

The Curse of Anuganga

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PROLOGUE

376 CE

It was the end of a warm, humid day in Kotivarsha, a small village near the splendid city of Pataliputra. The sun was beginning to set, and darkness had begun to descend upon all the houses. Diyas were being lit in front of homesteads in a bid to keep the supernatural away by the grace of Lord Vasudeva and Maharajadhiraja Chandragupta. Prayers and piety were found here in plenty, as the pious, knowledgeable residents went about the business of life.

At the door of a small hut, facing the long road towards Pataliputra, stood an old lady and a young girl, not more than ten years old. They were looking out onto the road, onto the village gates, which had still not been shut. They were probably waiting for someone — a father, a son, engaged in muted conversation. Presumably, the conversation was about the day that had been or even about the person awaited, or just banal chatter.

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Nightfall was soon to herald its arrival in a grand manner: one would not be able to see a thing – but for the dim light and the hovering fireflies and tiny insects.

For now, however, to an observer's eye, it was not so. Only remnants of a day, that was soon turning into night, remained.

It was then that the unnatural silence was broken. There was some movement on the road to Pataliputra — at a distance. All conversation came to a halt. The old lady and the little girl looked up alert, wondering what the chaos was about. At a distance rose some dust, or was it smoke? Unused to any commotion at dusk time, people from the other huts in that lane also stirred and came outside. This was an unusual occurrence and guessing from the expression on the old lady's face, it was clear that this was unexpected. This was not what they had been waiting for.

Two men on horseback were hurrying towards Pataliputra. Were they spies or soldiers? As they came closer to the observers, a collective gasp went up in the air. Was it him that was being dragged? But he is a good man! Why? A harried, helpless man was being dragged, his arms tied to the two riders astride. As they galloped at top speed, the man screamed and shouted; his voice, feeble and wracked with pain, rage and frustration.

“Lord Vasudeva will never forgive you! Anuganga will never forgive you! You shall pay for this grave injustice. Fear your karma; think of your children. You will pay. Some day. This is a dying, innocent man's curse on all of you...”

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The curse, loud and clear, echoed in the air as nightfall descended upon the tiny hamlet, sending an eerie chill down the spine of the spectators.

The horseback riders and the protesting man were soon gone. The *Amavasya* night was to be remembered for a very long time.





CHAPTER 1

403 CE

Summer had been harsh and unrelenting in its spread and showed no remorse or even any signs of abating. Yes, there had been the rains in the month of *Ashadha*, pouring and sparking some life into the parched, hapless beings, providing a brief respite — but that was just that — a short break, fleeting and ephemeral.

As this particular morning of *Shukla Saptami* in the month of *Bhadra* dawned on the township of Nandivardhana, the heat was back — sticky, muggy, unpleasant and utterly insufferable. Ah! but this did not deter the natives of Nandivardhana; there was palpable excitement in the air, for Rani Prabhavatigupta, the queen, was to return from her journey to Pataliputra to visit her beloved father, Maharajadhiraja Chandragupta II that day.

There were many rumours about a major announcement that the Rani was to make — throwing

open much speculation of impending celebrations. It was said that she would be accompanied by a large entourage. Why, even Kalidasa was said to be one among the retinue. The *Mahakavi* was visiting Nandivardhana after a decade, perhaps, or was it more than that? He had come once before with the great king Maharajadhiraja Chandragupta. What a heart-rending visit that was. Maharaja Rudrasena II had just passed away leaving the young Queen bereft and alone — to bring up the two boys and handle the kingdom. But for the Maharajadhiraja and his wise counsel and guidance, I wonder what would have become of Nandivardhana. It was during the visit that Queen Prabhavati requested the *Mahakavi* to stay back and teach young Divakara and Damodara till the time they could go to the gurukula. He had stayed back in Ramtek and Meghaduta was written then.

How things have changed. Years have gone by, seasons have changed — and the little boys are now strapping young men. The air of gloom from the *Mahakavi's* previous visit has been replaced with frissons of excitement and pleasant anticipation. Maybe one of these boys, perhaps Divakara, is to be married! Maybe this is the announcement our Rani is to make.

