Mary came straight to the point.

"Does this mean that we do not have to wait for Baba for the answer? We shall get it from you."

"Yes."

"What have you to say?"

"Just this. Go to Bangalore and you will have your cherished reward.

"Why Bangalore?"

"Because it is a new incarnation of Vanaloore?"

"Do cities also re-incarnate?"

"Yes everything does. This is how history repeats itself."

"But Bangalore is a small town."

"According to my book it will be a city of twelve million in forty years. Now close your eyes for a minute."

When we opened them she was gone.

* * *

17

“Jai Vaastu!”

Two days later Mary and I arrived in Bangalore after an arduous train journey in scorching heat, when the great landmass of India resembles a blazing inferno. We had decided to try our luck in the famous garden city. Mary's academy was closed for the summer vacation and I had taken two months' leave from the newspaper where I was employed as a senior correspondent. I could look for a job in a Bangalore daily while Mary should have no difficulty in being taken as a teacher in a college or school.

Our luggage consisted of two suitcases and our bosom companions, the bicycles. The first sight that greeted us on coming out of Bangalore railway station was not very pleasing. Sprawled all over the place, within the railway compound and beyond, we could see a mass of humanity, men women and children, old and young. They were ill clad or virtually naked and carried small bundles which

“Jai Vaastu!”

perhaps represented all their belongings. The auto-rickshaw driver who took us to a hotel told us that the hinterland of Bangalore had been passing through a severe drought for two consecutive years, leaving the peasantry destitute and jobless. The new arrivals were victims of the famine who had been driven to the city in search of food and jobs.

“Reminds me of Vanaloore”, said Mary.

“Me too,” I said.

The interview with Mr. Seshadri, Editor of the Bangalore Chronicle, went off smoothly. Displaying no outward signs or insignias of his august office, he sat in a small room in front of a small table without a telephone. There was no peon to usher us through his uncurtained door. We just walked in. He peered at us, lifting his brown rimmed reading glasses about an inch over his brows, and motioned us to take our seats in the two chairs placed in front of him across the table.

The first thing about his personality that would at once draw the attention of a foreigner or a visitor from Northern India were the three stripes of yellow sandalwood paste drawn across his forehead with a vermillion mark in the center. But for the absence of a bulge around his middle, he wore a vague resemblance to another Banagalorean, Swami Bhrigunanda, whom we had seen only three days before in Allahabad.

“Jai Vaastu!”, said Mary with folded hands by way of a greeting.

I shuddered and thought the interview with the Editor was over before it had begun. The man would obviously be offended by Mary’s thoughtless allusion to his obscurantist make up.

To my surprise Seshadri perked up. “Are you familiar with Vaastu, madam?” he asked with a broad grin.

“Yes, to tell you the truth this great science of Vaastu has brought us here.”

“Indeed, how fascinating!”

Mary was a guileless, simple hearted woman who kept no se-

crets even from strangers. She needed no further encouragement to pour out our story from the moment of our meeting with Swami Bhrigunanda.

Seshadri was visibly moved.

“Have you really met the great man?”, he asked, standing up from his seat with folded hands as a mark of respect to the holy guru and, in the process, revealing the immaculately starched and pressed white shirt and lungi covering his body.

“He rarely meets anyone”, Seshadri went on. “Of course he makes an exception for a few devotees like me. The result of his blessings you can see before you. Within a few years the Chronicle has emerged as the leading English daily of our nascent State of Karnataka.”

I need hardly tax the reader with details of what followed. Mary and Seshadri now stood on a separate pedestal from me as fellow disciples of a man who for both of them was the greatest living saint of the century. To step into a reporting slot in the Bangalore Chronicle, similar to the post I had held in Allahabad, was for me a mere formality.

As it transpired Mary and Seshadri had another close affinity. Like Mary, Seshadri had studied at Oxford twelve years before her. He was passionately devoted to English literature and the theatre. Through his good offices Mary soon found a job at an elitist Anglo-Indian school as an English teacher. Seshadri offered to get her a position in a University college, he being a member of its Senate. But she declined.

“You know Mr. Seshadri, English is best taught to children between twelve and seventeen. That is the time when they really hang on your lips as you expound to them the secret beauty of a word, phrase or couplet. It seems to open new horizons for them like the opening of a bud before it blossoms into a flower. The school is the place where lies all the romance of teaching English.”

