

VINEET BAJPAI
HARAPPA
CURSE OF THE BLOOD RIVER



PROLOGUE

1700 BCE

He was the only human for miles. He could hardly see in the dark of that unusually fearsome, stormy night. Especially with the heavy trickle of his blood, tears and sweat mixed with the muddy waters of the unseasonal, torrential rain blurring his vision. In the pitch-black night the bald, bare-chested Brahmin struck with his axe back and forth at a feverish yet futile pace. He was attempting to cut at least one of the thick jute ropes that bound one pillar of the freshly built, man-made mountain of brick and bronze. Although made with the objective of diverting the course of a river, the enormous mound of stone, brick, metal and wooden blocks appeared threatening enough to alter the assault of even the bold tsunamis of a rogue sea. But then the river un-

der question was no less than the mighty oceans themselves.

Muttering to himself under the roar of the downpour, like a man possessed, he used every ounce of strength from his body hardened by years of penance and Vedic discipline. He pounded the cable-like rope furiously even as his fingers splayed and started to bleed. When he couldn't breathe anymore he threw his head back and looked up once to let the heavy raindrops slap his face angrily. With the unsympathetic water washing the red mud off his eyelids, he let out a ghastly, sky-piercing scream. It was perhaps an attempt by his recently blackened soul to make the Gods hear his indescribable angst. But he knew it was too late. The Gods were horrified at his deeds and would not forgive him. Or anyone.

He started cutting the rope with his short axe again, more menacingly than before. He knew he had been trying to cut one coupling knot for over an hour now. The ropes were specially made, upon his own instructions. He knew there were 998 more brick, bronze and stone pillars held together by thousands of similar rope-knots that forged the unbreakable mount. And that it would take weeks to disassemble it if a thousand men worked day and night. The 999 strategically engineered and reinforced pillars were built as per his own careful architectural and astrologic guidelines. *What was he doing? Had he gone mad?* He knew he could not undo the giant mound even one bit. And yet he fired away his axe incessantly, hopelessly.

A solitary figure in the lonely miles of empty land ravaged by a mid-night cloudburst, Vivasvan Pujari, a man worshipped for decades as a *devta* (half-human, half-God), revered as the

Sun of Harappa, looked liked a ghost. He felt extreme pain and a sinking regret at the sinister consequence he knew could not be averted. He kept weeping, kept mumbling and kept chopping away. And then he heard it.

It had begun.

The ominous rumble of the mighty river gushing into an unnatural course, somewhere distant but not too far, made his blood curdle. The once generous, loving and nurturing Mother River had incarnated into a thirsty *Rakt-Dhaara* (Blood River) lunging towards devouring her very own children. The *River of the Wise* was betrayed by one of her favorite sons. She was betrayed by her devta son, Vivasvan Pujari.

The once righteous and indomitable Vivasvan Pujari let the axe slip from his hand and it fell on the slushy mud with a wet thud. He stood frozen gazing towards the direction he knew his now-manic Mother would appear in her demonic form. He knew it then. He knew he was going to be the first blood at her altar. Suddenly, he wanted it that way.

He slowly felt a sense of ease and relief spreading within him. He felt hope. Maybe his Mother would claw out his life but spare the millions of others. He dropped to his knees, stretched out arms in submission by his sides and opened his palms. The rain washed his taut and wounded body as if finally helping him cleanse his badly knotted conscience. As if pitying Vivasvan Pujari and offering him his last bath.

“Take my life, O mighty Mother! I have earned your wrath. And I submit myself to thee!”, he yelled out as the night sky lit-up with an angry clap of thunder. It was as if the Gods were reject-

ing this fallen devta's plea.

He screamed again, this time his voice splitting with desperation and heavy sobbing, *"Do you not listen to your crestfallen son, O mighty Mother?! Take my life but forgive the others! They have not sinned as your son has. Take me!!!"*

The sky lit up again. It was nearly daylight for a few moments. The silent lightning flashed on Vivasvan Pujari's bleeding, sweating and deranged face. And then it followed. The delayed noise of the thunder was as loud as an exploding sun.

The Gods were saying NO!

