

DOGISTHAAN

KINGDOM OF THE DOGS

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DOGISTHAAN

(PART 1)

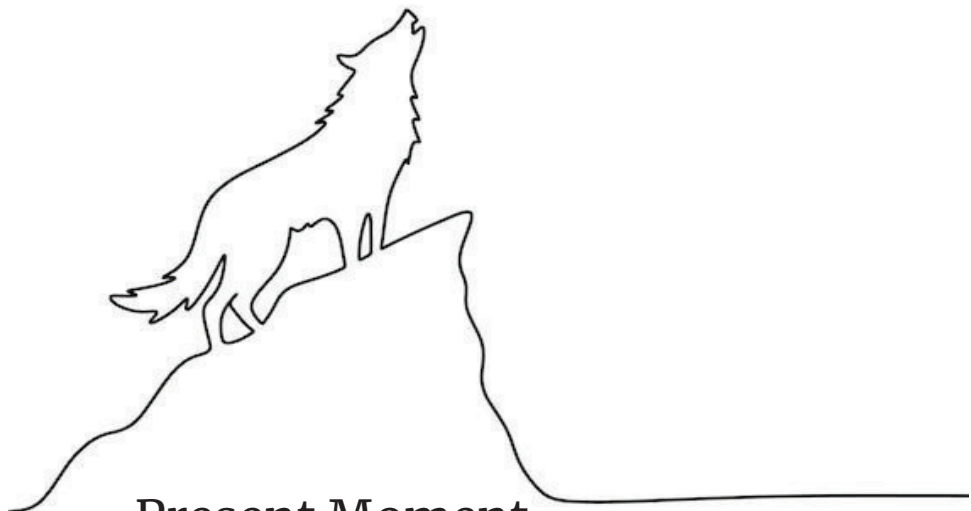
KINGDOM OF THE DOGS

To Chester and Dexter,
whose unconditional love and boundless joy have taught
me what it truly means to love.



"Even to the gates of heaven, Yudhishthira refused to abandon the loyal dog. For in his steadfastness to a creature who had shown him devotion, he embodied Dharma itself."

-Mahaprasthanika Parva, Mahabharatha



Present Moment

In the chilling depths of the wild forest, Moksh screamed in agony as Kram, the betrayed dog lord, scratched his sharp claws along the tender flesh of the young man's leg. The air of the wild forest was heavy with tension, the echoes of the wild growl reverberating in the gloomy dark lair that felt like a prison of nightmares. Kram, with eyes like molten gold, bore down on him with an intensity that chilled Moksh's very soul.

"SPEAK! RIGHT NOW!" Kram commanded, his voice a thunderous growl that shook the cold stone walls. "Tell me, wretched human! Why was I betrayed? Why did you lie to me? Was my loyalty worth nothing to you and your kind, Daivik !?"

Moksh, trapped in the clutches of fear, could feel the pulse of desperation in the air. He stammered, each syllable a struggle against the terror that threatened to swallow him whole. “I—I don’t know!” he gasped, the weight of Kram’s oppressive gaze pressing down like a heavy blanket. “I’m not Daivik! I’m just—”

“Silence!” Kram’s command cut through him like a blade, sharp and unyielding. “Now that you stand before me, Daivik, you must atone for the atrocities your kind has inflicted upon me, upon Shvanasthan! Humanity’s treachery has driven me to the brink of madness, and you shall be the harbinger of this reckoning!”

The air grew thick and suffocating with the burning rage emanating from Kram, sending shivers down Moksh’s spine. He knew he had stumbled into a tempest, a whirlpool of vengeance and heartbreak. The images flashed in the canvas of his mind—fire, blood, the cries of his people swallowed by chaos.

Kram leaned in closer, his breath hot and heavy. “If you choose to defy me, the world you know will vanish. You will witness the end of everything you hold dear! This is not just a warning; it is a promise.”

Moksh’s heart raced, a frantic drumbeat of survival. He had no understanding of this creature’s pain, or of the ancient wrongs that had birthed such a deep-seated fury.

But one truth crystallized in his mind—the only path forward was survival. He knew he had to escape this nightmare, even if it meant sprinting into the jaws of uncertainty.

With every ounce of courage clinging to his trembling body, Moksh stammered through clenched teeth, “I—will find a way! I swear it! Just—just let me go!”

Kram’s eyes blazed with a feral intensity, the remnants of his shattered heart laid bare before Moksh. “You cannot flee your destiny, Daivik. The storm is coming, and you will be at the heart of it. Choose wisely, for the sands of time are running low, and soon the cries of humanity will fill the void where hope once thrived!”

And in that moment, the shadows grew long and ominous, foreshadowing a tale of vengeance and redemption that was only just beginning.

Prologue

3000 Years Ago ...

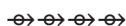
In a divine era, the mighty ocean known as Dvaitama surged like a god, its vastness commanding the earth with an untamed spirit. At its heart lay a colossal arch shaped landmass, a mysterious island cloaked in the secrets of existence, carrying the whispers of life and the shadows of terror. Here, Matsya, a small village nestled along the shoreline—was home to a fragile population of humans, who were inhabiting a land brimming with breathtaking wonders just out of reach.

“Daivik! Daivik!” the children of Matsya joyfully called out as they hurried toward the temple of the revered priest, their hearts filled with anticipation for the evening lessons.

On the temple steps, Daivik opened his eyes from meditation. Seeing the children approaching he gracefully waved and smiled back at them. His presence emanated a divine aura that touched everyone who approached him, inspiring deep respect, and admiration from all who knew him.

In the peaceful village of Matsya, he was more than just a holy man; he was the heart and soul of their community. His teachings, deeply rooted in ancient traditions, emphasized on the interconnectedness of all living beings, the power of compassion, and the enduring strength of the human spirit. The children of Matsya frequently gathered around Daivik, eagerly seeking to absorb his wisdom and lose themselves in his magical tales and rhythmic poems. A true poet and storyteller at heart, Daivik had a unique gift for enchanting young minds. His narratives, rich with mystery and wonder, celebrated their village's vibrant heritage and timeless legends, igniting the imagination of every listener.

That evening, Daivik recited a poem infused with ancient wisdom, his voice a gentle echo of profound spiritual truths:



“Dancing beneath the cosmic laws,
Filled with both virtues and flaws.
A dream that ends only to begin again,
Transient like the whispers of morning rain.
Truth be told, there is no truth to hold,
But transcend maya and see the absolute unfold.
Set your gaze on the glaze of the supreme,
Rising from slumber, let your spirit gleam.
For love is all you need to know
To understand life's divine flow”



In the village of Matsya, life unfolded as a sacred journey toward spiritual awakening and social harmony. Each day was enriched by the unwavering wisdom of their devoted priest, whose presence served as a solid anchor for each villager, providing support and guidance at every turn. In their deep connection to the natural world, the villagers found alignment with a greater design, recognizing in every wave and gentle breeze the sacred pulse of creation itself.

The village of Matsya lay nestled gracefully at the edge of the sacred ocean, with its peaceful settlements dotting the expansive shoreline like gems along a radiant necklace.

The villagers flourished on the rich gifts of the sea and fertile land, engaging in a culture of vibrant fishing and farming. Over time, the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tides became intricately woven into the fabric of village life, establishing a natural rhythm that resonated deeply within the community. In this idyllic haven, time flowed slowly and gently, allowing the villagers to fully savor the essence of harmony and balance that enveloped their lives. Matsya, despite being modest in size, flourished as a close-knit community where everyone knew one another, fostering deep bonds of familial unity and unwavering trust. The laughter of children mingled with the sound of the waves, while shared stories floated through the warm evenings, creating a sense of connection that embraced every villager.

Surrounded by rolling hills and filled with the refreshing scent of salt and ocean air, Matsya radiated a deep sense of simplicity and tranquility.

In stark contrast to the serene village of Matsya, where life flowed gently like the tides, many miles away lay a realm steeped in mystery and dreams. Hidden Beyond towering mountains and at the farthest reaches of the vast ocean known as Dvaitama, rested the enigmatic land of Shvanasthaan—the kingdom of the dogs.

Shvanasthaan, derived from the Sanskrit words "Shvana" meaning dog and "Sthan" meaning place, was a

hidden world, shrouded in legends and whispers. This ancient land was a fusion of fable and truth, leaving the people of Matsya in a haze of uncertainty about it since time immemorial.

As for Shvanasthaan's landscape, it was a vibrant masterpiece with majestic mountains overlooking lush valleys, rolling hills hiding treasured secrets, and vast plains stretching out beneath a brilliant, ever-changing sky. At the heart of the kingdom stood a mighty mountain range, its towering peaks reaching high into the sky as if they were trying to touch the heavens. These ancient mountains bore the scars of time, their rough surfaces shaped by centuries of strong winds and heavy rains. The highest points, covered in eternal snow, contrasted sharply with the dark, jagged cliffs below. The air was thin and cold, filled with the fresh scents of pine and earth, a constant reminder of the harsh realities that accompanied such elevated heights. Traveling through these mountains was no easy task. Yet, despite their harshness, the mountains held a rugged beauty, revealing stunning views and moments of quiet elegance with each passing season.

For the dogs, these mountains represented so much more than mere scenery; they were a formidable symbol of strength and resilience, rising like a natural fortress that shielded their kingdom from all threats. In this land, the

dogs roamed with fierce independence, unchallenged and unafraid amidst nature's grandeur, filling the realm with untamed power and beauty. The spirit and strength of these canine inhabitants far eclipsed that of Matsya, their distant human neighbors. Just the thought of venturing into Shvanasthaan sent shivers down the spines of the villagers, awakening a powerful blend of awe and fear within their hearts.

The first barrier to this enigmatic land was the Wild Forest, a dense tangle of lofty ancient trees concealing hidden dangers lurking at every turn. Even if one were brave enough to go through this thick maze, they would still face towering mountains and a bewildering labyrinth of trails leading deeper into the mysterious unknown. On rare, crystal-clear days, the villagers could catch fleeting glimpses of the majestic peaks that loomed like distant guardians on the horizon, their imposing presence watching over all. To the villagers, the idea of crossing those mountains felt utterly unimaginable, a reckless act reserved for the most daring of souls.

Beyond the formidable physical challenges lay an ingrained fear and respect for Shvanasthaan that held the villagers back from daring to embark on the journey. Ancient legends spoke of this land as a realm ruled by powerful, intelligent dogs, unmatched by any other

creature in existence. Fiercely protective of their borders, these majestic guardians were said to thwart any intruders who dared to cross into their territory, preserving their land in its pure and untouched state, free from human influence. The villagers of Matsya, haunted by the chilling tales of those who ventured too close, chose to remain within the comforting embrace of their own village, honoring the boundary that kept their worlds apart.

In the land of Shvanasthaan, the dogs were no ordinary canines; they were truly magnificent creatures, their intelligence bordering on the supernatural. Many believed they were the direct descendants of Kram, the legendary Dog Lord, a figure of immense power and wisdom who walked among them. Kram was a titan among beings, ruling over Shvanasthaan with an iron will, his presence commanding and inspiring respect. His reign was also defined by a remarkable balance of strength and compassion that endeared him to his subjects.

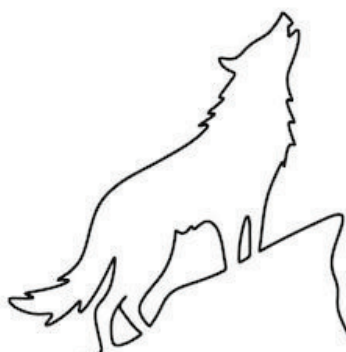
Kram's legacy thrived as he continued to roam his kingdom, his spirit alive in every heart and paw. His aura—a potent blend of might and wisdom—radiated throughout the land, filling his subjects with unparalleled courage and a sense of purpose. In every noble glance and every commanding bark, the echoes of Kram's indomitable spirit could be felt like the rumbling of thunder, a

testament to the immortal saga of the Dog Lord. His influence stretched far beyond the borders of his magnificent kingdom; his presence was felt in every corner of Shvanasthaan. His unmatched strength, coupled with the extraordinary bravery of his loyal followers, laid the foundation for grand epics and captivating legends. Tales of these remarkable beings, blessed with abilities that bridged the gap between the mortal and the divine, swept across the realm like ripples on a still lake, casting a spell that enchanted the hearts and minds of all who dared to listen. In the shadows of the mountains and the whispers of the forests, Kram stood watch, ensuring that his legacy would soar like a wildfire, igniting the spirits of all who called Shvanasthaan home.