Seshadri agreed with her whole-heartedly.

Thenceforth our life in Bangalore was like a fairy tale in which its

“Jai Vaastu!”

stars, a princess and her lover who is usually a commoner, get married and live happily ever after. As predicted by the holiest of the holy, Swami Bharginanda, Mary became a mother within a year of our arrival in the city. Our first child was a girl. Three more followed, all boys, during the next four years.

Bangalore grew and we prospered with it. We were accepted as rightful legatees of the spectacular fortunes of new Bangalore. In it our progeny rose to positions we could not have envisioned in our wildest dreams.

* * *



Afterword

The New Maharajas

People of Mysore and nearby areas still nostalgically reenact what their ancestors called the halcyon days of the Maharajas. The magnificent palace, broad shining streets, small shops standing unobtrusively along the side-walks and glittering with their merchandise — mostly the products of local artisans — lent to the princely capital an aura of exclusiveness to which the hustle and bustle of today's big cities would be as repugnant as jazz music in an academy of classical dancing. The atmosphere of openness was enhanced, by way of contrast, by the occasional appearance on the city's highways of stately elephants and horse-drawn carriages of the elite of the town. These provided something to watch to the seemingly idle populace.

Elsewhere in the lanes and bylanes housing the gentry and laity, life moved placidly in the firm belief that nothing could go wrong while His Highness was there on his throne. The Maharaja's pictures adorned the walls of every house along with those of the family deities. Some ardent devotees of royalty would make it part of their morning walk to stop by the palace gates and bow with folded hands in reverence as they did in front of a temple. In a reserved green part of the city, lush with trees and gardens, lay the bungalows of the elite who included the King's Ministers, courtiers, judges and other high functionaries. Though they never saw him, except on rare ceremonial occasions, the citizens of the city felt honoured by their proximity to their monarch.

No Mysorean would be worth his salt if, while on visit to another part of the country, he or she did not spend the first half-hour of the conversation with a stranger singing paeans in praise of the King and the royal family and extolling the grandeur of the city and its surroundings.

It is perhaps due to the people's fondness for royalty that Maharajas have returned to the state under a new garb. Its new capital city of Bangalore could now boast of at least a dozen luminaries of international fame who could outdo the former ruler

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of Mysore in every respect, be it wealth, authority, luxury, fame or sheer sense of personal power. They enjoy comforts the princes of old could have never dreamt of. They are the new Maharajas of India. Just below them would be a few hundred others who, for want of a more appropriate name, could be styled as 'rajās'. Their reach is global and the wealth of each of them runs to hundreds of crores of rupees. Next in line are the multitude of millionaires, each of whom owns property and other assets exceeding the magic figure of ten lakh rupees. On a conservative estimate their number in Karnataka would be anywhere between a million and two million. The figure could be larger still. One of the new Maharajas ---- the owner of a software empire that has sprung up from nowhere in the last fifteen years — proudly claimed a few years ago that even his peons were millionaires.

We thus have within the state of Karnataka a "super-state" of these over two million people who are law unto themselves. They are the "new face of Karnataka", and indeed of the whole country. In the years to come they hope to convert Bangalore into India's Shanghai. America is the model of their new life-style. They can splurge money on modern luxuries in casinos, glitzy malls and discos. This new life has opened before the lucky two million avenues of sexual enjoyment that have given a sensual dimension to their lives even as it has shocked the sensibilities of their elders. They couldn't care less about what the old fogies thought of their new life. The world was with them. Proportionate to their numbers, their purchasing power for the goodies of life, be it property, garments, rich food or sex, equals that of any modern metropolis like Paris, Dubai, Singapore or even New York. In fact their affluence has encouraged hundreds, if not thousands of Indians settled in America, to return to this mini-America in India.

Politicians of all hues have jumped on their bandwagon. Here in one compact lot they have found what makes the wildly swaying see-saw of politics worthwhile. In one place they have everything, money, power and women. Their children and grandchildren revel in night-long orgies of dining drinking, dancing, gambling and all that goes with it, hailing the dawn of the "New Age" in India. Leaders of the state and country have opened the gates of government treasuries and financial institutions to pander to the extravagant

demands of this mini-America which, so they believe, has fallen in their lap as manna from heaven. One can go on and on endlessly to describe this metamorphosis in Bangalore and several other pockets in Karnataka and the rest of India.

