

THE LAST OF THE MYSTIQUES

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CHAPTER 1

The Invitation

Just like every other day, Daksh walked back home from school, only to find the apartment empty and quiet. Every day seemed similar – same usual routine. The soft afternoon sunlight peeked through the window, shining on just a little part of the room while the rest stayed hidden in shadows. Daksh sighed and switched on the lights, making the room feel a bit brighter. Every tiny sound seemed so loud when he was all alone, and it made the silence feel even bigger.

Daksh often thought how his life could have been if they did not come to this new city and if Baba was still there with them. He took out the cold half filled bottle of milk from the refrigerator when his eyes fell on the note that his mother had left behind.

“Finish your milk and don’t forget to do your homework. I will bring your favourite sweet today. love Maa”

Daksh felt more sad after reading this. Since they moved to the new city this had been the way his mother mostly communicated to him. She had to balance a job and most of the days she returned late at night and Daksh would not get the time to chat with her about his day at school

and other things that he eagerly wanted to share with his Maa.

They had come to the busiest part of the city yet Daksh only felt more lonely these days. The absence of Baba had become more evident these days. He drank a little milk and went to his room. The dim glow of the evening sun painted golden streaks across his bedroom wall. His heart felt heavy. He tried to remember Baba. But all he could remember was an unclear image of him from his childhood. However for some unknown reason Daksh never forgot his father's voice and the numbered days he could spend with him. Daksh lay down on his bed with his face facing the ceiling and tried to recall the warmth and care he felt when his Baba would hug him and tears rolled down his face. He missed him terribly. He had tried many times to ask his mother, but she always changed the subject, her face shadowed with sadness and fear. The most he could get out of his mother was, "*Some things are better left in the past, Daksh,*" But he didn't want to leave the past alone. He needed the answers. Daksh was determined that today he would ask his mother again about Baba.

That night while they were having dinner Daksh gathered his courage again and asked, "Ma, did you get any news of Baba from the police station? They said they will inform you."

His mother remained silent for a while and shook her head. Daksh would not give up this time and asked again, " Why don't you call them up? They might be knowing something?"

This time his mother looked up at him and Daksh could see anger and a fleeting anxiety in her eyes. “How many times I have to tell you this. No one knows anything about your father. He had just left us. Stop wandering in the past Daksh.”

Tears filled his visions and he couldn’t stop the emotions in his voice from coming out, “Maa please. I can not leave without knowing. I miss him.” his words came out almost like a cry to which his mother had no comfort to give him.

This had happened many times before and everytime Daksh was left unanswered. He felt bad for upsetting his Maa who had been doing so much for him and even though she never showed it, Daksh could see the pain in her eyes.

Later that night, Daksh laid on his bed. He couldn’t sleep. The questions in his mind chased him. He couldn’t let it go like always. He understood that he might never get an answer from his Maa. Therefore he must look for the answers himself. He needed to find Baba or at least he must know what made him leave his family like this.

He waited for the house to lay silent. Daksh tiptoed through the hallway toward his mother’s room. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, only that he had to find something – anything – that could tell him the truth.

His mother’s room was partially dark. He felt guilty of doing this as he looked at his sleeping Maa. He was doing something very wrong but he was helpless and there was something inside him that pushed him to this extreme action. He carefully searched through the drawers of her

mother's closet. He carefully checked each drawer, trying to make as little noise as he could. However it seemed his mother did not have anything unusual or anything that was related to his Baba. As he was about to give up, his eyes fell on the last drawer, a thin ray of shimmer was coming out of it. Curiosity got the best of him and as he pulled the drawer the light disappeared and he could see, tucked away beneath a pile of yellowed papers- an old, worn out parchment. It was strange and peculiar to be there in his mother's drawer. He felt clueless on how his mother had something so strange in her possession.

Thrusting the parchment in his pocket he carefully closed the closet and rushed to his room. On close inspection he realized it wasn't like anything he had seen before. The parchment was smooth, but as he held it up to the dim light, golden Sanskrit inscriptions shimmered across its surface.

*"Whether for men, women, or kings,
it brings them destruction of evil,
unrivalled sovereignty, freedom from disease,
and growth of strength.*

*All afflictions born of the planets,
stars, thieves, or fire will be removed.
Vyasa tells us that there is no doubt about this."*
(written in Devnagari)



The letters danced before his eyes, forming words he didn't recognize. It was a Brahmi Script like the ancient times. But what was it doing in his mother's closet? How did she get it? Then, suddenly, the parchment lifted itself from his hands and hovered in the air. Daksh gasped and

stumbled backward in awe. His heart started to pound. The room darkened, and the air around him began to swirl. A golden spiral formed at his feet. Symbols of the Navagrahas, the nine celestial planets, flickered in the glowing spherical ring. Wind rushed through the room, rustling papers and lifting the edges of the curtains.

Daksh's breath caught in his throat. Fear and wonder gave rise to curiosity and in slow and trembling steps he moved towards the swirling spiral. It was a portal to an unknown destination. The closer he got the more brighter the portal glowed, pulling him toward it. His feet barely touched the ground now as the portal slowly wrapped him from all sides and before he could find his voice to scream the glowing light engulfed him. the room went back to usual-dark, silent and empty.

CHAPTER 2

The Hidden Academy

Daksh took a deep breath. He was no longer in his tiny, dark room but on a bridge suspended in mid-air, high above a chasm of swirling mists. The bridge, made of polished sandstone with geometric carvings, carried a fresh, woody fragrance. As he sat up, he saw a vast green valley surrounded by the towering Himalayas, the breeze ruffling his hair. It was real, not a dream. Something mysterious had brought him here. The parchment beside him—it was a portkey. It hit him like a flash of lightning.

A tremor shook the bridge, and Daksh noticed other children walking past him in a hurry. They wore strange outfits: knee-length beige tunics, loose trousers, leather sandals, and stoles embroidered with a white lotus. The girls wore skirts instead of trousers. Daksh gasped when he realized he was dressed the same.

Around him, voices buzzed, and the bridge swayed. Dizzied, he stood and followed the children. What he saw next deepened his confusion. Gigantic gates, or *toranas*, stood ahead, glowing in the golden sunlight. He'd seen similar ruins in a museum, but this one, made of basalt, looked brand new. It was the grand entrance to

Takshashila Academy, a hidden world of ancient wisdom.

Daksh remembered about the parchment that he was holding and in a daze looked at it once more. He knew he might not understand a single word but this time his eyes caught a line glaring at him from the script and it said -

“We welcome you to the Takshashila Academy. Home to ancient knowledge and mystery and open to only those who have earned it from Fate.”

Daksh's eyes sparkled with curiosity and wonder. He had indeed stepped into a mysterious hidden world. He looked up at the monumental entrance and started walking towards it like the rest of the children. The closer he got the clearer he could see the inscriptions on the gate in ancient Brahmi script that shifts and rearranges itself as if whispering a welcome in forgotten tongues. Towering on either side stand Yaksha statues, the guardians of the academy looking down upon those who entered the sacred land.



Beyond the gate the Academy unfolds before his eyes like an inexplicable wonder. Vast courtyards stretch in every direction, their stone pavements embedded with lotus motifs and sacred mandalas. Rows of sandstone pillars,

carved in the grand Mauryan style. The pillars had the tales from the Jataka stories, the life of the Buddha, and the legendary scholars of Takshashila engraved on them. Daksh's eyes grow wide with wonder. In front of him, floating staircases made of shiny black stone twist and turn in the air, moving as if they have a mind of their own. Nearby, magical scrolls wrapped in silk hover gently, their pages flipping open to whisper ancient secrets to the students. The walls of the academy glow softly with mysterious writings, as if they are alive, waiting to share their wisdom with those ready to learn.

"All of these were designed and executed by the Great King Ashoka after he converted himself to Buddhism. Here, young guardians are trained in the lost mystical arts of India, learning everything from Astra-Vidya (divine weaponry) to Drishti-Vidya (the art of true sight)."

A soft voice from behind broke Daksh's trance. He looked back and found a girl around his age. She had long raven black hair and deep eyes which reflected her intellect. – she looked like a scholarly girl. She smiled at Daksh and said, "You look too lost. I am Ammu and you are?"

Daksha found his voice somehow and managed to tell her his name.

"You know about this place?" Daksh asked.

Ammu nodded to this question.

"How? I mean did you read it somewhere?" Daksh couldn't control his curiosity.

“No” Ammu smiled mysteriously and then said, “I can read these languages on the walls.” She pointed at the inscriptions that glowed on the walls.

Ammu’s answer seemed to have confused him even more but before he could quench his curiosity about a mysterious object she was holding in her hand, he was startled by an announcement from somewhere.

“Welcome to the Ancient grove of knowledge. We are pleased to see so many new bright faces who will now walk the path of learning the highest and the darkest knowledge of this earth which once our ancestors had brought forth.”

The heavy voice felt like thunder although the speaker couldn’t be spotted, the amazement of the student on hearing the voice silenced the hall almost immediately.