As these stories journeyed through vast landscapes, they had eventually reached the distant village of Matsya, where they took on a life of their own. The awe-inspiring tales of Kram and his enchanted dogs transcended physical distances and cultural barriers, transforming into a powerful sensation in the hearts of the villagers. Whether driven by the whispers of ancient legends or the thrill of unexpected encounters, an unbreakable thread of destiny began to weave together the fates of these lands.

Back in Matsya, as midnight covered the village in deep darkness, Daivik emerged from his deep meditation,

his mind still lingering in the realm of tranquility. But as he slowly opened his eyes, a wave of unease crashed over him and the air in the dimly lit temple suddenly felt heavy, thick with an unsettling sense of foreboding. Shadows flickered ominously in the candlelight, and the familiar sounds of the night—the gentle rustle of leaves, the distant rhythm of waves—now felt haunting. The peace he had cultivated vanished swiftly, replaced by a chilling realization: Matsya's end was near.



Chapter 1:

Matsya's Last Stand

It began with a storm.

What at first had been a faint, distant rumble in the sky developed into a thunderous roar as the heavens opened and unleashed a torrent of rain not seen in generations. The people of Matsya, a small village nestled along the coast, were no strangers to rainstorms. Living near the ocean meant enduring many storms over the years, yet they had always emerged with their homes and spirits intact but this storm was different. Relentless.

For days, the rain hammered down without mercy, soaking the earth in sheets of water so heavy that the villagers could barely see more than a few feet in front of

them. The sound of the rain, beating down relentlessly on the rooftops, was a constant hum that drowned out all other noises and filled their hearts with foreboding. The wind howled with an unnatural fury, ripping through the trees, sending branches hurtling through the air like a storm of arrows. It felt as though nature itself had turned against them.

They watched in growing anxiety as the relentless storm battered their village, the ocean's waves rising higher with each passing hour, threatening to engulf everything in its path.

At first, the waters lapped around the edges of their crop fields, an intrusion they hoped was harmless, which would retreat as quickly as it had come. But the sea would not retreat; in a strange, relentless movement, it had swallowed the fertile fields that had nourished this village for years.

"How much more of this can we take?" Indu, a villager elder, asked in dismay as he stood at the edge of the flooded fields and watched in helpless despair as the water crept closer towards the village itself. His voice, heavy with the weight of his years and the growing fear within, was swallowed by the relentless roar of the swollen river.

"It is as if the gods have forsaken us," said Mira, the village healer-her composure broken by what lay before

her. Her shawl was tightly clasped around her shoulders, trying to ward off the chill that seemed to have just settled within the air, even though the season should not really have proved so cold. "Let us hope this tempest isn't going to take everything from us before it passes."

However, as the days went by and turned into weeks, it slowly became clear that this storm did not plan on passing. The rain continued to fall, the ocean continued to rise, and bit by bit, it consumed the land on which villagers relied for survival. Acres of rice and wheat fields, so fertile and the lifeblood of the village, were now submerged under several feet of water. The crops, none of which was more than a few days away from harvest, were ruined: the stalks bent and broken under the weight of the floodwaters.

The villagers came together to save what they could, but it quickly became clear that it was impossible. The flood arrived too suddenly, and the damage was overwhelming. In just a few days, their main source of food was gone, washed away by the relentless tide. The waters not only destroyed their crops but also turned the once-fertile land into salt-soaked soil, leaving it barren and unusable.

The villagers were caught off guard by the rising floodwaters, forcing them to abandon their homes in

search of higher ground. From the makeshift tents where families huddled together, they watched in terror as the ocean crept closer and closer. The wind howled through the flimsy shelters all night, rattling their resolve, while the rain fell relentlessly, as if mocking their desperate attempts to survive. Eyes wide with fear, the families clung to one another, united in their uncertainty and dread.

Reality soon began to set in. With their crops destroyed and their land submerged, the people of Matsya faced the grim truth: there was no way to feed themselves. The village had relied on their fertile fields and the ocean's bounty, but now both had turned against them. As the waters continued to rise, their dwindling food reserves became the only lifeline, slipping away little by little, leaving them with a growing sense of despair.

"The shops are nearly empty," Surya, the head fisherman, informed the village council, his voice heavy with concern. His gaunt frame and hollow eyes spoke of sleepless nights. "We might scrape by for a few more days, but after that... I fear we won't have enough to survive."

"We're facing a crisis, on the brink of famine," Daivik said in a whispering voice, his tones thick with sadness. "The floodwaters have claimed our fields, and if we do not find a way to endure, they will soon claim our lives as well."

The word "famine" sent a cold shiver through the village gathering. It was a word uttered only in the most dismal times, an omen of sorts, carrying with it much suffering and death. Famine meant hunger, disease, and the gradual, painful dying of people who had been so full of life and energy. It was a fate that no one among them would have believed they could face.

"We can't just sit here and wait to die!" Indu exclaimed, frustration rising in his voice. "There must be something we can do. We can't just watch our people starve."

But what were they to do? The sea had swallowed up their land, and the rains seemed unabated. The rivers that should have brought life to their crops now were carrying death in the form of rising waters, flooding everything in sight. The fishermen tried to go into the ocean, but the waves were treacherous; the sea was dangerous, with no prospect of bringing them some catch.

As days went into weeks, the village reserve was getting smaller and smaller. Meals comprising rice, fish, and vegetables started getting replaced by portions of whatever was left. Children who were playing in the fields earlier now listlessly sit back with empty stomachs and shattered souls. The elders commented on it as a disaster that has been met at its worst ever since they were born.

Daivik watched all of this with growing concern. He knew with dread in his heart that this couldn't be a coincidence. They were signs—warning signals by gods that something was drastically wrong. He had read the ancient texts, learned the old ways, and knew how delicate the balance between the land, the sea, and the people who lived on it was. And he knew that this balance was getting disrupted and the knowledge weighed heavy on him. In his restless sleep, a kaleidoscope of dreams unfolded: visions of fire and water, the earth gaping open to swallow the village whole. He saw the faces of villagers, wide-eyed with fear, grappling with the weight of their despair.

That evening, as the storm clouds thickened across the sky and the sea raged just beyond the village, Daivik called the villagers together into the temple. Fear and foreboding weighed heavy in the air; people crowded close, their features ashen from hunger and concern. Mothers clutched their children to them, while the older folk, who had so often faced hardship in their lives, said nothing at all but stood grey-faced.

Daivik stepped forward, his heart racing in his chest, while his voice did not even quiver. "I understand the hardships we are enduring. The flood has claimed our land, and soon the sea will demand even more. Our food

supplies are almost over and the storm shows no signs of stopping. We stand at the edge of annihilation.”

A murmur of assent ran through the crowd, tinged with the hopelessness of having lost so much already. What more was to be done?

“But there is still hope,” Daivik went on, the voice rising with determination. “A chance to save ourselves and find refuge. You all know the stories of Shvanasthaan, the land of dogs beyond the mountains. They say that no human has ever set foot there, but I believe now is a time for us to seek their help and do what has never been done before.

KRAM, the Dog Lord, is an entity with incomprehensible power and wisdom, and the only hope left is asking him to grant us sanctuary to save our village.”

The name “Shvanasthaan” sent a feeling of awe and dread into every villager’s heart as they exchanged insecure glances. Indu, the elder, stepped forward sceptically. “Daivik, Shvanasthaan is a place of myth. How can we trust that the stories are true? And even if they are, how can you or anyone expect to reach it? The passage through mountains is dangerous, and beyond the woods lies a realm of unknown dangers that none of us can begin to comprehend.”

Daivik locked eyes with Indu, his determination unwavering as he spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "I understand the dangers that lie ahead," he said, each word heavy with urgency. "But inaction is a death sentence for Matsya. I must undertake this journey alone. The path is fraught with perils too great for any but me to face. I will navigate the treacherous Wild Forest and scale the unforgiving mountains. I will seek out KRAM, the Dog Lord, and I will implore him for mercy—for the survival of our village hangs in the balance."

A hush fell upon the crowd. They had always believed Daivik—he was their spiritual guide, their only connection with the gods. If anyone could do so, it would be him. Still, the fear of the unknown gnawed at their hearts.

"What if you don't come back?" a woman asked, her voice shaking. "What shall we do then?"

Daivik's heart clenched in on itself at the question, but he made himself stand strong. "If I do not return, then know that I gave all to try and save you. But I have faith that the gods will guide my path. And I believe that KRAM will listen. The howls. They have been calling me. This is the only way."

For a long moment, silence fell over the villagers as the weight of his words settled in. Indu finally nodded; his

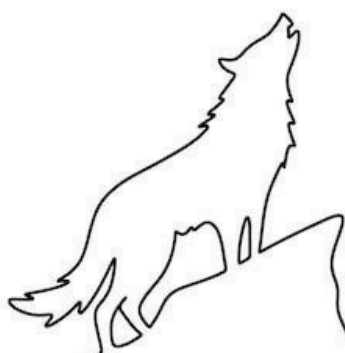
expression grim yet resolute. "Then go, Daivik. Take with you our prayers and our hope."

The others nodded in agreement, their murmurs lacking enthusiasm. They had little choice; Daivik's journey was their only hope.

With the storm looming at his doorstep, he readied himself to depart. He packed sparingly, aware that he must move swiftly and silently, like a cat. He took only the essentials—a small amount of food, a mat, and the priestly robes that signified his station. The weight of his mission pressed heavily on his shoulders, but there was no turning back now.

Before dawn broke, Daivik stood at the edge of the village, the path to the north stretching out before him. The mountains rose in the distance, their peaks shrouded in mist, beyond which lay Shvanasthaan. The howls returned on the wind, clearer now yet still distant – calling him into the unknown.

"I will return," he whispered to himself, the resolve firm in his heart. "I must."



Chapter 2:

Daivik's Path

Daivik sat under the grand Banyan tree the next morning, silently preparing for his journey, as heavy gray clouds loomed over Matsya village. His eyes were half-lidded, lost deep in meditation.

The energy in the air that once was gentle had grown heavy, as if it came from deep within the earth. Daivik's sharpened instincts had sensed it for weeks. In dreams, he saw distant mountains hidden in mists, calling out to him like some forgotten memory. The summons were not urgent nor forceful, only mild —subtle, like the beat of his own heart, yet constant and unstoppable.

The village children turned up around him as they had done all along, but today, there was a whispered awe among the little ones for the revered sage. To them, Daivik was not only a spiritual guide but also a bridge between man and the divine. His wisdom flowed through the village like a river, quenching parched minds and hearts. But something distinctive characterised that day. The children could feel it. Daivik had been in deeper meditation than usual, and his stillness was more profound than ever.

Daivik slowly opened his eyes. The spark in them was clear as if he had seen something wonderful. He didn't stand up. He remained sitting there in silence, absorbing the message that he had received. The call to Shvanasthaan had arrived, and it was now time to leave the tranquillity of Matsya.

He felt that something momentous was about to happen and saw a few children walk up to him hesitantly. There was a young man named Jeet, who usually came to Daivik for advice; he was the one who took the initiative of speaking first.

"Daivik-ji," Jeet began softly but with some seriousness as he uttered, "Is everything alright? You seem distant today."

Daivik smiled serenely; his eyes reflective of the peace welling up within him. "All is well, Jeet. In fact, all is as it

should be. The time has come for me to embark on a journey that has been long in the making."

Jeet furrowed his brow. "A journey? Where will you go?"

"Shvanasthaan," murmured Daivik softly, as if the word itself bore the weight of centuries. "A place not seen by ordinary eyes, yet a place I must go to fulfil a greater purpose."

The children looked at each other, confused at what this meant. To them, Shvanasthaan was more myth than real, something almost never spoken about outside old tales.

But Daivik-ji," one of the younger girls, Anjali, said hesitantly, "isn't Shvanasthaan dangerous? The mountains, the weather. No one ever returns from there."

Daivik nodded gently. "Danger lies only in the mind, Anjali. The journey may be treacherous for some, but not for those who walk with faith. I am not afraid, for I trust in the higher power that guides me."