This process of 'modernization' of Karnataka, as a fore-runner of what is going to happen to the rest of India, is being pushed through at top speed. Soon a whole belt between Bangalore and Mysore will become a special Economic Zone where this model of growth is to expand with a new dimension of international tourism added to it, which will bring with it a first class airport, hundreds of hotels, highways, speedways, fly-overs and malls to cater to the needs of an additional two million or more new members of the "super-state".

2

What about the remaining fifty million or so of the fifty-three million people of Karnataka? The official line, propagated by politicians, more as protagonists of the new "super-state" than as leaders of the masses who have elected them to power, is that this "super-state" is the "engine of growth" which will instill new vigour into the entire economy of the state. It is supposed to galvanise the people into a new revolution of growth.

And now to facts. Let us first take a look at what Karnataka has already accomplished during the last fifteen years of the Information Technology revolution making it one of the world leaders in the field.

As one looks at the statistical charts of India, the first thing that strikes the mind is that despite the heavy investments made by the Centre and state governments, foreign companies and other agencies, in per capita incomes Karnataka slipped from the 10th to the 13th position among the states of India between the years 1991 and 2003. Apparently the benefits of the 'revolution', though computed in the incomes of the people, could not compensate for losses suffered during the same period in other sectors. A startling fact to be noted in this connexion is that factory employment in Karnataka declined from 752,00 workers in 1990 to 370,000 in 2003. Apparently Karnataka has had to pay a heavy price in other sectors to earn global fame in the IT Sector.

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Some other economic data relating to the state is equally depressing. It occupies the fourteenth rank in the country in per hectare food grain output, one fourth of what Punjab produces and the lowest among the four Southern States. Notwithstanding all the hoopla about its technological miracle, in per capita gross industrial output Karnataka ranks sixth in the country. In per capita terms Gujarat produces three times as much industrial goods as Karnataka. Not surprisingly, its per capita consumption of domestic power, a sure indicator of living standards, is among the lowest in the country and the lowest in Southern India. In female employment in the work force, taken as a measure of poverty levels, Karnataka shares the top honours with Madhya Pradesh at around 33%.

What is the contribution of the New Maharajas, Rajas and their two million millionaire lackeys to the rise and fall of Karnataka, rise in the glittering arena of servicing the software needs of Western countries, chiefly America, and fall in the incomes of the fifty million common people in relation to their counterparts in other states? It stands to reason that if, despite the IT boom, the overall growth of the state has been slower than the national average and if, it has still spawned a "Super-state" of two million luxury loving rich people, it could do so only by apportioning them a larger slice of the common cake, leading to further deprivation of the masses. Karnataka has taken a conscious decision to continue this trend believing it to be the best model of growth to lift a backward state from the bullock cart to the jet age.

3

Is there an alternative?

In my humble opinion the best way to deal with this question is to consider an alternative model. The case of Punjab comes to mind. In 1947 when India was partitioned the part of Punjab that came to India's share was a poor cousin of the Western half which went to Pakistan. Its southern part was largely a dry desert – an extension of Rajasthan — and the rest low-yield agricultural hinterland. The flood of millions of refugees from Pakistan placed a heavy burden on this poor region. But soon, within a matter of a few years, things changed.

Out of nowhere, small workshops sprang up along the highways of the new state as a byproduct of the rehabilitation of such a large

population. The skills needed to build new townships and colonies were provided by the refugees. They included masons, drivers, mechanics, blacksmiths and craftsmen of all sorts. Women took to knitting woolens on a large scale to cope with the severe northern winter.

By 1955, when I toured the state extensively, the small roadside workshops were producing almost every thing, from needless to bicycle parts, tools, farm implements and even automobile parts, besides building construction equipment.

How did this miracle come about? Somewhere along the line between 1947 and 1955 these small technicians, working from loosely fabricated shacks, discovered that given an electric lathe and drilling and welding machines, you could make or fabricate almost anything under the Sun, even a motor car minus its engine.

Within a few more years these sturdy, semi-literate and grimy mechanics were making their own dies and die – casting machines as well as lathes, drills and welding equipment.

The list of items they produced with these basic tools in mind-boggling. They were perhaps the first in the country to replicate a variety of handy foreign gadgets whose import was banned to conserve foreign exchange. These included house-hold accessories like mixies, electric cookers, ovens and so on.