“Now we request you to get ready for the House Selection Ceremony. In Takshashila we have been observing the sorting ritual for centuries on the day of the arrival of new pupils. Here we have four houses Garuda, Naga, Yaksha, or Vanara represented by four Navaratna crystals: Ruby or Manikya, Emerald or Panna, Amethyst or Katela and Blue Sapphire or Neelam.”

Before the announcement could end out of nowhere on the right side of the hall two huge lanterns lit up making the children startle. They could see a podium and a stool at the centre of it. A figure walked in. He was tall and dressed all in black with a turban on his head and a stern look on his face. He held a wooden box and from that box

flickers light appeared. He placed the box on the stool and the announcement resumed.

“Each student must get on the podium and with the help of Guru Brahmashivan will take up the sacred Navaratna Crystal from the box and hold the orb until it changes into one of the four gemstones. The sacred orb will decide your house at the academy by judging your inner thoughts.”

With that a loud gong rang at a distance marking the beginning of the ceremony. One after the other children stood with the orb in their hands and indeed the stone glowed as different gemstones. When Ammu’s turn came Daksh wished her luck and the orb glowed with the bright red ruby hue which meant she was sorted into the Garuda house. Next was Daksh himself. As he held the orb in his palms it felt strangely cold and trembled in his hands. He could see four lights twirling inside the crystal and finally the red hue came out. This filled Daksh with relief to know he will be with his new friend Ammu.

Everything felt like a dream to him. he was in a place where where history and wonder come together, Daksh stood with Ammu at the hall to go to their rooms he wondered how did he come here—a place where ancient knowledge isn’t just remembered but comes to life, waiting for those brave enough to discover its secrets.

EPilogue of CHAPTER 2

The Warning

Daksha was still in a trance. He pinched himself several times to make himself believe that it was actually happening. The room that was allotted to them was quite big and spacious and Daksh saw everyone was cheerfully chatting with each other. Clothes, books and other essential items were provided to each of them. Daksh sat on his bed and tried to make sense of everything that had happened since he had opened that parchment.

Suddenly a gentle pat on his back made him startle. It was the boy who had earlier saved Daksh from falling down the moving stairs. Daksh was both dumbfounded and impressed to see a boy of his age doing such a trick.

“I am Aadu” the boy announced his name and sat beside Daksh.

“Aadu, Thanks for earlier. I am Daksh.”

Aadu was a very impish looking boy. There was a mix of innocence and mischief on his face and his eyes were twinkling all the time with some unknown excitement. He grinned at Daksh and said, “ it was nothing. Just an Illusion. It is called wielding a Maya-Chakra”

Sensing the confusion on daksh's face he clarified that he had this power of creating illusions to trick someone into believing something that was not actually there. He did the same with Daksh. As he was about to fall from the twirling stairs, Aadu tricked him to believe that the particular staircase that they were climbing was still.

Daksh and Aadu instantly became friends and soon they started to laugh and chat. Ammu, too, joined the group.

"Ammu, what is this thing you carry in your hand?" Daksh asked, pointing at the strange artifact in her hands which he saw earlier.

"It is an heirloom I received from my grandma. It's Yama's Quill that can reveal hidden and prohibited texts and can judge their content." Ammu explained.

Daksh looked at the quill and was astonished to see how uniquely it was made. The carvings and the adornment were nothing like the objects of any antique shop.

"Enough about us tell us about you now." Aadu declared in a demanding tone.

Daksh was a little embarrassed to tell them that he did not have any of their skills, that he came from a small town. However deep down he knew he was not completely without any power. There was something inside him that often made him do things that was beyond his understanding. But he chose not to share that with his new friends. Instead he talked about his Maa and Baba.

A pang of guilt and sadness choked his voice as he remembered his Maa who must have been looking for him almost everywhere. His disappearance had given her

another grief and Daksh felt ashamed. Throughout the night Daksh laid on his bed and kept thinking about this academy and why of all people Fate chose him and before he could realize, he was lulled into a deep sleep by the gentle breeze of the valley.

Daksh woke up by the continuous pushing of Aadu who kept on calling his name to wake him up as they were already late for their first class. They changed into their uniforms and rushed to the class.

The dome shaped structure of the Academy allows very little light to seep in and the corridors, thus, remained hidden in shadows even in the morning. Two friends rushed through the corridors. Their footsteps echoing in the empty hall.



However in hurry Daksh got separated from Aadu and ended up on a rather abandoned wing of the academy. This side of the dome had no source of light other than

the small holes on the outer wall from where thinnest rays of sunlight entered the passage.

Daksh felt uneasy and curious at the same time. Something inside him warned him of a probable danger while his mind raced for unearthing the hidden mystery at the end of the passage.

Suddenly Daksh could feel a ruffle of air, brushing earlobes. Shiver went down his spine yet he looked around to find the source in that enclosed passage. After a few seconds it happened again but this time it was more like a whisper. Daksh could hear a voice. Daksh no longer felt fear, rather he was desperate to understand what the voice spoke. After a while the voice returned again. this time a little louder than a whisper and Daksh heard every single word this time. Though he was unable to make out the meaning, he could realize the bad omen etched to the cryptic warning:

“Not all secrets are meant to be uncovered... Beware the Tenth Guardian.”

As the voice died Daksh could hear Aadu’s voice calling his name. Daksh turned to return and decided to keep this a secret from his friends.

CHAPTER 3

The First Trial Begins

Guru Adityanaryan master of Art of Mantra was speaking in slow and low voice,

"Mantras are not just prayers but sonic vibrations that shape reality. Repeated with focus, they can manifest desires, summon gods, or repel evil. Ancient texts claim sound is the first force of creation (Shabda Brahman), and by manipulating it, one can alter material and spiritual realms. Mantras harness this power to influence maya."

He straightened, cleared his voice, and instructed, "Repeat after me. Close your eyes and feel the vibration of your voice in the air." He chanted:

*"Maya dissolves form, where truth is not found,
Neither logic, nor illusion, nor body exist,
The soul is like the rope, the serpent seen,
Brahman, the self, the illusion unseen."*

The class echoed his words, and the air seemed to throb with life. Pleased, Adityanaryan unrolled a bhojpatra with the mantra inscribed. "Write this down. Now, create a spell from this mantra — one that conjures an illusion yet transforms reality. But remember, spells are not random;

you must grasp the mantra's essence and dictate it into action."

The students stared at their palm leaves, puzzled. But for Daksh, the words seemed to shift and dance. From the chaos, four golden words emerged before him:

"Māyā satyaṁ prakāṣayet" (Let illusion reveal truth.)

Adityanaryan beckoned him forward. Without hesitation, Daksh envisioned the lush valley he had seen upon arriving. Closing his eyes, he uttered the spell.

In an instant, the classroom vanished. A cool breeze brushed past, and they stood before the majestic Himalayas under an open sky. The class gasped in wonder. Then, as swiftly as it had come, the vision dissolved, and they were back in the dim classroom. Stunned silence gave way to applause.

After class, Aadu asked how he did it. Daksh had no answer. He himself did not know.

The next day the summon reached them to gather in the Hall of the Nine Unknown Men as the Headmaster Rudranath announced the Initiation trial. Ammu explained to Daksh on their way to the hall that Takshashila Academy had been holding this Initiation trial for ages to test the abilities of the first year students. Every new student, regardless of their magical lineage or family history, had to pass this series of tests. The Trials were legendary, spoken of in hushed whispers by the older students, and their purpose was clear: to discover each student's hidden potential, strengths, and even their weaknesses.

Guru Rudranath, the headmaster stood at the podium of the hall and around him the teachers gathered as well. He was a tall figure with a voice that commanded respect, yet always carried a touch of benevolence and kindness. He was old yet it was hard to determine his age. Aadu told Daksh that it seemed that Rudranath had been the headmaster of this academy from the beginning of time. His tall stature demanded respect from the other gurus and none walked past him without bending their heads in respect and reverence.

Guru Arjun tried to silence the hall full of students but the collective chatter died only when Rudranath came forward and raised his right arm gesturing the students to be silent. As if like a hypnosis the buzz was gone. All eyes beheld the headmaster of the Takshashila Academy. Rudranath began,

“You are here to uncover your true potential, and for that, you must face the Trial of the Nine Gates. It is a test that will challenge not just your magical skills, but also your courage, adaptability, and wit. You will face illusions, traps, and puzzles designed to stretch the limits of your mind and heart.”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Ammu whispered to Daksh and Aadu’s ears, “The Trial of the Nine Gates was famous—no one who had entered it had ever come out the same. It was said to be an ever-changing labyrinth that tested not only a person’s skills but their willpower.”