His serenity was really contagious, and gradually, the people of the village lost all their worries. Daivik was no ordinary human being - his life was always ruled by forces beyond anyone's imagination. If someone could undertake such a trip, then only he could.

As the villagers surrounded him, offering their blessings and words of encouragement, Daivik felt a deep connection to the place that he had called home for so many years. He had no fear, no anxiety. This was not one of desperation or haste. It was, in fact, a path he always knew he would take, though the when and how had remained hidden until now.

With one last glance at the village and the people he had vowed to protect, Daivik stepped into the unfamiliar wilderness. A long and perilous journey lay ahead, but he understood that the fate of Matsya rested on his shoulders.

Summoning courage in his heart and casting fear behind him, Daivik journeyed north into the darkness—toward Shvanasthaan and the flickering hope that lay within.

His only guide was the vision that had called him and his faith in the higher power, which up till then had never failed him. The villagers watched from their doorways as he passed. They offered silent prayers for the frail figure passing through their village, unaware that Daivik was already beyond the realm of ordinary men.

The road out of Matsya was narrow and winding, with dense forests and rocky terrain. It was little travelled because it disappeared at last into the foothills of the far-off mountains. These mountains- one covered in mist-

were said to hold Shvanasthaan within its folds. Few dared to venture in there because the weather was unkind and the terrain even worse. Stories told of those who ventured and never returned.

Daivik, however, had no care for these rumours. His mind was quiet, and his heart steady. Having left the familiar view of the temple, the lake, and then the fields of Matsya, he went on with his journey. He felt that there was something deep inside him; what lay ahead of him was uncertain. However, he could put his trust in the flow of life, like a river puts its trust into its winding course through rocks and valleys. It will, in the end, come to an ocean.

The first several miles went easily, for the path was still visible, the air fresh with the scent of pine and earth. Daivik walked with measured steps, his sandals pressing softly into the dirt. The forest began to thicken around him; its towering trees stood like ancient guardians. The farther he ventured, the quieter the world became. Even the songs of the birds faded, leaving only the sound of his breath and the soft rustle of leaves underfoot.

By noon, the forest opened up to a more hostile terrain. The trees were sparse, and the ground was rocky, some of which was uneven. The sun burned high overhead, casting its warmest rays down below and the

wind grew stronger and biting cold. Daivik's robes fluttered in the wind, but his face didn't contort with the discomfort of the changing weather.

For a moment, he stood at the edge of a cliff, his eyes out into the broad expanse lying before him. Beyond, the mountains rose in the distance; all but their peaks took behind the dark swirl of clouds. They were imposing, yes, but not frightening. For Daivik, they simply marked his path. He filled his lungs with the scent of wildness, the smell of earth and stone and distant rain. It was both eerie and beautiful—the kind of beauty that spoke of raw, unbridled power in the world.

From here, the trail only grew tougher, but Daivik hesitated not. He steps ahead, his feet finding their way over the rough ground, his mind attuned to the rhythm of the earth beneath him.

The first challenge came in the form of a ravine where the sides cut awkwardly into the landscape, spewing out jagged rocks. There was no bridge, no apparent way across, but Daivik's serenity did not crack. He stood there for a moment; a gust of wind shifted as he observed the changing terrain before him, and then he quietly began his descent into the gorge. Sharp rocks jutted out, making the ascent treacherous, but Daivik moved with an almost supernatural grace, as if guided by the earth itself.

Halfway down, a loose rock gave way beneath his foot and sent a cascade of pebbles tumbling into the chasm below. Daivik caught himself just in time, his hand finding hold on a jutting rock. He hung there for a moment, suspended between earth and sky, the wind whistling in his ears. But there was no fear in him, only a deep, abiding calm.

With minute accuracy, he pulled himself up; his body continued sliding down to the bottom of the ravine. Ahead was not going to be an easy road, but the spirit inside him was the same, equally stable. The mountains, Shvanasthaan, were waiting there, and he would meet them with as much gracefulness and patience that had gotten him thus far.

As Daivik emerged from the gully, all around him came a sudden change of landscape. The forest was left very far behind; it seemed miles away from the rolling hills of Matsya. Before him lay an expanse of rocks, steep inclines, and cramped paths winding quite perilously along the edges of cliffs. Dark clouds gathered above, bearing an ominous promise of rain.

The path ahead was not one for ordinary travellers. In fact, it was hardly a path at all—it was more of a suggestion of a route carved by time and the few intrepid enough souls who happened to have passed this way. The earth was hard

underfoot, and the wind howled as it whipped through the rocky formations. Still, Daivik walked calmly, his steps unhurried, his breathing measured. His body flowed over the terrain as if each rock, every crag, had been placed there for him to cross.

He moved through the challenging landscape with a sharp mind, not driven by compulsion or fear. To Daivik, the obstacle was not merely something to overcome but an opportunity to become one with the surrounding earth. Each step he took resonated in harmony with the world, and though the land was reluctant, he encountered no resistance.

But the weather began to turn. The temperature plummeted sharply, and a light drizzle started falling. Moisture clung to his skin and robes, seeping into his bones, but Daivik paid it no heed. His gaze remained fixed ahead of him upon the steep path which led up to the first mountain peak.

The rain poured down when he was halfway up the slope, and the rocks grew slippery. Winds screamed through the crevices on the mountainside. For anybody else, this would be the moment of doubt, testing willpower. However, Daivik, his body soaked and shivering, felt nothing but peace. He knew his journey wasn't about conquering the elements but about trusting

them to surrender to the power without being consumed by it.

As the rain continued falling, pounding against the earth, and the sky darkening, Daivik sought shelter under a jut of rock. He crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and sat there. The sound of the rain was a symphony in it, drumming on the earth to echo through the mountains. It would have seemed like absolute madness to stop and meditate right in the middle of such a storm. But for Daivik, it was the best time to re-establish contact again with the higher power guiding him.

He was breathing deeply, constantly, his chest going up and down in slow, measured rhythm. The storm roared around him, but inside it, only silence could be felt. The pulse of the mountain, its energy beneath him, the confusion rising of the increasing wind and rain. All this too was part of the same divine plan. Daivik was no less a part of it all than any other thing.

Hours passed and the rain stopped gradually. The clouds lightened up, and a faint glow from the setting sun crossed over the darkness. Daivik opened his eyes and got up. He stood over the glistening landscape and continued on his way.

But life was no easier ahead of him. In the mountains of all their terrible beauty, Daivik felt a strange sense of

belonging. Every step forward took him closer to Shvanasthan, but he went neither fast or slow. Time did not seem to exist at all for Daivik; the journey was a destination.

As he climbed up, the air grew thinner, dropping the temperature even further. His breath fogged before him, and his limbs felt heavy. But there was no fight in him, no struggle against the forces of the ascent. Long ago, he had yielded to the need for control, for certainty. He was simply a traveler now, moving through the world with ease, guided by forces of higher understanding.

Now, the mountains towered higher still, spread over Daivik like ancient guardians who watched every move he made. The land had shifted again—from sharp rock and narrow pathways to wide, open stretches of snow-covered ground. Soft crunching filled the air as the snow crunched beneath Daivik's bare feet, leaving behind imprints so delicate they were quickly swallowed up by fresh powder. He shivered, the wind being crisper, nipping at his skin, yet his face was serene, as if this cold was just an illusion for a brief moment.

The peaks ahead started to glisten in the pale light of the sun setting over the mountains. Long shadows began to touch the land. The sky above had lightened, now an expanse of stars peeking through the darkening twilights.

Daivik drew a long breath deep into his lungs. He stood there for a moment, taking in the emptiness. Except for the occasional wind gust or distant creaking of ice upon the mountainside, there was nothing else. Yet, Daivik felt one with this world.

There, in the stark beauty of the mountains, an energy seemed to throb—almost alive, pulsing through the landscape and within him. He felt the veils of ancient wisdom below his feet, stories told of countless travellers and pilgrims who trod this path before him. He is part of something much greater: a thread in the vast tapestry of existence that stretches across time and space. As he climbed higher yet, the air thinned even more, and each breath came laboriously. Every step hurt now, but Daivik's pace did not break. His body, tired though it was, moved with a calm and steady deliberation that had brought him thus far. The path, invisible beneath drifts, twisted and curled as it led toward a ridge that rose into the sky like the back of a sleeping monster.

The higher he climbed, the more beautiful the view grew. Despite the very breathtaking grandeur that surrounded him, Daivik remained centered. He walked with purpose, but did not rush. To him, there was no destination other than the moment at hand. He stepped forward, each step he took was part of a greater plan, guided by a higher power destined to reveal his true path.

And then, as if the wind itself had changed direction, it brought with it a noise that tore through the silence: a low, rumbling growl, echoing down from the mountain sides. Daivik held silent, his senses growing sharper. It was the sound of the wild and something primal and raw. But as the growl gained in volume, pulsating in the cold air, Daivik's calm did not waver. He had confronted such trials before, and he knew that fear was alien ground.

The growl came again, closer this time, followed by heavy footsteps crunching through the snow. Whatever it was, it was heading toward him. Daivik slowly turned, his eyes scanning the darkness beyond the ridge. Though unseen, its presence was unmistakable—a mountain guardian, testing those who dared enter its domain.

But Daivik neither prepared for battle nor fled. He stood his ground, breathing slowly, his heart open to the world around him. The wind howled, echoing the creature's growl, yet Daivik remained rooted, a silent figure against the vast emptiness of the snow-covered peaks. He was not there to conquer, but to live—moving with the natural order of the world, not against it.

Sensing no fear from Daivik, the creature halted. Its growls faded into the wind, and the footsteps disappeared into the night. Daivik continued his journey, unhindered,

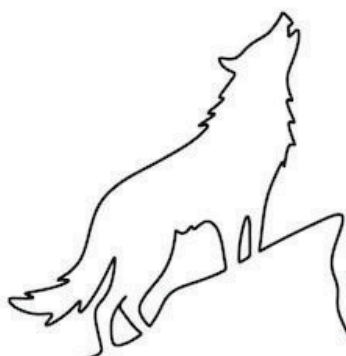
as though the mountains themselves had accepted him as part of their eternal dance.

The ridges ahead became sharper; the last mile towards Shvanasthaan awaited him. But Daivik with the same quiet determination that had brought him so far continued onward and came out untouched by the trials of the world.

The air grew thinner, and the silence deepened as Daivik climbed higher into the mountains. The stars glittered brighter in a sky so clear, it seemed as though one could reach up and touch them. The moon's glow cast a strange beauty upon the rocky outcrops and winding paths that led onward.

The ambient energy around him shifted, subtle at first, but undeniable. It was as if the very atmosphere bent to his presence as he neared the sacred portal. The once-rugged peaks smoothed out beneath his feet, giving way to a vast, eerie plateau that seemed to stretch into infinity. A chill ran through the air, heavy with the weight of what lay ahead.

Daivik had finally reached the final approach to Shvanasthaan—the forbidden realm of Vikra, the mad exiled dog. Every step forward now felt like a descent into danger, as if the land itself held its breath, waiting to see who would survive the encounter.



Chapter 3:

Vikra

The wind swept through the narrow streets of Matsya Village, carrying whispers of fear and ancient battles. In the stillness, the villagers spoke in hushed tones—of their protector, Kram, of the mysteries surrounding Shvanasthaan, and most fearfully, of Vikra, the mad, exiled dog of the mountains.

Daivik had heard those familiar stories countless times as a child, but today they felt hauntingly closer, more real than ever. As he gathered his meagre belongings from his overnight stay, his mind spiralled back to the elders' chilling tales of Vikra—the once-honourable guardian who had devolved into a creature of pure chaos, a beast that

thrived on fear and madness. The very thought sent shivers down his spine, as he prepared for the next leg of his journey, knowing that the shadows of those stories loomed ever closer.

The mere mention of the name "Vikra" sent a shiver through anyone who heard it. He was no ordinary dog but one of the most feared creatures in all of Shvanasthaan. His legend had grown over the years, becoming almost mythic in nature. Elders warned children not to wander too far from the village for fear of crossing his path. Travelers deliberately avoided the mountainous roads, haunted by the knowledge that his presence always lurked in the shadows.