The marketplaces and taverns were teeming with more people than usual — hungry for any new gossip. At mid-morning, some activity was reported at the town's southern gates. A royal messenger on horseback was said to have entered the city. He had been spotted by a grain merchant who had just come back from Ujjayini. The merchant was then

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accosted and plagued with more questions: whose royal messenger was he? The Queen's or some other kingdom's? Was the merchant able to see the messenger and observe his face? Was he bringing tidings of joy? Or did he look worried? Of course, he had no answers to these questions — the tired trader, back from his travels.

At that moment, the royal messenger was hurrying towards his destination in the jewellers' quarter at the other end of town. *Shukla Saptami* in *Bhadra* maasam was an auspicious day for this community and they typically started new assignments after invoking the blessings of Lord Vasudeva. It was into a busy locality that the messenger made his way, looking for the house of Vishnuveera.

Vishnuveera, Nandivardhana's most reputed goldsmith, was known for producing artistic masterpieces out of gold, like a magician creating magic out of thin air. His creations were in much demand through the year — with young nobles, royals and traders thronging his place to get new ornaments crafted. With steady work pouring in from Nandivardhana and elsewhere (why, it was rumoured he had just gotten back from Pratisthana after an especially lucrative assignment), Vishnuveera was indeed a much sought-after man.

This part of the town was clearly divided into two separate sections — the left reserved for goldsmiths and craftsmen dealing with precious stones; and the right for workers in other metals (bronze, silver, ivory).

At the extreme corner of the jeweller's section was a large, four-storeyed brick building with a vast façade opening onto the busy street. The signage on a stone signboard next to the building indicated that this was Vishnuveera's house and work area. The ground floor was where his artisans and craftsmen sat and worked. There was a languid atmosphere in the workshop in the absence of any customers or visitors, as the messenger entered. Two boys, barely in their late teens, were beating gold in a corner of the vast but sparse room and they were being supervised by a middle-aged man, rotund and pot-bellied, who did not seem very happy about the quality of their work. There were three-four experienced craftsmen who were engaged in some friendly chatter, careful not to get loud enough to irk the supervisor. A typical day's post-lunch scene or so it seemed to the royal messenger, whose entry had not been noticed.

One of the teenage boys soon took cognisance of this stranger and alerted the supervisor.

"Greetings! How may we assist you?"

"Greetings, Arya (Sir). Our great queen, Maharani Prabhavatigupta has sent me to convey a message to Arya Vishnuveera. Where can I meet him?"

"Arya Vishnuveera is in his chambers. I will inform him of your arrival. Please be seated."

As the messenger was seated and awaited the goldsmith, the workshop sprang into life. The friendly banter of the craftsmen stopped, and they resumed setting gems into ornaments. While the boys continued their gold-beating and getting their act

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right, they were clearly more distracted than before. A royal messenger in their workshop was definitely worth getting distracted about! Wonder what the queen wants their master for. But then their master's fame had spread far and wide. Even across the seas, or so they had been told!

Five minutes later, the renowned goldsmith made his way into the workshop and the royal messenger conveyed his message. Arya Vishnuveera was requested to pay his respects to Maharani Prabhavatigupta in her chambers at an auspicious hour the next day, preferably in the third quarter after sunrise. Of course, the goldsmith accepted the summons and confirmed that he would be present at the palace at the appointed time.

The summons left everyone present at the workshop in a tizzy. Despite Arya Vishnuveera's presence, work stopped for a while; the craftsmen were too excited and were discussing the meaning behind the royal summons. The rumours were possibly true and a royal wedding was indeed on the cards. There had not been a royal celebration in more than a decade. And what better than their master being summoned. Maybe he will be commissioned to craft some exquisite jewellery.

Only Arya Vishnuveera seemed unperturbed. Exhibiting a state of equanimity, he seemed lost in thought. The supervisor, clearly attuned to his master's moods and behaviour, stood quietly next to him. A few minutes later, Vishnuveera came out of his reverie and indicated to his supervisor,

“Somnath, when did we promise Arya Nandabhatta his jewels? How far have we progressed on that?”

