

**VIRAT VILAS PAWAR**



## Chapter 1 Welcome To The World of Magic

Arav was a level-headed and logical man. Appearing to be in his mid-30s, he had an athletic build, was of caramel complexion, and had bushy hair. He sported a subtle beard that complemented his pronounced jawline. With an air of mystery about him, he walked tall with his bold demeanour and razor-sharp confidence. He wore clothes that set him apart -- a short kurta, and a pair of joggers were his ensemble of choice. He waved his hand towards the door, blowing it into pieces with yellow energy that shot from his hand. Not devastating, but the attack shattered the door into pieces. He entered the house and found the lights were off, except for one room. Arav quietly walked towards the room, entered, and noticed an owl trapped in a cage. The bird looked pretty calm and composed for being trapped in a rusty cage. The brown owl looked absolutely magnificent compared to a common owl. His eyes twinkled like a constellation of stars.

Arav looked around and saw a family of four in a trance. He sighed, walked towards the cage, and opened it.

“Time to go!” said Arav.

The owl hooted and perched on his shoulder.

“Right, sorry. Took me a while to find you.” Arav replied to the owl's hoot, and prepared to leave.

As he got out of the house, he looked at the owl, and said,

“Come on, knock them out of their trance. Can't leave them like this forever.”



The owl hooted and the family sitting in the room were back to normal, confused about what had happened. Arav quietly left from the house, leaving the family without any explanation.<sup>4</sup>

“Next time try and keep up with me if you don't want to be lost and captured by humans enamoured by your-beauty.” said Arav.

He then moved his hand mid-air and a hovering circle made of energy formed before him. He casually stepped into it and teleported to an empty street.

It was a quiet, but heavily windy night. Arav walked down the street towards his house, when he stopped abruptly and turned towards an alley.

“What do you have for me?” he asked.

“What do you have for me?” asked another voice in return.

“Cut it out, Sandesh! Don't make me kill the messenger. We had a deal. You're supposed to share any intel you find.” said Arav.

“Yeah, yeah! I got what you need.” said Sandesh.

Sandesh was a Vetal. He had pale skin, pointy canines, and shaggy hair. His sharp ears were hard to miss. Despite these unusual features, his hazel eyes made him look surreal. For someone trying to be inconspicuous, he was tall, skinny, and ironically wore a rainbow-coloured jacket with purple jeans.

“Thanks for addressing me by my name and not my species.” said Sandesh, with a toothy smile revealing his canines.



“Continue.” said Arav, in a rather irritated tone.

“So, word on the street is that your friend Nedarraaj is after the Naagmani again, and he's very desperate to find it. He's chasing down every possible magical being for even a tiny bit of intel regarding the Naagmani. So far, no luck, but seeing his dedication, he might just eventually find it.” said Sandesh.

“Hmm -- the Naagmani.. If he gets a hold of it, he's going to wreak havoc. He needs to be stopped.” replied Arav whilst preparing to leave.

“Thanks? Maybe? Where are your manners?” prompted Sandesh, as he saw Arav leaving.

“You're welcome!” said Arav, and left without waiting for him to reply.

“Nice! Trying to be sassy, huh? This is how you treat a humble Vetal. Real nice!” said Sandesh, in an innocent voice, as he noticed Arav leaving.

Arav ignored Sandesh as he walked away, and looked at his owl.

“How about you take a break? Fly about the open skies. I've got someone to meet.” said Arav.

The owl hooted and soared towards the sky.

He summoned a portal in a nearby alley, walked into it, and reappeared in a dense forest.

Looking around to find something or someone, he heard a voice fade in from behind.

“Hello, Arav!”



An unusually large snake slithered towards him and stopped before him. The snake hissed and slowly transformed into a woman. She wasn't dressed extravagantly, but wore just a simple snake-skin textured mantle and a tiara on her head. Her thick, lustrous hair was done up in multiple long braids, fitting for a queen such as her, making her look modest yet fierce

“Oh queen.. my respects..” said Arav, bowing down.

“So Arav, what brings you here? That too at such short notice?” asked Naagrani curiously.

“It's Nedarraj.” replied Arav.

“Oh.. that selfish bastard who took my husband away from me. I hear he is after our Naagmani again.” replied the queen bitterly.

“That's right. Since his last encounter with the Naagmanavs, he's been laying low, but now he's back at it. I'm here not just to warn you, but also to reaffirm my support, should the need arise.” replied Arav.

“Our last encounter may have been years ago, the wounds however, remain fresh. We still mourn the loss of the King of Snakes...” said Naagrani melancholically.

“We weren't prepared the last time, but now we know what's coming. Stay vigilant.” replied Arav.

“Thank you, Arav.” said Naagrani, heaving a deep sigh.

Arav nodded, and teleported back to the city..

He reached his house. It was a big place, with sculptures of



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Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali. He prayed for a bit, then got up and walked towards his room.

Nedarraj and Arav were trained by the same Vidyadhara – Guru Sikandar Swami, regarded highly as one of the strongest Vidyadharas ever born, and had died a mysterious death.

After getting out of magic school, Nedarraj had decided to take control of the magical beings and rule the world, as he believed man was meant to rule, and the world had to be kept in check by someone who knew everything about everything. His hunger for more power made him cruel. He used magical beings one after the other for his greed and disrupted the flow of nature. As it is said - Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Arav wasn't as powerful as him, but he knew he had to stop Nedarraj, else all the knowledge he had amassed over the years would be in vain.

“Nedarraj, you've done more damage than imaginable. You need to be stopped, and I will stop you, no matter what...” said Arav, standing on his balcony, overlooking a beautiful view of the city.

### **Elsewhere...**

Nedarraj stood atop a hill, gazing at the vast, dense forest. He meditated.

“Master...” a shaky voice interrupted him from behind.

“What?” asked Nedarraj, turning around.

Someone stood in front of him. It was shapeless and floated in the air, translucent, surrounded with light mist. Nedarraj had summoned a Pishacha, but it looked weak and helpless.

“Did you find what I asked you to?” asked Nedarraaj.

“No, master. I have been looking for it for a very long time, but am unable to find it. I am not strong enough. I haven't consumed anything for days. If you feed me a human soul, it would be easier for me.” he said, as his voice broke out of weakness, but mostly fear.

Nedarraaj looked at the Pishacha straight in his misty face. His knowledge and skills were incomparable. He had conquered many magical beings; he knew exactly who to set against whom to get what he wanted. He was quite a looker, and so could easily come across as endearing, and no one would doubt for a second. He had brown eyes, thick hair with a salt and pepper shade, a dense beard, and a sharp nose that accentuated his features and made him look majestic. Over the years, not only had he amassed great knowledge and skill, but also an impressive physique. He often wore a simple white shirt and black trousers that he pulled off well. Despite these delightful features and attributes, his plans were contrastingly evil.

He reached into his pocket and slowly pulled out something. The Pishacha noticed this and tried to flee. But before it could even move, Nedarraaj pulled out a diamond-crusted knuckle duster from his pocket, and punched him hard. The shapeless mist-filled being cracked open and fell to the ground.

“Worthless! You know what *is* worthy, though? This beautiful knuckle duster made of the horn of a diamond-horned rhino. Their horns possess the strength and indestructibility to annihilate anything in their path. It's a pity I had to kill the last

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one to make this weapon. But here's your reward-- you'll never starve again. Your reward for being a useless tool. Die!" he said, as he looked at the Pishacha lying on the ground, dying a slow death.

He stood up and looked back at the forest.

"Naagmani, here I come!" he whispered, looking at the dark forest ahead of him



## **Chapter 2**

### **Swami Sikandar Gurukul**

#### **(The School of Magical Studies)**

The Gurukul was situated in the lap of the dense forest of Gadchiroli. It was far from the reach of the common man.

Guru Sikandar Swami was meditating in his room in front of a fire. He looked old, but could take on anyone if he wished. His long grey hair was tied up in a bun over his head, giving him the appearance of a Sadhu. His attire was very common-- a simple saffron kurta and pyjama.

There was pin drop silence with him being alone in the room. He kept chanting, "Om Namah Shivay" as he closed his eyes. The fire flickered uncontrollably, and suddenly someone appeared to emerge out of the flames. The Guru calmly opened his eyes and looked at this man. He stood there, unperturbed by the fire. The fire wasn't just below, it also moved around him, like it was one with his body. He wore a short dhoti with his upper body uncovered. His eyes looked like they were filled with molten lava, and his hair was ablaze, floating in the air.

"Namastey, Angiri! Thank you for blessing me with your presence." said the Guru, as he joined his hands in front of the Angiri.

"Namastey, Vidyadhara! You always have my blessings." said the Angiri with a pleasant smile.

The Angiris were descendants of Lord Agni (God of Fire), and are powerful celestial beings who have unmatched



pyrokinetic powers (Ability to control fire) . They are regarded as deities who are close to the gods in heaven. Angiris are believed to watch over everyone in contact with the fire element.

“How can I be of service, Angiri?” asked Guru Sikandar Swami.

“There is a matter I would like to bring to your attention.” he replied, and got out of the Yagya that he emerged from.

“It has been observed that someone from your school has been using fire to gain forbidden magic, and planning to summon powerful artefacts. We have given your school the authority to do whatever necessary, as part of education and protection against negative forces. But this.. this is increasing each day. Please look into this matter seriously. Things aren't looking good.” replied Angiri.

Guru Sikandar let out a sigh, and said,

“Please accept my sincerest apologies, O' descendant of Lord Agni. I am aware of who is responsible for this...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Angiri interrupted him by saying,

“Then stop him. This must not continue. At least not in your school. Our boundaries lie within the confines of our educational institutes and temples, else we would have dealt with this matter ourselves.” he replied with a commanding voice.

“I give you my word. I will take care of this.” replied Guru

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Sikandar and joined his hands again.

Angiri nodded, and transformed into flames and returned to the Yagya.

It was almost sunset. He got out of his room and walked towards the open lawn, barefoot, where he saw a young boy meditating under a tree.

“Arav...” Guru Sikandar whispered.

Young Arav opened his eyes, and immediately bowed before his teacher.

“Guruji, what can I do for you?” he asked humbly.

“Nothing, I just came to check on you. Hope you are practicing your chants well.” said Guru Sikandar, as he touched Arav's head.

“Yes, Guruji. I was able to open a teleportation portal, but it didn't stay open long.” he replied, with an unsatisfied tone.

“That is fine. In due time, son.” assured Guru Sikandar.

There were some loud chanting going on a little far away, it quickly grabbed their attention and Guru Sikandar followed the sound of these aggressive chants. They both reached the backyard of the school, where they saw young Nedarraaj chanting unholy mantras, sitting before a Yagya.

Guru Sikandar raised his hand in the air, and the fire immediately got put out. This made Nedarraaj quickly get up, frustrated.

“What are you doing, my child?” asked Guru Sikandar.

“I was about to forge the 'Stone of Rush'. I was so close.” Nedarraaj yelled out.

“Nedarraaj! These weapons are not meant for us to use. They belong to gods, demons, and a select few magical beings. We are humans. We are not allowed to forge these weapons.” replied Guru Sikandar in a loud tone.

“But Guruji, that could save us from death. The gods don't need it, the demons don't need it, nor do the magical beings. We need it the most. We humans are powerless before them.” Nedarraaj cried out loud, as he missed the chance to forge a powerful weapon.