Daivik, still hesitating before embarking on his final journey into Vikra's realm, sat lost in flashbacks of the moments when he had first heard the tales of the fearsome creature.

"Vikra. He hadn't always been mad," one of the elders had said to Daivik, sitting by the communal fire, his worn hands tracing patterns in the air. "Once, he was KRAM's most trusted lieutenant, a fierce and loyal protector of Shvanasthaan. But something happened, and no one knows for sure what. Some say it was a betrayal by other dogs; others claim it was a battle that left him broken in

more ways than one. All we know is that when Vikra returned, he had changed.”

Vikra was vividly imprinted in Daivik’s mind: the big gray creature with matted, streaked fur, its body scarred like a tapestry of battle tattoos. The left ear was half-bitten off, a grim testament to its survival through countless violent encounters. Now, only madness glinted from those bright, constellation-like eyes, filled with unspent rage.

“Don’t go in search of him, Daivik,” the elder had warned. “Vikra is no enemy you can persuade to change. He’s well and truly lost.”

The silence was Daivik’s response, his heart unwavering, his thoughts unshaken. Not a man to run from battle nor to be intimidated by threats of violence. His path was for a higher cause, and he knew that every foe, be it man or beast, was part of that path.

Perhaps it was said that Vikra had been banished to the darker recesses of Shvanasthaan because even KRAM, the mighty Dog Lord, could no longer check his hand. He had turned against the very land he had defended, his thoughts now warped by whatever darkness took him over. Vikra’s banishment certainly had not cured the fear, though. Instead, it only heightened the terror; for now, nobody knew wherein the beast roamed.

Daivik's path became clear: he had to traverse the mountains to reach the heart of Shvanasthaan, where the lore of the land intertwined with Vikra's legend. Despite the daunting presence of the crazed dog, fear did not grip him. He understood that any encounter would test every ounce of his will and wit. Killing Vikra was not his intent; that was not his way. Instead, he aimed to outsmart the creature, to neutralise the threat without shedding blood.

The air grew colder, the landscape more unforgiving. Every step forward was felt as one closer into Vikra's territory, and while the winds muttered warnings, Daivik strode on with unshakeable composure.

His plain, dusty robes fluttered in the cold gusts as his bare feet moved steadily over the rough terrain, showing an elegance and simplicity that masked the dangers around him. This was Vikra's territory now. The mad dog's legend hung heavy in the wind. Birds seemed to fall silent here, perhaps out of respect or perhaps fearing this beast that roamed these lands.

Daivik stopped at the edge of a steep slope, his eyes spanning the horizon. In the distance, the snowy summits of Shvanasthaan sparkled. It was then that he saw the faintest flicker of movement, a flash darting between the rocks far below.

It was too fast, too low to the ground to be a man. Daivik narrowed his eyes. Unmistakable—he'd caught his first glimpse of Vikra.

The mad dog moved with a weird, almost ghostly silence through the rocks, weaving through them at a speed almost unnatural for a creature so ravaged by battle. Even from that distance, Daivik could make out the gray, scarred figure of Vikra—lean yet colossal and utterly wild. His fur, probably once thick and shiny, now hung in matted patches streaked with dirt and dried blood. Scars, deep and ugly, crisscrossed his body, the stories of violence and survival etched into the very fabric of his being. His torn ear gave him a lopsided, almost pitiful look. Everything about Vikra was pathetic. He was a killer, a creature of madness and instinct.

Vikra stopped and lifted his head, sniffing the air. Daivik watched, the dog's movements sharp, paranoid, and as if he could smell an attack anytime. His eyes were wild, bloodshot, and fixated in different directions on the rocks around him. For a moment, at least, he located Daivik above. Daivik kept still, his breath even, body equally balanced on the cliff's edge.

The moment passed, and Vikra, seeming satisfied that he was alone, continued his swift descent down the mountain path.

Daivik knew that the meeting was inevitable. Stories of Vikra's savagery were not exaggerated either. He had heard stories of travellers who had encountered the mad dog and never returned. But Daivik had no fear. His mission was beyond the ordinary, and he had learned to silence any emotions that could pull him off course. He wouldn't face Vikra with violence—that was never his way.

Instead, Daivik emerged from his resting platform with silent movement and followed Vikra without disturbing the mountain's balance. The way would directly take him into Vikra's territory, from which he would have to devise a plan to catch the dog without causing it any harm.

The situation ahead was almost impossible, but Daivik took another step, as he always did, still with patience and trust in the greater force that guided his steps.

When Daivik descended the trail mountainside, the terrain here became much more treacherous. The rocky path narrowed to an unpleasant width; he had to balance himself against jagged cliffs so as not to slide off. The wind howled through mountain passes, biting and sharp, whipping him in the face and pushing him back with every step. But he was undisturbed, walking slowly and deliberately, each step measured out carefully.

Soon, the trail dropped into a dark gorge, where the walls of rock closed in like the jaws of a great beast. The air grew stifling, with sunlight barely managing to pierce the towering cliffs above. This was a place lost to time, where nature ruled unchecked. It was here that Vikra had made his lair, and Daivik could feel the presence of the mad dog drawing nearby.

He waited, listening intently to the far-off faint sounds—the drip of water off the rocks, the rustle of sparse bushes clinging to the mountainside, and then, barely audible, the soft padding of paws on stone. Vikra was close.

The ground was littered with bones—some ancient and crumbling, others disturbingly fresh—grim evidence of Vikra's savagery. Shredded, bloodstained scraps of cloth hinted that many of his victims had been unsuspecting travelers, unaware of the lurking terror. But these bones weren't just human. Among them lay the remains of goats, birds, and other creatures—some even of other dogs—all claimed by Vikra's insatiable hunger. The twisted fragments told stories of violent ends, each one more horrific than the last.

Eventually, the narrow gorge opened into a small clearing trapped between two towering cliffs. Here, the air was thick and stale, heavy with the scent of decay. In the centre of the clearing, half-hidden by a large boulder,

Daivik saw it: a crude den made of rocks and debris, littered with bones and the grim remnants of past kills.

And there, just beyond the den, stood Vikra.

The dog was much more frightening up close. His big, gray body was scarred from deep, ragged wounds that spoke to the count of battles he had fought. His good ear was erect, while the other hung limp, torn and mangled. His body was soiled down to his matted fur. The ribs were sharp against his flesh, giving him a gaunt, ghostly look. His wild and bloodshot eyes flamed with madness.

Vikra was pacing in the open area, quick, sometimes jerky movements. He'd stop, sniff the air, then be off in another direction, as if scenting something odd lurking nearby. Daivik watched the creature closely, thinking over a plan. He had no intention of killing Vikra but didn't want the dog to run free either. Somehow, he was going to have to catch the animal without hurting him.

Vikra's erratic behavior flashed an idea in Daivik's brain. He remembered tales of dogs driven by their own madness, and were lured into traps by clever distractions. Vikra's paranoia and relentless agitation could be turned against him; perhaps he could exploit the creature's chaotic state to gain the upper hand.

Daivik scanned the area for anything that could aid him, his gaze landing on a pile of loose rocks near the edge of the clearing. An idea began to crystallize in his mind—a strategy to use the very landscape as a trap. He knew he had to act swiftly and precisely. If he could lure Vikra toward the rocks, he might catch the creature off guard without inflicting harm.

Steeling himself, Daivik crept along the perimeter of the clearing, blending into the shadows cast by the rocks. He understood that even the faintest sound could send Vikra into a frenzy, and the dog's speed and strength made any direct confrontation dangerous...

He reached the pile of stones, positioning himself carefully, ready to spring the trap. Now, all he needed was to lure Vikra into the perfect position. Taking a deep, calming breath, Daivik stood tall and stepped boldly into the clearing. He had to time it perfectly—not to provoke Vikra outright, but just enough to steer him into the trap without igniting the dog's unpredictable rage too soon. Vikra felt the disturbance immediately and became stiff as a rock. Wild eyes, bloodshot, locked on to Daivik, the muscles in his body tensed with anticipation, beginning to growl low in his throat- a sound filled with warning.

Vikra had witnessed fear, chaos, and aggression before—people running, screaming, or striking out in

desperation. But Daivik's calm behaviour was foreign to him, and it only heightened the dog's anxiety. His wild eyes flicked nervously between Daivik and the shadows, instinctively wary of unseen threats lurking in the darkness. Vikra paced back and forth, a low snarl escaping him as he weighed his options, restless and on edge. In stark contrast, Daivik remained seated, embodying tranquility; not a hint of fear or malice marred his gentle gaze as it rested on Vikra, an anchor of serenity amidst the storm of the dog's chaos.

"I know you're tired, old friend," Daivik's voice was soft, almost a whisper, yet it resonated through the heavy silence of the gorge. "I have come to end your suffering, not by death but by peace."

Vikra reacted quickly, with a ferocity that caught Daivik off guard. Letting out a growl, the dog took a few steps forward, baring his teeth, then, in a sudden twist, he hesitated, torn between charging and retreating. Daivik kept himself anchored to the ground, his eyes fixed on Vikra, drawing air slowly and deliberately. He knew that a momentary miscalculation could be all it took to send Vikra over the edge.

"Shhh..." Daivik whispered, his voice again as soft as the wind through the gorge. "You have fought enough. You must rest."

Vikra paused as if torn between the instinct of a wild animal and confusion of the unknown. His pacing resumed, but Daivik could see that the dog's frenetic energy was only beginning to wane. The great beast was weakening, exhausted by hunger, madness, and years of living in isolation. It was then that Daivik knew it was time.

In a measured movement, Daivik sidled to the left, inching closer to the boulder pile he had observed earlier. Vikra's gaze followed him, a predatory instinct awakening within the dog as if he were being drawn toward something instinctively familiar.

"That's it," Daivik murmured softly, soothing but firm in tone. "Just a little closer."

Vikra's muscles tensed, and for a moment, it seemed the dog might lunge again. But instead, he stopped, standing directly in front of the loose rock pile. Daivik's heart was steady like a stone but beating just a little faster. He had to act now.

In one fluid motion, Daivik scooped up a convenient rock off to his left and flung it to the right, where it clattered off the walls of the cliffs. Immediately, Vikra's head came around to the noise. And, just as he hoped, that was where the dog leapt toward the noise, crossing the precise spot Daivik wanted him to cross.

Daivik was barely knocking at the rocks when the loose pile had tumbled down. Stones tumbled and fell; they made a barrier between Vikra and the open clearing. The dog turned around, his crazed eyes growing wide as he realised, he was enclosed in a small space now, walled in on all sides by jagged rocks. Panic set in; Vikra barked and howled, clawing frantically at the stones, but the wall held firm, sealing him in a space with no escape. The once-feared beast was now a cornered shadow, trembling with rage and confusion.

Stepping back, Daivik watches the dog rage against his new prison. Vikra's ferocity is savage, but Daivik's calmness is unmoved. He knows the dog will tire himself out, and when he finally does, he'll have little choice but to submit to his fate.

"I told you," Daivik said softly, almost talking to himself. "I'm not your enemy. You'll find peace here."

Vikra's pointless struggles soon became feeble, each movement more desperate than the last. Finally, with a defeated whimper, he collapsed onto the cold ground, panting heavily, utterly vanquished. Daivik stood before the broken creature, his heart not swelling with triumph but weighed down by pity.

This once-mighty guardian had endured a lifetime of pain and madness, and now, as he lay there trembling,

Daivik realized that the end of his torment was near. But it would not come in a violent blaze; it would come quietly, a final release from the agony he had suffered for far too long. Daivik felt a wave of compassion wash over him as he gazed at the pitiful figure before him, a creature lost to chaos, finally finding solace in stillness.

He turned and walked away, leaving Vikra behind, for he knew the battle of the beast was done. He had won, not with violence but with wisdom and understanding. The mission to Shvanasthaan would continue, but this chapter, the one with Vikra, had come to a peaceful conclusion.

A far-off howl echoed through the gorge as Daivik left the clearing. but it wasn't the fierce cry of a raging beast. Instead, it was a mournful, resigned wail—a sound that echoed the end of an era. Vikra, once the terror of Matsya and a creature of chaos, had finally been subdued.

