

VINEET BAJPAI

PRALAY

THE GREAT DELUGE



# PROLOGUE

‘They are all going to die...’ mumbled Manu to himself. ‘And I will die with them.’

*These desperate souls, these young men and women, the infants, the old and the destitute, this entire collective that I promised to protect forever, will be crushed like ants.*

Manu now realized the ghastly reality of his daring enterprise fully for the first time. Till this horrifying moment of truth, he had been way too immersed in carrying out the bizarre yet fateful commandment of the mystical Master of the *ocean-tribe*.

The fiery young leader of this nearly deranged, ragtag architectural force froze as he saw the gigantic vessel tilt beyond the endurance of the twenty thousand jute chords and tree-

vines holding it aloft. The violent, monstrous waves of the river-sea were pounding on the biggest ship mankind had ever built. And the vicious flood was going to sink it.

*Does this murderous deluge know what irreplaceable cargo this last boat carries?*



That the final, universally destructive flood was incoming was not hard to tell. The dark, reddish-purple clouds, that appeared like some insane celestial painter had dyed the skies with the color of stale blood, enveloped all of known Earth. The maddening roar of *Indra's* thunder and the unnatural tempest of violently lashing rain had now announced the apocalypse, the final end. Droplets the size of tiger fangs were falling from the skies, transforming into a piercing shower of agonizing water-arrows as they struck *Manu* and his devoted followers. Every drop hitting the skin of the *Manu-Shishyas* or *Manushyas* was like an invisible spear penetrating through. What this militia of valiant men and women was trying to tug at and balance on the furious waters was not a regular boat anyway.

It was the *last* boat. Not the last boat from a harbour. Not the last boat of a fleet. Not the last vessel to leave a port for the season or a sailor rowing away for the night.

*It was the last boat for creation itself.* It was the *nauka* (boat) where *Prithvi* (Mother Earth) herself was going to take refuge. Along with the seeds of all her flock.

It was the great warrior, priest, ascetic, philosopher and king

Manu's ultimate deliverance.

It was his ark.

Manu's Ark.



The fearless struggle of over one hundred thousand men and women against a vessel, the expanse of which even the Gods could not imagine, was a spectacle that had never been seen before on the planet. And would never be seen after, even till the end of time. Manu's gigantic ark was the size of a glorious city. But its purpose was the noblest that mankind could ever fathom.

It was a doorway. The only bridge of continuity. From a decaying ancient world...to the new dawn of resurrection. It embodied a fierce contest between Armageddon at the behest of nature and the survival instinct of man. Humanity was not going to perish without a fight – a fight that even the heavens would remember. But despite this heroic endeavor, a lot was going to be lost. Eons of precious and irreplaceable wisdom acquired by the human race was not going to pass through this portal of sorts between different universes, even though it was all going to unfold on the same planet. Ancient alchemy, medicine, aviation, occult sciences, architecture, weaponry and spirituality were all going to disappear forever, drowning in the aftermath of the great deluge, to the bottom of the mighty oceans in spate.

And yet the Ark was the last ray of hope for life, as *Aryavarta* knew it. Much as Man is dumbfounded by God's profound

conceptions like the stars, the galaxies and the constellations being the symbols of His divine workmanship, the greatest of the Lord's creations is undoubtedly *life*. Magnificent, resilient...life. Beings that feel pain, give birth, weep tears and love boundlessly. Beings that mirror the image of the Gods themselves. And it was *this* creation that needed to be saved.

*Above all.*



The thick, twisted, drenched ropes and vines were now cutting into the arms, necks and flesh of Manu's militia. The tearing force exerted by the ropes, harnessing the toppling boat as big as a floating city, was breaking their fingers, dislocating their shoulders and ripping into their forearms and biceps. Men, women and children fought on alike against the formidable onslaught of the unimaginable weight of their adversary. They were all made of destructible blood and bones, whereas the *Nauka* was made of heavy wood, reinforced copper and rock-stone – so enormous that the people pulling the ropes in the water could not even get a glimpse of the mast of this massive vessel, even if they looked straight up at the grotesque skies.

The *Nauka* was taller than Mount Sumeru and wider than the gory field that had hosted the *Dasarajna* or the decisive ancient Battle of the Ten Kings.