“Arya, we need to give Arya Nandabhatta his *ratnanguliyas* - the finger rings encrusted with gems, before *Trayodashi*. We have five days left and Harihara and Deva are working on it. Sir, if you permit, there is another thing I would like to remind you about.”

“Hmm, proceed.”

“We are to visit Arya Vinayashura tomorrow at the auspicious hour. I met his servant near the chitrasala just yesterday. There is some celebration being planned at the house and he seemed rather keen that Arya should visit him and his Devi at the earliest so that they can let us know what designs of jewels they would like crafted. With your permission, should I convey our apologies at not being able to go tomorrow and maybe we can go on *Dashami*?

“No, Shaunaka should go, along with Kumaragiri and Ashwini. Go and call him,” said the goldsmith then motioning to his servant who had accompanied him. He looked around the workshop, scanning the work area. “Ah, there you are, Ashwini. You go with Shaunaka and Kumaragiri tomorrow. Is Kumaragiri not here today? Is he well?”

“Arya, Kumaragiri had to excuse himself today – his mother is slightly indisposed and he had to inform the Vaidya. Arya, if I may be excused for speaking out of turn. Would this not be a huge responsibility on young Shaunaka for such an assignment? Should we not start him independently on a smaller one?”

interjected Somnath politely, as the others strained to hear this conversation, with undisguised interest.

“Why not? At his age, I had taken up many such assignments. Have you not taught him what you know? He should be fine and this is the way he will learn. You should not protect him so much.”

Shaunaka was Vishnuveera’s eldest and only son — at present, an unwilling and a good-for-nothing apprentice. Back from the gurukula after completing his basic education in the Vedas and other sciences, Shaunaka had recently started his apprenticeship and training under Somnath. Vishnuveera was aware that Shaunaka did not have the experience or even interest to handle an independent charge but he was confident that his son would be able to deliver under pressure and with the help of two of the finest goldbeaters he knew. Like every other worker in the workshop, Vishnuveera was aware that Somnath was not too fond of the young lad. Indeed, Somnath did not have a high opinion of the master’s son. This was largely due to what he perceived as a complete lack of attention and interest on the young man’s part. Somnath had tried to impart all the training he could, based on his own extensive experience of twenty years, to the lad. But Shaunaka’s mind was just not into learning the craft.

Somnath was too devoted to his master and his art form, to take the rejection of his suggestion personally. He was genuinely worried about how this boy with no interest in his work would manage!

At this moment, Shaunaka entered the workshop, looking a little hassled. As he stood in front of

his father to pay his respects, this tall young man towered over most of the others present. There was something intellectual about this mild-mannered man of serious and quiet disposition; probably the mop of curly shoulder-length hair, the pair of dark eyes set in a round face, and the high forehead contributed to that impression. He was clad in a comfortable cotton kanchuka (tunic) with an antariya (lower garment); certainly not dressed to play the man of town, he had been resting, which explained his hassled expression. This was his favourite part of the day – when he would escape the drudgery of the profession that had been thrust upon him by virtue of his birth. This was also when he could spend time with his family, mainly his grandmother and mother, post a satiating meal. The summons was unsettling and certainly did not portend well.

“Arya, you called me? How may I be of service to you?” he asked, bowing his head respectfully in front of his father.

“Shaunaka, by the grace of Lord Vasudeva, you have been able to complete your education at the gurukula and have been learning our family trade. Somnath ji, as your guru here, has been teaching you all that he knows. With the blessings of Vakratunda, our *pitrus* (ancestors) and the entire family, I am now confident that you will be able to craft jewels beautifully and carry forth the tradition. The time has come for you to take on independent work.

“I want you to go to Arya Vinayashura’s house tomorrow with Kumaragiri and Ashwini and

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understand what they require from us — what is the occasion and what kind of jewels they would like us to craft and by when.”