Daivik paused and glanced back at the defeated figure still huddled in its rocky prison. The beast made no more attempts to break free ; instead, he lay there, his sides rising and falling with each labored breath. Gone was the fire of ferocity in his eyes, replaced by a softness born of exhaustion and something deeper—acceptance. In that moment, Daivik understood that Vikra's battle was not just against him, but against the very demons that had tormented him for so long.

Daivik stood on the very edge of the gorge; every sense heightened as the gravity of the moment washed over him. He sensed Vikra's spirit surrendering under the inevitable compulsion, now knowing that his last and greatest fight was over. In that quiet acceptance, Daivik saw the flicker of understanding in Vikra's eyes: the realization that his tumultuous existence was finally at its close. The mad dog, despite his chaos, was left with only the weight of his memories and the stillness that followed a relentless fight.

In a sense, Vikra's madness mirrored the turmoil that echoed within many souls: lashing out with terror that was born of deep rooted pain and isolation. Daivik's act of confinement became a paradox; while he trapped the beast physically, he also offered a pathway to liberation from the relentless torment that had plagued Vikra's mind.

Daivik walked back to Vikra's enclosure. Approaching, Vikra's ears shook, and he trailed the quiet, steady figure. This time, no growl, no lunge to strike. The dog remained immobile, gazing at Daivik through a strange, exhausted-curious mixture of expressions.

"You fought bravely," he murmured beside me, knelt by the side of that rocky wall. His voice was soothing, like balm for the creature's wounded soul. "But your battle is done. You no longer need to fear." .

Daivik simply stood there, gazing at Vikra, the tension between them uncomfortable, however. Vikra's body had finally ceased to shake. His breathing steadied. He could've been in his prison for years, but it was as if, for the first time in that long while, the beast felt it was finally safe — something he hadn't known for a long time. He knew Vikra needed time. The trust that he had built through this short but intense encounter was fragile, but it was there.

"There's peace in stillness," Daivik went on. "You'll learn that soon enough."

Vikra's once wild eyes seemed to contain a spark of awareness. He was nowhere near trained but subdued-not by fear, but rather by Daivik's gentle persistence and refusal to see the dog as something to be conquered.

It felt like hours. Daivik stood there; his eyes remained trained on Vikra. "Rest now," he whispered gently. "I will come back."

Then he turned and walked away, leaving Vikra within the natural enclosure. The mad dog was no longer a menace but a beast that now stood at the last leg of his journey—to peace, to stillness.

When Daivik advanced towards Shvanasthaan, the air around him brightened up, for it seemed that with his actions, justice was achieved in that mountainous region.

He passed through one of the numerous tests he had encountered on that journey, not through violence but patience and sympathy in understanding the order of nature.

The road ahead would no doubt be filled with even more challenges, but Daivik would not give in. His journey to Shvanasthaan was not a journey but a mission to deliver balance and peace to where chaos abounds and to become a living example of the peace and trust he put forth to the higher powers guiding his ways. Daivik, with a gentle yet unyielding spirit, had proven once again that true strength comes not through domination but through understanding.

As Daivik left the enclosure, he felt the pressure of the encounter with Vikra still on his shoulders but not fully. Yet the experience stayed in the mind like the thin mist that clung to the valley. His steps remained measured as the soft crunch of the gravel under his feet was the only sound in the otherwise silenced expanse of the mountains.

He had set out with so much purpose and plan, but with every step, there were new confrontations and new insights. The encounter with Vikra was a confrontation not with a dangerous creature but with a test of his resolve, his faith in non-violence, and his relation to this fragile balance between man and nature.

He walked, and the sky went on to change above him in ways that could only happen as he walked on, turning from pale blue to golden dawns. The air, once harsh and biting, softened by the warmth of the last rays of the sun.

He stopped when the trail began to rise once more, his eyes outward, gazing out. To his left lay the valley, spread across before him in a wide green-and-grey expanse, the shadows of the mountains falling in jagged lines like skeletal fingers across it all.

Daivik's heart was as calm as still water, his mind clear. Reminded that the journey to Shvanasthaan was not just a physical one but also a spiritual journey which would require patience and understanding and an open mind and heart, ready to meet whatever unknowns lay ahead. With those lessons learned during his introduction to Vikra, he discovered that humility and strength were the right directions: The most powerful thing is not to conquer but to connect, not to see the world as a series of challenges but a web of life where each string is knit to the other.

And with one final heave of air, Daivik took off once again, his feet now almost feather-light, his purpose renewed. Mountains seemed to stretch as far ahead of him as could be imagined, gigantic and formidable, yet every step that he took made him feel closer to Shvanasthaan—and that was where the answers waited for him.

It began to get dark over the mountains, and the temperature fell sharply. Stars appeared like scattered gems, and the full moon rose slowly, casting a soft light over the rugged terrain.

Daivik found a sheltered spot between two big boulders where the wind was less fierce. He did not want any fire; his thick, woollen robe was enough to keep him warm for the night. He spread out his mat, crossed his legs, and sat with an open chest, breathing in the crisp mountain air. The stillness of the night was almost suffocating, but Daivik welcomed that silence. It was as if in solitude that he felt closest to the greater purpose of his journey.

Closing his eyes, he let his mind quiet and focus on meditation. He thought again of Vikra: the lean, scarred dog with one ear missing. Daivik's heart ached with compassion for the creature. He realised Vikra was born not to be a monster. Circumstances, hardship, and a lot of fear had transformed him into the dangerous beast he became. In trapping Vikra, Daivik gave him an opportunity: a way out from the vicious cycle of violence and sorrow. But he knew it was up to no one to decide Vikra's fate. Vikra's choice was the journey of the dog, and only he knew whether he would find peace or continue on the path that led to destruction.

There was a rustling in the distance that cut across Daivik's meditation. His eyes snapped open; his senses sharp. The sound was no threat, though; it was the wind, carrying whispers from the mountains. Daivik relaxed again, remembering that there existed both beauty and danger within the wilderness and that to cross through it was to endure both with grace.

He lay on his mat, gazing up at the stars, and slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep. The journey to Shvanasthaan would be long, but Daivik felt confident he would navigate it, guided by the unseen forces that had led him this far.

At the break of dawn, Daivik resumed his journey. The landscape gradually transformed as he walked. What had been endless fields of snow gave way to a vibrant, green expanse stretching far into the horizon. Flowers in stunning hues of deep purples, blues, and fiery reds bloomed all around, bending gracefully in a warm breeze that was a stark contrast to the freezing air he had left behind. It was as though nature itself had shifted, welcoming him into a new realm, full of life and color.

No noise came but the gentle crackle of wind and the beat of his own heart. Daivik was soaked in serenity, a peace that transcended the human body. This was Shvanasthaan, the setting for the fables, but it was something more: pure

consciousness, where the material would balance with the spiritual.

Over here lay the gateway to the very heart of Shvanasthaan, the sacred land of KRAM. This was the place where the answers Daivik had sought all his life awaited him. Yet, beyond those answers lay something even greater: the chance to fulfill the prophecy written in the stars—the unspoken promise that the universe had woven into its very fabric.

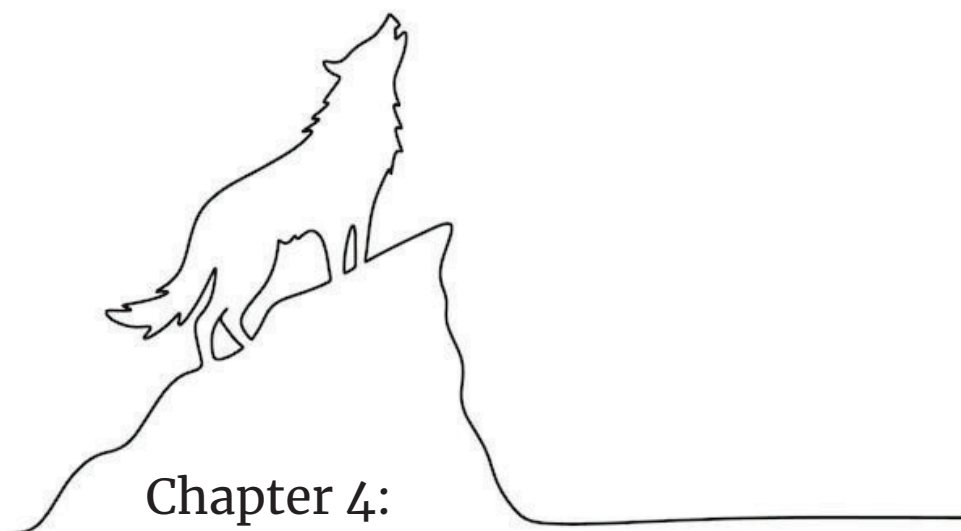
Daivik closed his eyes, breathing the weight of the moment. He travelled so far and braved the harshest conditions, yet in his heart, there was never a whisper of fear or doubt. His journey was not one of urgency or desperation but that of faith and unwavering trust in the divine plan that had brought him here.

He took one last deep breath and walked, leaving the world of men behind and entering Shvanasthaan. Here, the air is different, thicker, and more alive. It hummed with energy as though every molecule vibrated with the essence of life itself. As far as the eye could see, the soil unfolded into miles of rolling hills and distant mountains, bathed in a golden light that seemed to emanate from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Yet even as he walked there, Daivik understood that his journey was only just beginning. Countless mysteries

awaited him in the depths of Shvanasthaan's mythology, and the path ahead would not be devoid of adventure.

In the far distance, an awe-inspiring formation emerged on the horizon, unlike anything Daivik had ever witnessed. The structure was breathtaking, a majestic blend of stone and wood, intricately carved with depictions of dogs—regal, wild, protective, and fierce. As he drew closer, the air seemed to hum with reverence, and the weight of ancient stories whispered through the very stones. This was no mere building; it was a sacred site, a sanctuary where the past and present intertwined. And with that realization, it struck him: this was the temple of KRAM.



Chapter 4:

Kram

Daivik pushed his way through the dense underbrush, every step bearing with it a sense of exhaustion. Towering above him were the trees of Wild Forest, twisted and gnarled, their branches like skeletal arms stretched toward the sky. Though he still carried in his mind the echoes of Vikra's vicious growls, all was now eerily silent. The oppressive gloom of the forest had given way to a bare land; the terrain opened up before him as he crossed into the land of Shvanasthan.

He caught his breath for a while, his chest heaving from exhaustion. The earth beneath him had changed from the soft damply moist earth of the forest into a

harder, rockier terrain. Jagged boulders stuck out of the ground like the teeth of some ancient, slumbering beast, and the air was sharp with the scent of stone and dust. The sky was of a grey dullness, overcast and heavy with rain over his head. But here in this land, the air felt different - like it is ancient, like the very air hummed with untold secrets.

Before him lay the landscape that went on to an enormous cave. Dark, vast, and brooding, the entrance was framed by jagged rocks looking like the jaws of some primaeval monster waiting to devour what would dare approach. The size of the cave was in itself enough to make any reasonable man fear it; for its mouth was so large that a small village might fit into its enormous space. From the darkness, there went up a low, steady rumble, and Daivik felt the vibration rattle beneath his feet. It could not be the wind nor the earth moving-it was the growl of something decidedly far more dangerous.

Daivik swallowed hard; dry-wiping sweat off his brow as he took in the landscape before him. This was it—he had crossed over into Shvanasthaan. The legends from his village whispered of this place since it was said that it was a place of great power ruled by the dogs, with KRAM the noble lord at its centre. No man had crossed here in centuries as far as anyone could recall, and today Daivik stood at this threshold to this forbidden country. He felt

the cold creep at the back of his neck as the realisation struck him.

And as he stepped forward, the gravel crackled with each step beneath his feet, and it seemed impossible how loud it was in that oppressive silence. His eyes fell to the shadows around the mouth of the cave, and it was then that he saw them: dogs. Dozens of them.

They came slowly from the darkness, their massive forms moving with a silent ease that belied the truth of their size. These were not like dogs in any shape or form—they were enormous, their coats glossy and black, their muscles rippling under their hide, and of course, their eyes, shining faintly in the dim light, tracked Daivik's movements, from which low growls began to rumble deep within their throats. There seemed to be a cold, calculating awareness behind their gaze that set Daivik clearly beyond being considered a mere animal.