“One cannot defeat death. It is inevitable. It comes when it is time. Summoning things that don't belong to us will only lead to misuse, Nedarraaj.” asserted Guru Sikandar, as he walked towards him.

“An Angiri visited me today. He told me someone from the Gurukul is using fire to summon dark magic. I know it is you, and I want you to stop this right now.” said Guru Sikandar, as he placed his hand firmly on Nedarraaj's shoulder.

“Guruji, I do not wish to use dark magic to harm anyone. I'm only using it to prepare for a time when the magical beings might attack us, and I know someday they will.” he said, as he looked into his teacher's eyes.

“Harm? Attack? What are you talking about, Nedarraaj? The magical beings won't harm us. This is what dark magic does to you. I understand it is very tempting, but you need to control this temptation. This will lead you down the wrong





path.” said Guru Sikandar, trying to keep his calm.

Nedarraj did not argue. He was angry, but suppressed it. He didn't say anything, and stood quietly, hanging his head. He knew he had to shut up, or else he had to face the wrath of his otherwise calm teacher.

“Get to your quarters, and straight to bed. You will sleep hungry tonight.” said Guru Sikandar in a firm tone.

Nedarraj left the place, thumping his feet hard on the ground.

Arav, who was younger than him, looked at his teacher with curious eyes, and a mind filled with doubts.

“Is dark magic really that wrong, Guruji?” he asked innocently.

“Dark and light magic are two sides of the same coin. The difference is -- dark magic does more harm than light magic, and so people tend to gravitate towards the latter. Dark magic is easier to perform, but the price you must pay later is high. On the other hand, light magic requires years of practice and a pure heart.” asserted Guru Sikandar, as he held Arav's hand and walked him out.

### **THE NEXT MORNING...**

Nedarraj stood near a river and watched the beautiful sunrise. Guru Sikandar Swami walked up and stood beside him.

Nedarraj immediately bowed down to his teacher.

“Nedarraj, what are your thoughts on dark magic? What is it that you wish to achieve?” Guru Sikandar asked him politely.

“Guruji, you know how strong these magical beings are.

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What if someday they turn against us? What do we have as defence? My plans are not evil, but I don't want humans to suffer. Dark magic gives access to powers that can help us defeat them and stay alive."

"But what do you have against them? Has any of them from the Gurukul ever bothered you?" asked Guru Sikandar, concerned about his pupil's potentially sinister train of thought.

"Nobody has bothered me yet, but you are well aware of their powers and abilities. Faced off against them, we won't last even a minute. They're always going to be a step ahead of us because of their abilities, and we wouldn't stand a chance."

"What's with the cynicism, Nedarraaj?" asked Guru Sikandar.

"Guruji, I believe this planet is meant for humans and we are supposed to rule. Look at how we have adapted. Magical beings can live here, but they shouldn't have any advantage over us, and we'd all get along just fine. The gods left them here for our assistance, and they should stay that way -- at our service." and stopped after pouring his thoughts out non-stop.

"Aeons ago, humans thought the same way, and it led to this secret war. You are not thinking straight Nedarraaj. You should get a grip. It's your time to go and explore the world out there. A world full of possibilities and people who may need your help." replied Guru.

"Are you abandoning me, Guruji?" asked Nedarraaj in a worried tone.

"No, my child. It's your 18th birthday today. You are an adult

now, and I can in no way govern your opinions or thoughts. Regardless of everything, you are my strongest student, and I am sure you will make me proud.” he replied with a smile on his face.

They both went back to the Gurukul.

Nedarraj took a final look at the Gurukul where he was raised, touched his chest, as he felt his heart racing due to being emotionally overwhelmed.

### **Present Day...**

Nedarraj stood atop the hill, gazing at the forest, as he touched his chest and felt the “*Stone of Rush*” hanging around his neck.

“Nedarraj...” a female voice came from behind him. The voice was unusually seductive.

“Hey, Nishija!” he said, as he turned around.

A very beautiful woman stood before him, she was the epitome of beauty and sensuality. Modestly attired in a simple jacket over a top, and jeans, with knee-length boots, long lustrous hair, and voluptuous curves that could make any man fall for her.

“What are you thinking?” asked Nishija, as she caressed Nedarraj’s shoulder.

“Nothing, really. Just reliving some past memories. Enough about me. How are you?” he asked, and grabbed her waist, pulling her closer.

“Beautiful as always. Ready to die for you.. as always”, she

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said, as she bit her lips.

“Glad to hear. Help me find the Naagmani, will you?” he asked.

“Of course!” she replied, and walked towards the cliff of the hill.

She closed her eyes, and levitated in the air. She continued levitating and moved towards the forest. She looked back at Nedarraaj and smiled at him, but this time her hair was hovering in the air, and her eyes were glowing red. She closed her eyes again, and proceeded towards the dense forest.

“Stupid witch!” whispered Nedarraaj, as he watched her enter the woods, and scoffed.



## Chapter 3 Naagmani

Arav woke up to the sound of something knocking loudly on his window, repeatedly in quick succession. Almost like a woodpecker pecking. Arav quickly got up and walked to the window, rubbing his sleepy eyes, vision still blurry. He moved the curtains, and the harsh sunlight beamed upon him. Before he could open the window, he joined his hands and looked at the sun from the translucent window, and prayed for a few seconds.

He then quickly opened the window, annoyed by the continuous hammering. As soon as he did, his owl gushed inside and slapped Arav with his wing and hovered before him.

“What the hell! What was that for?” he asked.

The owl hooted out loud, and went to perch on his T-shaped post. He continued hooting.

“I’m sorry, man.” he replied, as he shut the window.

The owl hooted and looked elsewhere.

“Come on, no need to be so rude.” he said, shocked at what the owl said.

While Arav and his owl were at it, his doorbell rang. Both of them quickly looked towards the door, anticipating danger. Arav's eyes glowed white as he looked at it. He couldn't see through the door, but it gave him a vision where he could see people in energy form, kind of like thermal vision. He sighed



and his eyes turned back to normal.

He opened the door and a girl hopped inside with a lot of excitement. She was beautiful. Her big, black eyes gleamed in the sunlight, and her mesmerizing beautiful long hair waved in the air. She also had a cute, small nose, and her full rosy lips complemented her rosy cheeks.

“What’s up, Mr. Magician?” she asked Arav, as she walked towards the owl.

“Stop calling me that...” said Arav, as he saw her rushing towards the owl to pet him.

Before she could even reach him, he flew away.

“One day.. I’m gonna pet your owl! Why don’t you give him a cute name? I’ve been telling you for so long.” she asked, turning to Arav.

“Well, because his name is owl. He prefers it that way. That aside, how are you here at this time? No patients today?” he asked.

“I just thought of coming to see you. So, here I am.” said Lisha, as she sat on the couch nearby.

“I am going to freshen up, but I may have to leave at any moment. So, I can’t commit to spending much time, okay?” said Arav.

“Okie-dokie!” she said and made herself comfortable.

Arav went to his room, and the owl hooted.

“It’s fine! She’s been our friend for so long. Probably the first



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person I met after I moved to this town.” said Arav, as he grabbed a towel.

The owl hooted again.

“Okay, allow me to rephrase. *My* friend for so long.” said Arav, and left for the bathroom.

After a while, he got back to the hall and found Lisha engrossed in her phone.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Just reading something about celestials. Interesting blog.” she said, and handed him the phone.

He looked at the name of the writer, and said,

“*Dr. LSD?* You need to stop reading blogs written by these hippies who pop acid and claim to have seen gods.”

“Then why don't you teach me magic? I really want to learn it. It's kinda cool, you know? Since the day you saved my life from that misty ghost, I've been super stoked to learn magic.” she said, getting up.

“I wish it were that easy, but I can't put you in harm's way. You're too precious to me.” he said, and smiled.

His smile was interrupted by the beep of his phone. He checked the phone and nodded. His owl quickly came and perched on his shoulder.

“It's Sandesh. As per his source, Nedarraaj has finally figured out that the Naagmani is in the forest of Gadchiroli. We should leave now.” he said to his owl, and he hooted.

“No, we're not teleporting. I'm taking public transit. Can't have him detecting my energy. Let's use the element of surprise to our advantage. You can start now, we will meet at our fixed point.” replied Arav.

The owl hooted, spread his wings, and flew out of the window.

Lisha looked at him with a big smile, and asked,

“Can I come? Please?”

“Not a chance! You've no idea where we're headed. Please go back and tend to your clients. We'll catch up as soon as I'm back.” he replied, and opened the door for her to leave.

“Fine, fine!” she replied and got up to exit. She hugged him tightly, and and said,

“Mr. Magician, please come back safe.”

“I will!” said Arav, and moved away, trying to hide his blush.

After hours, he finally reached Gadchiroli Railway Station. He walked a short distance away from the station, and found his owl already waiting for him.

The owl looked at him and hooted.

“Stop taunting. I'm just a human who knows magic, not a magical owl who can fly at great speeds.” he replied, as he felt the cold breeze of Gadchiroli brushing over his skin.

“So, did you do anything productive, since you got here so early?” he asked.

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The owl hooted again.

“Great! It's easier for us to track them down now.” said Arav, as he looked in the direction of the forest.

Arav knew going against Nedarraj wouldn't be easy, but he had no choice. A lot depended on him, as he had to be stopped from gaining control over the Naagmani.



## Chapter 4 To The Land of Naagmanavs

Arav took every step carefully, as he walked through Gadchiroli forest. He knew Nedarraaj could be very close to the Naagmani, or may have even acquired it, but he had to take his chances. He had to stop Nedarraaj.

The forest was thick and dense, getting colder the deeper they went. The trees were tall, and they interconnected with each other. They were so thick that light could barely enter the forest. Just a few sun rays, but sufficient enough for them to walk through the perilous forest.

As they kept walking, the owl hooted something into Arav's ears.

“Yes, I know. Somebody's been following us for a while.” he replied.

Arav moved his hand towards his belt, which had a scabbard hooked to it. He uttered a chant, causing rainbow-like light to break out of his hand, that turned into a silver dagger in the scabbard. He continued walking, pretending to be oblivious. He grabbed the handle of the silver dagger and sluggishly pulled it out. He quickly turned around, and blindly threw the dagger in the direction of the pursuer.

The dagger flew and pierced through a tree bark.

“What the hell! You?” exclaimed Arav.

The owl hooted, surprised.

It was Lisha who was standing in front of him. Just inches

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away from where the dagger passed, cutting through the air. She froze as she saw him throw the dagger at her. She didn't know what to do. Her feet felt glued to the ground.

"How the hell did you get here?" asked Arav, as he rushed towards Lisha, out of surprise, but mostly anger.

"I. I. I." she couldn't say anything else, as she had just had a near-death experience.

"You followed me?" he asked.

"Yes." she whispered under her nose.

"Goddammit! Do you even know where you've brought yourself?" he asked.

Lisha stood still, not moving, or even trying to say anything. She wore a blue and orange trekking jacket and shorts, and carried a backpack that looked overstuffed.

"You think we're out on a picnic?" he said.

"Umm, yeah, I thought it would be cool to physically see the Naagmani. And did you just throw your dagger at me? I would've turned to dust had it hit me. What the hell's wrong with you?" she yelled.

"Keep your voice down. You have no idea where we are." said Arav, looking around to make sure they hadn't attracted unwanted attention.

