

# AGNIBAN

## GUARDIANS OF THE FIRE CHAMBER

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# Prologue

## THE ORACLE OF TANIS

*535 CE*

*Great Pyramid of Giza, Egypt*

The band of twenty hooded men sneaked out stealthily from the most iconic structure ever built by humankind.

Icy winds blew across the vast emptiness of the desert as the light from an eerily bright comet outlined a caravan parked near the Great Pyramid of Giza. The light also fell on the dark cloaks worn by the hooded men, highlighting the image emblazoned on the cloaks. The image depicted a gnarling serpent with fiery eyes, a pictorial representation of Apep, the Egyptian Spirit of Evil and Destruction.

The men in dark cloaks were shivering, and it was not just due to the cold wind.

They had committed the ultimate sacrilege. They had entered the Great Pyramid of Khufu, and each of its chambers and shafts. Those who committed this grave trespass were believed to be doomed to eternal damnation.

But there was a more immediate reason for their trepidation.

They had searched the length and breadth of the Pyramid, but had not found what they were looking for. And they needed to convey this to the tall, imposing man who was at the head of the caravan.

This tall, imposing man was Durjatep, the Chief of the secret society known as the *Kunh Kunbet*, the Dark Order of Apep.

The mere mention of the Dark Order was sufficient to give listeners the chills, but Durjatep represented an altogether different degree of menace. The glint of stony coldness in his eyes conveyed that he was capable of inflicting horrors which would put eternal damnation to shame.

‘It’s gone,’ one of the men said to Durjatep in the local dialect. ‘We were able to find the Fire Chamber in the Great Pyramid, but the...’

The man paused. A mere mortal like him was not used to taking the name of the object that had, until recently, rested in the Fire Chamber.

He was quick to continue after an impatient glance from Durjatep. ‘...the sacred object, Chief, is not there anymore. The Lightning Warrior probably took it before we reached.’

‘His name is Aphotep,’ Durjatep snarled. ‘Not Lightning Warrior.’

Durjatep let out an angry rush of breath. He had a few guesses on where Aphotep was likely to head next. Hopefully, it would not take him more than a day to narrow down the location and find Aphotep.

And take possession of the *object*.

Even Durjatep could not bring himself to say its name. It was, after all, an object which had eluded even the mightiest of conquerors over many centuries. It was the prize for which thousands of gallons of blood had been shed, kingdoms had been pillaged, and tens of thousands had been massacred.

Durjatep looked up at the sky. Over the last two nights, a bright comet had occupied the night sky, casting its ominous light over the landscape, even as the moon was covered in a misty haze.

Durjatep knew that a comet was an ancient omen of an impending catastrophe.

That was befitting in a way, considering what was going to happen.  
The Dark Order of Apep would finally fulfill its primordial destiny.



*Tanis, Egypt*

The tall, striking man in the flowing blue linen robe walked in slow, measured steps, his lips moving slowly as he chanted a hymn.

The comet had cast its glow across the night sky in its eerie splendor, and Aphotep's silhouette on the hillock gave him the appearance of an angel.

To many, Aphotep was indeed an angel. The youngest member of the Order of the Guardians, he was revered by the villagers for his wisdom.

Yet that was only one facet of Aphotep. You could not protect a two-thousand-year-old secret from adversaries as diverse as kings, warlords, dacoits and devil-worshippers with wisdom alone.

Aphotep was the *Watet Stratus*, the Lightning Warrior, the 'one who moves faster than lightning', and he was proud of it.

But right now, he was worried.

The Order of the Guardians, the *Qurators*, existed for one reason alone: to protect the secret that was concealed between the walls of the Fire Chamber.

And now, for the first time in centuries, that secret was in danger of falling into the wrong hands.

They had been betrayed. Aphotep's father, the former Lead Guardian, had been killed surreptitiously, his food poisoned. Two of the other Guardians were dead, too. He, Aphotep, was the only surviving Guardian.

And he and his men had barely managed to make it out of the Great Pyramid with the secret, the object that the Guardians had protected for centuries.

*Minew Satey*, the Fire Arrow.



Alexander, conqueror of the world, had looked far and wide for it, but had been unsuccessful. As was Pythagoras, who had heard about it at the Mystery Schools of Egypt. Theodosius I had tortured pagans across the empire, but still could not find it. It was what had destroyed the Pharaohs; it was what had brought about Cleopatra's downfall.