Soon they were making bicycles, sewing machines, farm threshers, Persian wheels, spindles and looms for the upcoming hosiery industry, small radio sets, fans and almost everything for which there existed a good demand.

Next came precision equipment like car dynamos whose rotor has to be calibrated with an accuracy which until then could only be achieved by highly sophisticated imported machines. These rustic sons of the soil, often sporting big beards, were able to accomplish the same result with their large oily hands which looked more like tiger paws.

Often the workshop was their home. They slept on large rope spun cots with their families outside their unit during summer and huddled inside it in winter. Their women worked with them while the children walked or bicycled long distances to attend school.

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MIRACLE 2. Simultaneously with this technology wave, another silent hosiery revolution was taking place during the same years in Punjab, concentrated mainly in Ludhiana, then the least significant among the cities of the state along the Grand Trunk road. If the small workshops could be classed as small industry, this new upsurge sprang up almost entirely as a cottage industry.

Starting purely as an answer to the need for cheap winter covering as the poor man's substitute for costly woolen textiles, within two decades it had made Ludhiana the hosiery capital of the world. Almost every single house in this sleepy city became a small factory making something or the other for this industry, be it knitting, spinning, weaving, making spindles, looms, dies and doing a hundred other jobs connected with this sector. The whole city became one giant assembly line of this gigantic enterprise, though each house was an independent unit without being controlled by any central authority of an industrialist or a government. Tucked away in a corner of fancy knitted sweaters, pullovers, jerseys babies' and women's dresses that people brought from America or Hong Kong as gifts for relatives in India was the label "Made in India", or "Made in Ludhiana". How this miracle was wrought in this small city and how it spread to the rest of Punjab is a long story.

While Ludhiana was thriving in hosiery the city of Jullunder took to producing sports goods for global needs. Amritsar plunged into carpets and textiles.

The saga is never ending.

Miracle 3. Again within the same period the small and medium farmer of Punjab increased his farm yields ten times by dint of hard labour, helped by timely supplies of inputs and finances by government agencies.

Its own food grain needs being limited, by the Nineteen Seventies Punjab had become the granary of India and Ludhiana one of the country's richest districts if not the richest.

By the Nineteen Seventies electricity and roads had reached every village in Punjab. Farming was mechanized throughout the state. What with the roar of tractors and rice mills, big and small, and humming of winnowing and thrashing machines, among others,

the whole countryside of the state resembled a factory. Instead of bullock carts tractor-trailors became the principal mode of transport of goods and people in rural Punjab.

Miracle 4. In accomplishing this economic miracle Punjab was not alone. An altogether different model of growth was taking shape, with great success, in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Quite suddenly the two states of Western India found themselves wafted on the high tide a cooperative movement the like of which had never been seen in the world. The two states together looked like a giant cooperative conglomerate. The cooperative sector soared to heights of achievement in practically every sector of rural activity. Unlike Punjab the peasant here was too poor, illiterate and unskilled to act on his own steam like his counterpart in the Northern state. But he had one gift which was unique in the country. He could 'cooperate' and submit to the discipline of collective interest of the community.

The result was that one by one all spheres of rural production and distribution came under the sweep of cooperatives. Gujarat began with milk, the mainstay of the poorest members of the community, the shepherd and small farmer. Then it went on to cover cotton, oilseeds and sugar, besides banking and credit.

Likewise, the cooperative movement in Maharashtra concentrated on sugar to begin with and, within a short period, from being a virtual non-producer, the State emerged as the country's largest producer of sugar, depriving UP of the title. Simultaneously it took over cotton in which again miracles were achieved.

Any student of the growth of Indian economy during the past fifty years will agree that if Maharashtra and Gujarat are among the four front-line states it is entirely because of their cooperative miracle.

But perhaps one of the biggest achievement of Maharashtra was the success of its irrigation cooperatives. It was something unheard of in the text books of any ideology that the proud small land-owner would willingly surrender his traditional claims on irrigation water in the common interest. Yet they did it, practicing great honesty and tolerance among themselves, since it is impossible for any outside agency to superwise such a widely distributed network from field to field. Under this system, called "bara-bari", the farmer at the head

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of a water channel got the same share as the man at its tail. Great was the enthusiasm of Maharashtrian peasantry to act collectively during the period.