"Man, I can't even ask you to leave. It's getting dark and it's going to get darker soon." he said, realising how bad the situation had gotten.

Arav heard some movement on the ground, and quickly turned to check what it was. It was nothing. He turned back to Lisha, and saw her losing her balance. Her body fell to the ground with a thud.

“Owl, secure the perimeter.” he said. The owl quickly flew atop a branch with urgency.

He held her in his arms, looking for clues. That’s when he noticed two puncture wounds on her left leg.

“Shit! She’s been bitten.” he said, and reached into his side pack to pull something out. But before he could grab something, he started feeling giddy and lost his balance, dropping to the ground.

After a while, he opened his eyes and found himself tied to a rope. His vision was blurry, his head was heavy, and he couldn’t hear properly from the buzzing in his ears. He struggled to see what was around him, but could partially see two men standing in front of him, with spears in their hands. They looked like strong men with rugged features. They were Naagmanavs-- snakes who could shape-shift into human form -- a combination of fearsome snakes and humans.

“What? Where... Where am I?” he said, fumbling.

He looked around and saw Lisha unconscious and tied to a rope. He also saw his owl trapped in a cage, where he too was unconscious.

“Wake up, you devil!” said one of the men, as he splashed water on him.

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“What the hell man!” exclaimed Arav, as the spine-chilling water touched his skin.

Hearing the loud noise, Lisha came back to her senses.

He tried to chant something, but he couldn't finish the spell.

“Your spells won't work here, mage!” said the same man , as he looked at Arav struggling.

One of the Naagmanavs looked at him, and replied,

“We were told by the queen that you and your witch will come here to steal our Naagmani. Thank Lord Shiva we found you.”

“Witch? Do I look like a witch to you?” yelled out Lisha as she had gotten back to her senses.

“Seriously?” said Arav, turning towards her.

Lisha said nothing.

Arav then turned to the Naagmanavs standing in front of him, and said,

“What is wrong with you? She was talking about Nedarraaj. I am here to help you all. My name is Arav. Free me before it's too late.”

“Lie all you want, but you die today. We shall avenge the death of our King!”

“You Jay-Viru are going to put everyone in danger.” exclaimed Arav, struggling to free himself.

One of the Naagmanav rushed towards Arav with his spear to pierce him, when he suddenly stood like a statue, staring at

nothing. The other man too was zoned out.

Arav quickly turned towards his owl and saw him performing his magic of putting them in hypnosis.

“Bingo!” said Arav, as he continued struggling.

Suddenly the ropes fell off and both of them were free. Arav looked around and found Naagrani walking towards them with a few other Naagmanavs.

“Please excuse my men. I had given everyone standing orders to capture anyone who fits the description.” replied Naagrani.

“Wait, if you're here, where is the Naagmani?” asked Arav, getting up quickly.

“Don't worry, it's safe in the Snake Court.” replied Naagrani.

“No, no, no! This is bad news. Nedarraaj is here already.” exclaimed Arav.

“What?” replied Naagrani, with a voice filled with shock and anger.

“Yes! We must return to the Snake Court before he reaches there.” said Arav.

Naagrani looked at Arav, and said,

“We are transforming into our snake form in order to move faster. However, I am leaving behind one of my strongest soldiers. He will guide you.” she said and transformed into a snake along with the others and left quickly.

Lisha was shocked to see people turning into snakes. It was



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the first time in her life witnessing transformation magic. She was speechless. Her eyes and mouth were wide open.

Arav looked at her, and said,

“Look, this is going to get very ugly. I think you should stay here. You'll be safer.”

“What? No. I'm not hiding in this spooky cave in the middle of a forest.” she replied.

“Look, you can't keep up. You'll only slow me down. I'm gonna leave the owl here. He'll protect you in case something happens.” he replied.

“Right?” he asked the owl, and he hooted in agreement.

“Sorry to interrupt you, we have to leave now, if we don't, there is no point in leaving at all” interrupted the Naagmanav assigned to guide him..

“Alright! Let's leave!” replied Arav, and looked at Lisha.

“Don't make that face! We'll talk about this when this is over.” he said, and rushed after the Naagmanav.

After slaughtering dozens of Naagmanavs, Nedarraj and Nishija had finally reached the Snake Court. It was the residence of the queen, huge and dark from the side but calm enough.

The queen reached outside the court and saw all the wounded Naagmanavs. She was filled with anger. She pulled out the sword from her scabbard and rushed inside to stop him.

Nedarraj held a very thick sword, curved like the crescent

moon, with an edge so sharp, it could slice the air. He stabbed the last soldier and looked prepared to advance.

“You don't deserve to wield that weapon.” said Naagrani, looking at the Chandrahasa sword in his hand.

“ It belonged to the mighty Asura Raavan, and was gifted to him by your supreme Lord Shiva. After Raavan, it remained with the Asuras, and now *I* possess this sword. I have earned this.” he replied, as he cleaned the blood off the sword with his bare hands.

Arav ran behind the Naagmanav. He knew what would happen if he didn't reach on time, so he didn't stop to even catch his breath. Arav ran as if the world depended on him. A part of it certainly did.



## Chapter 5 Naagmani

Naagrani had given Nedarraaj a good fight. Both of them were equally wounded. The queen rushed towards him with her sword in hand, and leapt to strike him. Nedarraaj quickly dodged, and struck his sword swiftly, slashing her stomach a bit. She landed on the floor and held the wound to stop the bleeding, unfazed by the pain.

“You’re not getting the Naagmani. Not while I’m still alive.” she said, as she breathed heavily.

“Then I’ll have to kill you first.” said Nedarraaj, and charged towards her.

He swung his sword around her neck, but the queen was quick to block it with her’s, and punched him in his chest. He coughed as the Snake Queen had immense power in her fist.

“What have the Naagmanavs done with the Naagmani for over a millennium? Just preserved it as a showpiece? It’s more than that. It holds power beyond imagination.” said Nedarraaj, as he gripped on to his sword.

“Now *you* will explain to me what a Naagmani is capable of? It may just be a weapon to you, but for us, it is something we revere and worship. This is beyond your understanding.” replied the queen, as she pointed her sword towards him.

Nedarraaj lowered the sword, and said,

“Queen, I do not wish to kill you. Give me the Naagmani, and nobody dies today. I need it for a greater purpose, unlike you all, who want to keep it around like a trophy.”

“Over my dead body.” she said, and advanced towards Nedarraj.

“Okay! You chose this!” he replied, and paced towards her with his sword up in the air.

The queen dropped her sword and quickly started chanting something in 'Sarpabhasa' (The language of snakes). Nedarraj stopped to figure out what the queen was up to. She raised both her hands towards him and a powerful energy blasted out of her. The energy came in the form of a huge snake that blew out with great force and whacked Nedarraj out of the cave, sending tremors across the ground.

Arav felt it, despite being far away.

“What just happened?” wondered Arav, balancing himself.

Nedarraj lay on his back, bleeding and grunting in pain as he was hit by the strongest attack of Naagrani, which had drained all her energy. She had dropped on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

Nedarraj looked around, and saw the Pishachas he had summoned were fighting the Naagmanavs, while Nishija attacked them with combat magic.

He touched the pendant that was hanging by his neck. As soon as he did, it seemed like he was pumped with a huge dose of adrenaline. He jumped back quickly and stood on his feet. Despite being badly wounded, the spike in adrenaline kept him going. Nedarraj couldn't stand straight and felt like a huge weight was put on his shoulders, but he was still standing, undaunted.

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“Now you've pissed me off. I'm going to send your hissing soul where your husband must be whining about how I whooped his scaly ass.” he said, as he walked towards the queen who was now powerless.

“Oh, Lord Shiva! Help us.” she whispered, as she saw her death approaching.

Nedarraj picked up his Chandrahasa and approached the queen, slowly, but steadily.

“Any last words?” he asked, gripping his sword.

“I curse you. You will die a slow death.” she cursed him with rage filled eyes as tears rolled down.

“That's a lifetime from now.” he said, and moved his sword to behead the queen.

He swung his sword with great force, and was about to behead her, when he looked up and saw Arav diving towards him with the *'Dagger of Indra'* in his hands. Nedarraj gasped as he beheld this sight. For a second, he felt as if a thunderbolt was about to strike him. He could feel the electricity flowing in the air as Arav reached near him. Nedarraj experienced fear, which was a rare emotion for him.

Arav yelled, as he dived with all his force with the enchanted weapon and stabbed him in the chest. As the dagger pierced through his body, he felt an enormous surge of thunder passing through him, causing him unspeakable pain. Arav pulled out the dagger and kicked him to the ground.

Nedarraj trembled in pain, feeling the force of a thousand lightning bolts inside his body. He had turned black and blue,

and was about to die.

“You left me with no choice. Look at yourself. What have you turned into, Nedarraaj?” said Arav, breathing rapidly.

Nedarraaj couldn't utter a word. He was experiencing a seizure, and was drained after the attack.

Arav looked around and saw the Naagmanavs gaining an upper hand over the Pishachas.

As Nedarraaj grunted in pain, he looked at the Dagger, and said,

“Obviously, someone who got personal attention from a biased Guruji will definitely get such perks. Unlike me, who was abandoned for having a revolutionary mindset.

“Think whatever you want. This ends today.” said Arav, ignoring his taunt.

Nedarraaj looked around and saw that Nishija was held by the Naagmanavs, and she too was badly wounded.

“Nishija! Grab the Naagmani and get us out of here.” yelled Nedarraaj.

Nishija disappeared into the wind as soon as she heard Nedarraaj. The Queen gasped, as she realised where the witch might have teleported.

“ARAV!!! THE NAAGMANI!!! And my son....the prince!” she screamed at the top of her voice, despite being completely exhausted.

“I got this!” he said, and ran towards the broken cave where they hid the Naagmani.

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The 7 year old prince stood against the wall as he saw the witch approaching the Naagmani.

“Get out of my way, child. Don't waste my time.” she said.

Arav reached there just as Nishija had scared the Prince.

“You better stay the hell away from him,!” screamed Arav as he approached.

“I don't care if he lives or dies. I am here for this!” she replied, pointing at the Naagmani.

“Run!” yelled Arav at the Prince, and he followed it without wasting a second.

She was astonished by its grace and quickly held it in her ugly hands. As soon as she did, her skin started peeling off. She screamed in agony, but she had to teleport back to Nedarraaj and rescue him too.

Before she could teleport, Arav dashed her, making the Naagmani fall on the ground.

He quickly got up and tried to grab the Naagmani, when she grabbed his leg, and pulled him down.

“You stupid human. You cannot touch it. You will turn to dust without proper enchantment.” she said, as he struggled to grab his leg.

“I don't care.” he said, and grabbed the Naagmani with his bare hand. As he did, the Naagmani glowed brighter. It illuminated like never before.

The dust settled and a huge light explosion occurred from inside the cave, but Nishija had shielded herself with her

forcefield.

She looked at Arav and was astounded to see him. He was hovering a few inches above the ground with the Naagmani in his hand and his eyes glowed. She saw a bright light behind him that looked like a huge snake with multiple heads. It looked godly, but scary for her. She quickly teleported to Nedarraaj.

“Where is the Naagmani? What was that explosion?” he asked.

She was so weak, she couldn't even talk properly.

“I.. The.. Naagmani.. Arav contained the Naagmani. I saw the projection of 'Sheshnaag' behind him. I cannot fight this...” she said, as she was trying hard to stay conscious.