And all the while, it had been in the Great Pyramid, right under their noses.

*Minew Satey*, the Fire Arrow.

It was in Aphotep's possession for now. But the forces of evil were not far behind.

Aphotep clenched his fists. He would protect it with his life. And that of his loved ones, if necessary.



Aphotep looked up as a tall woman with a brisk gait, charming face and high cheekbones walked up to the hilltop. She looked every inch a warrior princess—her jaw firm, her eyes alert and her hands resting confidently on her bow.

Even in the midst of all the mayhem, Aphotep felt his heart flutter as he saw her, just as it had when he had first met Merti, exactly a year ago. Somehow, the memory made him feel vulnerable.

'The *Kunh Kunbet* has spies everywhere,' Merti said. 'They are combing the entire countryside; every village is being searched. An object so large is not easy to keep concealed for long. We must hurry.'

Aphotep nodded. The *Kunh Kunbet*, the Dark Order, were greater in number, and were close to the corridors of power, the palaces of those who controlled Egypt's destiny.

'I will go to the Oracle of Tanis,' Aphotep said. 'We will do as she says.'

The Oracle of Tanis was the spiritual mentor of the Guardians.

'I will protect the Fire Arrow till you return,' Merti said. 'With the help of the villagers.'

Aphotep sighed. Merti would almost certainly come under attack from the Dark Order.

But he had always known that she was a better warrior than him.

It was a pity that women were not allowed to formally become Guardians. *Something about a woman who has her own mind seems to unsettle folks*, he had told her. *I will change the rules once I become the Lead Guardian.*

Little had he known then that these would be the circumstances in which he would become the *Sewant*, the Lead Guardian.

As he headed out, Merti gave him a gentle hug. ‘You take care,’ she told him.

‘You too,’ he replied, his heart skipping a beat.



### *En route to the Temple of Tanis*

Aphotep wiped the sweat from his brow as he climbed up the hill to the Temple of Tanis.

It was the middle of the night. The moonlight was dim, and the stars absent, edged out by the eerie light of the comet which had been dominating the night skies.

Aphotep, however, had no time for the view, preoccupied as he was with protecting the Fire Arrow.

The Oracles of Tanis, a lineage of masters and students over many centuries, were believed to be clairvoyants who possessed visions that gave them the ability to look into both the past and the future.

Aphotep had been fortunate to partake of the vast knowledge that the Guardians possessed: about maths, astronomy, philosophy and science. The foundation upholding this knowledge was the realisation that the Ma’at, the delicate order and balance of the universe, needed to be preserved at all costs. But Aphotep was no clairvoyant.

Could the Oracle of Tanis actually look into the future? What would she say?



*Thirty minutes later...*

‘The Oracle has been expecting you,’ said the woman at the door of the Temple of Tanis.

Aphotep stepped back in surprise. How did she know?

The woman, the Oracle’s disciple, was wearing a dark blue robe. She was exquisitely beautiful, and for a second, Aphotep’s mind went back to the day when he had first met Merti. She, too, had been wearing a dark blue robe, her eyes radiating beauty and character at the same time.

Aphotep’s heart beat faster as he thought of Merti. Were she and the villagers alright?

His mind came back to the present as the disciple ushered him into a courtyard.

Aphotep immediately felt a sense of awe. The courtyard was adorned with intricate sculptures, the walls and ceiling covered with paintings of gods, demons and celestial objects. Aphotep noticed a majestic image of Horus, the God of the Sky, battling Apep, the Spirit of Evil and Chaos.

But the most striking feature was the woman seated cross-legged in a meditative posture in the centre of the courtyard. The Oracle of Tanis.

Her eyes were closed. It was the midnight hour, and the light from the comet, penetrating the misty sky, cast an unnatural glow above her head, almost like a halo.

The courtyard offered a magnificent view of the desert plains and the Nile. In the distance, Aphotep saw a sight which made him freeze.

A caravan. Comprising horses and camels.

Most likely Durjatep and the members of the Dark Order. They would be here soon.

Before Aphotep could react, he realised that the Oracle had opened her eyes.

As she looked straight at Aphotep, the disciple swiftly stepped away, out of earshot. The Oracle's words would be for Aphotep's ears alone.

Aphotep could not help but notice the calmness and intelligence in the Oracle's eyes. She was no older than thirty-five years, yet she seemed possessed by wisdom well beyond her age.