During a tour of the country in the famine year 1964-65. I was thrilled to find in a hilly village in Yeotmal district, men women and children, old and young, carrying water from a stream in pitchers and even in cooking pans and bowls to water small vegetable plots of their village, a rough climb of over one hundred feet, in the night in dim lantern light.

Leaders of the state had plunged themselves into the movement with gusto. During the same tour I met V.P. Naik, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, in Nagpur. In the midst of severe drought he was bursting with confidence. "Hang me if I fail. I promise you that within two years I shall make Maharashtra fully self-sufficient in foodgrains." Sure enough he succeeded, because the entire peasantry was behind him.

A few years later while India was still in the throes of a severe food crisis, I asked the veteran socialist leader, Asoka Mehta, who was then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, why the miracle of Maharashtra and Gujarat could not be replicated in backward U.P. and Bihar. He replied, "my friend, I have wasted half my political career trying to inculcate the cooperative spirit among the peasantry in East UP and Bihar. I must confess I have failed miserably. You can transplant a system from one place to another but not the spirit that drives it."

4

The two models of growth explained above present a complete contrast to the latest model adopted by Karnataka. It is this author's confirmed view that if the Bangalorean model spreads throughout India, which seems very likely from the Central government's plan to create Special Economic Zones, it will be a national disaster.

The reasons are obvious :

- 1. While it professes to be working for the 'greatest good of the greatest number' of people, our government's SEZ scheme is clearly directed at serving the greatest good of the smallest number. The direct result of such***

policies pursued world-wide by the rulers of the day is that half the total wealth of the six billion people on planet earth is owned by less than three hundred individuals. The SEZs are clearly aimed at concentrating national wealth in a few hands through the tried and tested mechanism of the stock market and real estate.

Not even ten percent of the big boom in the IT industry can be attributed to its own efforts by way of production and sales. Most of it is public money illegitimately pumped into the industry via the stock market by manipulating government's financing policies. These malpractices include the printing of paper currency, which pushes up prices of goods of the common man's daily use, and acquiring and gifting away to the IT tycoons poor farmers' fields at a hundredth, and at times a thousandth, of the price the beneficiaries reap by converting the landholdings into real estate.

2. As can be clearly seen from the falling figures of the organised sector's workforce during the last few years, such diversions of most of the nation's productive capital only leads to negative employment, that is, increased unemployment.
3. The alternative models of Punjab, Maharashtra and Gujarat presented by me involve the entire population of these states, not just a band of engineers, most of whom are from outside the state and not sons of the soil.
4. In the earlier models growth begins from below. Its first beneficiaries are the poorest class of small farmers, shepherds, unskilled and semi-skilled technicians and a whole variety of odd jobs men. There is hardly any one in the rural and semi-urban population of the covered area, which includes almost the entire state, who does not derive direct benefit from it.
5. The hub of activity in the Punjab-Gujarat-Maharashtra models is the village. Almost every village or cluster of villages has a center where people gather, discuss plans and problems, organise innovations in the development of their human resources through schools, medical

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facilities and cheap entertainment. Small road-side markets spring up, some of which later grow into big bazaars. The list is endless.

6. All this happens through local initiative and investment without involving the government or financial institutions.
7. In this model income always exceeds investment. One does not sink massive amounts of public money in the elusive hope of long term returns.
8. ***Lo and behold! Miracle of Miracles! All this spectacular growth in Punjab, Gujarat has Maharashtra has been achieved without involving a single MBA, IITian or American trained scientist. It is India's good fortune that this new class of greedy Americanized Indians was not born when this silent revolution was taking place. On a modest estimate a member of this new elite group would require one hundred to one thousand times the wage packet of the rustic professional of the country-bred revolution conceived, manned and directed entirely by sons of the soil, in contrast with the Bangalore model which is an exclusive enterprise of, by and for the Western companies and their chosen Indian protégés. Add to it the thousands of crores squandered on the training of this elite class.***

While these heaven-born supermen draw unconscionable salaries in millions a year, experienced post graduate college lecturers can still be hired in the city of Bangalore on nine –month contracts of Rs.3000 to Rs.5000 per month.

Dear reader, please compare this with the pay package of One crore and twelve lakh rupees per annum, that is nearly ten lakh rupees per month, offered this year to a fresh IIM graduate at the time of leaving college. To the "FREE MARKET" economy, which guides our destinies, his worth is three hundred times that of a learned professor.