Rudranath continued,

"You will enter the maze, where each gate represents one of Ashoka's Nine Unknown Disciplines. **The Gate of Illusions (Maya-Vidya)** - Shadows morph into their greatest fears. **The Gate of Time (Kala-Vidya)** - The past and future momentarily merge, confusing the students. **The Gate of Weapons (Astra-Vidya)** - Students must summon and control a divine weapon. **The Gate of Echoes (Dhvani-Vidya)** - Words spoken here manifest as reality, but only once. **The Gate of Reflection (Pratibimba-Vidya)** - Every action within this gate is mirrored, forcing one to outthink themselves. **The Gate of the Abyss (Rahasya-Vidya)** - Confronting one's deepest secret is the only way forward. **The Gate of Dreams (Swapna-Vidya)** - One must navigate their own subconscious to proceed. **The Gate of the Elements (Bhuta-Vidya)** - Mastery over fire, water, earth, and air is the key. **The Gate of Freedom (Moksha-Vidya)** - A single lie will bar passage; only pure honesty allows one through.

Each discipline is a key to unlocking deeper knowledge, and the gate will test you in ways you cannot imagine. Only by passing through them can you reach the heart of the maze and emerge victorious. But remember... time is not on your side."

Confusion ran through the faces.

"Each gate you face will demand something different from you," he continued. "You must think, fight, and adapt under pressure. The maze will shift with each passing moment, and the walls themselves will change. What is real may not be, and what you think is an obstacle may be the key to your escape."

Suddenly the students could hear the blowing sound of the sacred conch and with that the Trial of the Nine Gates began. Daksh gulped. He had heard stories about the trials – about how the labyrinth was alive, shifting with every step, throwing illusions at the participants.

Without another word, Master Vasudev raised his hand, and the floor beneath them vanished. The students screamed in surprise as the stone ground disappeared, and they fell through the air. Daksha fell as if he was spinning through an endless void. With a soft thud, Daksh landed on the ground, his breath coming in short gasps. He blinked, trying to adjust to the dim light that surrounded him. The walls of the labyrinth loomed before him – tall, ancient, and moving.

Ammu frowned. "What now?" Daksh glanced around, feeling the weight of the maze's ancient magic. "We move forward. There's no turning back now."

Three friends moved past the gates by efficiently solving the puzzles and with Aamu's help deciphering ancient inscriptions, battle shadow creatures, and uncover hidden paths to escape. However something unexpected happen as they reached the sixth Gate of Abyss. Daksh accidentally touched the shifting walls of the maze which had an ancient inscription on it in Sanskrit. "Look!" Daksh pointed.



"It's a lost language," Ammu explained, "used by the Nine Unknown Men. It holds the key to unlocking secrets."

As Daksh touched the inscription, a strange warmth spread through his arm. His forearm glowed, the markings on his skin lighting up in time with his heartbeat. "Your arm!" Ammu gasped. On his forearm a mysterious and alien symbol had appeared which glowed as if it was burning. The symbol looked like a crescent moon with the ring of Saturn around it.

Before Daksh could answer, a growl echoed through the maze, followed by a whisper: "The Gate of Freedom awaits."

They moved forward. A severe pain on his forearm weakened Daksha while a terrible shifting of the walls began around them. The labyrinth was collapsing. As they crossed the gate of Elements with Ammu's help and her knowledge the final gate opened in front of them. The ring of fire.

The deadly ring was the gateway to escape the maze as winners of the trials. Though weakness and the pain weighed down on his strength Daksh took the leap of faith with his friends and escaped the labyrinth. However as he was about to leave the maze, he thought he saw an ominous figure at a distance glaring at him but before he could look again, the maze had already vanished and he was lying on the courtyard of the academy gasping for breath. Only a handful of students could complete the trial with Daksh, Ammu and Aadu.

Questions looped in his head like a whirlwind as the shooting pain started to subside in his wrist.

'Why did the inscription appear before him?'

‘Why did the symbol appear in his arm?’

‘Who was the figure?’

Guru Rudranath proudly came forward to welcome the winners but soon his expressions changed to see the ominous mark on Daksh’s wrist. Something was seriously not right. Something bad is on its way.

CHAPTER 4

The Forbidden Wing

After the unsettling episode of the Trial, nothing seemed the same again. Daksh could not wrap his mind around the happenings of that afternoon in the labyrinth. As he lay awake in the dorm, all these raging questions swirling around his head. All of a sudden the image of the shadow figure he saw in the Gate of Freedom flashed before his eyes and again a thousand more questions fogged his thoughts. The more he thought about the Trial the more lost he felt, especially by the feared expression of Headmaster Rudranath on seeing the symbol on his forearm. He looked at the symbol on his arm again. This time it was not burning like earlier and the shape looked not so threatening either. But how could he get this just like that? It felt the mark was waiting under his skin to appear at the proper time.

Daksh was completely clueless and he did not know what was happening. It was clear that something was trying to reach out to him but he had no way of knowing, no exact point to start his search for the mysteries.

Something flashed through his brain like thunder all of a sudden. The mysterious wing on the north of the

academy where he accidentally lost his way on his first day. Something did happen that day, something had whispered into his ears, a warning. As he tried to remember those words he had heard that day, a cold shiver ran down his spine. He started sweating profusely. He could feel a strange fear tightening around his limbs. However he couldn't go on without finding the answers. The ominous warning in the wing must have a link to the happenings in the labyrinth. Daksh felt the urge to go back to that mysterious wing once more if he needed the answers.

The dorm was dark and the shafts of the half moon partially lit up the room and Daksh could see Aadu fast asleep beside him and so were the rest of the students. Silence ruled the night in the dorm. Daksh slowly got up and wrapped the shawl around him. He slowly stepped out of the room and started walking towards the north of the academy. The hard stone walls were standing like silent guards on both sides of his path. Daksh could hear sounds of wind bashing against the hard outer walls of the academy and it seemed a lot of restless entities were trying to break into the academy. Daksh did not know how far he walked until he reached the forbidden wing. He had got to know later that students were strictly prohibited from entering this part of the Academy. But Daksh had no other way. The air was thick with an eerie silence, and ancient stone statues of Yaksha guardians lined the corridor, their eyes seeming to follow him.

He kept on looking for clues in the dim light but it seemed he was trying to throw stones in the dark. As he was about

to turn back to his dorm without finding anything. Something stirred beside him. A flicker of light that had suddenly turned the dark passage a lot brighter. A mixed sensation ran through his veins as he turned back and saw the wall behind him which was dark and dingy just a few seconds before, was now glowing with burning letters in Sanskrit. The wall was covered in glowing Sanskrit inscriptions, pulsing with a mysterious golden light.

The words burnt in front of his eyes and he slowly read the inscription.



“Nāmnā spr̥ṣṭe śīlālekhe dīpyamāne svarṇavarṇe |
Daśamo grantho vimocyate, yaḥ kuryāt lokasamhāram | |”

**"When the golden glyph bearing
his name is touched,
The Tenth Manuscript is unleashed –
to bring forth world-ending ruin."**

The meaning was eventually getting clearer and Daksh felt a fear of the unknown in his core. It was a threat for those who wanted to get hold of the Tenth Manuscript. Daksh had no idea about the manuscript. But as he was struggling to comprehend the cryptic message suddenly he heard a low whisper from the wall. As if the wall was beckoning him by his name. Like air his name floated in that windless passage.

Daksh mustered up all his courage and went closer to the burning inscription. He had barely brushed his fingers over the letters when in a blink of an eye it seemed the letters became alive and started to swirl and shift in their places. They rearranged themselves and formed a strange mark which was unknown to Daksh but he had seen it before. The symbol that glowed in front of him was not very complex; it looked like a small triangle within a bigger one. But the light with which it was glowing was not exactly fiery; it glowed with a deep purple and blue hue unlike anything Daksh had seen in the labyrinth.



*The symbol is related to time.
The center from which moments rotate*

He was about to take a few more steps towards the symbol to get a closer look when all of a sudden a shooting pain raged on his forearm where the mark was. He looked down at his arm to be shocked to find it glowing like amber. The pain brought him back to the present and stepped back from the wall. He was almost drenched in precipitation yet he felt abnormally cold-freezing cold. He felt everything had become lifeless and frozen in this academy at that very moment. His mind raced with questions and fear but it felt his limbs had gone numb. Daksh failed to move when suddenly like cold wisp a shadow figured appeared in front of him whispering a verdict:

"The past should remain buried... or you will be, too."

The shadow figure was afloat in mid air and started to come closer to Daksh. He tried his best to move his legs which seemed to have gotten completely frozen and immobile. He put all his strength to move them but all was in vain while the figure raised its arms, cladded in a long black cloak at his direction to get hold of his shoulders.

Daksh closed his eyes and this time he forced all his magical power to summon the strength and released his legs, finally, from the invisible shackle and crawled his way out of the deadly grasp of the figure. As Daksh runs out of the Forbidden Wing, he hears the whispering Sanskrit verse rearrange itself, spelling his name. The mark on his wrist burns, as if awakening something long-forgotten.

Daksh did not know how he managed to walk to his dorm. When Daksh reached the dorm his body felt heavy with fatigue. He fell on his bed – almost breathless. He tried to organize the happenings one after the other in his head and he could tell now the reason for him being summoned and all the incidents that took place around him ever since were not coincidental. He surely had some unresolved connection with this academy and the Tenth Manuscript – whatever it was.