The young man looked aghast, almost terrified at his father’s suggestion but was quick to regain his composure. “Arya, as you suggest, I will go tomorrow to Arya Vinayashura’s house,” much to the surprise of the onlookers as they certainly expected him to oppose the decision.

“Good. You will go with Kumaragiri and Ashwini. They will give you good counsel. Pay heed to their advice, if need be.”

“Yes, Arya. I will take your leave now.”

Satisfied with his son’s answer and conduct, Vishnuveera charted the next day’s programme with Somnath with a rather extensive discussion on the designs they may have to craft.

The workshop was connected to the main building housing the living quarters by a long-winding path that took the visitor past a lush garden and the grand kitchen. After imbibing the instructions for the next day, Shaunaka left the workshop and walked past the kitchen, in a state of deep consternation. His mother, who was supervising the servants as they husked and ground the rice for the evening meal, noticed his state and called out to him:

“Shaunak, *putra*, what happened? Why do you look so worried? Come here.”

“Maate, pranam, Pitashri has given me an independent assignment. I have to go to Arya

Vinayashura's residence tomorrow morning to understand what the occasion is and what kind of ornaments they would like made."

"Hmm, and you are worried that you will not be able to live up to your father's expectations? Shukla, clean that area and then place those utensils."

"Haan, ma, and that I am not yet ready for such an assignment."

"I think you are worrying unnecessarily. Believe in yourself. If your father thinks you are ready, you must be," said his mother, patting her son on his back.

This brief conversation with his mother, Gautami, left Shaunaka strangely uncomfortable and distinctly unconvinced. He loved his mother but lately, he felt sad at the thought that despite her efforts, she was not able to understand him. This feeling of discomfort and restlessness continued to envelop him as he walked back towards the main residence.

Gautami, on her part, had a pensive look on her face. It really bothered her to see the lack of communication between her son and her husband. Shaunaka's mind clearly was not in their family profession and she had brought it up with her husband many a times. While Shaunaka had not openly spoken about what he wished to do, she had gleaned his disinterest through conversations with him.

Just the previous evening, before they retired for the day, Gautami had brought it up. "Arya, Shaunaka does not seem too happy. Shouldn't we ask him why he is so unhappy these days? It has been three

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months since he came back from the gurukula. In comparison, look at Ashoka; he seems more settled and comfortable. I would like to check with him why he seems so despondent.”

“I have noticed it too. It is evident that his mind is elsewhere; he hardly pays any attention to what Somnath tries to teach him. He probably wishes to engage himself in something else but he is in that foolish age. We should get him married. That will take care of his distraction.”

“But should we not ask him what he really wishes to do? I do not like seeing him unhappy.”

“Gautami, he is nearly 22 years old; I had taken over Pitashri’s work by then. Do not be soft on him. Pressure and responsibility have never killed anyone. He should and will learn the craft and pursue this for a few years before he decides to do something else,” countered Vishnuveera, turning the other side in bed, signalling the end of the conversation.

The next afternoon, Shaunaka found himself saddled with the burden of an independent jewellery assignment. Gautami wistfully recollected this conversation, as Shaunaka took his leave and made his way back to his first-floor room in the main residence, contemplating and ruminating the consequences of his father’s orders. Pensive and reflective, Shaunaka was not impulsive by nature. Each of his actions was preceded by much thought.

“Ah! Shaunaka, there you are. I was about to retire for the afternoon. I thought you had abandoned this old woman and sought more interesting company,”

teased the old lady, Shaunaka's companion— his grandmother who had been waiting for him to return. Ahalyabai, Vishnuveera's widowed mother doted on her grandson and ever since Shaunaka had come back from the gurukula, they would spend an hour after the mid-day meal, playing a game of chaturanga.

Upon seeing his pensive and reflective expression, she became concerned and bade him to sit by her side:

"What happened, son? What urgent matter did Vishnu want you for? Could he not have waited? If only he would be less stubborn!"

"He wants me to take on an assignment all by myself. I do not feel confident enough, Pitamahi. I wished to tell him there at the workshop that I may not be able to acquit myself respectably but restrained myself. There were too many people and I was aware that my raising any objection would be viewed as disobedience and disrespect."