When she spoke, it seemed like a thousand spirits of the ancestors from many generations ago, and of those yet to come, of every living being, and even the inanimate objects of the universe, spoke through her.

*The Fire Chamber has been desecrated,* she said.

Aphotep nodded. He knew that the Fire Arrow, which had rested in the Fire Chamber, was a metaphor for the Ma'at, the delicate order of the universe, a veritable mirror to humankind's greed and excesses.

The Oracle continued:

*The Ma'at has been disturbed,  
An evil mist shall shroud the skies,  
Empires will fall, Darkness will prevail,  
Hell's fury shall be unleashed.*

Aphotep's heart skipped a beat. If the Ma'at had been disturbed, that spelt doom for the world. *Hell's fires once fanned have to burn themselves out*, he remembered his father telling him.

'Can this be prevented?' Aphotep asked.

The Oracle continued further:

*When the forces of evil come together,  
the forces of good must come together too.  
The Fire Arrow, the last hope for humankind, needs to be preserved,  
Until a new era dawns.*

Aphotep could sense where this was going; that an enormous responsibility was about to fall on his shoulders. He tightened his fists as he asked, 'Where do we safe-keep the Fire Arrow? The Dark Order has spies everywhere.'

The Oracle extracted a tablet from the sculpture next to her and handed it to Aphotep.

*Sail eastward across the seas  
To the temple of the Roman emperor  
Unite the Fire Arrow with its twin  
In the land of the holy river.*

The Oracle then closed her eyes and became deathly still.

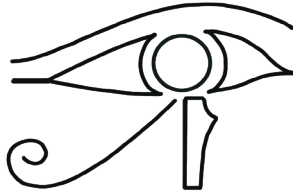
Alarmed, Aphotep called the disciple who was in the ante-room.

'She has gone into a deep trance,' the disciple said. 'She will not speak any further. You must leave now.'

Aphotep looked at the tablet which the Oracle had handed him.

It contained an image that he would have recognised even in sleep.

It was the Eye of Horus.



Below the symbols were two letters in a script that he did not recognise.



But Aphotep could not make sense of the Oracle's words. Which 'land of the holy river' was she referring to?

His mind raced. Could it refer to Mesopotamia, the land of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers? Or was it the land that the Greeks called India, also known as Indos or Indica: the land of the holy Ganges river. Both required him to 'sail eastward'.

He turned to the disciple, but before he could ask, the disciple stopped him. 'The Oracle's words are for you alone,' she said.

Aphotep looked at the caravan of soldiers drawing closer to the hill. 'The Oracle must leave this temple at once,' he said. 'The Dark Order will be here any moment.'

'She is sworn not to leave this hill,' the disciple said. 'That is the oath of the Oracle of Tanis.'

'What about you?' Aphotep asked. 'You don't need to die.'

'I am sworn not to leave her side,' she said.

Aphotep looked at the tablet. What was it for?

'You should hurry,' the disciple said. 'You are our last hope. The Ma'at, the order of the universe, depends on you.'

Aphotep reluctantly departed, the Oracle's words still ringing in his ears.

*Empires will fall, Darkness will prevail,  
Hell's fury shall be unleashed.*



*One hour later...*

The men in dark cloaks broke down the door to the temple, the ominous light of the comet highlighting the image of the gnarling serpent on their cloaks.

In the courtyard, they came across two figures deep in meditation: the Oracle and her disciple.

The Oracle opened her eyes and looked Durjatep straight in the eye.

*The Ma'at is disturbed; it is too late for you to atone*

*The gods shall never forgive you for what you have done.*

Durjatep let out a deep-throated laugh. 'I did not come here to atone. I want to know where the warrior-boy hides with the Fire Arrow.'

The Oracle simply closed her eyes.

The Chief of the Dark Order drew his sword and brought it right up to the Oracle's neck.

'I ask one last time,' he threatened. 'Tell me.'

'You have no power over me,' the Oracle responded. 'Or over anybody else. We are all mere pawns, dancing to the tunes of the elements.'

Durjatep pressed the sword into the Oracle's neck. It drew blood, and a few drops trickled down to her robes.

'I have other ways to find out,' he sneered. 'I won't hesitate to kill.'

'And I won't hesitate to die,' the Oracle said, going into a meditative trance.