CHAPTER 5

The Shadow Keepers

A terrifying vision startled Guru Rudranath. The thing had taken place which he feared always inside his Academy. The Forbidden Wing had unleashed the secret before Daksh- the truth about the Tenth Manuscript and if the ominous wanderings had started within the academy it wouldn't be late when the most feared prediction will become reality.

Rudranath paced up and down in his chamber. His tall figure moved inside the room like a shadow and his snow white bearded glistening in the candlelight like gold. Rudranath had been an inseparable part of the Takshashila Academy from the very beginning it seemed. There was a time when he was called the Agni Vakta (one who speaks fire). Rumours had it that he could bend flame with his voice. His words carried the power that even ancient spirits listened to his voice.

In his youth, Rudranath became a guardian of the Ninth Flame, sworn to protect the Sacred Manuscripts. But after failing to summon the Tenth Manuscript during a brutal attack on a village, he changed – taking a vow of sacred restraint, never to use his true voice again unless the

world faced ruin. At Takshashila, he was a kind and wise Headmaster, known for unmatched knowledge in mantras and magic. Yet rumors swirled—some said he had studied under the Nine Unknown, others claimed he was one of them, a fallen guardian still protecting the Manuscripts. Some believed a recent companion of his had vanished in a failed venture.

Takshashila itself was born from King Ashoka's legacy. After the Kalinga war, he turned from conquest to wisdom, forming the Nine Unknown Men—keepers of nine books on dangerous sciences like alchemy, warfare, and time travel. But hidden from history was a Tenth Manuscript, older than the rest—feared by Ashoka, not guarded.

Right now, The happenings in the Academy proved that the Tenth Manuscript had been again discovered by the wrong people and if not stopped sooner, a grave disaster awaited humankind.

Rudranath stood still in the middle of the chamber. The vision he had just seen was threatening enough but seeing Daksh on the Forbidden wing facing the dark figure made him fearful. He must take a stand to protect his students and he must tell them the truth.

The next morning Aadu woke Daksh up and told him that they must hurry to the hall as the headmaster had summoned an urgent assembly for the students. When they reached the great hall they could see everyone from all the four houses had taken their places and the hall was packed with students. As they settled down on their own places, Rudranath stood up on the podium and silenced

the buzz with his hands. Silence came down the hall and he started to speak.

“Students and Teachers, I thank you for gathering today and I ask for your attention as the things I am about to share with you all might be concerning to you. There is something I must share with you, a truth hidden in shadows, buried in time. It was not until recent events have come to notice that I felt the need to share things with you. you must have seen the disturbing events of the Initiation ceremony and many of you had already reported to me about such unsettling whispers and disappearance in the last month also.”

He paused and casted a look at Daksh which made him realize that the headmaster already knew about the events of last night at the forbidden wing. Taking his eyes away from Daksh, he resumed,

“ I must tell you now that all this strange activities are being executed by the Shadow Keepers”

A buzz of whisper rose from the students. Everyone glanced at each other in confused state when once again they were silenced by the deep voice of Ruudranath,



“Long ago, there existed a secret brotherhood known as the Nine Unknown Men. Chosen by Emperor Ashoka himself, they were guardians of powerful and ancient knowledge – knowledge that, if misused, could destroy the world. Each of the Nine guarded

one book, one domain of forbidden wisdom: from communication to energy, time travel to warfare. These men did not seek fame or recognition. They worked in silence, protecting the world by keeping dangerous truths hidden. But among them, there were those who could not resist temptation. The Shadow Keepers were born from betrayal - splinter group, once part of the Nine, who broke away. They sought the Tenth Manuscript – a volume believed to contain the most dangerous knowledge of all. Knowledge that could bend reality or perhaps break it. They wished to unlock this power, not for protection, but for control."

He paused and scanned the attentive faces that looked up at him and continued,

"The greatest scholars, gurus long back understood the gravity of the danger and successfully defeated the Shadow Keepers and hid away the manuscript. Somehow they erased the Shadow Keepers from History until quite recently some signs of their return have emerged within the very walls of the Academy."

The curious face of the children flickered now with fear.

"And so, I tell you this not to frighten you, but to prepare you. I urge you to stay alert. Be careful with curiosity. Knowledge is a gift, but also a weapon. If used without wisdom, it becomes a curse. Do not seek out the Tenth Manuscript. Do not follow strange symbols or promises of hidden power. And above all, do not trust those who offer knowledge without responsibility."

Rudranath now looked directly at Daksh, "Remember, we are not here to dominate the world—we are here to protect it. Stay united. Stay wise. And let the light of truth guide you, not the thrill of secrets. Always remember:

Maunamayī śaktiriyam, yatra kālo namasyati.
Nāśakānām chāyayā, rakṣām kurvanti mantriṇaḥ.”

(This silent power, where even Time bows low—
Through the shadow of destroyers, the mystics weave
protection.)

Students left the hall soon after and Daksh, Aadu and Ammu shared a confused and worried glance. That day when the three friends were retiring to their dorms they overheard Guru Rudranath and two other teachers in Rudranath’s chamber. Although they knew eavesdropping is prohibited here they couldn’t control their curiosity after the morning assembly. But what they heard made them more worried.

Daksh heard Guru Rudranath speaking to another teacher: “It’s happening again... just like before. We must protect the manuscript at all costs.”

Then there was Guru Adityanarayan’s voice, “And what of the boy? Does he know?”

“He knows not much but he is very eager to know everything.” Rudranath said.

“He is just a boy. Can we not let him go back to his mother? The danger is too much for him at this age.” Adityanaryan spoke.

“No he can’t leave. He doesn’t have any other choice.” The cold statement of the Headmaster sent chills down the spine of Daksh.

CHAPTER 6

The House of Secrets

Ammu and Aadu returned to their dorm with Daksh. On their way back, after hearing the chilling prophetic statement of Guru Rudranath, none of them could utter any word of comfort to Daksh. On the other hand Daksh felt a building pressure of unresolved doubts and unanswered questions in his mind-as if thousand voices spoke in his ears but he couldn't make out a single word from the muffled chaos.

As they reached their dorm it was pretty late and most of the students had gone to bed. Moreover a state of utter shock and fear ran through all students of the Academy at the present moment since they heard about the shadow keeper. Daksh sat by the window gazing out blankly at the courtyard.

An awkward silence floated between the children and Aadu wished Ammu to break the silence with her well articulated words. Long silence prevailed until she looked up at Daksh and said, "We should go to the library and read more about the tenth manuscript and Ashoka's secret society. Something is bound to show us light there."

Both the boys looked at her. Her eyes flickered with excitement and enthusiasm.

Takshashila Academy had the oldest and the most vast library that had ever existed on earth. On their way to the library Ammu told them that she had read how magic breeds in the walls of the library and it was believed that the library could open gates to different dimensions on its own. Precisely, the library was alive.

It was strictly prohibited for students in the current scenario to wander around the Academy after hours so they tried to make as little noise as possible. As they entered the library their jaw dropped. Daksh thought even his imagination had lost to the visual he was seeing before him. The library had endless shelves packed with hard leather bound books, categorized by subjects. The ceiling of the library had an open area covered with glass from where the stars of the night sky could be spotted. But this library was special not only because of its vastness but for its kind. Ammu was right, the library was alive with floating books everywhere whispering ancient knowledge.

Ammu led the way and it seemed she was well aware of her way in this labyrinth of books. Daksh and Aadu simply followed her. They passed the racks of spell, yantra, history, alchemy, astronomy and reached the extreme south of the library where the books looked the most worn out over time with their fragile binding. Ammu started skimming through the scrolls while Daksh simply strolled when suddenly his eyes fell on the wall opposite to the racks of ancient scrolls.

A cold wave of fear rushed through his spine once again. Another inscription had appeared on the wall. This time as a symbol. Daksh walked towards the wall and he was soon joined by the other two as well who were as taken back by that as Daksh himself.

The moment Daksh touched the engraved symbol the wall shifted, revealing a hidden passage behind the bookshelf. The trio cautiously entered, descending into a forgotten underground chamber.

“This chamber is exactly like the ones the Nine Unknown Men were provided with by the King for their secret works and meetings.” Ammu announced quite unmindfully.

All of it felt like a dream to Ammu and Aadu while Daksh climbed down the stairs to the chamber in hurry and with ease. Inside, they discovered the House of

Secrets, a hidden

archive belonging to the Nine Unknown Men. It contains mystical relics, old battle records, and ancient astras (divine weapons).



They walked cautiously among the ruins and in the very weak light that came from the library. Suddenly they could see a faint yet powerful light coming from the east side of the chamber. As they reached the source of the light, they became speechless. On the east wall of the

chamber a warning inscription flashed revealing a vision of destruction and betrayal tied to the Tenth Manuscript.

Daśamasya rakṣaṇaṁ — niḥśabdena eva.

Praveśaḥ duḥsvapnasya dvāram udghāṭayati.

Svajano 'pi śatruḥ bhavati yadā lekhyam diptam.

Paśyataḥ netrayoḥ andhakāram avaśyam.