Daivik felt his heart racing, his pulse quickening as the dogs closed in around him in a circle. He had known this journey would be hazardous, but standing alone in the heart of Shvanasthaan, surrounded by these creatures, Daivik felt the weight of his own mortality pressing down on him. Tension filled the air, having a heaviness that seemed to live upon bone, with each growl alive inside him as if warning earth itself to turn back.

He just could not turn back. Not now. The Matsya folk were counting on him, else survival rested on the very finest of threads. A glimpse of his village—of children whose stomachs were empty of land submerged beneath the angry waters of the sea—was enough to bolster his courage. And squared his shoulders, and drew his head up to face the glare of the nearest dog, whose yellow eyes burned with an ill-omened brightness.

The dog was far bigger than any wolf Daivik had ever met, easily double the size. Its teeth were bared, and a low snarl slumped through his throat. Fur stood on end, and for an instant, Daivik thought the creature would spring. But he didn't flinch. He had travelled too far to turn back now.

"Withdraw!" Daivik's voice broke into the air, harsh yet cracking with the rigour of his weariness and fear. His hand unconsciously clutched the small talisman he carried—he was one of the village priesthood, and this was an ancient symbol to ward off evil, but would it have any effect on these creatures?

The dogs growled louder, their massive bodies tensing, but none moved to attack. They stayed in their circle, with fiery eyes of caution and hostility. Daivik knew the next move was life or death. He took deep breaths and

stilled his shaking hands, then whispered a silent prayer to the gods for strength.

Just at this moment, a louder growl was coming out of the cave. As though scolded, the dogs were quietened and all were on their haunches now to gaze at the cave entrance. Daivik sensed the shift in the air, the ground underfoot seemed to shudder as something inside the interior of the cave was stirring.

Then he saw it.

KRAM.

He emerged from the cave-a great, immense body that cut shadows in two, a man-powerful living energy as ever to be seen. He was the biggest creature Daivik had ever seen so far; his fur was raven black, darker than night, and seemed to hold within its dark depths all the dull light of dusk. His eyes fixed themselves on Daivik with a glare that seemed so sharp it had been a stab in the soul.

Kram's paws, the size of Daivik's head, crushed stones under his careful advance. Each step made the earth tremble as if the ground were some flaccid, hanging thing that was carefully permitted to rock by the sheer weight of this creature. Such was his strength and such power, and yet despite this dreadful aspect of him, there was a nobility

about him, sleek fur rippling with an undercurrent of raw muscle and power.

KRAM was a monstrosity, it is true—but he was a leader. There was wisdom in the way he regarded things, a nobility in his movement which meant this could not be an animal of pure instinct. He was the master of Shvanasthan, a great powerful and intelligent being. And there he stood before Daivik, his eyes flickering with mild interest and cold calculation.

The others heard that they could feel it, so they stopped barking too. They lowered their heads to the ground and submitted. And when they saw KRAM, their animosity dissipated. The tension in the air changed again—Daivik was no longer in front of a pack of vicious feral beasts. He was standing in front of a king.

KRAM did not utter a word. Not even the blinking of his glowing eyes was directed toward Daivik as he was held captive to gaze into their depths of worth. The mass of this being cast long shadows about him as he towered over the human who now dared to enter his domain. Daivik's heart pounded in his chest, yet he did not draw back, for he knew that this is the moment he came for.

He had to convince KRAM to help.

Daivik stood still, being overpowered by KRAM's massive form, his legs shaking to form streams of perspiration. The shadow of Dog Lord was enough to make any courageous man stump, but Daivik took a deep breath and stood his ground. This mission was too important and the lives of his people were hanging in the balance. He could not allow fear to overpower him now.

As KRAM stepped out of the cave, the pack of dogs by Daivik began to stir. Their growls, which had relatively subsided with the arrival of the Dog Lord, once again started, low and menacing. The dogs glared at Daivik, their pointed teeth bared, muscles strung taut as if ready to pounce at any moment of provocation. The weight of their presence pressed in, making him breathe with full lungs, and the air was heavy with anticipation, the very ground seeming to throb and vibrate with pack energy.

The biggest of the dogs, this monstrous creature, this beast with fur that seemed black as night, and eyes that seemed glowing with an unhuman intelligence, stepped out forward. It was even bigger than the others, its body rippling with raw power. This dog was no ordinary beast of KRAM; there was a ferocity in its gaze, an intent to go beyond mere instinct. Its growl was deeper and more resonant than the others; its gaze pressed forward fixedly

on Daivik with an intensity that raised hairs on the back of his neck.

Daivik felt his heart beating, the pounding in his throat as the great hound moved toward him. Each step was deliberate, and there was a menace in it. The dog's lip curled back above sharply gleaming teeth, and for the moment, Daivik believed this would be the end—that this beast, this creature, would tear him apart before he even had the chance to speak.

The dog lunged, but just as it was moving, Daivik stood himself up straight, refused to show weakness, and collected himself enough to meet the beast's gaze. There was no room for fear. He could not have been so weak. Everything in him was focused on that precise moment, on holding himself together as the hulking dog lunged closer.

They stood there, agonising heartbeat, staring each other down: Daivik and the massive dog. It felt as if time itself had frozen, it's very air thick with tension. All the dogs surrounding them watched; their growls shook the clearing, but they did not move; they just waited for a command.

Then, as if at some hidden signal, the dog stopped. His growl lessened, he wagged his ears and tilted his head a little as if he sensed something through Daivik's stance, through the fire that yet burned in Daivik's eyes, though filled with

fear. The dog stepped back, lowering his head, retreating within the circle.

Daivik exhaled shakily, easing the tension in his body. His legs still trembled underneath him, but he had passed the first test. The pack of dogs still appeared wary but did not attack. They remained in their circle, eyes still fixed on him, their aggression somewhat lessened. For now, at least, Daivik had passed whatever silent trial had been placed before him.

It was at this time that KRAM, the Dog Lord, stirred. Slow, and deliberate, each step shook the earth under his enormous paws. Yellow-red, glowing eyes didn't leave Daivik as he came out into him, their gaze sharp and unreadable. Daivik felt the weight of the Dog Lord's presence before him, a radiating power like that coming from a roaring fire.

There was something about KRAM—something beyond his fearsome appearance. He was a beast, a creature of immense strength and power, but there was also some nobility to his bearing. There was something undeniably intelligent about his gaze, though it was cold and piercing. He wasn't some stupid beast, but a leader, the king among his people. Despite all these dreadful features around him, one could feel an aura around him that could make even the strongest of people respect him. Daivik had heard all of

them, but then, seeing KRAM face-to-face, he realized this was the ruler of Shvanasthan. This was a being who had lived for centuries, a creature who had witnessed the coming and going of empires, who had ruled over his kingdom with wisdom and strength.

Neither Daivik nor KRAM spoke a word for a long time. The silence between them was heavy with unspoken tension. The only thing that seemed to be going on in Daivik's chest was the pounding of his heart, but Daivik didn't move. He knew that whatever happened next decided their and his people's fates.

It was KRAM who broke into speech first.

"Why have you come here, human?" KRAM'S voice was a deep, resonant growl, vibrating through the very air. It was not the voice of an ordinary dog-it was the voice of a leader, a being of power and authority. Each word seemed to echo through the clearing, carried on the wind like the rumble of distant thunder.

With a heavy heart, Daivik spoke, cutting straight to the point. "Our people are dying. Devastating floods have swept through our lands, destroying everything in their path, including our crop fields. The situation is dire, and the worst is yet to come. With the ocean levels rising each year, we are losing more land with every passing storm.

Our children, our women, and our men are struggling to survive, subsisting on just one meal a day, with food reserves running dangerously low. Experts predict that unless help arrives soon, we will face an overwhelming number of deaths due to starvation.

We are at the brink. We need your help, now more than ever."

KRAM's eyes narrowed, and the glitter of his yellowish-red gaze intensified. He said nothing, but for a moment he was as silent as if considering every word Daivik had spoken, weighing their truth.

Daivik's heart went heavy at the words of KRAM. He had dreaded that very same thing—he feared KRAM would see humankind as too low to assist. But he could not give up. Not now.

KRAM's amber eyes narrowed, his gaze never wavering from Daivik's. For a long, tense moment, silence filled the sacred space as the two spoke in an ancient tongue, one known only to the priest and the noble Dog Lord. The air between them was thick with tension, charged with the unspoken weight of their words.

"I sympathize with your plight, priest," KRAM's deep voice rumbled, carrying the gravity of thunder across a

distant plain. "But there is nothing my kingdom can do. You ask for help where none can be given."

But Daivik, his mission fueling his determination, pressed forward. "There is a way, Lord KRAM. Your kingdom has the space we so desperately need. Our ancient scriptures predict that in three thousand years, the waters will recede, and our lands will return to us. But until then, humanity cannot survive unless we move north—into Shvanasthaan."

KRAM's growl rumbled low, his ears flicking back in displeasure at the boldness of Daivik's request. something like "How dare you ask of such a thing that too walking into my kingdom and asking for my land. How dare you disrespect me?"

"Please," he pleaded, his voice growing more desperate. "I have come here not to demand, but to ask for mercy-for refuge."

Daivik's chest constricted with despair. He was losing this battle. KRAM would not be swayed by his words, and the lives of his people slipped further from his grasp with every passing second.

But deep inside Daivik stirred something, a flicker of hope. He knew that words alone would never sway KRAM

but maybe there was another way-something more than just words that would tell the truth of his heart.

And so, with a quiet yet bold purpose, Daivik took a step forward and asked something that even he could hardly believe.

"Let me show you," he murmured, his voice weaving in and out of a gentle rhythm with the crackling flames. "Let me show you the truth."

KRAM tilted his head to one side. His curiosity was piqued, but he was still cautious. He quieted the growls of the pack with a swish of his heavy paw.

"What do you want to show me, human?" KRAM growled, his eyes narrowing once again.

Taking a deep breath, Daivik took his leap of faith. "Let me touch your forehead, Dog Lord. I will show you what I have seen in the future that awaits if we do not help each other."

The pack bristled at the audacity of the request. But KRAM was not a creature easily offended by arrogance. There was something in Daivik's voice that intrigued him.

KRAM towered above Daivik, his long frame making a dark silhouette in the dim light. The pack, surrounding him, bristled and tensed at the young priest's bold request. The growls from the dogs built into a vibration within his

chest, and it echoed hollowly in his bones. The heavy silence after his plea for mercy hung in the air between them, as if the earth itself was holding its breath.

Daivik knew he was being bold to the extreme by asking to touch KRAM physically. No ordinary dog, this was the Dog Lord of Shvanasthaan, an earth-shaking entity of immense power and legendary strength. Yet, despite the fear that struck him to the bone, Daivik had gone too far to allow himself to falter now. If KRAM did not take him in, Matsya would die. The storm had taken their crops, the flood waters the land, and famine was already casting its dark shadow over the village. This was his last chance, his final hope to secure refuge for his people.

It was like a vibration shaking out from his chest in this deep, resonant growl. Daivik felt shivers run down his spine as he met the gaze of the Dog Lord whose eyes had appeared like those of an animal left to burn in the sunlight with that yellowish-red light. He narrowed them, relating to the human in front of him. His massive body shifted slightly, and it seemed like air turned heavier, as if it reacted to the presence of this one mighty creature-the land alive.

“You ask much of me, human,” Kram rumbled, his voice low and deadly. His words hung in the air; the weight of each syllable imparted like the judgement of the ages.

His pack of dogs surrounded him in a growling murmur, rippling with tension, his teeth hard and white. They inched closer, their eyes on him, set to rip him apart on command from KRAM.

Yet with ears attuned to the growls he perceived, KRAM raised his mighty paws and fell silent with a mere gesture. The dogs drew back, complacent to their lord, but their eyes did not leave Daivik's face. It was as if the thick tension held in the air still clung, and Daivik knew that his fate swung on the smallest tangle of thread.

The wind shrieked through the rocky waste, tearing at Daivik's robes as he stood outside KRAM. His heart thundered in his chest, but he did not yield. He extended one hand, slowly and deliberately, palm open and nonthreatening.

For a long, anguished moment, KRAM sat staring at Daivik, eyes clear as crystal in the faint illumination, weighing the truth of the young priest's words. The silence was heavy and oppressive, punctuated by only low growls from the rest of the pack.