Just then, a dazzling flash of light illuminated the entire night sky. The comet, which had been hovering overhead ominously the last couple of days, had exploded in a giant burst of light.

The Oracle was still in a trance when Durjatep, Chief of the Dark Order, pulled back his sword momentarily and then, with a gesture of contempt, plunged it deeper into the Oracle's neck.

With that one swift motion, Abyra Nebetah, the Oracle of Tanis, the last in a line of succession going back two thousand years, was no more.

# PART 1

## THE EYE OF HORUS

Present Day



# Chapter 1

*Present Day, Uttarakhand, Northern India*

The black Jawa motorcycle pulled up adjacent to a modest eatery by the road that led from Nainital to Delhi. Uttam Snacks, popular among locals for its chai and pakodas, was located in a busy village marketplace, and a few heads turned as a tall, young man of around thirty got off his bike and walked into it.

Dhruv Ralhan did not even look up as he made his way to a corner table. He was used to turning heads since he was a teenager. Nowadays, he simply found it amusing.

A group of three young city girls, college buddies heading back from a trip to the mountains, shot a sideways glance at the handsome young man.

‘Hot. Very hot.’

‘Yeah. Rugged and cute at the same time.’

‘Looks a bit like Virat Kohli.’

‘That explains it. I thought he looked familiar.’

As the chai arrived. Dhruv drank it slowly, savouring every sip. It felt strange, maybe even good, to be away from the maniacal frenzy of his job, where even a single idle moment could mean the difference between life and death.

He had soaked in the mood well, spending the last three weeks driving through the mountains and lakes near Nainital and Binsar.

Dhruv ordered a plate of pakodas. He could permit himself such indulgences on a holiday, he thought with a half-smile as he continued sipping.

But then he remembered the circumstances which had led to this holiday, and the smile disappeared.



There was a commotion outside as two SUVs came to a stop in the marketplace. Almost as a reflex, Dhruv reached for his revolver, only to remember that it had been taken away when he had been asked to go on leave.

He didn't need a revolver. There were at least a dozen objects in the eatery that he could use as a weapon, if the need arose. That was one of the first things he had learnt when he had joined the Shauryas, an elite unit of the Indian Army, eight years ago.

Dhruv shrugged, and got back to his chai.

A sudden hush seemed to fall over the eatery as some men got off the SUVs. Again, as a reflex, Dhruv counted: there were seven men and four were carrying guns.

There was a stampede in the marketplace as the crowd tried to disperse hurriedly.

*'Kaun hai?'* Dhruv asked the waiter.

*'Bheeshan Singh,'* the waiter's voice was quivering. *'Dreaded dacoit. Over a hundred cases of murder, rape and kidnapping. Operates from a hideout deep in the mountains. Even the police run away when he comes.'*

The owner of the eatery tip-toed to the front, gingerly attempting to down the shutters. But he ended up catching the eye of one of the men.

The man was towering and muscular, had a winding moustache and an extra swagger in his step, the demeanor of someone who was used to being obeyed.

Must be the leader of the pack, Dhruv mused. He did not need his years of field experience to guess that one.

The eatery owner practically fainted as Bheeshan's gaze bore down on him.

Bheeshan swaggered into the shop, accompanied by three henchmen, and the owner prostrated before him.

A small exchange ensued, and the owner parted with a wad of currency notes. Bheeshan chewed on some paan as his henchman counted the notes. Clearly, Bheeshan was not satisfied and the owner's expression turned progressively more fearful.

Some of the customers quietly exited the shop, trying to be unobtrusive. The young city girls, their spirit as yet unsullied by fear, continued sitting at their table.

Dhruv kept sipping on his chai. He'd had enough of interfering in stuff that didn't concern him.



Things began to get ugly. One of the henchmen slapped the waiter hard, who reeled back, barely managing to keep his balance.

Bheeshan continued chewing on his paan.

Dhruv's fingers tightened around the chai cup. He felt his muscles instinctively becoming tense, like a tiger before a hunt.

*Breathe in. Breathe out. Take it easy. Resist the urge to act,* the therapist at the Shauryas had told him.

Dhruv felt his grip on the cup loosen.

*You don't have to take on the mantle of all the world's problems,* the therapist had said.

Bheeshan's crony landed another slap on the waiter's cheek.

Dhruv looked away pointedly. He could not afford to get into trouble again.