Ammu translated the inscription to the boys:

"The Tenth is guarded by silence alone.

Entrance opens the gates of nightmare.

Even kin become foes when its words ignite.

Darkness will claim the eyes that gaze too long."

The children stood there motionless trying to figure out the hidden meaning of the cryptic warning when suddenly a shuffling sound right above them. Someone has entered the library and any minute can come down to this chamber.

Daksh whispered to his friends to hide and climbed up to carefully close the door, leaving a thin crack open for air. But the plan couldn't be executed as they saw a shadowy figure descending down the stairs, just like the one Daksh had seen a couple of nights ago in the forbidden wing.

The figure speedily progressed towards them. The dark hooded figure had no face other than a pair of glaring red fireballs in the place where the eyes were supposed to be. The escape path was blocked by the figure and the chamber had no other exits. As they felt stuck suddenly Daksh closed his eyes and chanted a mantra under his breath, momentarily creating an illusion of themselves on the other side of the chamber. As the Shadow keeper got

distracted by the skillfully crafted illusion the three children hurriedly escaped the dark chamber.

The mysteries were unfolding slowly to them and now they know that the Nine Unknown Men left behind a secret that is still alive today. Daksh now realizes that his presence at Takshashila Academy is no accident. The Nine Unknown Men left behind a prophecy—and he is part of it.

CHAPTER 7

The Navaratna Trials

“Before time began, there was only chaos. The Brahmand was a flame without end. From it emerged the Navaratnas—Nine Jewels, each a fragment of creation’s essence, born to bring balance to the universe.”

Guru Arjun looked over his class, then held up a crown, its nine gems glowing.

“King Ashoka trusted these gems. Each was guarded by a chosen one, along with a scroll of knowledge. Only when both are mastered can their true magic awaken.”

The gong rang declaring the end of the class.

Before leaving, Guru Arjun turned. His voice was calm, but firm. “Tomorrow’s Trials will test your harmony, not ambition. Only those aligned in mind, body, and spirit can unlock the legacy of the Nine.”

Daksh stood in silence. The Trials would change everything.

The next day, in the great hall, Guru Rudranath addressed the Academy.

“The Nine Gems lie scattered across the astral plane—between time and space. Each student will face a trial. The gems are guarded by illusions, riddles, and tests of virtue.”

He paused. “Those who succeed may summon the divine Astra—Navachakra-Vajra. It once belonged to Lord Vishnu, who used it to restore balance without war.”

The room was still.

“May the worthy find what the Nine Unknown Men have hidden.”

Fear loomed on the faces of the students after the Initiation Ceremony nothing had been quite normal in the Academy.

Guru Rudranath closed his eyes and for a moment it seemed he was chanting some mantra under his breath and next he touched a golden orb in front of him making it burn all of a sudden.

“This blazing orb marks the commencement of the Navaratna Trial. You all soon will be transported to the astral plane. Vijayibhaba”

Soon after Rudranath’s voice died the hall started to twirl and eventually nine portals started to emerge in the air. Daksh could see his friends disappearing through the portals one after the other. His head felt heavier than ever and before he could see his fate his eyes shut all his visions and he disappeared into one of the portals himself.

All the students are now on the astral plane-an otherworldly realm. Each of the students found themselves in a completely alien place.

Ammu was the first to regain consciousness and she found herself in a magical grove with humming trees and glowing leaves. Ammu started to walk while the trees on both sides seemed to be whispering something to her. As she reached the centre of the forest she could see the leaves were no longer hanging from the trees rather they were afloat midair. Suddenly a disembodied voice spoke, "Decode the unspoken verses and the path to victory will be revealed to you."

Ammu could see that the floating leaves had inscriptions on them. One of the leaves flew before her eyes and unfolded its curl. Ammu saw glowing lines written in Sanskrit. As she focused she realized the lines were riddles from the ancient time and she must solve them to win the trial.

On the other end of the plane Aadu woke up in complete disbelief. He was on the floor of his own room back in his home. He was home. A blazing yellow light bathed the room completely.

Everything looked exactly the way it was the day he left home. But it wasn't right. It was too perfect. No dust. No creaks. And then—there was Rishi, his elder brother. Aadu knew it was an illusion but it was flawless.

Suddenly the walls flickered and scenes started to form on them- some real, some born from fear. Faces rose out of the walls. Familiar voices whispered over his shoulder.

His mother called his name in a voice that sounded too distant. He tried to focus. Tried to pick out which memories were true. But they overlapped. His head throbbed with the pain of forgetfulness. He realized he must choose the true memory from the illusions. The opponent, whoever he might be, wanted to outsmart him and he could not let that happen.



Somewhere on the plane Daksh, too, woke up in a vast infinite space that looked like nothing. As Daksh looked around to get an understanding of where he was, he saw a huge shadow figure appearing from a distance. Daksh froze momentarily. In this lifeless dome he was now

tangled into a deadly combat. He realized that the approaching figure was there for him to defeat it. He got up and took his position. He must invoke his powers to embody a weapon in order to fight this shadow monster.

Daksh started to chant the mantras. Initially nothing happened. He could feel the presence of the shadow nearing him. Without opening his eyes he remained still and kept on chanting the mantra of fire weapon. He tried to remember his lessons. A mantra must be chanted from deep within and with desperation. He pressed his hands together and chanted the mantra in a low deep voice. With each time he chanted louder. For a flicker of a moment—there was a spark. A small ember of fire lit in the space between his palms. The shadow flinched. Daksh went deeper, his voice rising with hope and desperation.

The ember grew, flickering like it wanted to become a blade. He could almost see its shape forming. The sight stopped the pace of the figure. He remained still in its place. Daksh needed a little more time for the weapon to be ready only when suddenly the fire flickered and died in his palms.

Daksh shouted, trying to summon it again, the mantra tumbling from his lips in a rush. But it was not working anymore. The shadow surged forward. Like a strong gust of wind Daksh felt it coming closer. He closed his eyes and tried to surrender when suddenly like he was in some kind of trance he opened his eyes and looked straight at the figure who was now extending its grasp towards Daksh's neck. Daksh's eyes did not move from the figure

and he started to chant an ancient mantra which nobody had ever taught him.

Like a strong wind sweeping down from the mountains, the words of the mantra hit the shadowy figure and pushed it far away from Daksh. In the space between his hands, something began to appear. It started as a shimmer of gold.

Then, slowly, a ring took shape—glowing, spinning, sharp-edged like a saw of light. The air around it twisted, whipping into a whirlwind. The ring spun faster and faster, its power growing with every breath, taking in everything. As the ring sucked all the air only dust remained and the figure was gone.

The trial was over.

The glowing light of the astral plane faded, and the students of the Academy found themselves standing once again in the school's quiet backyard. The grass rustled in the breeze. The stone walls stood still. But everyone's eyes were fixed on Daksh, holding the golden weapon.

It hovered just above his palms, spinning slowly, glowing with quiet energy. This was the prize meant only for the final winner of the trials. But Daksh had called it early—summoned it in the middle of the fight. The Gurus stepped closer. Their faces were serious. No one clapped. No one smiled. It was indeed the Navachakra-Vajra. The hidden astra. The lost weapon.

Even the teachers seemed unsure of what they had just seen. Like a secret had been let loose. The students watched with wide eyes, nervous and amazed. At the

edge of the courtyard, the Headmaster stood still, his long robes brushing the ground. He didn't look proud. He looked worried. Daksh had done something no one expected. Something that should have been impossible. The Chakra would choose to be summoned and it had refused to come out from its hiding for centuries.

But now it was back. And it had chosen a boy.

The trial may have ended, but a door to a dark past must be opening somewhere.

CHAPTER 8

The Tenth Manuscript Prophecy

The Hall was bathed in the dusk's saffron light. The walls and the stack of scripts scattered in order seemed to be waking up under that light. The tall and slender figure of Rudranath emerged from the darkness, pacing back and forth, lost in some deep thought. The clouds of questions had been finally cleared for Rudranath by Daksh's extraordinary feats in the trial. The Headmaster knew now that the nine years old Daksh was the chosen one.

He must know and he must be informed by Rudrnath himself.

A soft knock on the large wooden door announced Daksh's arrival. Rudranath gestured and the giant door creaked open slowly.

"Come in, Daksh." The deep voice of the Headmaster echoed through the empty hall.

As the door closed behind Daksh, his eyes fell on the strange interior of the hall. It was huge, even bigger than The Great Hall. Sensing the awe in Daksh's face Guru Rudranath spoke first, "This is the Hall of Lost

Knowledge. The secret gateway to all hidden and forgotten wisdoms of centuries.”

He paused to look at Daksh, and began again, “ Daksh, your performance this morning in the trial has put me into a great thought. I am assuming that you yourself might not have the clue about the Astra you have summoned yet I must tell you in the last nine centuries you are the only one who could do it.”

It seemed the headmaster’s words awakened something inside him and he looked straight at him and said, “But sir, I did not know back then what I was doing. It felt like something got into me and made me summon it.”