Vivasvan Pujari felt a powerful gust of wind on his face as he saw the giant water-mountain appear from the corner of the far mound, turning directly towards the path where he sat crumbled on his knees. It looked like an enormous hydra dragon turning its head towards its prey. The din of the river was louder than the thunder that roared a few moments ago. Vivasvan Pujari sat there dazed, as he looked up at the mountain-high torrent casting a looming shadow even in the darkness. He appeared as small as an ant would in front of Mount Sumeru, as the sky-high tsunami of his Mother River was all but a few moments away from engulfing him.

Vivasvan Pujari had faltered in the last few days. He lost the glory of a lifetime in a few days of the blinding revenge he sought. But he was Vivasvan Pujari. A devta! Like all men of advanced *yogic* learning, he instantly summoned and centered his soul within his *kundalini*, he froze his heartbeat and prepared his mortal body for death. Even as he did that and was getting swept off the ground with the force of the invading

water, he whispered a calm, last prayer.

“Mother, forgive them. Don’t let them perish for my sins. Forgive them, Mother!”

The devastating river swallowed the devta Vivasvan Pujari like a mammoth tornado erases the existence of a dry twig. The Gods, the murderous blood-river, the dark night, the thunder of *Indra* (the God of lightning and storm), the vast expanse of land and the merciless rain stood witness to the end of the greatest man of his time. But the death of Vivasvan Pujari was not going to be the end of his impact on this planet. It was the beginning. He was going to live on in hatred, deceit, conspiracy and violent conflicts for thousands of years. He would haunt not just Aryavarta but the whole world with never-ending bloodshed and killing in the name of the very Gods that abandoned him. Even his death would not liberate him or human kind from the curse.

She maintained her unrelenting course. Despite Vivasvan Pujari’s dying plea, the blood-river was not going to forgive them.

The *Saraswati* was going to devour the mighty city of Harappa, along with every last one of its inhabitants.



Delhi, 2017

VIDYUT

The mobile phone wouldn't stop ringing. Both Vidyut and Damini were in deep sleep and neither of them had the energy to get up and take the call. It was 4.30 am. The phone continued to ring incessantly. Damini shook Vidyut slowly.

'Vidyut...get up *na*. Its your phone.'

'Hmm...' mumbled Vidyut.

'*Arey* get up *please*,' Damini insisted with her eyes still closed.

Vidyut reached out for his phone, his hand groping for it on the bedside table.

'Who calls at such a God forsaken hour man?! Hello...!'

Vidyut nearly barked into the phone as he took the call.

There was silence in the room. Vidyut sat up on the bed and was listening to whoever was on the other side of the call very intently. His muscular body appeared as tense as his brow.

‘All okay, baby?’ enquired Damini.

Vidyut squeezed her wrist gently, indicating that he wanted complete silence. Damini knew Vidyut well. She opened her eyes and looked at Vidyut holding the phone tightly against his ear, teeth clenched, eyes shut in concentration.

‘But Purohit ji, why didn’t you tell me sooner?’ said Vidyut to the person on the phone. Damini had no idea who Purohit ji was and why Vidyut looked so anxious suddenly. She got up on her elbow as she listened carefully.

‘How much time does he have, Purohit ji?’ asked Vidyut pensively. After a few seconds pause he said, ‘I’ll be there by this evening.’



Vidyut hung-up the phone and rested his head on the bed’s backrest, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. His well built chest, arms and shoulders combined with the rare glow of his fair skin gave him the appearance of royalty, of an august lineage. His long, light-brown hair complimented his chiseled features and penetrating eyes well. Vidyut looked every bit his name – *vidyut* or electricity! But there was infinitely more

to his persona than just his Greek-God looks.

Damini knew she loved a strange and strong man, and while she never spoke about it to him, somewhere deep down she hoped to get married to him one day. She knew Vidyut was different from all the other boys and men she had met at the premier Hansraj College of the north campus of Delhi University, and the world in general. Apart from her deep and secret delight of *owning* this man who was pleasantly complexioned, well built, with deep-brown eyes like those of a Biblical conqueror and the intense facial expression of a man born to lead the world, she was convinced that Vidyut was uncommonly gifted. And he was. Vidyut was an inferno of talent, skill, spirituality and ambition. He was an entrepreneur par excellence at his young age of 34. He was a musician, a poet, a writer, a painter, a martial artist, a party-maker and a natural leader of men. His friends lovingly called him Video. What worried Damini sometimes was the kind of friends he had.