“Get us out of here. Now!” he commanded her, and she instantly teleported.

All the Naagmanavs were shocked to hear that a man touched the Naagmani and still breathed. Two Naagmanavs helped the queen get up, and all of them rushed inside the cave.

Lisha finally reached there and followed the others to the cave.

What they saw in front of them was totally divine. Everyone was speechless after this sight. Everyone, including the queen, dropped down on their knees and joined hands.

Arav was hovering in the air as he held the Naagmani in his right hand, and behind him, they saw the projection of the divine all-powerful King of the serpents – Sheshnaag. Arav's eyes were glowing as bright as two Suns.



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“What the hell! The Sheshnaag is real?” Lisha said to herself, as she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Arav raised his hand towards the Naagmanavs, as if he was blessing them, and the next moment his eyes stopped glowing and he dropped down on the ground.

The queen rushed towards him and checked his pulse.

“Oh, thank almighty Shiva!” she said, glad to know he was still alive. She commanded the guards to pick him up and escort him to safety.

She then looked at Lisha and the owl, and said,

“You two, please be our guest. Wait until Arav regains consciousness.”

Lisha nodded.

Arav lay on a flat marble surface. It looked like some kind of energy was passing from the marble to Arav which healed him.

Lisha and the owl sat beside him, and the queen stood near them.

Lisha looked at the queen and said,

“It was nice to meet you, queen. I have only read about your type till now, but this is the first time I'm seeing a real Naagrani. This is unbelievable!”

“You don't look like a witch. Nor do you sound like an Apsara. What are you? Human?” she asked.

“Thank you for not assuming I'm a witch. Yes, I'm just human.” replied Lisha.

“Very brave of you to accompany Arav for this task,” said the queen.

“That’s something I’ll have to handle once he wakes up.” she said to herself, looking at Arav.

After a little while, Arav opened his eyes and saw the queen and the Prince looking at him.

“What.. What happened? Is the Naagmani safe? Is the Prince safe?” he asked even before he could sit straight.

“Yes, everyone is fine.” she replied.

“Thank god!” he said, and dropped on his back to rest.

“Thank you, Arav!” said the queen.

Arav gave the queen a smile and rested his head, as there was nothing to worry about anymore.

After a while Arav was ready to leave with Lisha and his owl. They all gathered near the huge cave with everyone present.

“I cannot express how obliged I am, Arav. You make me believe in humans. Thank you!” said the Queen.

“Naagrani, I barely did anything. If it weren’t for you, Nedarraaj would have fled with the Naagmani. You’re the strongest person I know, and I am sure the entire Naag community is fortunate to have a leader like you.” he replied with a smile.

“Barely did anything? You saved my life, held the Naagmani with your bare hands, and ultimately we saw the aura of Sheshnag behind you. How did you do that?.” she asked.

Arav was clueless about this himself. He said,

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“I have no idea. There was just one thing on my mind-- to protect the Naagmani. All I remember is grabbing the Naagmani, that's all.” said Arav.

“You took a risk nobody would. The true strength of a man is his will to risk his life for others.” said Naagrani with a smile.

“I am willing to take hundreds of such risks and promise to be there whenever the need arises.” said Arav, with a voice filled with confidence.

If you ever need any help, we won't think twice either. The entire Naagmanav army will stand by your side.” promised the queen.

Arav opened a portal and was ready to teleport.

“This was one hell of an adventure! I don't believe this.” said Lisha, as he looked at the Naagmanavs waving them goodbye.

“Yeah! You and me, we need to talk.” said Arav, as he waved back at them, and they teleported back to his house.

“Sit over there.” he said to Lisha, as he pointed towards the couch and he sat opposite to her.

It was the first time ever in the history of Naagmanavs that someone had held the Naagmani in his bare hands, and had the projection of Sheshnaag behind him. Arav had managed to stop Nedarraaj. But he knew he was coming back, stronger, and with someone even more cruel next time.



## Chapter 6 The Past

Arav sat in front of Lisha as she sat quietly, and looked at his angry face. The owl had been hooting for a while.

“What is he saying?” she asked.

“Something you probably don't want to hear.” he replied with a straight face.

“I'm sorry!” she said, as she held both her ears with her hands.

“What the hell were you thinking? I explicitly told you to leave, didn't I? Do I keep looking back to see if I'm being followed by you?” he asked.

“I didn't know we'd be getting into something like that.” she replied.

“Keep your curiosity in check. This little adventure of yours could have cost a lot. You saw what happened there, right?” asked Arav.

“Yeah...” she replied in a low tone.

“You could have gotten yourself killed. Nedarraaj knows you're associated with me, which means he can use you as leverage against me. This is what happens.” said Arav, as she banged his fist on the armrest.

“No. I don't think he'll do that. Why would he?” she replied sheepishly.

“Right, because you know him better.” said Arav, as he got off and went towards his balcony, worried and stressed.

“So what now?” asked Lisha.

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“Now? Nothing. You've become a freaking liability to me. Your negligence has added one more burden in my life.” he replied, without looking at her.

“I'm a burden to you?” she asked, feeling hurt.

“After your stupid decision of following me into the Kingdom of Naag? Yes! Stop being excited about things that are beyond comprehension of your tiny brain.” he replied loudly.

“You should think before speaking...” said Lisha, as she got up from the chair.

“I don't care.” replied Arav.

“As if you ever did.” said Lisha softly, and prepared to leave.

Arav saw this from the corner of his eye, but didn't react. She slammed the door and left his apartment in anger, but mostly out of hurt.

The owl hooted as she left.

“Was I? But wasn't that necessary?” replied Arav.

The owl hooted again.

Hearing this, he heaved a sigh and crashed on the sofa nearby. He was so exhausted, he fell asleep immediately.

He woke up the next morning as the sun rays entered the bedroom. Before setting foot on the floor, he prayed to the sun. After finishing up with his morning chores, he sat on his chair, looking outside his window. The city seemed calm, and he knew he had some time with him until Nedarraaj came back with his new plans.

The owl hooted at Arav who was busy gazing outside.

“I get it. How many times are you going to point that out?” he replied.

Arav sighed, got off his chair, and opened a portal. He walked in it and it disappeared.

Lisha opened the latch of her clinic's door and was startled seeing Arav sitting on the couch in front of her chair.

“You? How did you even get... well, nevermind. What are you here for? An apology?” she asked, as she got inside and shut the door.

“No, I'm here for a session.” replied Arav.

“I don't take sessions without prior appointments. Please book your slot 24 hours prior.” she said, sitting in her chair.

“I already have an appointment. Check your schedule .” replied Arav with a plastic smile on his face.

“I know my schedule, thank you...” she said, opening the calendar on her iPad.

“What? How did you? Really? Magic works on technology as well?” she asked as she saw Arav's name in her schedule.

“Well, it works on everything that exists.” replied Arav.

“Now I'm your client, and you are bound to provide me your services against the payment I have already made.” he added.

“What do you want, Arav? If this is about last night, let it be. This wasn't the first time you've been insensitive. It's nothing new. So, tell me what you want.” asked Lisha, as she tied her hair in a bun.

“I just came here to talk...” replied Arav, trying to avoid eye

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contact.

“Look, I know what all this means to you, but I notice a change in your behaviour every time you have an encounter with Nedarraj. It's about time you told me why his presence bothers you. Please don't tell me it's because he has an agenda, etc. I know that's not true. What is it, really?” she asked, looking straight at him.

“It's a long story...” replied Arav.

“Well, my schedule says 2 hours for you. I'd be happy to listen to you, professionally.” she replied, grabbing a pen and a pad.

Arav sighed and started.

“I was 9, happily playing in the garden, when my mom came running towards me, and said, 'We have to leave'.

We traveled for hours switching transportation, and finally stopped in the middle of a jungle.

'Stay here my child. You'll be safe.' were her last words. She then hugged me, kissed me on my forehead, and ran away.

Hours had passed since she'd left. I was petrified and spent the rest of my night crying, accompanied by the scary roars of wild animals. I could never forget that night, ever. I was helpless, alone, and scared...”

And he stopped to catch a breath.

“Are you okay?” asked Lisha, looking at him.

Arav nodded, and continued,

“I starved for days, surprised by the fact that I had lasted so long. Later, I started eating whatever I could gather.

Every day I woke up to the sound of birds. That would be the highlight of my day. But that morning was different. I woke up with a terrible pain in my stomach. The previous night I'd eaten some berries that were clearly toxic, and started feeling dizzy. I was hallucinating, and felt like I saw portals open in front of me. In each portal, I saw scenes from different places - places I knew nothing about, weird things. I puked as I walked, so I decided to go to the nearby river and drink some water. With the visuals in front of me, it was difficult to distinguish between what was real and what wasn't. I kept hearing voices. Some spoke over my head, some whispered in my ears, some yelled inside me. I wanted it to stop, wanted it to end. I was ready to jump into the river and end my life, to stop this horrifying experience. At least that's what I'd thought. As far as I remember, I was crawling to cover the last patch. It seemed so far from me, yet close. So close. I felt someone grab me from behind, and also felt something pull me towards the river. Refusing to give up, I crawled, hoping a few sips of water would make me feel better, and contemplated taking a dip and never coming out. I realised I was very close to the river, but had no energy. The sound around me was amplified, my vision was unstable, the edges shook with every heartbeat, and I felt my skin rub against the mud below as I crawled. I felt like I was a part of the stones, pebbles, and dust. For a moment, I felt like the earth and I were one, and that the earth was taking away all my pain. I felt a sense of euphoria. I was ready to die at that moment. Despite feeling heavy in the head, I looked up to have a good look at the beautiful river before me, and saw a young boy crossing the river, running towards me. He was neck-deep in water, but



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marched towards me with all his might. He reached me and turned me around on my back.

'What are you?' he asked.

I knew things I didn't understand. I wanted to tell him the meaning of life and humanity, but it was too much of an effort. I didn't know where I learned them, but the voice that spoke over my head and inside, told me this, maybe.

'Did you eat the yellow berries?' he asked, forcefully opening my mouth.

'Damn it! You did, didn't you? How many?'" he asked.

I couldn't say anything as these thoughts ran in my head. I just opened my tightly closed fist to denote the countless numbers of berries I had consumed.

'Don't tell me you had so much you don't even remember.'" he said, panicking.

This time I only nodded my head. As soon as he saw me nodding my head, he sat beside me holding his head.

'Don't worry, I am taking you to the school. You're going to be alright.' he said, as he picked me up on his shoulder and carried me.

I felt an immense feeling of dependability. I felt as if I was being a burden on someone for no reason. Maybe I was overthinking, or maybe it was the hallucinogen in the berries. He somehow crossed the river and walked several kilometres carrying me. As he walked, I felt what he was feeling. I felt what he thought. He had a different kind of energy in him. An

indescribable kind of energy. We finally reached the gate of a small place that looked like a school. Houses that were made of bamboo and stone, and a place filled with trees.

'Guruji! He ate the yellow berries!' he yelled at the top of his voice. I felt the voice reverberating throughout the place. I couldn't believe what I was feeling.

'How many?' asked another voice. I moved my eyes to get a clear look at that strong voice. It was a middle-aged man with grey and black hair. He wore saffron clothes and had a long, grey beard.

'He doesn't remember. Maybe he ate them all.' said the young boy, as he placed me on a jute mat.