“That Is precisely the reason why I have summoned you today and I promise I will keep no secrets from you any more.” Rudranath smiled at Daksh kindly and began to recount the secret of Takshashila.

“Years after the war of Kalinga, King Ashoka founded the Council of Nine Secret Men. He was hugely impacted by the bloodshed of the battle and realized the devastating evil power of mankind. So in order to develop knowledge that could be dangerous if misused, and to preserve it as a secret from the world, he built this council of scholars as guardians of these knowledge.. These nine scholars were guardians of nine Principles: Psychological Warfare, Physiology, Biology, Alchemy, Telepathy, Gravity, Cosmology, Light and Invisibility and Societal evolutions. They took the blood oath to protect and preserve their discoveries in the form of nine manuscripts which must never be revealed. However during their research they found out a terrifying truth, a parallel

principle to Cosmology which they preserved in a tenth manuscript. The nine scholars were made to believe that of all the manuscripts this one was the most dangerous for mankind and it must be concealed from civilization in such a way that it could never be awakened."

Rudranath stood with his back to Daksh as he paused.

"What was in there, In the Tenth Manuscript, Sir?" Daksh asked as he remembered the strange encounters he had with it and also the warnings he received about it.

Rudranath turned to him but Daksh could see a grave and solemn frown on his face. "The Tenth Manuscript was said to contain the ultimate secret—the knowledge of Kaal-Asura's Curse, an ancient force that could manipulate time, reality, and the human mind. It was believed that those who read the manuscript would either gain immense power or be consumed by madness. According to legend, Ashoka himself glimpsed the forbidden pages, and what he saw changed him forever. Some say he saw a future where his empire was destroyed, others claim he saw Kaal-Asura rise again, feeding off the greed of future generations. Terrified, he ordered the Tenth Manuscript to be hidden, sealing it with Vedic energy and a riddle only the worthy could solve."

Rudranath turned to face the dying light of the sun and spoke again. "Guru Kapila, the Cosmologist and one of the Nine Men took the responsibility of its concealment. Guru Kapila was the one who established our Takshashila Academy and he chose this place to hide away the forbidden manuscript, locked within layers of

enchantments.. But on his deathbed Guru Kapila made a prophecy that there will be a bloodline chosen by fate who would be capable of awakening the Tenth Manuscript and it would be his decision to either keep the manuscript hidden or to unleash its horror."

"Why did they not destroy the manuscript?" Daksh asked

"The Tenth Manuscript can not be destroyed. It's immortal." Rudranath looked down at Daksh and hesitated a little before he said, "Few Years ago a former student of this Academy and a descendent of the chosen bloodline tried to destroy it but the manuscript backfired and now it seems that in his attempt to destroy it he must have initiated unlocking of the seals."

Daksh could see the lines on Rudranath's face darkening with worry.

"What happened to the student who tried to destroy it?"

Rudrnath looked away and spoke almost in a whisper, "He disappeared."

The hall fell silent. Daksh felt a strange sorrow. He felt as if he was connected to the man who tried to destroy the manuscript. He looked back at Rudranath but his eyes were fixed on Daksh's arm. As he followed his gaze Daksh gasped- the symbol on his arm was glowing again.

A confirmation that scared both Rudranath and Daksh.

Daksh was a part of the Prophecy.

On the other side of the hall Ammu and Aadu were hiding as they followed their friend. Daksh had little idea that he was being followed. Ammu and Aadu couldn't

leave their friend alone after what had been happening. However the door to the Hall of Lost Knowledge was revealed to only those who had been summoned. The gate disappeared behind Daksh and they found themselves on a strange alley instead. The alley extended to an indefinite end. Confusion and fear clouded their thoughts.



Ammu and Aadu could not understand if there was an escape and started to abruptly walk wherever they could see a little light. The shadows were playing with their senses as they walked with unsteady steps. Suddenly a dent on the floor made Ammu fall and her eyes caught the sight of the wall in front of them. It was covered in

shifting Sanskrit text. The moving letters started to form a sentence or rather an ominous warning:

"The Manuscript is not knowledge — it is a prison. And the key is already turning."

Ammu and Aadu walked up to the wall when all of a sudden the alley seemed to be stuck by an earthquake. The bricks started to shake on the walls. It felt as if any minute now the floor would give into this tremor and the whole Academy would fall.

But something even worse than that was about to happen. Aadu pressed on to Ammu's hands as his eyes were fixed on the wall with the warning. Something was stirring within the wall—a dark shadow was struggling restlessly within the walls to come out.

Ammu held on to Aadu with all her powers. They must escape. As the truth was revealed, the ancient walls began trembling—sealed force is trying to break free. The Shadow Keepers have tracked them down and they are closer than ever.

CHAPTER 9

Betrayal in the Academy

The curse of the tenth manuscript could destroy the Academy. If the Shadow Keepers had

already started to unfold the layers of enchantments then they must be stopped right now.

But how?

And what happened to the man who years ago tried to destroy the manuscript?

The thoughts overpowered Daksh as he walked towards his dorm. The questions rose without rest. but little did he know what awaited him in the dorm.

As he pushed past the heavy door of the dorm he was greeted by a muffled chaos. All students had gathered in the common room and there was fear reflecting in each eye.

Something extremely disturbing might have happened.

Daksh tried to find his friends. The children gathered around something which Daksh couldn't see from afar. As he reached the centre of the room. His jaw dropped. Aadu was lying on the floor, conscious yet too weak to sit

up. It seemed that something had drained the blood out of him. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips trembled in fear as he saw Daksh. On seeing Daksh Ammu rushed to him. Tears flowed down her cheeks. Ammu gulped her cry and took Daksh to a corner,

“Today when you left we were following you. But we couldn’t find where you went. Instead we got lost on a strange alley. Aadu was leading the way to the other end of the alley so that we could escape but...” She whimpered in absolute fear. Daksh had never seen Ammu breaking down like this ever. Something horrible must have happened to make her so helpless.

“But after we’d walked a few more steps in that alley, a tremor hit us and again there was the warning on the wall about the tenth manuscript. We turned to find another path to leave when... when we saw Guru Adityanarayan. He was frozen in time, floating midair with his eyes glaring at the void as if he was no longer alive.” Ammu whimpered again. “We couldn’t move from our place for some time but then Aadu tried to pull me out of there. We ran wherever we could. Suddenly something pushed Aadu on the floor and it was a Shadow Keeper. It tried to throttle him.” Ammu covered her face with her palms and started to cry.

Daksh was completely speechless. He blankly looked at Aadu and Ammu. He sat beside Aadu who had now sat up. He still looked weak. Aadu spoke in a feeble voice. “The teachers have taken Guru Adityanarayan’s frozen body to the Aragya kaksha. But he looked completely lifeless, as if he was stuck in between time cycles. He was

trapped inside a golden energy seal with Sanskrit inscriptions spinning around him. When they were carrying me to the dorm I overheard the teachers.” Aadu stopped to breathe and spoke again, “They were saying that this kind of magic is forbidden. Only those with the knowledge of the secret manuscript can perform such enchantments.”

Daksh realized that the news had reached the students everywhere and that was why there was a commotion among the students. Everyone was confused and scared and refused to go to their beds. Slowly the crowd of students started to disperse and Ammu and Daksh helped Aadu to his bed. They knew none of them would be able to sleep that night so it was better if they stayed together. The night grew and the whole academy seemed to get lulled to sleep eventually .

“Someone from inside our Academy is helping in the unlocking of the Manuscript.” Ammu spoke finally but her voice seemed distant as if she was speaking to herself.

“What do you mean?” Daksh was startled by the unexpected statement by his friend.

“I don’t know but I heard Guru Arjun suspecting the same this evening. He said to some teacher that without internal help it couldn’t have been possible to find the manuscript. Moreover I saw something when we were lost in the alley.” Both Aadu and Daksh’s eyes widened and they waited for Ammu’s explanation.

“When Adityanaryan was found, right before the teachers could come I saw someone rush out from there

and he was wearing our uniform. I remember clearly seeing the lotus emblem.”

Daksh did not speak after this. Everything was happening like a bad dream- building mountains of fear without much clarity.

Who could be the traitor?

Daksh stayed awake. Sleep had vanished from his eyes. The dorm was silent and Aadu was asleep. His face was still pale and feeble. Only Ammu was awake. She was sitting by Aadu’s bed with a scroll open on her lap.

The moonless sky was a dark fort, guarding its territory. Daksh tried to fight the exhaustion and weariness of his limbs but eventually his lids got heavier and momentarily he dozed off.

“Daksh, wake up” Ammu’s whisper broke his slumber and he saw Ammu gesturing to him to stray quietly. Daksh followed her gaze and saw someone, draped in the stole, sneaking out of the dorm. Whoever he was, he didn't notice Ammu or Daksh. As he left the dorm, Ammu and Daksh got up and followed him as carefully as possible. The student walked through the darkest alley of the Academy. Daksh immediately remembered that he was leading them to the forbidden north wing.