One of the henchmen was staring unabashedly at the college girls.

One of the girls looked back with a defiant smirk. This was the twenty-first century. The age of demure women, who did not dare confront the male gaze, was long gone.

The man, all body and muscle, could not handle this affront to his masculinity. He walked towards the girls and made some comments that Dhruv could not hear. Most likely lewd comments.

Another girl replied, firmly but politely. Again, the man couldn't take it. By then, two of his armed companions had also showed up at the girls' table.

Dhruv found his grip on the cup tightening again.



Things escalated swiftly.

The muscleman slapped the first girl, while his companions pushed the other two girls. Bheeshan continued chewing on his paan, looking on almost appreciatively.

Dhruv got up from his chair.

To hell with what the therapist at the Shauryas had said.

The therapist had not heard the terrified screams in Bhatinda.

The therapist had not seen the charred bodies. Or the pleading eyes.

To hell with *breathe in, breathe out*.

In one swift motion, Dhruv aimed and threw the chai cup towards the men; a lethal weapon powered by a precise yet effortless burst of energy.

The cup, travelling at the speed of a fast cricket ball, broke squarely over the head of the muscleman who had slapped the girl, making a dramatic sound as it disintegrated into a dozen pieces. The man staggered back, disoriented.

The two men with the guns turned around.

One of them ran menacingly towards Dhruv, while the other man unstrapped his gun.

Dhruv effortlessly picked up a chair with this right hand and slammed it at the armed man who was approaching him. The man crashed to the floor in a helpless heap.

The other man had barely aimed his gun when an uppercut from Dhruv caught him in the face, dislodging a couple of his teeth and making a loud sound as his skull hit the ground. Dhruv relieved him of his gun.

The first muscleman had meanwhile taken out a revolver. Dhruv calmly walked towards him, twisted his hand and broke his wrist. The man's agonised wail filled the chai shop.

The girls had taken on the other men. One of the girls, who seemed to be trained in self-defence, landed a neat kick on the groin of one of the men, teaching him a lesson he would not forget in a hurry.

Bheeshan had finally stopped chewing on his paan, his customary swagger gone.

He was clearly not armed. He looked around, expecting support. But there was none. A crowd was watching, but from a distance.

Realising that he was on his own, Bheeshan rushed towards the revolver of one of his henchmen.

His left hand had reached within two feet of the revolver when two of his fingers were crushed by the weight of Dhruv's boots. Bheeshan yelped in pain, his cries echoing in the entire marketplace, to be talked about in the village for decades to come.

He nevertheless pulled away from Dhruv's foot, the fingers of his left hand dangling lifelessly. He charged at Dhruv with the entire weight of his massive body, letting out a menacing grunt.

Bheeshan Singh was as tall as Dhruv, much bulkier and had years of wrestling practice.

But Dhruv was quicker, sharper and knew how to use his muscles more effectively. And he had spent his entire professional life battling worthy adversaries, not scared villagers.

Dhruv effortlessly dodged Bheeshan's attack, and before the dacoit could re-orient himself, swung at his jaw viciously from the side, simultaneously kicking him just below his knees.

Bheeshan buckled over momentarily, but regained his footing and charged at Dhruv a second time. Dhruv again used his superior reflexes to evade him, and within a fraction of a second, delivered a vicious blow to Bheeshan's solar plexus.

The dacoit staggered back, stunned by the impact, gasping for breath, and was in no position to protect himself from the next punch that Dhruv landed with full momentum on his ribs.

Bheeshan's agonised scream, a result of his cracked bones, filled the marketplace as he hit the ground with a huge thud.

Three other henchmen emerged from the SUVs, but they were no match for a trained Shauryas' agent. They were also stupid enough to come into the eatery one by one.

Dhruv subdued all three of them in under two minutes. He kicked the seven bandits together into a heap in one corner of the eatery.

'Call the police,' he calmly told the waiter.



'That was one neat kick you delivered,' Dhruv told one of the girls as he made his way towards his bike after giving his statement to the police.

'Thanks,' she replied, then looked at him a bit closely.

'Hey, wait,' she called out. 'Now I know why you looked familiar. I saw your photo in the papers.'

Dhruv shot her a sideways glance as he revved up the Jawa.

'He's the guy from the Bhatinda bust, isn't he?' she asked her friends excitedly.

But Dhruv was already gone from there, his bike a mere speck in the distance.