At this rate, if of two brothers with the same background one joins an IIM and the other opts for teaching in a college, the latter

will have to slog for his entire working career of thirty years, till retirement, to earn what his brother will rake in within the first month of leaving the management institute. So now we know the true meanings of the magic words "FREE ENTERPRISE".

If this does not prick your conscience nothing ever will. And if you have tears of shame to shed over the tragic devaluation and demise of true learning and scholarship in this country, and indeed of the entire gamut of basic human values, you can shed them now.

Also, according to published reports, the same "FREE MARKET" allows a mere actor to walk away with a pay packet of two crores and thirty-three lakh rupees as his wage for anchoring a single episode of an hour-long TV programme, making a total earning of two hundred and eighty seven crores for just 120 episodes.

9. *The indigenous models cited here require very little or no investment on infrastructure by way modern international airports, five-star hotels, luxury cars and buses, six-lane highways, fly-overs, grand shopping malls, casinos, night-clubs, sex-parlours and all the other paraphernalia needed to build a mini-America in India, entirely at the expense of the poor peasant and small man of the cities, who is thereby squeezed into further poverty. No MacDonalds' burgers or Coca Cola to cheer the workers!*
10. These models do not require the creation of a 'super-state' of Maharajas and Rajas and their millions of millionaire minions.
11. They check large-scale migration of people from villages to the cities by bringing prosperity directly to the villager in his home.
12. Perhaps one of the most serious arguments against the Bangalore model is that its benefits accrue almost entirely to Western countries through their multi-nationals. India gets nothing from it except a handful of jobs for a specially recruited class of Westernized Indian cronies of these companies. Instead, the country pays heavy

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financial and social costs by creating a wasteful infrastructure for this new class, in gross violation of the egalitarian social objectives with which all Indians fought shoulder to shoulder for the nation's freedom.

13. The indigenous systems leave no room for capitalist tycoons to siphon off the benefits as their private loot.
14. ***In short, the protagonists of the Bangalore model who champion the so-called 'free-market' revolution, refuse to accept that India belongs equally to all Indians. They are hell-bent upon creating two Indias, one of the rich consisting of no more than ten percent of the population, and the other of the remaining ninety percent poor, most of whom must necessarily lead a life of semi-starvation and unemployment, and bear all the indignities and dehumanization that go with it.***

5

The spectacular achievements of the Punjab-Gujarat-Maharashtra experiments have been deliberately pushed under the carpet by both the Right and the Left in this country because small and cottage industry and the cooperative system do not fit the rule book of either of them. The Western champions of globalisation and their Indian stooges are out to wipe out all grass-roots activity, in any sector whatsoever—from retail to big marketing to distribution to production—and reduce the poor man to the status of an unemployed beggar. Any commonsense look at the economy can prove this point.

Except in West Bengal, the left tends to concentrate on trade unions which do not cover even one percent of the country's work force of four hundred and fifty million. They end up by pampering the creamy layer of teachers, bank clerks and the like who would think nothing of spending Rs ten lakhs on a daughter's dowry.

The vacuum created by this high neglect is an open invitation to the Naxalites to fill it. Already they are believed to be calling the shots in more than a third of the country. Citigroup Inc, an international financial services company with some 200 million customers in more than 100 countries, has said in its report on 'India

in 2007' that the Naxalite movement "has spread to 165 districts in 14 states covering close to 40 per cent of the country's geographical area and affecting 35 per cent of the population".

Ridiculing our tall claims to super-power status, Cait Murphy, Assistant Managing Editor of 'FORTUNE' magazine describes India as the "world leader in hunger, stunting and HIV" since "half the world's hungry live in India."

Quoting UN statistics she writes:

- ***47 percent of Indian children under the age of five are either malnourished or stunted.***
- ***The adult literacy rate is 61 percent (behind Rwanda and barely ahead of Sudan). Even this is probably overstated, as people are deemed literate who can do little more than sign their name.***
- ***Only 10 percent of the entire Indian labor force works in the formal economy; of these fewer than half are in the private sector.***
- ***The enrollment of six-to-15-year-olds in school has actually declined in the last year. About 40 million children who are supposed to be in school are not.***
- ***About a fifth of the population is chronically hungry; about half of the world's hungry live in India.***
- ***More than a quarter of the India population lives on less than a dollar a day.***
- ***India has more people with HIV than any other country.***

The 'FORTUNE' article further points out that the 2006 UN Human Development Report, which ranks countries according to a variety of measures of human health and welfare, placed India 126th out of 177 countries.