Manu was getting increasingly desperate. He pulled out the crooked seashell blow-horn that had been given to him as signaling gear, only to be used when caught in the midst of

the worst calamity. And that time had come. Nothing could be darker than the imminent and painful demise of his devoted people. Manu wiped his face with his leather wrist-guard, took a deep breath and blew into the horn, which shrieked out in its horrendous and maddening call, nearly splitting open the stormy skies.

Standing atop a lone and eerie cliff that looked black as coal against the bleeding red sky, Manu covered his eyes against the whipping rain with his open palms, looking far into the misty horizon. He saw nothing. With every passing moment his despair was growing. He tried hard to hold back his tears of defeat, and once again blew into the twisted horn with all his might. The scream of the blow-horn was like the cry of an angry dragon, and the tens of thousands of Manu's subjects felt needles piercing through their eardrums.

Manu squinted his eyes to ward off the vicious sky-arrows and tried to look far beyond the mountainous waves. He hoped to see the faint silhouette of the One he believed was the true savior.

He saw nothing.



‘MA...AATTSYA!’ yelled Manu, now darting feverishly on the edge of the protruding cliff that was his observation post as well as control station for the gargantuan undertaking he was overseeing. His tired, afraid and hopeful eyes kept gazing at the far horizon of the devastating deluge. Raindrops lashed on his handsome yet battle-torn face. He was

probably crying at the horror he could see envelope his ambitious enterprise. A sinking realization was making it impossible for him to continue battling this unnatural typhoon.

Had the only person he had ever trusted, aside from his own beloved father - the great Vivasvan Pujari, betrayed him? Had his friend, mentor, counsel, healer ...betrayed him?

*Had his beloved Matsya betrayed him?*

‘MAAATTTTSSSYAAAA...ARRGHH!’ screamed Manu, looking up at the punishing firmament, his arms outstretched and his lungs ready to explode, as if he wanted the heavens to hear his desperate plea!

And then he saw it. In the endgame flood, riding the oceans’ merciless surfs, he saw it.

*Lok-naas*, the biggest sea-monster that even the mighty creator *Brahma* could have envisaged, raised what looked like its enormous head in the distant waves. It was the first time Manu was witness to the faint outline of the fabled giant-beast.

And there he was, standing fearlessly between the hydra’s gleaming eyes.

*Matsya.*

Somewhere near Rome, 2017

**‘DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS  
REALLY *HIM*?’**

He was late for his only superior’s customary public appearance. The Big Man from somewhere near Rome was uncharacteristically agitated this morning. The phone call he had received in the wee hours had left his nerves jangled. His hands shook as he raised the teacup to his holy lips.

Revered by millions as one of the highest priests on Earth, he was the guardian of the known world’s greatest wealth and treasures. He was the spiritual God-man to the planet’s most powerful men and women. He was someone who decided the fate of not just individuals or communities, but of entire continents. A text message from him could activate a nuclear payload or end the bloodiest, decades-old civil war.



The Big Man was not an ordinary man by far. He was one among the many lovingly disguised yet sparkling symbols of absolute power, unquestioned monarchy, superiority and global control. Yet a 34-year old lad from half the world away, had made this remarkable man nervous.

*Really nervous.*

This cold anxiety was not something the Big Man was accustomed to. He glared angrily at the junior priest who came in to politely remind the Big Man of his routine duty to his superior, who had already stepped out to greet the thousands of people gathered below the balcony of the palace of ultimate dominance. The Big Man needed to smoke some tobacco to calm his rattled soul.

After more than 1,600 years of ancient and haunting prophecies, the pious *devtub*, as the Big Man pronounced it, seemed to have finally arrived. And this was horribly bad news for everything the Big Man's golden palace stood for.

*I must call Reg.*



‘Good morning, your Holiness,’ said the sophisticated Italian voice from the other side. ‘You did not have to call me, Sir. I am on my way to you anyway.’ Reg Mariani was sweating under his collar.

Very few people knew the Big Man as closely as Reg did. Which is why he knew he was speaking to the world's most powerful and most dangerous religious leader.

‘Is your job done, Reg?’ asked the Big Man calmly.

‘No...no, your Holiness, it is not.’

‘Then what purpose would your visit serve, my son?’

There was a momentary pause.