And then, to Daivik's amazement, KRAM bent his head a fraction of an inch, his vast body turning in upon itself as he lowered his towering frame toward the earth. His gargantuan, blacker-than-raven snout reached out inches from Daivik's outstretched hand. The young priest

could feel the heat radiating from the Dog Lord's breath, warm and heavy against his skin.

The dogs in the periphery sensed KRAM's judgment and were all edges. They did not, however, intervene. Their growls fell away, and the clearing drifted toward an awkward silence.

Daivik's heart was racing. This was it. If KRAM turned him down now, that would be the end of it. But he had lowered his head to signify, to acknowledge Daivik's courage – or possibly desperation.

Daivik had no time for ceremony or hesitation. Every moment counted, and the weight of his mission was heavy upon him. With shaking fingers, Daivik slowly reached forward and pressed his palm to KRAM's forehead.

And with a sudden whoosh, the Dog Lord fell into a trance, his fierce amber eyes slowly closing. But as his eyes shut, an intense vision unfolded before him, vivid and unyielding. He was no longer in the quiet of Shvanasthan—he was thrust into a world consumed by death, pain, and suffering.

As Kram stood there, the world around him melted into a silence that was unbearable to bear. The air became heavy and was suffocating, with a weight on his chest that pressed him flat. In the midst of this chaos, a wave of vision

rushed over him, like an immense tide dashing into his very soul, drowning him in sorrow he had never imagined could be possible.

At that moment, Kram was not the Dog Lord; he was a witness and bystander to the unimaginable suffering of Matsya, the village, and the children. His senses - the once sharp, the senses once strong-become overwhelmed, his bones sinking under the burden of the pains. He could feel the raw terror and anguish rife through him as if it were the very wind filled with screams of dying men.

He saw the black ink of darkness carry the rising waters over the village and swallow everything in it. The bangs of developing homes, that sacred ground, were now lost underwater by the rising toll of destruction. He listened to the screams of frantic mothers as their desperate voices clawed at a way to save their children, only to be swept by the currents. There the deep water had his screams and cries reverberate in his chest, a torment so deep that left him gasping for air, as if their weight of suffering became his.

The children, these innocent wide-eyed souls scattered out in the water, thrusting up those little hands, but nobody reached out to pull them out of the water. Their cries for help blended with the wind howling, their frightened faces swelling to match their weakening bodies

as the devouring waters swallowed them down. He felt the panic rising in his heart, not his own panic but that of every child in the waters. He could taste the salt of their tears on his tongue, feel the cold, numbing chill of their frozen hands against his skin, even as he tried to reach out to them.

The scene shifted, and Kram saw scorched crop fields turned to dust, the land that once had thrived now a barren wasteland. The earth beneath his feet crumbled, its lifeblood draining away from it, leaving behind only the echoes of desolation. He could feel the heat of the dying soil searing his soul. Those fertile lands, now incapable of nurturing them again, would bear no more fruit, nor would those with mouths brimming full of hunger live wretched lives any more than they were.

And now that the vision began to spread, it was not just the floods alone, nor the land, nor the children. It was the torment of humanity, the never-ending anguish of those trying to survive—to mothers embracing their dying children, once proud men now broken, starving, and hopeless. He felt their despair branded into his very being. Every breath, every heartbeat is a reminder of their doom.

It was as if the entire tapestry of existence unraveled in his mind. There was a weight around him, bearing down on all sides: heavier than mountains, enough to stop him in place, unable to think. Every tear fallen, every soul lost,

every painful gasp taken in seemed to be etched into the bones of the earth itself.

The pain was excruciating, endless as if it would never stop, stretching beyond time itself. The suffering of mankind wasn't just a passing moment—it was an eternal wound, one that would scar the world forever. The agony was not something he could undo. It was inevitable. It was fated.

Kram fell to his knees. He could not see how to go on bearing the weight of it. He was being sucked into some bottomless pit of sorrow, drowning in it, devoured by it. The vision would not let go. It came at him like a storm, merciless and forceful.

He could no longer differentiate where Matsya, the village, and its people ended and where his own pain began. He is a witness to the unfathomable suffering that humanity would endure.

The vision was relentless, pulling him deeper into the anguish and suffering of humanity. It gnawed at his heart and soul, the weight of the sorrow almost unbearable.

Open eyes found KRAM staring at him. But it was not anger or indifference in the gaze that glowed in his eyes but something deeper—something beyond that. The Dog Lord had seen what Daivik had seen. He had felt the

suffering of Matsya's people and the impending destruction of Shvanasthan. And in that moment, Daivik knew that KRAM understood the gravity of the situation. KRAM stepped back a little, his titanic head rising to its full height. And while his eyes were still luminescent, their brilliance now expressed a new thing: contemplation. A leader faced with a choice that would determine not only the fate of his kingdom but the fate of the world outside as well.

The pack of dogs watched him in silence, now perfectly silent, their growls silent, and he said nothing for one long moment. Anticipation filled the air; it seemed that all the land held its breath waiting for the Dog Lord's decision.

Finally, KRAM spoke his deep voice carrying over across the clearing.

Now there was no anger in his voice, only that calm, quiet authority, and KRAM knew what had been decided. Upon his next words, the future of Shvanasthan and of Matsya lay.

KRAM'S words slid through the glade like a shiver over Daivik's spine. Dog Lord towered, an enormous figure whose long shadow lay across the young priest, and in those eyes, still glowing with that unnatural yellowish-red light, Daivik could see a cold intensity-a chill due not

to the glance itself but more to the fact that they had only just shared a moment of connection.

"I have seen enough," KRAM repeated, his deep voice like the rumble of thunder across a distant plain.

Daivik's heart drummed. He had divulged the destruction that was in store for the Matsya and Shvanasthan if the ancient bond was not restored. This had given him glimpses of the spark of understanding flaring in the Dog Lord's eyes, and saw how KRAM reacted to the images of destruction and despair. But something was holding the Dog Lord back. He would hold back, though noble, would not be easily swayed.

Taking a deep breath, Daivik steadied himself. He knew this moment was fragile, with success and failure hanging on the ends of a thread. "Dog Lord," he began, soft but firm in voice, "you have seen what is to come—what my people will face—if we do not act. My village stands at the precipice of destruction. The floods have stolen everything. Our crops are gone, and our homes are washed away. And soon, famine will claim what remains."

KRAM sat across from him, his body massive, still. His eyes never changed - a fixed intensity. The dogs flanking them showed not an iota of the aggression that had gone on just moments before. All manner of hostility and tension still lingered in the kinks of their muscles, but

now it lay dampened, alert but calm, waiting on the master to make a move.

Then spoke the priest, his voice desperation-filled but steady with intent. "Our people are dying, O great KRAM. Terrible floods have ruined our lands and swallowed every inch of our farmlands. The ocean rises higher every year, attacking even more and more of our homes. Predictions foretell this is just a beginning. Waters will continue to rise, taking even more and more lands until nothing remains."

He paused. Then the weight of it all sat there in the air. "Our children, our women, and our men. they are just barely surviving on what little reserve we have left. One meager meal a day, and even that will soon be gone. The shadow of death looms over Matsya. Starvation will claim us all unless something changes. We need your help, Lord KRAM."

The weight of the request was slowly sinking into KRAM's eyes, growing darker. He said nothing, only waiting for the priest to continue.

"I know this would be no small task, O great Dog Lord. I do not speak lightly," he said, the weight of sincerity crushing his words. "But beg, I beg you, to think on this: your kind, strong and resilient as you are, can survive in the wild forest."

KRAM's deep, resonant voice boomed through the clearing, echoing his final words as if they were the pronouncement of fate: "Perhaps still hope there is".

The pack of dogs instinctively knew that something was shifting in their leader, moving a step or two back and allowing the growls to fade into the quiet hum of the forest. Daivik stepped before the Dog Lord, even though still at arms' length, and felt the burden of relief settle into his chest, knowing they weren't done yet.

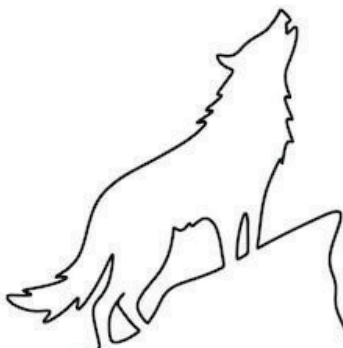
KRAM walked away from Daivik and slowly stepped off into the darkness with his paws crunching stones beneath him as he walked toward the cave opening, the sound rebounding across the silent night. The air did not move but stirred subtly by the soft shifting of the leaves of trees and the distant howl of the wind bearing with it the chronicles of Shvanasthan.

"Human," KRAM said, his back still turned to Daivik, "I will grant your people refuge in Shvanasthan, while we, the dogs, will move into the wild forest, but listen well and know this - there will be conditions."

Daivik's heart pounded in his chest, as he listened intently for KRAM to outline the terms of the agreement that would seal the fate of Matsya. Daivik knew that the Dog Lord's conditions would be far from easy.

"We will honor the pact," said Daivik seriously. "I swear it."

KRAM turned to face Daivik once again, his eyes now glowing with a blend of wisdom and authority. "But there is more," he said, his voice dropping to a near growl.



Chapter 5:

The Sacred Agreement

The clearing around KRAM's cave had grown silent, the tension from earlier replaced with a strange, almost reverent stillness. The pack of dogs that had surrounded Daivik remained at a distance, watching with wary eyes, their growls subdued as if they sensed the moment's gravity. The air was thick, charged with an energy that seemed to pulse through the land. KRAM stood tall, his massive form illuminated faintly by the soft light filtering through the canopy of trees above. Now calm and thoughtful, the molten amber of his eyes rested on the human priest who had risked everything to plead for his people.

Daivik, though weary from his journey and his efforts to convince the Dog Lord, felt a flicker of hope. He could see the shift in KRAM's demeanor. The great Dog Lord, despite his imposing stature and the ferocity he had displayed earlier, carried himself now with the weight of a leader who understood the significance of what lay before them.

Daivik exhaled in relief, though his heart remained heavy with the enormity of what was about to take place. He bowed deeply to KRAM. "Thank you, Lord KRAM. Your kindness will save not just my people, but the generations to come. What are the terms of this agreement?"

KRAM stepped forward, his immense frame moving with a grace that belied his size. The other dogs instinctively parted to make way for their leader, their heads bowed in respect. His eyes glowed as he began to speak, his words deliberate and filled with purpose.

"First," KRAM said, "Shvanasthan will be leased to humankind for a period of 3000 years. During this time, the land will be yours to cultivate, to build, and to live upon. But know this—at the end of those 3000 years, the land will return to its rightful owners, the dogs. This is non-negotiable."

Daivik nodded; his expression solemn. He could already imagine how difficult it would be to ensure that future generations upheld such a promise, but he also knew there was no other choice.

“Second,” KRAM continued, his voice growing heavier with the weight of what he was about to say, “I will remain. I, the Dog Lord of Shvanasthan, will be granted immortality until the land is returned. I will bear the burden of watching over my people, through all the generations that come and go. I will remind them of this agreement, of their homeland, and of the promise that binds us.”

Daivik’s eyes widened at this. The enormity of such a commitment was staggering. For KRAM to remain immortal for 3000 years, to witness the passage of time and the changes that would come—it was both an extraordinary gift and a heavy responsibility.

“The purpose of my immortality,” KRAM continued, as though reading Daivik’s thoughts, “is not for my benefit. It is to ensure that my kind never forgets who we are, where we come from, and the pact we made this day. I will carry the memory of this agreement so that, when the time comes, the transition back to Shvanasthan will be peaceful.”

Daivik bowed again; his voice soft with gratitude. “It is an honor, Lord KRAM, to have your guidance through the ages.”

KRAM gave a slight nod before continuing. “Third,” he said, his tone shifting to one of caution, “to preserve the bond between our kinds, each family in Matsya must adopt and care for one dog. This tradition will continue through the generations, ensuring that the dogs remain a part of your lives, even as you live upon our land. It will serve as a reminder of this pact and a way to ensure the survival of my kind in the mountains during this lease.”

Daivik felt his chest tighten. He knew the people of Matsya would willingly comply with this condition, for it was not just a duty but an honour to maintain the bond between humans and dogs. “I will ensure this is done, Lord KRAM. The people of Matsya will hold true to this promise.”