The man came close to me, looked at the young boy, and said.

'Nedarraj. Get me the Tulsi medicines now!'

Yeah. That young boy was Nedarraj. He ran and came up with a small cotton bag that had something in it. I don't remember what. The man who Nedarraj called Guruji, fed me something, and it gave me a sense of relief. A few seconds later, I fell asleep.

The next thing I know is I woke up and saw Guruji sitting next to me. It seemed like morning, maybe the next, or the day after the next. I don't know. I didn't ask. He didn't say.

'Where am I?' I asked him.

'You are safe here. How do you feel now?' he asked me.

'I feel better than I did before. What happened to me?' I asked, trying to get up.

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'You need to rest. You ate something hardly anybody dares to eat, even once in their life.' he said, as he kept his hand on my head.

'Thank you...' were my last words, and I fell asleep again..."

And finally, Lisha broke her silence.

"Ok, so you ate some psychedelic berries, and Nedarraaj saved you. Hmm.. Interesting! Continue.." she said

"Yeah. I owe him that. If it weren't for him, I'd be dead already." he replied sullenly.

"I stayed at the school and learned new things. I wasn't sure why I was there. Was it because I ate those berries and saw things that didn't make sense, or was it because it was my destiny? I had no idea.

I spent years there, and one fine day, Nedarraaj fell sick. He was extremely sick. So bad that Guruji, who'd never let us cross the river, was ready to take him to the city and get him treated. However, he had the utmost faith in his Ayurvedic medicines. He asked Nedarraaj to chant mantras and do everything possible. Nothing helped. And one fine morning, he was better than he'd ever been. Guruji had later realised that Nedarraaj had performed dark magic. He was furious, but looking at how Nedarraaj was fine, he turned a blind eye. Guruji requested him to not get into these things, but Nedarraaj was already committed. After months of praying and practising light magic, all he got was disappointment. He found healing in dark magic, and that was the time he slipped into the trap of darkness. Guruji tried to show him the right path. He even forced him to shift his focus towards light

magic. But that only resulted in him becoming good at both light *and* dark magic. A deadly combo. He draws courage from light magic and powers from black. He is the smartest guy I have ever known, and also the strongest now. But I have to stop him and remind him of the young boy who had crossed a river that he wasn't supposed to, and saved some unknown boy's life. I want to help him..."

And Arav stopped as his voice broke.

"Relax.. Here." said Lisha, passing him a water bottle.

She watched Arav struggling to hold his tears, and said,

"I think we should stop here for today."

"Every situation is different, and people change accordingly. Nobody's the same as they were years ago, and you should accept this. The sooner, the better." she added.

"I suppose." replied Arav.

"Now, to enjoy the present, you should be here and not in the past." said Lisha with a smile on her face.

"Right." replied Arav.

"One more thing-- Are *we* good?" asked Arav, getting off his chair.

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm sure you weren't being a jerk intentionally. Let's catch up tonight. I got work to do now." replied Lisha.

Arav smiled back at her and left the clinic, feeling a little less burdened.



## Chapter 7 The Wolf of Araku

Nedarraj lay on a bed unconscious, as Nishija sat next to him for hours, muttering dark spells for his speedy recovery.

Eventually, he opened his eyes and looked around. He found himself in a huge room that was his hideout. He looked at Nishija, and said,

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Four days.” she replied.

“Four days? Why so long?” he asked, trying to get up.

“Hey, relax! You haven't fully recovered yet. You need to rest.” she said, as she tried to hold him.

“I can't waste any more time. Where's my pendant? I need to get back on my feet.” he said, struggling to get up.

“The *Stone of Rush* will not heal your wounds. It will give you a little boost, but do more damage.” she replied.

“The two of us are not enough to fight him. Now that Arav has the support of the Naagmanavs, it's time we expanded our team too.” he said, lying on his back.

“Sound idea! But why would anybody want to join us? Your plans are straightforward. You want to rule the world with the help of the magical beings. Not everybody would want to be under someone's control.” she said.

“Why are *you* with me?” asked Nedarraj, slowly getting up and sitting upright.

“I owe you my life. You saved me from the villagers, who

would have otherwise killed me. I cannot forget the day when hundreds of them attacked me, and you, out of nowhere, came to my rescue. I'm forever grateful for what you've done for me." she replied, holding his hand.

"The world needs a leader who can balance the lives of both humans and magical beings. I want to bring a new order to the world, of course with the help of the magical beings, because humans have lost their way." said Nedarraj.

He lied. He wanted to rid the world of magical beings, but also needed their might to beat the others. He would go to any lengths to assert his dominance. That could mean allying with a few to defeat some, or simply by means of lies and deceit.

"It's time we visited our old friends." said Nedarraj, with a grin.

"Where do we start?" asked Nishija, walking up to him.

"Let's start from Araku Valley, Andhra Pradesh." he answered, walking away.

"Him? He doesn't even fit in with his own class. What makes you think he will be loyal to us?" she said, following him.

"He's ambitious, fierce, powerful, and psychotic. That's perfect." replied Nedarraj, walking out of the room.

"Why are you in a hurry? Can't we wait until you're fine?" she asked, as she saw Nedarraj struggling to walk properly.

"If we delay this, I'm afraid our friend won't be alive." he said, and walked away.

**ATARAV'S HOUSE...**

The owl hooted while watching Arav looking out of the window.

“Yeah, a bit worried. I feel Nedarraaj is up to something. I have known him for years and everytime we're up against each other, he has something new, something stronger.” he said, still looking out of the window.

The owl hooted again.

“Right. We might need some help. I know a few good people who might extend their support to us. I don't wish to involve other magical beings, and repeat the same mistake made aeons ago but I don't see another option either.” said Arav, as he looked back at the owl.

“I know someone who might play a key role in terms of defence. We should pay him a visit tonight.” he said, patting the owl.

The owl moved away, as if he was annoyed by his touch.

It was midnight when Arav and his owl stepped out to meet someone. This was the time when most negative forces would clash with humans, which is why he preferred this time. Over the years, he had saved countless humans from the trap of bloodthirsty vetals, hungry pishachas, and witches who would lure men into their trap.

They were walking through a dark alley, when they heard a person say,

“Going somewhere?”

Arav quickly turned around to see who it was.

“Sandesh! What do you want?” asked Arav.

“Nothing man. I'm just chilling in the dark alleys of Mumbai. What's up with you guys? I heard what you did with the Naagmani. You're the talk of the town.” he said.

“Yeah, we're off to some work. Do you have anything useful for us?” asked Arav, moving aside.

“Well, is there anything you want from me? You know I'm Google incarnate.” he replied, scratching his head.

“I am looking for Kubernath. Do you have any idea where I can find him?” asked Arav.

“Kubernath? Why would anyone want to find him?” replied Sandesh, laughing.

“Well, do you?” asked Arav sternly.

“I'm not sure, but I might have an idea.” he replied, stepping back a bit, seeing Arav annoyed.

“Where?” he asked.

“He lives in the west dumping ground. All by himself. A source tells me he's majorly depressed and drinks heavily.” said Sandesh, dramatically pinching his nose.

“Alright. Thanks!” said Arav, ready to leave.

“May I know why you're looking for someone like Kubernath?” asked Sandesh, out of curiosity.

“I can't fight Nedarraaj alone. He has resources, and knows how to exploit them very well. I've never asked for favours from any magical beings, given our bitter past. But I think it's about time I teamed up with them. Kubernath is the first



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person that comes to mind when it comes to bringing formidable men together.” replied Arav.

“Kubernath is now a toothless tiger. I doubt he could help you with anything.” said Sandesh.

“I’ll worry about that. Thanks for the info.” said Arav, walking away.

Sandesh quickly ran behind him, and stood in front of him, trying to stop him, and said,

“Can I come with you guys? I have nothing else going on.”

“No! We’re good...” before Arav could finish his sentence, his owl hooted at him. He looked at the owl and nodded in agreement.

“Sure. You can come with us, provided you don’t make a scene.” said Arav.

“Oh bats, yeah! Let’s do this! Let’s brighten up the depressing life of people.” said Sandesh, walking with his chest out.

Arav looked at the owl, and said,

“I hope I don’t regret taking your advice.”

## **ARAKU VALLEY, ANDHRA PRADESH...**

It was a full moon night and there was pin drop silence in the entire valley. It was unusually silent, not even a light breeze wafting through, and the entire forest was illuminated with the silver glow of the full moon.

“I see nothing here.” said Nishija, standing next to Nedarraaj, trying to look around.

“We’re early. Let’s wait.” he replied.

After a while, loud & unusual howling of wolves could be heard. The howls echoed throughout the forest.

“Let's go.” said Nedarraaj, heading in the direction of the howls.

Nishija followed him. Nedarraaj hadn't healed completely, but he ran like a horse. After running for a while, he stopped, and hid behind a shrub. Nishija hid next to him.

“There's our friend, about to die.” he whispered.

Nishija looked ahead and saw a couple of fire torches hung on the trees. There was a big wooden log on the ground, and several werewolves stood there.

Two werewolves dragged another werewolf and placed his head on the wooden log.

The alpha of the pack joined them. Unlike the others, he had sharper features, and brownish-white fur.

He said,

“You are a disgrace to us. Humans and us amicably decided to co-exist. Yet you trespassed on to their land, despite repeated warnings. You even attacked them and ate a few villagers, making it worse. You've sealed your fate.”

“The leader of the pack fails to even comprehend what his kind wants.” said the werewolf whose head was on the wooden log, struggling to speak, yet arrogant.

“I know what my fellow wolves want. I know what you are trying to do.” he replied.

“Look around. Your so-called wolves haven't eaten for days.



We're not common wolves. We need bigger prey, not rodents. If humans have agreed to a truce with you, then why do they stash a silver blade in their dwellings? You have no answer to this." he replied.

The alpha went closer to him, and said,

"Ajrunki! Stop talking! You and your corrupt ideas have ruined our relationship with the humans. Make your last words mean something, make them count." said the alpha.

Ajrunki was unlike the others. He had grey fur and relatively longer claws. His teeth were pointier and longer than others. He was the rawest and strongest of all. His brutal features underlined his merciless and savage temperament.

"Go lick some human balls, you spineless coward. That's all you can do." replied Ajrunki.

"Kill him!" the leader commanded the executioner.

He raised his hatchet in the air, and all the werewolves howled in unison.

Nedarraj looked at Nishija, and said,

"You cover me while I stop the executioner, and then we deal with the alpha. Now!" he said, summoning the Chandrasa in his right hand.

The executioner swung down his hatchet with all his strength, and suddenly Nedarraj lunged out of the shrubs towards him.

The large hatchet was about to decapitate Ajrunki, when Nedarraj blocked it with his sword. Everyone was shocked to see him leaping out of nowhere. Before anyone else could understand what was happening, Nishija too came out of the

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shrubs and attacked the alpha with a force that knocked him away.

Ajrunki was shocked to see Nedarraaj standing before him.

“Nedarraaj? You vile human!” he said, moving away from the log.

“Could've used a better adjective.” he replied, and turned towards a werewolf who dived towards Nedarraaj. He swung his sword and pierced the werewolf's chest, and proceeded towards the others to slaughter them with his lethal sword.