‘As you say, Sir,’ replied Reg, after clearing his tar-ravaged throat. For now, he was *persona non grata* at the palace of dominance.

‘Present yourself for my blessings only once you have delivered on the critical task you have been entrusted with, Reg.’

‘Yes, your Holiness.’

The Big Man now spoke in a tone that Reg was both familiar with and petrified of. He had often witnessed cruel and violent consequences of instructions passed in that tranquil yet ruthless tone.

‘Remind the *Maschera Bianca* for me, will you, Reg? Remind him that his very existence depends on the grace of my prayers for him.’

‘I will, your Holiness.’

‘Remind him that his evil deeds are overlooked by the Lord only because he promises to serve a larger purpose. If he fails that divine objective, the world has no place for him.’

Reg froze. Only the Big Man could send such a cold-blooded threat to Europe’s most feared Mafioso.

Reg was relieved as he heard the click of the phone line

being disconnected. He had seen the brutal outcome that several of the supposedly powerful men had suffered when they had failed the Big Man. Even though he had spent years in the service of His Holiness, Reg felt no safer than he did on the first day.

Even before he could heave a slight sigh of relief, his mobile phone rang again. To Reg's deep duress, it was the Big Man again. But this time he was not his cold, calculated self. He sounded uncertain, shaken.

'Tell me Reg, do you think it is really *him*? Do you think this boy is really the *devtuh* of the prophecies?'

There were a few moments of silence again. Reg knew better than to mince words with the Big Man.

'Yes, your Holiness. I believe it is he.'

Reg paused, before emphasizing the truth he knew the Big Man dreaded hearing.

'The *devta* has returned.'



**HARAPPA, 1700 BCE**

## **RAIN OF BLOOD**

Two hundred of the Harappan army's elite mounted troops rode at a fierce speed. Fifty of the piked cavalry galloped as advance guard. Fifty swordsmen rode as rearguard and a hundred archers on horseback pounded on either side. In their center tumbled and raced along the heavy, wheeled cage, pulled by sixteen thoroughbred horses. Made of solid stalks of the hardest wood and thick copper bars, this impenetrable cage was custom-built to hold in captivity a pride of lions. Only this time the prisoner was not one of the big cats. In his current manifestation, the prized captive was something far more savage.

The crazed cavalry was a fearsome sight. These Harappan warriors were now on the brink of complete insanity and uncontrollable blood-thirst. Their eyes were red and wid-

ened, nearly unblinking. Their mouths salivated froth like rabid wolves. They all grunted like beasts as they rode, their collective growl adding to the viciousness of the clouds of red dust rising from the hooves of their violent charge.

Armed to the teeth, each Harappan rider had a bone-cutting heavy sword strapped to his waist. The massive spears the advance guards swung in circles above their heads as they rode, could tear into the thick hide of even the one-horned rhino from the Far East. The archers' arrows were dipped in the blue poison of Harappa's war-chemists. This was a select platoon of the finest Harappan soldiers, handpicked by the new queen. She could take no chances with the powerful prisoner bound for the *mrit-kaaraavaas* (dungeons of the dead). For one last time. Once there, he would never return alive.

But Priyamvada was under the same predestined trance of madness that curses the fate of most ambitious monarchs. When even the Gods had never succeeded in holding *Surya*, the Sun, captive, how could she?



His head flew from his body and landed many paces away in the red dirt. The arrow came from nowhere, shot with extraordinary precision. The torso of the leader of the advance guard swung and galloped headless next to his comrades, his severed neck spouting blood like a small fountain.

Within moments another head was decapitated. And then another. And another. The confused and panicked soldiers

started to break ranks, their eyes searching wildly for the invisible attacker. A master archer had decided to pounce on this armed caravan like a cat in a henhouse.

Despite being among the finest warriors of the Harappan military, none of these demented fighters stood a chance in front of the Pujari family's very own slayer of demons.

Their very own protégé. Manu's closest friend and his greatest military commander.

The beautiful. The valiant.

Tara.



Much as they were intoxicated with the dark venom that the sinister wizards Gun, Sha and Ap had mixed in the water sources of Harappa, the cavalry of the metropolis was not one to be undermined by a lone archer without a fight, no matter how skillful he, or in this case, she may be. A trained and ferocious combat outfit, the hundred mounted archers spotted the direction from which the hidden assassin was assaulting their troops. Without breaking their gallop, these expert bowmen stood up in their stirrups and unleashed a shower of arrows in the direction of the attacker. Tara had no choice but to take refuge behind a boulder.