"You are a good child. You are smart and grasp things quickly; so do not worry about not knowing what to do. That you wish to be elsewhere and do something else is another matter altogether. Do not doubt your own abilities about handling this work. Will anyone accompany you?"

"Ah yes, that was reassuring. He has asked Kumaragiri and Ashwini to come along with me," smiled Shaunaka.

"Bah, you should have mentioned that! Of course you shall be fine. Kumaragiri has a wealth of experience and what can I say about Ashwini's skills?"

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Ashwini, a young man in his early twenties, had been adopted by Vishnuveera and his wife after he had been orphaned at a very early age. As a gratitude to the only family he had ever known, and the man who treated him as a son, Ashwini had focussed all his efforts on learning the art and techniques of the trade. To everyone's surprise, he soon became a skilled apprentice, displaying a special talent for this craft.

What also developed over the years was the bond and closeness between the two young men. Knowing Shaunaka's disinterest in the gold work, Ashwini would often cover for him and was his only ally in the workshop.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it? Come in."

"Shaunaka, there you are. Pranam Pitamahi! (Grandmother) May I join you?" It was Ashwini who had come looking for Shaunaka. It was wont for them to spend the evening together — either at home or at the town enjoying the entertainments on display!

"Of course you may! I was telling Pitamahi about our assignment tomorrow."

"Whose house are you expected to go to?" asked his grandmother, offering them some betel nuts, as she chewed.

"Arya Vinayashura. Who is he? Have you heard of him?"

"Arya Vinayashura? Is this the family that has a house in that locality where those rich Buddhist viharas

had been constructed? Those Buddhist sanghas have too much money, I tell you, and they are wasting it. Arre, back in my day, they used to be bhikshus, going around asking for alms. Now see them, using the King's grants and leading degenerate lives. All of them — worse than the nagarakas, the fashionable city dwellers.

“Don't you both look at me like that. I speak the truth. Not for nothing is my hair so grey. “

“Pitamahi, does this Arya Vinayashura also belong to a sangha?”

“Arre, no. This man and his family, from what I have heard, are from Pataliputra – nobility, they claimed when they came to Nandivardhana some thirty odd years ago. I forget when.

Known to be unfriendly and extremely proud, they have since kept to themselves. I heard that even the great poet Kalidasa visited their home last time he was here.

Have you heard anything about that rumour? Is there going to be an announcement soon? Is Kalidasa coming to visit too?”

“Pitamahi, I sincerely apologise. In my mental state, I forgot to share this with you. The reason Pitashri wants me to go to Arya Vinayashura tomorrow is because the Queen has summoned him to the palace.”

“Oh! You should have told me this before. Ashwini, when will this boy stop worrying and start enjoying the experiences fate is throwing his way?

“There will be a royal wedding in our city soon. This city deserves some celebrations. It has been too

long. When our Maharaja died ten-fifteen years ago, we wondered how the Maharani would cope. But look at her. What an amazing woman. Our Maharani has single-handedly ruled our country, protected all of us and has raised her two boys. We are indeed lucky people. Did I tell you, when I had moved to Nandivardhana from Mandhal...”

This was how the rest of the afternoon passed. Unlike most men his age, Shaunaka was pensive and reflective by nature — impulse and emotion did not rule his temperament. His responses were thought over and every action was preceded after contemplation. More than a hot-blooded reaction, he was often accused of failing to react or respond on time. Laconic and a loner, Shaunaka did not have many friends in Nandivardhana, barring Ashwini, who was more a brother! All of Shaunaka’s friends from the gurukula were mainly in other towns and villages.

It was in Ahalyabai and Ashwini that this mild-mannered boy confided his ardent desires. He wished to travel, to visit Pataliputra and Ujjayini and other far-off places. Knowing that this may not be welcomed warmly by his father, he was biding his time to seek his parents’ permission at the right time.

As he retired for the evening, Shaunaka wondered if the time to pursue his wishes would ever come. What did this independent jewellery assignment portend? Would it take him one step further away from his dreams, which anyway were just that — dreams?

