

VINEET BAJPAI

KASHI

SECRET OF THE BLACK TEMPLE



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PROLOGUE

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He knew he would not be able to hide for long.

There were too many of them.

They had succeeded in tracking him down right from the banks of the Ganges to the freezing waters surrounding the infamous Alcatraz prison. He knew he was being hunted by the most dangerous men in the world...and there was no stopping them.

Not for now.

Not until the prophesied Rohini Nakshatra.

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I must find a phone.

I must call Baba.



He was shivering as much from the drenched state he was in as from the anxiety a battle-hardened warrior experiences when he knows his time has come. When he is clear that the odds are insurmountable and senses death approaching fast under the tightening grip of a winning enemy.

But this was no ordinary man. And he was not going to be defeated easily. He threw his long brown hair back from his handsome face and shut his deep, almond eyes for a few moments. He was summoning his consciousness into his *kundalini*, as most advanced practitioners of Vedic yoga do to prepare their mortal bodies for the final departure.

The scion of the Dev-Raakshasa *matth* then clenched his teeth and stepped out from behind the counter of an open-air restaurant into the darkness of that ominous night. He walked in the shadows, close to the walls of the shuttered down shops and clam chowder stalls. The torrential November rain lashed against his face and his shining black raincoat as he hustled towards a pay phone. He *had* to make that one last phone call. He *had* to say goodbye.

Before he took on that pack of rabid wolves.

All by himself.



The giant African-American man, who appeared out of nowhere, towered at nearly seven feet. He was as broad as a bull and the heavy rain did not seem to bother him, as he drew out an enormous blade from his belt.

The dashing young man from Kashi was unfazed. He charged towards the monstrous man, diverted his own route in a flash towards a tall grill on his right, ran up the iron bars and used the elevation to twist his muscular body, landing a crashing kick on the American's massive head.

The man staggered like a crumbling mountain, swinging his gleaming knife blindly. The scion of the matth then shot another expert kick and knocked off the blade from his adversary's hand. He was going to go for the winning blow into the American's gut, when he heard an unnerving tear right on his back, followed by unbearable pain.

He turned to see that seven or eight beastly looking men now surrounded him in the dark, rainy night. The extraordinary man could see the red glimmer of the Golden Gate bridge far in the backdrop of his assailants. One of them had already slashed him with a fatal wound using a machete. Two others carried rusty, whirring chainsaws.

Blood seemed to be pouring out of his body like water from a torn balloon. His eyes started to black out. He knew the end was near. But he braced himself, shook his head to rid himself of the cold sweat and took a stance to combat them all at once.

But he knew.

This is how I am going to die. On this rainy night. Far away from my

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loved ones.

A brutal death. Like the ancient curse had prophesized.



‘Babaaaaa...!’ he screamed into the phone, sobbing with grief and unbearable agony. ‘It is me...Baba...’

He was leaning against the glass panels of the phone booth. The walls of the booth were smeared with the sacred blood of this noble soul, this profound yogi and this astonishingly skilled warrior.

‘Yes, my son, I know it is you...I know it is you!’ cried back the grand old Dwarka Shastri.

The *matthadbeesh* knew what was happening. They had caught up with him. Finally, after all these years of battling the darkest force on earth, one more of the Shastri bloodline was going to fall prey to the black curse.

‘I am going, Baba...’ he gasped. ‘But I fought them long, and I fought them fearlessly...Baba...’

He now crashed to the ground unconscious, the phone receiver dangling by its spiral chord right next to his ears.

‘Say something...say something...*mera beta!*’ yelled Dwarka Shastri into his phone, as he broke into sobs of indescribable anguish.

He stirred. The man from Kashi was not going to die so easily, so quickly.

He summoned his last reservoir of energy and reached out for the phone again.

‘I did not reveal it, Baba...I did not give away the secret of the Black Temple!’ he whispered with all his remaining strength.

Dwarka Shastri ground his teeth, as tears rolled out from his aged eyes.

‘You make me proud, my son. You make us all proud.’

‘Baba...look after her, Baba. And look after my little boy... Baba! Don’t let him stay in Kashi. Promise me, Baba... promise me you will keep him safe. Only you can keep him...safe...Bab...’

The anguished, suffering voice slowly faded away.

‘I promise you, my son...’ said Dwarka Shastri, his voice choking with grief.

He whispered again.

‘I promise you...O mighty Kartikeya!’



Banaras, 2017

‘NAAAAAGG!’

He clambered down the dim, stone staircase. His tricky passage down the crooked, steep flight of stairs was lit solely by the *mashaal* or flaming wick-torch he carried. Despite having spent decades as a senior resident of the mystical institution at Kashi, this secret chamber was something he had actually descended into for the first time only in the last few days.