Nedarraaj single handedly killed numerous werewolves, while Nishija severely injured the others. Nedarraaj's clothes were covered in the blood of the fallen as he stood before the alpha. It was a difficult fight for him but he was persistent, a master of combat filled with nothing but ~~and~~ **an** idea to do what he wanted. He was hurt but didnt stop. Werewolves were much stronger compared to humans but that didn't stop him either.

“You are going to regret this, human!” said the alpha.

“Look around. Half your werewolves are wounded badly . What are you gonna do?” replied Nedarraaj, as he shook his sword to clean the blood off the edge.

“You're the reason werewolves like Ajrunki think humans are dangerous.” replied the alpha, ready to attack.

“As a matter of fact, I just saved his life. He owes me. Your purpose is served. He is now going to be good to a human.” said Nedarraaj, and jumped towards the leader with his sword in the air.

The leader dodged and rolled aside, but he still got cut on his

right arm. The Chandrahasa was a lethal weapon, and even a cut was enough to cause immeasurable pain. Suddenly, many werewolves gathered and surrounded Nedarraaj, who was now outnumbered.

Nedarraaj quickly got near Ajrunki and looked for Nishija.

“Let's get out of here!” he yelled.

Nishija was about to teleport them, just when Ajrunki stopped for a second, and turned around to look at the alpha one last time.

“I'll be back. And when I am, I'm going to kill you and lead the pack like an alpha should.” he said and was teleported.

The three of them reached Nedarraaj's hideout. Ajrunki, who seemed very exhausted, dropped on the floor.

“You need rest. Let's talk when you feel refreshed.” said Nedarraaj, as he walked away, leaving him in a pitiful state.

### **WEST DUMPING GROUND..**

Arav followed Sandesh as he led the way. The place reeked and had decomposed waste everywhere.

“Bats! It smells like shit in here.” Sandesh kept muttering something the entire way.

After walking for a while, he stopped and looked back at Arav, pointing at a broken house surrounded by heaps of waste.

Arav looked at the house, and said,

“I don't believe this is what Kubernath has done to himself.”

He walked up to the broken house. The structure was barely

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standing. Half the ceiling was broken, the door was half shattered, and rats scurried about.

He knocked on the door, trying not to break what's left of it.

"Who's there?" said a very rough male voice from inside.

"Kubernath? Is that you?" asked Arav.

"What do you want?" replied the man, rather irritated.

"Kubernath, I'm Arav Roy. I was a student of the Late Swami Sikandar. Can we talk?" said Arav.

"Come on in." said Kubernath.

Arav entered the house, and found the entire floor covered in empty rum bottles. There were more empty bottles than furniture.

Despite being a Yaksha, Kubernath looked totally devastated. Yakshas were -strong, with enhanced features like long hair, fat nose, bushy beard, big eyes, and a hunky body. But Kubernath looked totally out of shape. He looked old and unkempt. He sat in a corner, getting wasted. He also had his left eye covered with a patch and had a scar across his face.

"Kubernath! I need your help." said Arav, as he walked towards him.

"Help? No, I don't need any help." replied Kubernath, fumbling.

"I need *your* help. I need *your* help to protect the world." rephrased Arav.

"I couldn't even protect what I was supposed to. What makes you think I can protect the world? Go away, human. Go have a

good night's sleep." he replied.

"I know what happened to you. That was unfortunate, and could have happened to anybody. It's not your fault." said Arav, moving closer.

"What are you talking about, human? We're born to guard. Our mission is to protect. I couldn't do even that. I don't deserve to live." he replied, as his voice cracked.

"No. Listen to me. Even gods make mistakes. And you're only a Yaksha. Don't beat yourself up too much. Also remember that gods rely more on you than anybody else. You still have it in you. You are free from your duties. This also means-- you can choose your own goals. Help me stop Nedarraaj before it's too late." said Arav, as he sat in front of Kubernath.

"Nedarraaj? Oh, I've heard a lot about him. That guy is on his way to destroy whatever's left." said Kubernath, clearing his throat.

"I alone cannot stop Nedarraaj. I need men like you by my side to stop him. Else I'm going to fail." said Arav.

"I have lost an eye. What are you going to do with a handicapped Yaksha?" he asked, touching his left eye.

"You're more than that. I have heard stories about you. I know what you're capable of. Please help me save the world." said Arav.

"I am sorry. Those days are long gone. I cannot help you with anything. Please don't waste my time and yours." he said, taking a swig of rum.

"I have complete faith in you. I know you can..." before Arav



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could finish his sentence, he was interrupted by Kubernath.

“Leave.. now!” in a rather loud voice.

Arav got up and walked towards the broken door.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me!” he said, and left the house, while Kubernath ignored him.

“Buddy, I think this was a total waste of time.” said Sandesh, who was standing outside the house.

“I still have hope, but slowly losing that too.” said Arav, and started walking away.

Arav walked out of the dumping ground with the others, disappointed, and with a heart full of discontentment. He knew he had to get another Yaksha on board, or maybe go back to convincing Kubernath.

Nedarraj now had a werewolf by his side, and had become even stronger than before.



## Chapter 8 The Star Child

Ajrunki looked at the moon, standing on the rooftop. The moon's soft white light healed his wounds and rejuvenated him. Within no time, he was back to normal, and better. Nishija walked towards him and stood by him.

"It's amusing you can heal just by gazing at the moon." she said.

"Well, we get our powers from the moon, just like humans get from the sun. And you..." Ajrunki abruptly stopped.

"Yeah! Say it. We get our powers from luring men and sucking out their emotions." she replied.

"To my surprise, I see a different luring story here." said Ajrunki.

"What do you mean.?" she asked.

"I see how you and Nedarraj are. You are a witch and you can easily lure him. Why haven't you done that yet?" asked Ajrunki, stretching his limbs.

"It's complicated." she said, moving away from him.

"So, can you never transform into human form.?" she asked, changing the subject."

"No! We're cursed. Unfortunately, unlike you, we lack the ability to look beautiful. We're the same, inside and out." he replied.

Ajrunki looked at his big claws, and sighed.

"We have immense strength. We're neither human, nor

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wolves. Maybe we're the best of both, or the worst. Regardless, we aren't widely accepted." he replied.

Nishija looked at him, and said,

"I understand. Witches aren't accepted either. We have to put on a face which is not ours for a lifetime. And unfortunately, that goes on for hundreds of years. That's how we spend our entire life." she said, standing beside Ajrunki.

Ajrunki took a deep breath, and said,

"Our last few generations have been very peaceful. Our ancestors hunted humans and Vetals, and now... now look at my kind. Making a truce with humans and marking territories with Vetals. Unfortunately, the peaceful nature of the current generation has weakened us. We're supposed to belong to the lineage of wolves. But look at us. Last night, Nedarraaj ambushed and killed half a dozen werewolves. Yeah... Got to give credit to the Chandrahasa, but the entire tribe is weak." said Ajrunki, taking a deep breath.

"Are you guys done sharing sob stories? said Nedarraaj, as he walked towards them.

Both of them turned towards him, and nodded.

"Can you give us a minute.?" Nedarraaj said to Nishija.

"Sure." she said, and walked away.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions right now, and I am here to answer them. So, talk to me." said Nedarraaj, standing in front of him.

The night was calm. The place looked not too far from the city, as the city lights were visible at a distance. The place was

humid and dewy, as expected in a place surrounded by trees.

“To begin with-- Why did you save me?” asked Ajrunki.

“I’m not gonna lie to you. As clichéd as it sounds, I’m on a mission to rule the world. I want to end the chaos and bring peace. And for that to happen, certain things need to take place. You see, peace comes at a cost, and that cost sometimes means countless lives.” he replied.

“You still haven’t answered my question. Why did you save me?” repeated Ajrunki.

“I’m getting there. A person should act according to his true nature. He should follow who he really is, and not what generations of indoctrination and alterations have made him. Man is meant to rule, and I aim to do that. I aim to make this place a better one. Your true nature is to hunt, to kill, and fight till you die. You aren’t meant to make treaties with humans. You are a true werewolf, and I need your help to succeed in my mission.” said Nedarraj firmly.

“So, you want to use me!” Ajrunki instantly asked.

“Ajrunki, there are other ways to control or use someone. I am talking about working as a team here. I can’t fight like you, because humans are not optimally designed for combat. Having said that, if you fight by my side, you’re fighting on the winning side.” replied Nedarraj.

Ajrunki seemed convinced with Nedarraj’s words.

“If I help you, do you promise to help me avenge my mistreatment?” he asked.

“You lack vision. We’re talking world domination here, and



all you can think about is killing a werewolf. Revenge is a fool's game. If we win, you become the leader of the werewolves across the world. Think about that." Nedarraaj patted his shoulder, and left him alone.

The thought of him becoming the leader and an opportunity for revenge had given Ajrunki a different high. He sensed power and position-- the only thing he always wanted, but never got. He was ready to help Nedarraaj with his plans, and fight on his side.

As Nedarraaj walked away, he had an evil grin on his face, having successfully manipulated another magical being into furthering his agenda.

### **THE NEXT MORNING...**

Arav gasped as he sensed something unnatural. He looked out of his balcony and noticed bright light flashing in a distant building.

The owl hooted at him.

"That's what I'm thinking too. Also, he seems very young and unstable. If this is true, I have to reach there before Nedarraaj does." he said, and quickly teleported outside the place where the bright light originated.

He stood there almost blinded by the bright light. It was so bright, he couldn't even open his eyes. It wasn't just light, he also felt a strong force pushing him away.

"I know you're here, and I know you're scared. But you have to calm down." said Arav, as he tried to open his eyes, but couldn't.

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“I can help you. But if you keep at it, it's going to be a disaster. People are going to die if you don't stop.” Arav said out loud.

The light dimmed. Arav quickly opened his eyes and looked around. He saw a young boy sitting in the corner of the room. His skin and eyes glowed brightly. He was shivering in fear. Arav slowly approached him.

“Hey, little buddy! It's alright! You don't need to worry anymore. You're doing good. Now let's just take it easy, ok?” said Arav, taking another step towards him.

As Arav spoke to him, the light from the kid started decreasing. He glowed less than before.

“I'm Arav. Can we talk?” he asked, kneeling in front of the boy.

The boy nodded, and stopped glowing completely.

“What's your name?” asked Arav.

“Shyam.” he whispered.

“Hey, Shyam! Where are your parents?” asked Arav.

“They had an argument this morning, and mom left for somewhere. My dad got violent, and started breaking things in the house. He started blaming me and he left too.” replied Shyam, in a low, broken tone.

“Let's go find your mom?” said Arav, outstretching his hand towards Shyam.

“Please don't hit me!” he yelled out, as soon as he saw Arav stretching his hand and started glowing again.

“Oh, Shyam, no! I would never do that. I'm a friend, and I'm

here to help you. You're not alone. I know how you're feeling right now. Let's just calm down, ok?" he said, covering his eyes to avoid the bright white light.

Shyam calmed down and so did the light.

"I'm sorry. I'm scared. I don't know what happens to me, or why I glow. Someone told my father that I am a living time bomb, and could go off anytime. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna kill anybody." he said, as his voice cracked.

"I know. You have a gift. A gift that others don't understand." said Arav.

"You sure there's nothing wrong with me?" he asked.

"Wrong? There's nothing wrong with you, Shyam. You're blessed, and what you have is a boon." said Arav.

"Really?" asked Shyam, smiling.