But the attack had begun. The daring rescue of the great devta, Vivasvan Pujari, had begun.



‘Like we planned, our first objective is to unchain the devta,’ Somdutt reminded his handful of combatants, moments before they were to launch themselves into the heat of the clash. ‘Once he is free, not one of these beastly soldiers will survive. The devta will vanquish them all singlehandedly.’

‘But my Lord, pardon my audacity...the devta looks nothing more than a flayed lump of meat!’ exclaimed one of the young fighters.

They could see beyond the copper bars of the massive crate on wooden wheels. The devta lay lifeless on the floor of the cage, his body tossing and bouncing with every bump on the road. There was no skin left on his once glowing body. The wooden walls of his confinement were smeared with his blood. He *was* a lump of raw flesh.

‘Believe me, my brave friends. I have seen the mighty Vivasvan Pujari in the face of worse odds,’ responded Somdutt. ‘While I agree his present state is perhaps beyond human endurance or imagination, I continue to repose my faith in his unfathomable power. He cannot be defeated unless he chooses to be. He cannot be killed till he decides so himself. He cannot be beaten in battle, unless it is by an adversary he loves.’

His bunch of followers was listening. He knew he did not have much time. And Somdutt was aware that they only had a short window of opportunity on these red planes to deliver their sworn mission.

‘All I ask from you, the bravest of warriors in all of Harappa, is that you unlock the massive cage that holds the devta.’

Cut open his stifling chains. And the savior will rise. He will liberate all of us. And all of cursed Harappa.'



The Harappan soldiers were now scattered all around the heavy cart carrying Vivasvan Pujari. Tactically placed archers of Tara's combat unit had joined her and they were together wreaking havoc on the Harappan riders. Within moments of Tara's initial attack, over two dozen of the deranged cavalry had been annihilated - heads tossed off or chests torn open by merciless arrows. Their bestial rage was on the rise. Though their effectiveness had been radically diminished.

Losing all sense of direction and purpose, baffled by the invisible enemy and the rain of warm human and horse blood all around them, the mad riders began to collide into one another. One of the horseman lost balance, got entangled in the other's stirrup and flung off his horse like a pebble shot from a catapult. Only to be trampled to a mash of flesh and bone by the riders behind him. One angry soldier lost whatever little sanity he had left and stabbed his spear into the neck of a fellow rider that had come dangerously close. The extraordinary marksmen had achieved their mandated goal. There was fear and chaos in the Harappan ranks.

And a large part of the seemingly invincible cavalry, was trying to flee.





Knowing well that this was their only chance, the fifteen warriors from Somdutt's small platoon charged their mounts into the heart of the Harappan troops, like a pack of wolves among sheep. Swinging their swords, slashing and beheading at will, Somdutt's young fighters were battling their way to the cage that held their beloved devta.

Tara's archers had now left their positions and were riding into the wet crimson field to assist their comrades.

But this was not going to be easy. Amidst the bold and so far one-sided rescue raid, one of the senior Harappan commanders began rallying back his troops. A giant of a man with his face painted red and black, his shining eyes reflected both his lunacy as well as his cruelty.

'Fight baaaaack...!' he yelled out to his disarrayed troops in a hoarse and bloodcurdling command, swinging his massive spear wildly from its handle-end, making it impossible for any attacker to approach him from even a distance. 'Fight back, you cowards...!' He was charging towards the wheeled cage. Several of his fierce soldiers turned their horses and began following their commander with renewed lust for killing.

For now, this was anybody's fight.



Somdutt spotted this formidable and demented adversary from a distance. Two of his young fighters were now very close to the cage, and moments away from freeing the fall-

en devta. But the gigantic Harappan commander was now galloping towards the center, and Somdutt knew his brave fighters would not be able to resist this veteran beast and his trained troopers. He was too far to intervene himself. He turned to his best bet.

‘Taraaaaa...!’ screamed Somdutt.