Daksh and Ammu followed him into the North Wing. Daksh could see the walls growing darker with each step. All of a sudden a mysterious green light flickered at the extreme north of the passage and the traitor halted. Daksh and Ammu hid themselves behind a protruding chunk of

brick and waited anxiously. The light started to grow bigger and brighter as it got closer to the boy.

And then there was a figure, emerging from the light.

A Shadow Keeper.

As it stood in front of the student it extended its long capped arm and the student placed an object on it. From where they stood they clearly saw that it was an ancient relic.

Daksh was so shocked by the event that he did not notice that the symbol on his arm had started to glow. Ammu tried to cover the symbol but it was too late. The Shadow Keeper had already spotted them. He knocked down the traitor on the floor and the air around them started to tremble. The Shadow Keeper glared at them. Its eyes were like two burning amber. Daksh stood in front of Ammu and tried to summon the Astra when all of a sudden a force hurled both Ammu and Daksh backwards.

A strong pungent smell took over his senses and his vision blurred. He tried to grab the wall to steady himself and exactly then he felt the Shadow Keeper chilling breath on his shoulder.

All his senses were starting to go numb and before he lost his conscious completely he could here an other worldly voice in his ear, whispering in a sinister joy,

"The first seal has been broken... the manuscript will be ours."

CHAPTER 10

The Battle of the Ashoka Ruins

The first seal had been broken. A battle was impending. Daksh knew everything was going out of control.

He could see the fear of losing in the eyes of the teachers and an inexplicable stillness in Guru Rudranath.

The shadow keeper could not harm Daksh. Later she got to know from Ammu that Guru Rudranath made the Shadow Keeper flee and rescued her and Daksh. When he regained consciousness the whole school seemed to have gathered around him.

All scared and the unknown horror loomed on their faces. Time was ticking away, inching towards an unthinkable fate.

Daksh barely had time to brace himself before the explosion rocked the sky above Takshashila Academy. A bolt of red lightning cracked through the air, splitting the clouds apart as another seal of the Tenth Manuscript shattered. A sound like a thousand voices whispering at once echoed through the night.

Guru Rudranath stayed still in his place. Guru Vyas rushed to the window and his expressions changed into complete disbelief, as if down there, something was taking place which only used to be a fragment of imagination.

“They’ve broken through. The Shadow Keepers are heading to the Temple, Headmaster.” Guru Vyas’s voice shook as he addressed this to Rudranath.

This time the headmaster looked up, his eyes glowing like fire. “Students and teachers, Takshashila needs you right now.” his grave voice echoed. “Let us all unite today. Let us all go down to where it all had started centuries ago, the Ashoka Ruin.”

Daksh knew this place. He had seen this place many times in his dreams but never knew it actually existed until his day. Ammu and Aadu joined Daksh and the rest of the school as they rushed through the corridors to the Ashoka Ruins.

Beneath the school, hidden behind a stone archway, lay the Ashoka Ruins—a forgotten temple swallowed by earth and time where the final seals protecting the Tenth Manuscript remain. Daksh, Ammu, Aadu, and the academy’s warriors must fight against Rakshasa warriors, shadowy wraiths, and illusion magic.

As they entered the ruins, ancient torches flared to life on their own, casting flickering light on carved stone pillars. Sanskrit inscriptions glowed faintly, pulsing like heartbeats. The scripts shifted in their places with new

messages. Ammu used her quill to read the message, "They are coming." She shouted.

A storm of shadows took over the temple. Screeching sounds of evil spirits echoed off the walls.

And then it happened. The symbol on his arm started to glow again.

A memory came back to him.

He was standing in the House of Secrets again, but this time the books were whispering to him. "The mantra... the mantra to bind the darkness..."

Daksh remembered the mantra from his forgotten dream. If spoken at the right place, at the right time, it could seal the shadows away.

But before he could use a roar shook every stone of the temple. From within the darkness of the temple the massive figure of a rakshasa emerged. His armour as black as night and in his hands he carried a flaming weapon unlike any Daksh had ever seen.

On the other side of the Temple, ignorant of the intruder, Ammu knelt before a stone lab. She had found something. She brushed away the dust from top of it and gasped.

A Sanskrit inscription.

"If you have found this it means the Manuscript is awakening. If the final seal is broken, time itself will be rewritten."

This wasn't just about a battle anymore. This was about time. History. Everything.

She looked up to find someone to share her discovery and her eyes met with the Headmaster's. His grim face was enough for Ammu to realize that the Manuscript, once opened, would change the past and erase the future.

Rudranath turned from Ammu and looked at the warriors, ""Warriors of the Academy! Form the Circle of Light!"

At his call a formation around the seal chamber started to happen – a golden energy rose as they began the ancient chant. But the Shadow Keepers were relentless—more Rakshasas poured into the ruins.

Daksh closed his eyes. The mark on his wrist glowed brighter than ever. In his mind, the words of the mantra echoed clearly now. He placed his palm on the temple floor and began to chant.

"Sarva-tamasi-nāśanam... jyotir-āvahanam..."

The air shimmered. The shadows screamed.

But it was too late. The Manuscript was waking up when the last seal throbbed desperately to free the magic within it.

The very core of the Academy was shaken and there were no ways to retreat..

The time had come to face the worst nightmare.

The ground trembled, and an eerie blue glow seeped from the ruins—the final seal was about to shatter. The academy's defenders pushed back, but the Shadow Keepers were too strong. If they didn't stop them soon, the manuscript would fall into the wrong hands.

Daksh looked at his Headmaster who desperately chanted a secret mantra to stop the impending disaster.

The seal was breaking. Time was about to change forever. Or was there more to that?

CHAPTER 11

The Awakening of Kaal-Asura

(Climax – The Final Battle)

The fear reverberated through the temple. Something that Rudranath had dreaded throughout his career as a headmaster at the Academy had begun. As the final seal protecting the Tenth Manuscript shatters, releasing a wave of dark energy that shakes the ruins of Takshsheela Academy.

All of a sudden, through the pulsating walls echoed a chanting—a dark ominous mantra in the forbidden tongue. Daksh could see the Shadow Keepers had gathered around them and they were chanting the Brahmi script. They were summoning the dark forces— the ones which were left within the pages of the sealed books by the Nine Scholars. The chanting kept on ringing through the temple, the passages and the whole Takshsheela. The chanting was relentless and intoxicating as it hit the ears of the students and the teachers.

Daksh forced his eyes open and he saw that the Tenth Manuscript was gradually opening—, a massive black vortex swirls above them. From within the portal, an ancient force begins to emerge—Kaal-Asura, the

forgotten demon of lost time. Daksh's wrist glowed brighter than ever on witnessing the horror in front of him. He realized that Kaal-Asura was never a myth and whatever Rudranath told him was actually the truth. It was imprisoned within the Tenth Manuscript for centuries, hidden away under Emperor Ashoka's command. Now, it was breaking free.

The colossal shadowy figure begins forming in the vortex, its red eyes burning with ancient rage. The figure was no less than a nightmare – a monster imbibing every darkness inside. It emerged from the vortex, getting its whole form, it stood in front of the Warriors. The destruction was about to befall the Academy. Kaal-Asura's shadowy tendrils extend outward, corrupting everything they touch. The battle began and chaos started as everyone started to run away or hide from the deadly grip of the shadows.

But something was different about this battle. Daksh remained static in his position and he sensed shifting scenes around him like illusions. Scenes of the past were merging with the present. Every warrior was confronting scenes from their past- the ones they want to forget, the ones they feared. The Kaal-Asura was showing people how their times crumble and leave no sense to their existence.

Daksh looked around and his eyes caught a sight which left him numb. At the very end of the temple, where the Tenth Manuscript was lying, he saw a man.

Who was that man? Daksh couldn't remember seeing him before when they came to the chamber. Though only

partially visible, his face was strangely familiar to Daksh. He was crouching down the manuscript as if closely inspecting it. But to Daksh's surprise the Manuscript was still locked.

The Kaal Asura had started to trample reality itself. But failing to understand that, Daksh rushed to the man. But it seemed that to the man he was invisible. Daksh tried to touch him but before he could do that the man turned his way.

It was him.

It was Baba.

No. Daksh was not mistaken. He knew that face. He remembered the resemblances from his memory as a child.

"Baba. Baba it's me Daksh. Your son." Tears welled up and choked him as he screamed at the man. But not a single word reached his ears; he was busy with his own work.

Daksh tried a few more times but all went in vain until he realized that it was an illusion of the past. His father was the man about whom he had heard from Rudranath- the one who tried to destroy the Manuscript but accidentally broke the first seal instead and disappeared forever. A deep seated sorrow took over Daksh.

Things were starting to make sense to him as he thought hard. Rudranath had told him that only someone from the bloodline of the Ninth Scholar could know about the manuscript and if his Baba belonged from that blood line then he was certainly the chosen one and that explained

why since his first day he got involved in those strange events.

Daksh was startled by a light touch on his shoulders and looked up to find Rudranth. "I always knew you were the son of my most esteemed student – the one I loved like my own but I never knew how to tell you the truth."