Every step he took echoed in a loud and unnerving boom in the deathly silence and hollow darkness that enveloped him. His *kbandaan* or flat-sandals clapped jarringly, adding to his anxiety. He wiped his sweat every now and then, and kept muttering a prayer to Lord *Vishnu*. He could not believe how deep into the heart of the earth this underground *tebkaana*

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was built. He had heard about it many times, but never in his gloomiest nightmare could he imagine a place so haunting, so mysteriously charged.

As he finally touched the floor of the cellar, he was not relieved. Now was when the hardest part of his ordeal would begin.



With nearly trembling hands he lit two torches that were perched on the cellar's walls. Slowly the dark chamber came partly to life, glowing a dull red under the light of the flames.

It was only now that the real expanse of the *tekhbaana* became visible. The secret chamber was built of black stone, with beautifully carved figurines depicting the conquest of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu over *puraanic*, ancient demons. It was the presence of these sculptures that gave him the courage to carry on. He warily turned towards the long, dark passage that lay ahead of him, leading deeper into the inner core of the vast, underground chamber. He felt a lump in his throat. Fear was gripping him again. And why not?

He now had to walk through the dusty, dark passage.

The passage that led to the *creature*.

Despite all the reverence he tried to muster for this mystical, all-important guest, there was no better term he could find to describe him.

Or *it*.



Halfway into the passage he saw the spine-chilling green glow from a distance. Once again, his heart skipped several beats. It was his second visit to the secret cellar and he could still feel the impact of the first trip on his nerves. The distant glimmer then moved, the green radiance gleaming off the surface of their celestial guest.

And then he heard it. The sound that seemed to emanate from the walls, the ceiling and the statues of the black cavern itself. It was a nerve-shattering hiss.

The hiss of a monstrous, primeval serpent!

He did not know from where this otherworldly sound came. But it seemed to forcefully announce the presence of the scale-skinned guest of the Dev-Raakshasa matth. In a sound like that of a cold, swooshing breeze over a medieval graveyard, it seemed to declare *nho* was in attendance...

‘NAAAGG...’

‘NAAAAAGG...’

‘NAAAAAAAGG.....’

The icy hiss percolated into every particle, every grain of dust in the underground cellar.

And like a cold arrow of horror, it also tore into the soul of Purohit ji.



With both his hands, he scooped up milk from the bucketful that Purohit ji had brought him. His long hair covered his face completely, and from twenty feet away the old priest could make out that their guest was enormous in size, perhaps taller than eight feet. While he was human in his silhouette alright, his skin was scaly like that of a reptile, of a snake. And even under the spell of mortal fear, Purohit had to admit that the scaly skin of the guest radiated a dazzling green, something he had never seen before.

His mouth went dry as one of the cobras slithered over his foot. He did not dare look down as he knew what he would behold. Dozens of poisonous King Cobras seemed to be serving this *snake-man*. Never once did they bite him or anyone that enjoyed his grace – Purohit ji for now. They glided over his shoulders, his powerful, almost giant arms at all times. It was clear they served his will.

Purohit ji felt an urge to fold his hands in veneration to this human serpent. Something was magnetic about him. Moreover, if the great Dwarka Shastri had asked Purohit ji to take care of the guest like he would take care if Lord Shiva arrived in person, there must be good reason.

But the primal fear that even a man of his spiritual accomplishment felt in the presence of this holy yet terrifying ‘creature’, overpowered all other urges. With his duty of serving a large quantity of sweetened milk to the mystical guest done, the wise priest decided to leave.

‘I shall take your leave now, my lord,’ said Purohit, with a gentle bow of his head.

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The gleaming guest nodded, his face still down into his palms. But just as Purohit ji was about to leave, the frightening visitor raised his head. While his long hair still covered his face, his eyes shot up and looked straight at the priest of Dev-Raakshasa matth, who nearly fainted with horror.

They were not human eyes. They ripped through the darkness and glowered like sinister Suns in a black sky.

They were the yellow and black eyes of an immortal, primordial serpent.

HARAPPA, 1700 BCE

***‘THE GODS... HAVE
ABANDONED US!’***

They watched him from the walls of the city’s perimeter. He rode in towards the heavily guarded gates like a fearless lion.

For all those who had seen him before, he appeared magnificently different. Even in the darkness of the stormy night and the wildly flickering torches, something appeared to have changed about the son of the great Surya of Harappa.

None of them knew what had changed. None of them were aware how it had changed. And that was because not one of them knew in whose deific company Manu had spent the last few days.