Tara dodged a spear by falling back on her saddle and in the same motion stabbed the gut of an attacker with the dagger she held in her left hand. Her right hand wielded a battle-axe. Tara was ambidextrous and could fight equally well with either of her arms. She turned to Somdutt and even in the middle of what appeared to be a red cloud that had descended on the battlefield, she followed his eyes. Tara realized instantly what the erstwhile Chief Architect of Harappa was drawing her attention to. The monstrous commander and his men had to be stopped!

Tara took the shortest route to intercept the mad commander, even though she had to tear through a thicket of enemies, blood and gore. An ace rider and an accomplished pupil of the great Vivasvan Pujari himself, the golden Tara was a warcraft magician. She weaved her way through enemy soldiers like a shark through water.

‘Eeeyyyaaaaaahh...’ Tara screamed as she first stood on her horse’s saddle and then pounced on the giant Harappan commander. For a few moments Tara appeared to be flying in the air, her long-axe ready to plunge at the throat of her target, her beautiful, blood-washed hair flowing behind her supple body.

But this enemy was stronger and more skilled than the rest

of them. The giant commander sprung up on his horse and greeted Tara with his muscular leg ramming into her diaphragm. Tara was deflected mid-air, and she crashed to the ground, breathless and stunned.

The monster with his face colored red and black in battle-paint was quivering with anger. The reek of blood in the air and the screams of disemboweled, dying men was making him delirious with animal brutality. He threw away his headgear, tore down his own armor to display his astounding, brawny frame. He was truly a fiend. He slapped his own face violently, growled like a goblin and drew out a spiked mace-on-a-chain. He swung it violently to pop open Tara's head.

The spiked mace landed an inch from Tara's temple, as she rolled over on the red mud to avoid the strike. The spikes dug into the soil soaked in blood, and took a moment to get pulled free again. This was enough time for the Tigress to counter attack. She pulled out two shining needles from her hair with her arms across her face. Both of the killer needles were dipped in lethal poison. She charged towards the monster like a slippery serpent, but his powerful arm shot out and grabbed Tara by her throat. His arm was so long and strapped with such thick copper armor, that Tara could not reach any part of his flesh despite her frenzied and valiant efforts. His grip was tightening and Tara felt her life being sucked out.

Till something happened that she had never even imagined.



The monster's mouth opened wide in a suffocating gasp of extreme suffering. To her disbelief, Tara saw a bloodied human claw and then an entire human forearm emerge from the gut of the giant commander right under her eyes. Someone had clawed through the mad monster's entire girth with his bare hands, ripping him open.

As the agonized monster's dying grip on Tara's throat loosened, she got a glimpse of the creature that had performed this ghastly killing. Half the length of his arm was buried into the gut of the now already dead Harappan commander. It was the most inhuman killing Tara or anyone on that battlefield had ever witnessed.

A man drenched in blood, skinned beyond recognition, with one eye melted and the other eye shining like that of a primordial *Brahma-Raakshasa*, stood behind the corpse of the commander. It took Tara a few moments before she realized whom that was.

Her eyes darted to look at the wheeled-cage.

Its thick door was creaking heavily, wide open. Its massive locks were shattered to pieces.

Vivasvan Pujari was not a devta anymore. He appeared to be more evil, more ghoulish than even the darkest *raakshasa* described in the ancient scriptures.

Despite trembling with fear at the grotesque gutting of his commander, one of the slain giant's men attacked Vivasvan with his machete. With the ease of a master warrior, Vivasvan dodged the attack, grabbed the wrist of the attacker and rammed his elbow into his face, splitting it open instant-

ly. The Harappan soldier crumbled to the ground. But the slaughter was not over. Vivasvan Pujari slowly pressed his knee down on the fallen soldier's back, picked up his machete and like a skilled surgeon sliced the man's forehead from temple to temple. The pinned man screamed in pain as blood poured down on his face from the deep gash on his brow. And then, to everyone's shock and disbelief, Vivasvan Pujari grabbed the soldier's hair and tore out his scalp right up to the back of his shoulders. The soldier writhed with unbearable agony before succumbing - not to the injury but to the extreme pain he was systematically subjected to.

Within a moment Tara found herself regretting what they had just done. She exchanged a quick glance with Somdutt, and they both seemed to be thinking alike.

*He, who should not have been freed, had been freed.*

The Sun had set on Harappa forever.