"Yeah! Now let's get out of here. Actually, you know what? I know a place.. I think you'll be safer there for now." said Arav, standing up. Shyam got up and held his hand. He was about to teleport, when suddenly, Nedarraj, Nishija, and Ajrunki teleported there.

"Hand over the boy." said Nedarraj, as he stood before them.

Arav was shocked to see Ajrunki by Nedarraj's side.

"A werewolf??? You teamed up with a werewolf? questioned Arav.

Seeing the big grey werewolf, Shyam got scared and hid behind Arav.

"Nedarraj, this kid is unstable. He doesn't know his powers.



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This can turn into a huge disaster.” he said.

“I know. I was waiting for you to calm him down. Hand over the boy and nobody gets hurt.” said Nedarraaj, approaching Arav.

Arav quickly reached for his *Dagger of Indra*, but before he could grab it, Ajrunki leaped towards him. He was on the ground and Ajrunki had held down Arav's hands with his claws.

Shyam ran and hid in his room.

“Nishija, bring him here.” Nedarraaj asked Nishija. She obliged.

“Nedarraaj, you're making a mistake. He is a Star Child. You know what they're capable of.” said Arav, as he struggled to get out of Ajrunki's grip.

“Obviously, I know he's a Star Child -- a living unconventional source of energy, and that is why I'm here. Seems like the perfect tool.” said Nedarraaj.

“HE'S JUST A KID!!! HE HAS NO IDEA ABOUT HIS POWERS!!!” Arav screamed his lungs out.

“Whatever!” said Nedarraaj, and moved ahead.

Arav, without even wasting a second, kneed Ajrunki in his stomach with so much strength that he rolled on the floor. Arav quickly moved aside and stood back up before Ajrunki could get up. Arav paced towards him and punched him in the face. In return, Ajrunki attacked with his sharp claws that tore through Arav's kurta and wounded him.

Nishija had knocked Shyam unconscious and dragged him

out by his shirt. She came and stood beside Nedarraaj, as Ajrunki and Arav fought.

“Ajrunki! Leave him. We got what we came for. Let's go.” said Nedarraaj.

Arav charged towards Nedarraaj, when suddenly, Nishija got between them and blasted an energy beam at Arav. He was blown away and hit a nearby wall.

Ajrunki quickly joined Nedarraaj and Nishija teleported all of them out of there.

“Damn it!” said Arav, as he banged his fist on the floor.

He stood up and teleported back to his apartment.

The owl hooted as soon as he saw Arav.

“Yeah! Those are werewolf claw marks!” he said, trying to come back to his senses from the energy blast.

“He teamed up with Ajrunki from Araku Valley. This is getting out of hand.” said Arav, as he pulled out his phone and dialled a number and held the phone to his ears.

“Get to my place right away. This is urgent.” he said, and put his phone away.

He sat on the couch and tried to heal his wounds with a magical spell. It was slow, but effective.

The doorbell rang, and Arav walked towards the door to open it.

Upon opening the door, he saw Sandesh standing before him.

“Everything alright, mate? Why did you...” and he abruptly

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stopped as he saw Arav's wounds.

“Werewolf? There's a werewolf in town?” he said, sounding unusually furious.

“Nedarraaj teamed up with Ajrunki. He abducted a Star Child. I need to get the kid back, or else this is not going to end well.” said Arav.

“I'm always down to hunt a werewolf. Let's go!” said Sandesh.

“Before that, I need to meet somebody else.” said Arav, and walked inside.

“Who?” asked Sandesh, following him.

“Kubernath!” he replied.

“Bats! Are you out of your mind? We don't have time for this. He's a retired man who's rusty as hell. We can't be wasting time on him.” said Sandesh, getting restless and eager to fight his natural enemy -- a werewolf.

“The two of us cannot defeat a Vidyadhara, a witch, and a psycho werewolf.” replied Arav.

“Look man, that guy won't help us, in fact, *we'll* have to look after *him*. Let's focus on the core mission right now. I'll handle Arjunki, you take care of that witch and your ex-friend. Okay?” said Sandesh.

Arav nodded and opened a portal and teleported outside Nedarraaj's hideout.



## Chapter 9 The Search

“So, what’s the plan? We’re breaking in, and?” asked Sandesh, breathing heavily.

“I’m kind of freaking out. I don’t want to die here. My preferred death venue would be somewhere in bed with all my boyfriends & girlfriends around me. And if I don’t die like that, I’ll be damned.” he added.

“If we don’t stop Nedarraaj, you and your boyfriends & girlfriends are all going to die miserably.” said Arav, about to enter the building.

“Fine! Lead the way!” said Sandesh, letting out a heavy sigh.

It was an abandoned three-storeyed building that looked haunted, which made it perfect for Nedarraaj to execute his plans.

They quietly entered the building and reached a room with a thick iron door.

Sandesh looked at Arav, and asked,

“We’re going in hot?”

“You know what to do.” he replied.

Sandesh grunted and started transforming. Slowly, he grew in size, his sharp teeth got even sharper, and his ears grew larger. His pale skin turned even paler. The guy who had a lean body now looked hulky. He transformed into Vetal mode -- his combat form.

Sandesh took a few steps back, and charged towards the door with great force, and bashed the door in with all his strength.



The dash caused a huge dent, and the iron door fell with a thud. Arav rushed in without wasting a moment, but found the place empty.

“What the hell!” he said, looking around.

Sandesh was equally surprised.

“Are we in the right place?” he asked.

Arav walked around to check. He still couldn't find a trace of anybody's presence or activity.

“If he isn't here, where the hell is he?” Arav thought out aloud.

Sandesh turned back to human form and both of them promptly left the place, and started looking for Nedarraj. It was almost dusk, and they were yet to find him.

Sandesh abruptly sat on the street and started taking deep breaths.

“Bruh! We've been on this wild goose chase for some time. No luck. I'm really tired now.” he said.

“So, what should we do? Just let it go?” asked Arav.

“No. I mean – we're just going around in circles. We gotta think the way Nedarraj does.” said Sandesh, tying his shoelaces.

“What does Nedarraj want from Shyam? I'm sure he has some crazy world domination ideas, but what is he going to do with a star child? What the hell is he gonna do with all that energy?” he thought.

Sandesh looked at Arav, who was deep in thought, and said,

“Maybe he'll make the Star Child do something for him?”

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“Maybe. Star Children are literally living embodiments of stars. They were fragments of stars that fell on earth and merged with human DNA. We're talking about the power of a whole star in a kid who's scared, and doesn't know what to do.” replied Arav.

“Yeah, I know. That makes him even more dangerous.” replied Sandesh.

“All right. Break's over. Let's keep looking.” said Arav, quickly getting up.

Suddenly, there was a huge flash on the other side of the city.

“There's our guy!” said Sandesh, as he pointed towards the sky that lit up for a few seconds.

“Nedarraj, don't do anything stupid.” said Arav under his breath, and started running in the direction of the flash. Sandesh followed.

After running for a while, they finally reached the outskirts of the city. Once there, they saw something glowing brightly. Shyam was hovering mid-air as he lay flat and unconscious, emitting light brighter than he did earlier that morning. Nishija was making him float in the air. Ajrunki was scouting the area to keep intruders away. And while all this was happening, Nedarraj was meditating under a tree.

“Man, this shit is crazy!” said Sandesh, commenting on what was happening.

Ajrunki stopped as his ears wiggled. He looked in the direction where the two were hiding.

“We may have been spotted.” said Sandesh, sensing what was

about to happen.

Ajrunki quickly turned towards Nedarraaj, and said,

“He's here!”

“And it looks like he has someone else with him, someone I'd love to rip open!” he added.

Nedarraaj opened his eyes slowly and got up. He walked where Ajrunki pointed, and stopped.

“I know you're here. What took you so long? Did you knock on a few wrong doors?” and laughed hysterically.

Arav came out and walked towards him, blocking the bright light with his hand.

“Nedarraaj! He's just a kid. I know you won't hurt a kid. I remember how you helped a kid who was lost in a forest many years ago.” said Arav.

“Times change, Arav. Times change. I'm not the same guy I was back then, nor are you the same kid. Look at you -- all grown up. Standing up to the man who once saved your life.” he replied.

Nishija stopped and placed Shyam on the dusty ground. As soon as he was on the ground, he stopped glowing.

Arav let out a huge sigh as he heard what Nedarraaj said, and replied,

“Let the kid go!”

“Or what? You and your vampire friend will stop us?” and he laughed out loud.

Sandesh walked and stood beside Arav as he looked at



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Ajrunki with eyes filled with hate and rage. Ajrunki looked back at him with the same rage. Sandesh transformed back to Vetal mode, looked at Nedarraaj, and said,

“This vampire friend is going to slaughter your little pup.” and charged towards Ajrunki with all his strength.

Ajrunki too leaped towards him and Arav paced towards Nedarraaj with his fists clenched.

He threw a punch at Nedarraaj, but he dodged it. In return he threw a punch at Arav, which he blocked. Nedarraaj pushed him away with great force.

“Arav, don't make me kill you.” said Nedarraaj aggressively.

“I'd love to see you try.” replied Arav, and again went at him.

Meanwhile, things were getting very heated between Ajrunki and Sandesh.

Sandesh grabbed Ajrunki's leg and tossed him towards a tree. He went flying, and hit the tree hard.

“Aww, what happened? Little puppy forgot how to fight? Come on, you filthy mongrel! Fight me!” mocked Sandesh.

Ajrunki growled out loud and sprinted towards him. He got closer, jumped in the air to attack him, and opened his enormous jaw to bite him. Sandesh quickly grabbed his jaws with both his hands. Ajrunki took advantage of this opportunity and mercilessly attacked him with his sharp claws. The wound was deep and he started bleeding a river.

“I'm a werewolf, you worthless bat. We've been slaughtering your forefathers for ages. Wipe our memory clean, but never will I forget how to put down a Vetal.” replied Ajrunki, as he

approached Sandesh who was on the ground, grunting in pain.

Sandesh looked at him, and said,

“You think this will stop me?” and he quickly jumped back on his feet and kicked Ajrunki in the face.

The kick was hard, but Ajrunki balanced himself. He quickly leaped towards Sandesh, grabbed his leg with his sharp teeth with such force that it pierced into his thick skin, making him yell out in pain. As a reflex, he grabbed Ajrunki's mane with all his might and pulled it out.

“You worthless mutt!” Sandesh screamed as he pulled his mane.

Ajrunki cried out in pain as Sandesh pulled out a major chunk of his fur. He moved away, grunting in pain, while Sandesh put pressure on his wounds, panting.

Meanwhile Arav and Nedarraaj were going at it.

“That's all you got?” Nedarraaj asked Arav.

“Stop talking!” said Arav, and paced towards Nedarraaj.

He leaped towards Nedarraaj and grabbed his neck.

Although Nedarraaj was tougher and stronger than him, Arav's grip was strong.

Arav looked him in the eye, and said,

“I should've killed you when I had the chance.” and pulled out the dagger. He clenched it, about to stab him in the stomach, when Nishija intervened and shot him with an energy blast.

Arav was thrown away due to the force and fell on his back.

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“You really should have.” said Nedarraaj as he massaged his neck.

He looked around and found Sandesh leaping towards him to attack, and within a split second Nedarraaj grabbed him by his neck and slammed him on the ground so hard that he almost got knocked out.

“Your kind lacks a brain!” he said, as he looked at Sandesh who was on the ground.