In the midst of the euphoria over their feigned achievements our leaders should take time off to study how the world looks at us.

Clearly, no society or government has the right to call itself "Civilized", if it permits the manufacture, sale and consumption of luxury items of life of any description, and in any manner, within its

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territory, until the minimum needs of the whole population for food, water, shelter, medicine and education are met and there is no case of starvation and malnutrition, more particularly among children. In a just dispensation every citizen should receive his equitable share in the total resources of the nation. No extenuating circumstances can be cited to defend violation of this cardinal principle of social justice.

That the poorest country in the world, with half its population of over a billion living at near starvation level, should flaunt the largest number of billionaires in Asia, including two trillionaires, is an eloquent testimony to the spurious quality of Indian democracy. It throws open the question whether democracy, as we have practiced it over the last sixty years, can ever represent the wishes and aspirations of our people.

Says New York's WALL STREET JOURNAL in a front page article by Peter Wonacott:

"Few countries, however, can match India's numbers (of criminals in Parliament and state assemblies). Following the 2004 election, almost a quarter of the 535 elected members of India's national parliament have criminal charges registered against them or pending in court, according to the Public Affairs Center, an Indian elections watchdog. Half of those with charges pending against them face prison terms of at least five years if convicted..."

"Prior to the elections (in UP), slightly more than half of the 403 legislative assembly members, faced criminal charges. In the first six phases of the elections, there were 48 constituencies offering four or more candidates with criminal cases pending against them..."

"Many of India's legislators in legal trouble faced criminal charges well before their political careers began, according to I.C. Dwivedi, former director of police for Uttar Pradesh and now the state's head of Election Watch, an NGO. "They were criminals first and politicians later," he says"...

"Last year, the Congress Party lost a key ally, Coal Minister Shibu Soren from the regional Jharkhand Mukti Morcha party, who was convicted of the 1994 kidnapping and murder of his former personal secretary"....

The World Bank, which has approved about \$3 billion in loans for Indian projects, is among the increasingly anxious foreign backers. "It is easy to be optimistic about India's economic prospects," the bank stated in a 2006 India Development Policy Review. "But there is growing concern that the basic institutions, organization and structure for public sector action are failing — especially for those at the bottom..."

"The latest family health survey, conducted by India's Ministry of Health, showed child malnutrition levels even higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the survey, 46% of children under 3 in India are underweight. (Unicef figures show that 28% of Sub-Saharan children under 5 are underweight.) Anemia, linked to poor nutrition, is prevalent in 79% of India's children aged 6-35 months, up from 74% seven years ago..."

It is a sad reflection on the myopic state of India's rulers, intellectuals and politicians that even from so close they cannot read the writing on the wall. Umpteen instances can be cited, besides the riots in Bangalore triggered by actor Raj Kumar's death, to show that people's patience is running out. The flash point may be reached any time when they may be forced to take things in their own hands. In large parts of the country we are sitting on a tinder box that can blow up any moment. But, blinded by the razzle-dazzle of the "Market", we see it not.

"Seeds of Despair"

In a study of the Indian Economy, titled "Seeds of Despair", by Simon Robinson, the American magazine TIME says:

"The income disparity in the new India is massive: there are now 36 billionaires in India---and some 800 million people living on less than \$2 a day. In the most desperate pockets of rural India, a confluence of factors, from poor rainfall to the new availability of consumer goods, has driven some farmers into crushing debt.

"The financial hardships are so extreme that thousands commit suicide every year. Far from benefiting from the country's new prosperity, whole villages of India's rural poor are being left adrift, eager to join in the boom but unable to afford it.- - - More than 1,250 farmers committed suicide in Vidarbha's six central districts

Afterword - The New Maharajas

alone in 2006, up from 248 in 2004."

One can safely assert without fear of contradiction that in the prevalence of inequality between the rich and poor, by any yardstick India not only tops the list, it has practically no rivals, so wide is the gap between the two classes. This unique distinction for the land of Gandhi, the 'naked fakir', is in part the legacy of our deeply embedded caste system which gives us a divine license to be insensitive to the sufferings of the poor ('castes') whom, so the average Hindu seems to believe, God has made as substitutes for animals to carry the proverbial beast's burden for the upper castes.