‘Baby you okay?’ she enquired gently after a minute. ‘Who is this Purohit ji and where do you have to be by this evening?’

‘Varanasi. Or Kashi or Banaras...as most people call it,’ replied Vidyut, still gazing at the ceiling.

‘Why Banaras, love? Out of the blue...?’

‘Not really out of the blue, Damini...but I wasn’t expecting to be called like this. I was supposed to *never* return to Kashi.’

There was silence in the room. Damini listened with disbelief at the mysterious and disconnected statements Vidyut was speaking in. It wasn’t like him. And it wasn’t like her

assertive journalist self to keep waiting till eternity for the answers she wanted quickly. She sat up fully attentive, tied her hair swiftly in a bun while holding a hairpin between her teeth like only beautiful and confident women do, and fired her questions, politely yet firmly.

‘Kashi? You mean Banaras...or Varanasi...or whatever! Why do you have to go there, baby? What were you not expecting? And for God’s sake...why were you to *never* return to that place? And what do you mean return? When were you there in the first place? And how on earth have we never spoken about all this? Can you please tell me everything?’ Damini was now as curious as she was edgy.

Vidyut turned to look at her, as if noticing her presence for the first time since his phone rang.

‘We have not spoken about it because it was not important. Kashi was a closed chapter for me. For years when I tried to claw my way back there, I was prohibited from doing so. And now when I have learnt to live without the phantoms of the past, they give me a call?!’ said Vidyut with a laugh of disbelief.

Before Damini could organize her thoughts, Vidyut sprang up from the bed and walked to his wardrobe. He took out a cigarette box and lit a cigarette. Now Damini was really nervous. It was after nine months that Vidyut had put a cigarette to his lips. And it was now she knew something was really not right. Her eyes silently followed Vidyut as he walked out to the balcony of his sprawling penthouse in tony Gurgaon where she lived with him. She quietly followed and stood next to him leaning against the railing of the balcony. She

wore a very light and short negligee that accentuated her slim and attractive figure. Damini was as beautiful physically as she was intelligent. She did not utter a word. Vidyut was in a trance. And for the first time since she knew him, Vidyut looked afraid. Of what, she knew not.



Kashi is the holiest city in Hinduism, perhaps the most ancient religion and way-of-life on Earth. Originally called both Kashi and Varanasi, as hundreds and thousands of years passed the name changed first to *Baraansi* and then to Banaras under the influence of Pali literature. Hindu mythological scriptures have it that when the great floods destroy the whole world in the final judgment-day deluge called *pralaya*, Lord Shiva Himself will protect the city of Kashi by raising it on the tip of his mighty trident or *trishul*. A city that has seen over 10,000 winters, Varanasi is said to be home to some of the greatest occult practitioners and powers of this world, *and all others*. It is also the keeper of the planet's most sinister secrets.

It was a 90-minute flight from New Delhi to Varanasi. Vidyut was going to take the 3 pm flight so as to be with Purohit ji by 6 pm. He had a devoted set of friends and colleagues who took care of everything for him. And vice versa. Vidyut and his core team operated like one single organism that needed very little conversation among them. Most things got done with the exchange of a glance or two words on a phone text. Vidyut's dear friend Bala, short for Balakrishnan, was his closest confidante and perhaps the only man Vidyut fully

trusted. Bala was not only Vidyut's next in command at the company, he was also Vidyut's best friend. He was ex-military, a highly decorated army officer during his short service commission. Bala could crack complex financial models with the same ease with which he could bust the ribs of an opponent in unarmed combat. And he worshipped Vidyut. He loved Vidyut.

Vidyut ran a corporate security company that protected its large multinational clients against technology-based competitive espionage. Vidyut launched his company as a small start-up, which was now among the leading industrial security companies in India. The success of his company made Vidyut a very sought-after man, and gave him access to the movers and shakers of corporate India. Powerful politicians, who perhaps needed more technology-based security than even business houses, swiftly noticed the use of his company's products and services. Vidyut was soon a speed-dial for many of them. They took pride in having Vidyut at their social lunches and garden dinners. At a very young age Vidyut was a very influential man. But for people who knew his lineage, for people like Purohit ji, this came as no surprise. Vidyut was no ordinary man. He wasn't supposed to be one.