Daksh got up on his feet and looked around the chaos. The warriors were falling. No one could stand against the immense force of the kaal Asura.

"Daksh, listen to me very carefully. Only you can save us all now. The mantra that can destroy the Kaal Asura is known only to those who belong from the bloodline. You have to remember it." Rudranath pulled Daksh to a side.

Daksh was taken aback. How could he know such a mantra? Baba could have known it but he barely could live with his father and that too was years ago. He was just a toddler.

"Listen, try to remember the times you had with your Baba as a child. Is there anything that has remained with you? You know mantras are formed not learned. There must be a memory which has the power to evoke strong emotions in you. Use it. Think Daksh, think." Rudranath spoke in desperation.

In the meantime the battlefield was fractured through time, showing visions of the past, present, and possible futures and the future was a dark abyss. Daksh clenched his head with both his hands and tried to remember everything, anything. But nothing was ringing any bells.

Rudranath rushed to the other side to fight the shadow Keepers. Daksh was at loss; he looked at the corner where he saw his Baba earlier and found the illusion had been replaced by something else. Suddenly a cry made him look back at the battlefield and he saw that a Shadow figure was attacking Ammu. he tried to reach for her but before he could move he felt something was holding him down to his place. The Shadow tentacles of the Kaal Asura had pinned him to the place. He struggled to free himself when his eyes fell on an approaching figure.

The leader of the Shadow Keepers, who wielded the Kaladanda, the cursed staff of Yama, was making his way to Daksh.

It was a distraction. The Leader was trying to distract Daksh's attention from the Kaal Asura whose power was rising with every passing second.

"The mantra lies with me. it lies within me. I know. I must know" Daksh repeated to himself and closed his eyes, putting every last bit of his strength to make his mind work for him. With Kaal-Asura growing stronger every second, Daksh must make a choice—fight the Shadow Keepers or risk everything to stop the ancient being before it's too late.

Like a flash a memory appeared to Daksh as he looked past the approaching figure of the Shadow Keeper.

CHAPTER 12

The Lost Time of Ashoka Academy

(Final Chapter & Sequel Setup)

Time was non-existent. Time was thinner than sand, slipping through Daksh's hand and taking in, with it, the whole Takshashila Academy. Kaal-Asura had fully emerged with its towering figure. Echoes of the past were mingling with the present to create more confusion in the warriors. Figures from the past flickered in and out of existence.

Daksh could feel his legs going numb under the deadly grip of the tentacles. He looked up directly at the Shadow Keeper- the leader, coming towards him with the shaft. His vision kept fluctuating between clarity and haze. Thoughts are chaotic inside his head. He saw Baba today but that was a mere illusion just like everything around him.

He looked around him and for a fraction of time something caught his eyes - a scene from the past where he could see his Baba and Rudranath who looked a lot younger. They were talking in a pensive tone. Daksh tried

to listen. His father was discussing the Tenth Manuscript itself with the headmaster.

“What if you get lost inside the abyss of the Manuscript?” Daksh could hear the voices as if they were coming from afar.

“I am not sure whether I’d be ever found then, Guruji” Baba spoke in a pensive tone. The sounds seemed to hover around Daksh like an echo. He shut his eyes and listened. “However I believe in a mantra, the ancient scriptures call them the Trikaal Bandhan mantra. I don’t know if it will work or not but I can make the passing time work for me, to help me. time might betray too but still I need to have some faith.” The voices faded into the chaos.

Suddenly a lot of closed doors opened inside Daksh’s mind. He had been searching for the mantra in this world while it waited for him in his past. His childhood sketchbook where he hid away one thing that belonged to his Baba and Maa never knew about it which is why it’s not disappeared like the rest of his belongings. Baba wrote down the mantra years ago in his sketchbook and Daksh desperately tried to envision the page where he wrote it.

And as if it was waiting for him to find it, it appeared in front of him.

A simple three lined mantra. Which Daksh read aloud,

“Bhūtaṁ bhaviṣyacca yacca vartamānaṁ, sarvaṁ
baddhaṁ bhavatu.

Trikālamārgā yāntu andhaṁ, na kurvantu
punarāgamanam.

Sthitam kālacakram nirvṛtte saṅketa-sthale mahāśūnye”.

The past, the future, and that which is present – let all be bound.

Let the three paths of time go blind, never to return.

The wheel of time stands still at the final threshold, within the Great Void.

A secret sealing spell hidden in the House of Secrets which his Baba discovered when he himself was a student here. His wrist symbol blazes with golden energy, pushing back the dark force that was approaching him.

The Shadow Keepers all over the Academy froze in their places as if an invisible force has ripped off their strength to move. Daksh kept on chanting the mantra without a break and something started to shift and shudder around him. the tentacles around his ankles loosened and coiled into a lifeless mess.

The mighty figure of Kaal-Asura let out a deafening roar as its form began to weaken. The shattered Tenth Manuscript, now glowing with divine power, rose into the air, pulling its demon back to its ancient prison.

Daksh with his eyes fixed on the Manuscript chanted even louder with a glow of triumph in his eyes. However, that moment did not last long. As the Manuscript drew in the Kaal-Asura completely it did not go back to its place. it stayed afloat with its pages ruffling insanely.

Then it came to a halt and within its core a dark reddish hue emerged. The Tenth Manuscript started to create an unstable rift that was starting to engulf the whole

Academy. The entire school began to fade out of existence, as if being erased from time itself.

A slow yet powerful swirling sensation as if the earth beneath their feet was shifting relentlessly overpowered their senses and soon one after the other – teachers, headmaster and students started to disappear from Daksh's sight. Daksh and his friends try to hold on, but the last thing he sees is the academy vanishing into a blinding flash of light.

His own eyes felt heavy with a century-old sleep and before he could understand he was starting to lose his grip on his body.

Just an eerie voice rang in his ears – *“You are not the first to seek the truth... but you may be the last to rewrite it.”*

When Daksh opens his eyes, everything has changed. The Manuscript had created a whirlwind and the whole Academy was being pulled out of time – either somewhere in the future or in the Past.

CHAPTER 13

The Fractured Time

(Sequel Opening Scene – Book 2 Setup)

Daksh opened his eyes and a gust of dry air brushed off his lids. A strange silence had befallen around him. No sign of the deadly battlefield or the warriors or the Kaal-Asura. The Shadow Keepers had gone back to their eternal prison.

But where was the Manuscript?

Daksh rubbed his fists over his eyes and tried to open them. The sky extended before him. nothing unusual but different. The sky was different, tinted in a strange, unfamiliar hue. The air whose dry edges almost bruised Daksh was now getting thicker, excruciatingly slow, almost stagnant at times.

Time itself was moving at a different speed here.

Daksh was still at Takshashila and the battle he was fighting with his fellow warriors had ended but still something was far from ordinary. The ruins, the broken temple, even the students around him—they all looked slightly different, as if they belonged to another era. The once-glowing Sanskrit inscriptions on the academy walls

were now incomplete, as if they were never finished in this timeline.

Daksh was soon joined by his two friends, Ammu and Aadu who shared the similar perplexed gaze and so were the rest of the teachers and students who were fighting the Kaal Asura a few minutes ago and now they couldn't make sense of whatever was happening around them.

Guru Rudranath looked down at Daksh, his broad forehead wrinkled with a rave frown as he spoke, "The Tenth Manuscript's final seal didn't just trap Kaal-Asura—it displaced the entire academy through time."

Fear and confusion gripped the hearts of both students and teachers. The remark of the headmaster couldn't be deciphered by any one of them but it gave birth to a shivering terror. The danger they had faced previously had not yet gone.

Daksh took some steps forward and away from the crowd. Something at the extreme left pillar sparked for just once. An inscription of some kind. As he went a little closer to the pillar, he could feel a cold shiver down his spine.

It indeed was an old inscription but what sparked in front of his eyes was his name- written in the script thousands of years older than anything he had ever seen.

A thousand-year-old inscription bore his name. Someone in the past already knew about him.

But how?

And only then a deep pulsing low voice cracked through the walls of the academy like thunder:

"You were never meant to be here... yet here you are."

Something had followed them into this strange dimension. The nameless fear was yet not over.

CHAPTER 14

Echoes of the Forgotten Era *(Sequel – The Next Step in the Mystery)*

The battle is not yet over. The choices are yet to be made and this time challenges would be worse than the nightmares. The Academy has been buried in ruins. The once proud walls of glory are now growing fields for vines and weeds. strange symbols – different from the inscriptions they know – are etched into the stone.

Daksh finds a secret chamber beneath the ruins where an ancient artifact awaits him - a broken hourglass with a shimmering mystique mist inside it.

They are not alone in the chambers, a shadowy figure with piercing golden eyes and an aura of immense power, the figure speaks: "You are outsiders in a time that does not belong to you. The balance must be restored... or time itself will shatter."

the ground shakes violently, and a massive stone collapses, sealing the chamber behind them. The academy's true past is beginning to awaken.

The academy is trapped in an ancient past, and someone – or something – wants to keep it that way.