Or else how can one explain the disappearance, at the hands of professional kidnapers, of nearly 2,500 children of the poor from Bangalore streets every year, and every body sleeping over it as if nothing had happened?

The poor parents have to run from pillar to post and move heaven and hell to persuade the almighty city police to condescend to merely record the case of a lost child in their register. Its being pursued and investigated is out of the question.

By contrast, take the recent case of a top executive of Abode, a software multi-national company, in Delhi. The kidnapping of his eight-year-old son became an international media sensation, a prestige issue for the government. Official money in lakhs of rupees was spent by the Centre, UP and Delhi to trace the child who was ultimately recovered after his father had coughed up Rs.50 lakhs to the kidnapers.

*In its report on the kidnappings **THE TIMES OF INDIA** said quoting a source "we only hope there is not a repeat in Karnataka of the gruesome Nithari" (a Delhi suburb where children were butchered to satisfy the appetite of a few gentlemen cannibals for human flesh).*

The only parallel I can think of to such callous indifference towards the anguish of the poor, which has been a typical feature of our Aryan culture for thousands of years, is the treatment of the Black African slaves in America before Abraham Lincoln----one of the greatest men of all times----abolished slavery in that land.

M.B. LAL

Press comments on the Author's last book
'Through The Eagle's Eye'

THE HINDU
'On a flight of fancy'
(Extracts)

M.B. Lal's brand new book, "Through The Eagle's Eye", offers a fresh perspective into men's innate fixation with violence through the ages.

This surely is not a book that you think of writing in one day. Simply because not often do you find a topic that has the authority to amuse a reader with a rationale. Particularly those who have always nurtured a liking for topics touching philosophy.

Former journalist-turned-writer, M.B. Lal's book, "Through The Eagle's Eye" is much slimmer than his earlier tome, "Manikpur Junction" but has a real interesting perspective to offer when it comes to talking of man and his ways of life.

Importantly, it dabbles with the subject of man's innate fixation with violence through the ages, something that is worth sparing a thought in this century of aggression. - - - -

And then, there are issues of consistencies, the constant in a man's life throughout civilisations despite the changes.

And herein, Lal's book has something fresh to offer. He talks of violence and bloodshed as not just a factor distinctive only in our century but in all centuries.

"Violence has always been a human nature," he declares. Using The Ramayana as a floorboard for his arguments in the story, he emphasises the character of Hanuman in the epic. "My point is, in conceiving Hanuman, was Valmiki looking for a peace loving species as an alternative to war crazy man?" he says. - - - -

THE TELEGRAPH

Through the Eagle's Eye by M.B. Lal has all the ingredients for a perfect fairytale. Mary and her boyfriend, Nakul, embark on a strange mission — to discover the secret code with the help of which the

residents of a particular colony communicate with birds and animals. The two lovers choose an even stranger carrier, an eagle-flown aerial chariot under the command of an ape. This unusual tryst includes visits to “mile-deep craters, forbidden terraces and even the viceroy’s palace”, all for the sake of breaking the secret code. However, Lal’s claim that his work is meant not only for the young but the old as well is quite fantastic, just like some of the events described in the book.

THE TRIBUNE

Fairy tales fascinate us all — books have immortalized such classic fairy tales as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Puss in Boots* etc. Lal has come up with a highly readable fairy tale set in the once idyllic vale of Kashmir. In this story, Mary is both fascinated and intrigued by the locals’ ability to communicate with birds and animals. She and Nakul decide to find out the secret code that facilitates such communication. They are helped by divine beings and birds taking them on a journey that’s absolutely fascinating. Kids are going to love this book.

At another level, Lal explains in the prologue, this book is an interpretation of Valmiki’s fascination with the human mind. He makes an interesting proposition, viz., Valmiki created the half-ape-half-man race of Vanaras because he was disillusioned with man. Lal avers that successive interpretations by Tulsidas etc concentrated on the Ramayana’s devotional aspect, ignoring its philosophical- visionary content. He buttresses his argument by quoting parables. Over to the scholars.

THE STATESMAN

This book describes the adventures of Mary and Nakul as they travel in an eagle-flown aerial chariot commanded by an ape. It’s an exotic journey, and one which has never been undertaken by anyone ever before. While children will enjoy this story for its thrills, adults will take it as an illustration of how language has shaped our thoughts to create the atmosphere of hatred and violence that surrounds us.