Wearing a casual grey t-shirt and blue jeans, Vidyut looked much younger than he actually was. He was packing light, just for a day or two. Damini was worried about all that was happening, but maintained a brave and smiling face. Vidyut

looked at her every now and then, and flashed his disarming smile or winked at her playfully. He wanted to comfort her and show her that everything was normal. They both knew it wasn't.

After he was done with the quick packing, Vidyut paused for a while and stood staring out of the window. By this time Bala had entered the house and made himself comfortable with a carton of coconut water from the fridge. He sat on one of the dining chairs and sipped at his sweet coconut water silently. Both Vidyut and Damini were used to Bala's presence in their home, and they loved it. He was family.

Vidyut noticed Bala.

'Hi Bala.'

'Hey Video'.

'Whassup man? *Khaana khaaya?* Had lunch?' enquired Vidyut.

'Yea yea... ' Bala responded without looking at his friend. This was enough show of affection for the day. But it meant the world to Vidyut.

What happened next was something Damini dreaded and couldn't imagine happening. Vidyut walked to the safe in his study and pulled out the *maha-panchaanng* – the Hindu or *Sa-natana* calendar and planner. Damini froze with fear and her mouth went dry. The last time Vidyut had taken out this advanced *panchaanng* was his life's worst day. It was the day he had lost his beloved mother! Despite his modern clothing and appearance, despite his flashy cars and his technology company - Vidyut was an expert practitioner of Vedic as-

trology. He could read the *kundalis* (horoscopes) of people with the same prowess with which he often scanned through software codes.



Damini protested by covering her open mouth with both her hands and by allowing an expression of horror to envelope her face. Vidyut noticed it but made no effort to comfort her. He seemed to be in a trance again. He spread the *panchaanng* out on the dining table next to where Bala sat, chanted a silent Sanskrit mantra in his mouth and leaned over the large chart. His *panchaanng* was more detailed than the regular thing available in the market. Every year his dear friend Gopal from a Hindu monastery in the Himalayas sent him this authentic *panchaanng*. It was the real deal. It could be interpreted, studied and put to use only by the grandmasters of Vedic astrology. Vidyut was one of them. And Gopal was among the many friends of Vidyut that mystified Damini.

Bala could see the panic on Damini's face and the tears welling up in her eyes. He put his hand on Vidyut's and asked softly yet firmly, 'What are you doing man? Why do you need *this* now?'

Vidyut did not respond. Damini could not take it any more. She ran to Vidyut's side, held him tightly by his arm and pulled him to face her.

'What are you doing, baby?' she yelled at him, her voice ready to burst into a sob.

There was momentary irritation in Vidyut at being disturbed like this, but he quickly regained his composure. He realized that an explanation was now overdue. He had been behaving strangely ever since he took Purohit ji's call, and his love for Damini demanded that he shares everything with her. Or *almost* everything.

'Come here baby,' said Vidyut as he affectionately pulled Damini by her arm and made her sit on a couch close to the dining table. 'I can tell you what is important in two minutes, or try and tell you everything in the greatest detail. But for that even two days will fall short,' he continued.

Damini just stared lovingly at Vidyut, her eyes wet and her beautiful face slightly contorted as she tried very hard to hold back a barrage of tears.

'Even if I tell you everything Damini, you will not be able to believe it. You will probably think Vidyut has lost it. You will probably want me to meet a psychiatric consultant, if you don't want me to contact one already!' Vidyut laughed meekly as he tried to add some humor to the tense situation – in vain. Damini kept staring at him with the same disbelief and fear.

'Baby just tell me what is going on. Your woman is a strong woman. She can handle it,' said Damini as matter-of-factly as possible. 'I didn't want to push you till now, but I know you so well. You would never pull out the *panchaanng* if something was not seriously out of place.'

Vidyut was silent for a moment. He then took Damini's soft and artistic fingers in his hands and sat down on his knees

on the floor in front of the sofa she sat on. He looked at her with a charming tilt of his head and a genuine smile, this time for real. He kissed her hands and said simply, ‘Damini, *I am half-human, half-God.*’