Manu looked as dazzling as his great father, if not more. The

mere sight of him made hundreds of Harappans break into tears of regret and remorse. They seemed to believe that none of this mayhem would have happened if the Surya were alive.

That the imminent catastrophe could be prevented if Viv-asvan Pujari was alive.

Maybe they were right.



He had his beloved partner Tara to his right. She rode by his side like a true warrior-princess, her sword dangling from her waist. Her favorite battle-axe was clasped firmly in her hand, as she looked prepared to clash with an entire garrison singlehandedly. Pundit Somdutt was to Manu's left. His widely respected presence added to the gravitas and trustfulness of the moment.

Apart from the warriors from his own household and Somdutt's troops, what lent an air of military superiority to Manu was the mighty force of the fish-folk riding under his flag. The Harappan people and soldiers had never seen such a formidable looking army. Just as they had stunned Manu with their synchronized galloping and choreographed movements, warriors of the fish-tribe took the Harappan populace also by surprise. They looked fierce, invincible.

As he reached about a hundred paces from the gates, Manu raised his right fist. This was a command to his troops to halt. In a few short moments, the noise of hooves and the clanking of armors went quiet. Harappan citizens were in a

hushed silence, peeping from the parapets of the city's walls. They did not know what to anticipate from the son of Vivasvan Pujari. Was Manu going to sack the city? Was he here to avenge the horrible end of his wronged parents?

All that could be heard now was the whistling of the sharp winds and the frequent thunder, as the skies lit up.

Manu dismounted and was handed a torch by one of his comrades. He looked towards Somdutt, who nodded gently in supportive agreement. Manu walked slowly but firmly up to the city's walls from where he knew the trembling Harappans could hear him. As he reached closer to them, Manu unstrapped his sheathed sword, raised it for everyone to see, and then dropped it to the ground with a loud, metallic clang. It was his way of reassuring the people who once loved his great father that he was not here to harm them.

Little did they know then that Manu was there to rescue not just them, but all of mankind. The men, the women and the children. The old and the young. The rich and the destitute. The sinner and the saint. All of them.

He was there to save them from certain extinction.

He was going to protect them from Pralay!



'Hear me, O dwellers of Harappa!' Manu shouted out to the thousands of people that were now crowded behind the high walls, stretching their necks to get a glimpse of the fabulous young man addressing them.

‘A devastation beyond imagination befalls Harappa!’ he continued. ‘This blizzard that envelopes the lands like a hungry python; this incessant rain that soaks us to our souls; this thunder of Indra that roars and spews fire like a cosmic dragon – these are all nothing but omens of the colossal destruction that hurtles towards all of Aryavarta!’

The people of the great metropolis were stunned into silence. Given the unnatural, unnerving occurrences of the last few days, they were willing to believe anything. Amidst the commoners of Harappa, a not-so-common man stood wrapped in a shawl that covered him from head to toe. He was as eager to hear every word that Vivasvan Pujari’s son spoke as anyone.

He was Pundit Chandradhar, the ephemeral, unfortunate king of Harappa.



‘A mountain of water races towards your city, O Harappans! A deluge so gigantic that it will swallow the entire settlement in less than a *prahar*. You must save your children. You must save yourselves. You have to trust me! We must evacuate the city...NOW!’

The deathly silence now gave way to frenzied murmurs on the parapets. Was this young boy to be believed? Had he seen this monstrous water mountain that he was talking about? And if he had, how could he outrace it?

‘Why should we believe you, O son of Surya?’ yelled out one voice. ‘How are you so certain of this unspeakable fate?’

By now, Somdutt had walked up and joined Manu. Everyone recognized the erstwhile chief architect of Harappa and hundreds of folded hands went up in the air in deep reverence. What had added to the persona of Somdutt was that by now it was public knowledge that it was Somdutt and Somdutt alone who had stood with the Surya of Harappa in the latter's most trying hour. Today every single Harappan wanted to be Somdutt.

'The time for debate and discussion has passed, my friends! Every instant we lose draws us closer into the jaws of death and destruction,' said Somdutt, in a loud voice for everyone to hear. 'This young man is the son of the great Vivasvan Pujari - the man, the devta who saved this city and its people from the greatest of perils. You trusted him. I urge you today. Trust his worthy son!

Trust Satyavrata Manu!



Several men and women of the cursed city left for their homes in haste – to pick up their children and gather at least some of their precious belongings. The others remained on the city walls, anxiously debating the course of action.

Suddenly a shrill voice tore through the windy night.

'*The Gods...have abandoned us!*' shouted a very old woman.

In the darkness and in the commotion, her shaking, witch-like voice rendered horror into every heart.

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‘No, they have not!’ Manu shouted back.

‘At least One of them has not...’ he whispered to himself a moment later.