Nedarraaj walked towards Shyam and asked Nishija to continue her ritual.

Arav struggled to stand up, but was in no condition to walk.

“Why are you doing this?” said Arav, fumbling. His vision was almost blurry and he could hardly breathe.

Nedarraaj looked back at him, and said,

“I’m going to free Rankasur from the *Prison of Cosmos*.”

Arav was shocked to bits when he heard the name 'Rankasur' added single inverted commas .

“WHAT?? ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND???” yelled Arav, with whatever energy he could muster.

“You’re planning to bring Rankasur back? The day he sets foot on earth will be a day of death and destruction.” he added.

Nedarraaj ignored what he said, and signalled Nishija to continue.

“Stop this madness, Nedarraaj.” pleaded Arav, now concerned.

Nedarraaj again ignored his plea and turned towards Nishija to see how she was proliferating Shyam’s energy. He started

glowing again.

“I don't have much time! Faster!” he yelled at Nishija.

“I'm trying to contain his energy, but it's not easy. We're making him reach his peak and it's impossible for me to restrain it any longer.” she replied, as she tried her best to contain the energy of the star child.

Suddenly Shyam stopped glowing and opened his eyes.

“He has regained consciousness!” exclaimed Nishija.

Shyam still hovered in the air as he looked at Nedarraaj and Nishija, but this time he was doing it on his own.

“Please don't hurt me!” begged Shyam.

Nedarraaj chanted a spell that surrounded Shyam with a black aura, and grabbed him to pin him to the ground.

“No! Nedarraaj, don't!” screamed Arav at the top of his voice.

“Nishija, restrain him now!” said Nedarraaj, as he held Shyam.

Shyam yelled out as Nedarraaj grabbed him. As he yelled, he started glowing even brighter. So bright that Nedarraaj had to shut his eyes. Shyam emitted an enormous amount of energy from his body and it went through Nedarraaj. He yelled in pain, very soon followed by an extremely violent explosion, resulting in him disintegrating into small fragments and turning to dust. Arav saw this overwhelming energy that approached him, about to destroy him, just like it did Nedarraaj. But right before the blast could hit him, someone jumped in front of him and shielded him from the damage.

The blast settled, and he saw Kubernath standing before him.

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wielding his large shield in one hand and Sandesh in the other. As the flash faded away, Nishija and Ajrunki had disappeared.

Arav, who was feeling really foggy, got up with whatever strength he had left, and rushed towards Shyam, who lay motionless.

He looked around, and a small piece of Nedarraj's clothing hit the ground. He checked Shyam's pulse -- there was none. He grabbed that piece of clothing in one hand and yelled out loud.



## Chapter 10 New Enemy

Arav turned towards Kubernath as he held the piece of Nedarraaj's clothing in his hand.

“What's the point of coming now? It's all over.” he said, as he looked at a motionless Shyam.

“Shouldn't you be happy? The one person you wanted to stop is not your problem anymore?” said Kubernath, walking towards him.

“It's not just about Nedarraaj. This cost a kid his life!” said Arav, as he looked towards Shyam.

“He's not dead. He's a Star child. He'll be up and running by tomorrow, just so you know! You are not stable right now. You need to rest. I'll carry the Vetal. You carry the kid. They'll both be fine soon.” said Kubernath.

Arav and Kubernath reached his house. They placed both Shyam and Sandesh on the bed.

Arav walked blankly towards his room as Kubernath followed him, trying to squeeze through the hallway.

“Are you okay?” asked Kubernath.

“Please, leave me alone!” he replied, and shut the door of his room.

Kubernath's strength was unmatched. He swung the huge sword effortlessly. He was an experienced warrior. Years of living with depression had made him rusty, and he wasn't a warrior in his prime that he once was, but a man broken, out of shape, and demoralized.

**A FEW DAYS LATER..**

Several days had passed since Arav had been in his room. The owl knew he needed space and disturbing him wasn't going to do any good.

Sandesh opened the door with his spare keys and looked at Kubernath sitting on the floor. Sandesh looked perfectly fine, like he had healed completely.

“Man, why don't you ever sit on the couch or a chair?” he asked.

“Use your pea-sized brain. Look at my size. You think I can sit on a human-sized couch without breaking it?” said Kubernath.

“Well, you have gained a lot, I think.” said Sandesh, as he went near him and poked his oversized paunch.

“What were muscles earlier has now turned into fat.” he replied, as he pushed Sandesh away.

“It's fine. You'll be back to normal soon. Not like you need to work out or anything. You just need to get your shit together, and boom, the hunk is back.” replied Sandesh.

“By the way, any progress with the kid?” asked Sandesh.

“He has been in a coma ever since we got him back. We have no idea how long it will take for him to regain consciousness.” replied Kubernath.

“And, umm.. What about the other guy?” asked Sandesh, pointing at Arav's room.

“I think it's about time he got out of his room. He has some

responsibilities, and he must not let his emotions cloud his duties.” he said, getting up.

“It's been so many days man. We haven't heard anything from him. How do we get him out?” asked Sandesh, scratching his head.

“Well, I am breaking the door.” said Kubernath.

“As curious as I am to know what's going on inside, I don't think we should do that.” said a confused Sandesh.

Kubernath stood in front of the locked door and broke it down by just pushing it effortlessly. Sandesh couldn't control his curiosity and ran towards the room. The owl joined.

Arav was levitating in the air, meditating with his legs crossed. The room was dark as he had tinted the windows with black paint. The light broke in that room for the first time after several days. He was disturbed by the intrusion and woke up from his meditative state.

Arav looked a little different, his hair and beard were overly grown, he also looked weak and pale.

“What the hell!” exclaimed Arav, landing on his feet, suddenly disconnected from his meditation.

“That's enough 'me time' Arav. Stop running from your responsibilities.” said Kubernath, stepping into the room.

As soon as he took his first step, he gasped.

“Dark magic? You're practicing dark magic?” asked Kubernath, shocked at feeling the negative energy in the room.



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“Get out Kubernath! I am not taking lessons on 'doing my duties' from someone who failed at his only job, and then spent the rest of his life in a dumpster trying to feel better.” said Arav.

“Oh bats!” Sandesh muttered and took a step back.

“Oh, I need to eat a carrot. Going to the kitchen. Bye!” said Sandesh, avoiding the shitstorm about to unfold.

“What did you just say?” asked Kubernath, as he approached Arav.

“Yeah, that's the truth. You failed at your job, and then you couldn't deal with your failure. You have no right to tell me about my duties.” replied Arav.

“How dare you!” said Kubernath, and paced towards Arav.

Once close, he clenched his fist and threw a punch at Arav. He quickly chanted a spell and formed a shield of energy to block Kubernath's attack. The punch was powerful enough for the shield to shatter. He grabbed Arav by his neck and held him in the air.

“Don't make me put you down.” he said, still holding him.

Arav struggled to chant another spell and his fist lit up again. Before he could attack again, Kubernath threw him towards a nearby wall. He dashed into the wall with a thud and fell on the floor.

“Stay down. I am going to let slide whatever you said a few moments ago. Because I understand where this behaviour is coming from. This is not the solution and practicing dark magic is definitely not one either.” said Kubernath.

Arav couldn't even get up. He just lay there as if he had lost the will to get back on his feet.

“Who are you mourning for? Is it for the comatose kid? Or for Nedarraaj? Only you know the answer, Arav.” said Kubernath.

Arav was silent as he rolled over to another side, to avoid eye contact with him.

“You are mourning his death, right? Mourning the death of a man who wanted to rule the world, causing pain and suffering. You are mourning for the wrong man.” said Kubernath.

“You wouldn't understand.” replied Arav softly.

“Mourning is fine, but you should know when to stop.” said Kubernath, as he left the room.

Arav got up and sat on the floor. He was upset, but he knew Kubernath made sense.

After a while Arav walked and joined the others in the living room.

“Welcome back, my dear friend!” said Sandesh, as he got off the sofa with wide open arms.

“How do you feel?” he asked, as he forcefully hugged Arav.

“Get off me!” said Arav, irritated, trying to free himself from Sandesh's tight hug.

As Arav was about to get back to his room, the doorbell rang.

Sandesh quickly ran towards the door like a kid excited to open it.

“Wait!” said Arav.

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“It's cool, chill. It's some human. I can smell it.” replied Sandesh.

He opened the door and saw Lisha standing outside.

“Who are you?” she asked, panting. As she obviously hadn't noticed the unusual features of Sandesh yet.

“Who are *you*?” he asked in return, staring at her.

“Where is Arav? I need to speak to him.” she said, letting herself in.

She screamed out loud as she saw Kubernath sitting on the floor.

“What the hell are you?” she yelled out loud.

Arav went near her and muffled her mouth with his hand.

“Stop screaming!” he said.

“What's up with you? Why haven't you received my calls? And what's with this overgrown beard and all?” she asked, pulling her face away from his hand.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Okay wait! What is this creature?” she asked, pointing at Kubernath.

“Miss, you've got to relax. Stop referring to me as if I'm a monster.” he said, getting up.

As he got up, Lisha took a step back and looked at him. His towering size almost touched the ceiling.

“It can speak?” she asked again.

“It? My name is Kubernath. I am a male-- a Yaksha. You can

use words like he, his, him. Stupid human!” he said, sighing.

“Lisha? What happened? Why are you huffing?” interrupted Arav.

“What do you mean, why am I here? It's been several days since you answered my calls or texts. What's wrong?” she asked.

He was about to speak when something entered the house, breaking the glass window.

A small device that beeped, and the frequency of the beeps kept increasing, and then it exploded. The explosion wasn't huge, but definitely impactful. Everyone was thrown away due to the force.

“What just happened?” Sandesh screamed out, as he quickly got back on his feet trying to see where the others were.

Kubernath rushed and checked if Shyam was fine. He was still comatose. He picked him up and walked to the living room.

“Arav, are you okay?” asked Kubernath, as he reached him.

Arav couldn't hear anything due to the impact. His vision was a bit blurry, and his head was spinning. He looked at Lisha who was laying on the floor unconscious. He somehow managed to get up, but couldn't balance himself.

“What was it?” he asked, as he looked at Kubernath.

“I don't know. Some kind of explosive. It wasn't magical.” he said.

The atmosphere was still dusty, with low visibility.

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Suddenly, a bullet hit Kubernath. Fortunately, his skin was resistant to man-made weapons.

“What the hell?!” he said, as he jumped to take cover, trying to protect Shyam who was in his arms.

“Was that a bullet?” asked Sandesh, taking cover behind a sofa.

“Yes. A Sniper! What’s going on?” said Arav.

Kubernath hid trying to protect Shyam.

Arav pulled Lisha near him and hid behind another sofa.

“I think we should get out of here!” he said, looking around.

Another bullet came flying and hit a nearby vase, shattering it to pieces.

Sandesh looked at him, and said,

“We have a Yaksha with us here. People are gonna freak out if they see him. Can’t we teleport?”

“I am not sure. I don’t really have much energy.” he replied.

“What do we do now?” asked Sandesh, panicking.

The bullets kept coming.

Arav gathered all his energy at one place and formed a huge energy shield near the window. It seemed fragile, but enough to shield the place.

“Let’s go!” said Arav, as he rushed towards the door, carrying Lisha over his shoulder. As soon as they got out, the shield shattered and the bullets came in flying again.

“Where do we go now?” asked Kubernath, as he followed