KRAM’s piercing gaze softened, though the weight of the agreement was evident in his expression. “These are the terms of the sacred agreement. If either side breaks them, the consequences will fall upon us both. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lord KRAM,” Daivik said, his voice steady despite the enormity of the moment. “I vow to uphold this

agreement and to pass down its importance to all who come after me.”

KRAM inclined his massive head, the weight of the pact settling over the clearing like a tangible presence. “Then it shall be done. The pact must now be sealed.”

Daivik straightened, uncertain of what was to come. KRAM turned to the other dogs, and with a deep, resonant growl, he summoned them forward. The pack moved as one, forming a wide circle around Daivik and KRAM, their heads bowed low in reverence. The air grew thick with energy, an almost electrical charge that seemed to emanate from the very ground beneath them.

KRAM raised his head toward the sky and let out a long, powerful howl. The sound echoed through the clearing, rising into the heavens and carrying with it the gravity of the moment. The pack joined in, their voices blending into a chorus that seemed to shake the very earth.

Daivik felt the energy shift, a warmth spreading through the clearing as though the land itself acknowledged the agreement. The sky, which had been shrouded in grey clouds, began to part, and a shaft of golden light broke through, illuminating KRAM and the priest.

KRAM turned his glowing eyes to Daivik. “Place your hand upon my head, priest. Let this bond be sealed by both our spirits.”

Daivik hesitated for only a moment before stepping forward. His hand, trembling but steady in its purpose, rested gently upon KRAM’s massive head. The instant their connection was made, a surge of energy flowed between them, a current that coursed through Daivik’s body and seemed to bind him to the Dog Lord.

Visions filled Daivik’s mind—of Shvanasthan flourishing under human care, of dogs and humans living together in harmony, and of the future generations who would carry this pact forward. He saw KRAM, standing tall and unwavering through the centuries, guiding his kind with wisdom and strength. And finally, he saw himself, returning to another life to fulfill his part of the agreement, ensuring that Shvanasthan was returned to the dogs as promised.

When the visions faded, Daivik opened his eyes to find KRAM watching him intently. “It is done,” the Dog Lord said, his voice filled with solemn finality.

Daivik bowed deeply, his heart filled with both awe and gratitude. “Thank you, Lord KRAM. You have given humanity a chance to survive.”

KRAM inclined his head. “And you, priest, have shown the courage and wisdom needed to forge this bond. Let us hope that both our kinds honor it, for the weight of this agreement will be felt for generations.”

As the dogs began to disperse, their howls fading into the distance, Daivik turned to begin his journey back to Matsya. His steps were heavy, not with exhaustion but with the knowledge of what had been accomplished. The sacred agreement had been made, and with it, a new chapter had begun—one that would bind humans and dogs together in a promise of survival and mutual respect.

The sun hung low in the sky as Daivik descended the rugged path that led from Shvanasthan to his village, Matsya. His robes were torn and muddied, his feet blistered from the long journey, but his heart was lighter than it had been in weeks. He carried with him not just the weight of a promise, but the hope of salvation for his people. The sacred pact had been forged, and for the first time in what felt like an eternity, there was a chance for survival.

As he entered the outskirts of the village, the familiar sights and sounds greeted him—children playing by the remnants of a drying stream, elders seated in the shade of the banyan tree, their weathered faces etched with worry. The once-thriving village bore the scars of the floods, its

fields barren and homes in disrepair. Yet, as Daivik approached, a murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd.

“The priest has returned!” someone shouted, and the villagers began to gather, their faces alight with a cautious hope.

Daivik raised his hand, signaling for quiet. His voice, though weary, carried the authority of his role. “My people,” he began, his words steady and deliberate, “I have come back with news—news that will change our future.”

A hushed silence fell over the crowd, each person leaning in to hear the words of their priest.

“I have met with Lord KRAM, the Dog Lord of Shvanasthan,” Daivik continued. “And he has granted us refuge in the mountains. We are to move north, away from the rising waters, and settle in the lands of Shvanasthan. But this refuge comes with a sacred agreement—a pact that binds us to the dogs who have ruled that land for generations.”

The villagers exchanged uncertain glances, but Daivik pressed on. “Each family must adopt and care for a dog as part of this pact. These animals will live among us, not as servants or beasts, but as members of our households. In return, Shvanasthan will be ours to live upon for the next

3000 years. After this time, the land will be returned to the dogs, and the cycle of balance will continue.”

The initial silence was soon replaced by a wave of murmurs. Questions buzzed in the air—how would they live with the dogs? What did it mean to share their homes and lives with these creatures? But amidst the uncertainty, there was also relief. The prospect of survival, of rebuilding their lives in a new land, outweighed the hesitation.

One voice rose above the rest. It was Aarav, the village elder, his voice trembling with emotion. “You have saved us, Daivik,” he said. “You have given us hope when we thought there was none. We will honor this pact.”

The villagers cheered, a sound of tentative joy breaking through the gloom that had hung over Matsya for so long. The people began preparing for the journey immediately. Families gathered their meager belongings, bundling them into makeshift sacks and baskets. Children clung to their parents, their eyes wide with a mixture of fear and excitement at the unknown that awaited them.

As the village prepared, Daivik returned to KRAM to oversee the movement of the dogs. It was a somber moment. The mighty pack of Shvanasthan stood together at the edge of their homeland, their expressions unreadable but their energy subdued. The forest loomed ahead of them, dark and untamed—a place that, while part of their

ancestral domain, was far from the safety and familiarity of Shvanasthan.

KRAM stood at the forefront, his massive frame towering above the others. His amber eyes, filled with wisdom and melancholy, surveyed his people. "We leave behind our homeland today," he rumbled, his voice resonating through the clearing. "But we do so with purpose. This land will return to us in time, and until that day comes, we must hold onto the memory of what we are and where we come from."

The dogs howled in unison, a sound that echoed through the mountains, a farewell to the land they had guarded for generations. Slowly, the pack began their descent into the Wild Forest. The movement was orderly, dignified, as befitted creatures of such intelligence and strength. The younger dogs hesitated at the edge of the forest, glancing back at the mountains they were leaving behind, but the older ones nudged them forward with quiet reassurance.

Meanwhile, the villagers of Matsya began their ascent into Shvanasthan. The journey was arduous, the steep paths and rocky terrain testing their resolve. But there was a sense of unity among them, a determination to reach their new home and begin anew. Each family, as part of the sacred agreement, had chosen a dog to accompany them.

The first meetings between humans and dogs were tentative. Many villagers had never interacted closely with these creatures before, and the dogs, in turn, regarded the humans with cautious curiosity. Yet, there was a strange sense of connection, as though the sacred pact had bound them together in ways that neither could fully understand.

Children were the first to bridge the gap. Small hands reached out to touch fur, and the dogs, sensing no threat, allowed the contact. Laughter echoed through the group as children played with their newfound companions, their innocence breaking the barriers of mistrust. The adults watched, smiles slowly spreading across their weary faces.

By the time the villagers reached Shvanasthan, the beginnings of a bond had formed. The dogs, though wary, walked alongside the humans, their sharp eyes scanning the horizon as if taking on the role of protectors. The villagers, in turn, began to see the dogs not as creatures of legend but as allies, partners in the journey to rebuild their lives.

When they arrived at Shvanasthan, the villagers were struck by the beauty of the land. The mountains rose majestically around them, their peaks piercing the clouds. The air was crisp and fresh, carrying with it the promise of a new beginning. Fields of green stretched out before them, untouched and fertile, waiting to be cultivated.

Daivik stood at the front of the group, his heart swelling with a mixture of pride and relief. He turned to the villagers and raised his voice. "This is our new home," he said. "Here, we will rebuild. Here, we will thrive. But never forget the pact we have made. Treat the dogs with kindness and respect, for they are now part of our family, just as we are part of theirs."

The villagers nodded, their faces alight with determination. They began unpacking their belongings, setting up shelters, and exploring the land. The dogs, too, explored their new surroundings, their movements confident and assured.

For the first time in months, a sense of peace settled over Matsya's people. They had found refuge, and though the road ahead would not be easy, they faced it with hope and the knowledge that they were not alone. Humans and dogs, bound by a sacred agreement, stood together in the shadow of the mountains, ready to forge a future built on trust and unity.

The transformation of Matsya began quietly, almost imperceptibly at first. The villagers who had once climbed into the mountains seeking refuge had brought with them the resilience born of desperation and the determination to build anew. They tilled the fertile land of Shvanasthan,

constructed homes from the timber of nearby forests, and nurtured a new life, always with the dogs at their sides.

For years, the sacred agreement remained fresh in their minds. Every family faithfully adopted a dog, sharing their food and homes with these loyal companions. The dogs, in turn, protected the humans, their sharp instincts and unwavering loyalty serving as an unspoken reminder of the pact that had saved Matsya's people from certain death. The bond between man and dog flourished, built on mutual respect and necessity.

As time passed, the village began to grow. The barren mountain slopes were transformed into terraced fields of golden wheat and lush rice paddies. The homes, once modest huts, became sturdier structures, reflecting the prosperity that had begun to take root. Markets sprang up, bustling with trade and activity, and the people of Matsya thrived in their newfound home.

But with prosperity came forgetfulness.

Generations passed, and the sacred agreement began to fade from the forefront of memory. The once-revered tales of Lord KRAM and the pact he had forged with Daivik became stories told by grandmothers to wide-eyed children on cold nights, the details slowly blurring with each retelling. The dogs, once honored as integral members of every household, began to lose their place in human

lives. They were no longer seen as the embodiment of the bond that had saved Matsya but as mere animals, their importance diminishing as the people's focus turned inward—toward expansion, wealth, and progress.

KRAM, the immortal Dog Lord, watched it all unfold from the shadows of the Wild Forest.

For centuries, he had stayed true to his word, guiding the dogs that had followed him into the wilderness, ensuring that the sacred agreement was honored, if only on his side. But he had not anticipated the passage of time's cruel erosion. He had not anticipated how quickly the memory of their pact would fade from the hearts of men.

He had watched as Matsya transformed from a humble village into a thriving town. He had seen the terraced fields expand, the markets swell with goods from distant lands, and the humble homes evolve into grand structures of stone and mortar. The village's borders stretched farther with each passing year, encroaching ever closer to the Wild Forest that had become the sanctuary of his kind.

But the transformation of Matsya came at a cost.

KRAM had also borne witness to the slow, painful decline of his kingdom. Shvanasthan, the land that had once been a haven for his people, was no longer theirs. The

dogs that roamed the mountains were no longer regarded as companions or protectors but as nuisances. Once, every family in Matsya had cared for a dog, honoring the agreement with pride. Now, the dogs were reduced to strays, scavenging for scraps, their eyes hollow with hunger.

KRAM's heart ached as he saw his kind endure the cruelty of humans who had forgotten their shared history. He had watched dogs chased from the streets, pelted with stones by children who laughed at their suffering. He had seen them huddled in the shadows of alleys, their ribs jutting out from beneath mangy fur, their spirits broken by years of neglect. The bond that had once united man and dog was shattered, replaced by indifference and disdain.

The Wild Forest, too, had changed. It had once been a sanctuary, a place where KRAM's pack could roam freely, their howls echoing through the trees. But as Matsya grew, the forest began to shrink. Trees were felled to make way for roads and buildings, and the once-vast wilderness became little more than a memory. KRAM's pack dwindled, their numbers thinned by time and the encroachment of humanity. He had led them with unwavering determination, but even he could not stop the tide of change.

As centuries passed, Matsya evolved further. The thriving town became a bustling city, its streets filled with the clamor of merchants, the laughter of children, and the ceaseless hum of human activity. The city's name, Matsya, became synonymous with progress and prosperity, a beacon of human ingenuity and resilience. But in its ascent, it left behind the stories that had once defined its origin.

The sacred agreement, once etched into the hearts of Matsya's people, became a relic of the past. The name KRAM, once spoken with reverence, was now little more than a whisper in the annals of forgotten folklore. Even Daivik, the priest whose courage had saved his people, was reduced to a mythical figure, his story retold in fragments, stripped of its depth and meaning.

And yet, KRAM lived on.

Immortal by the terms of the sacred agreement, he had watched as Matsya grew and his own kingdom diminished. He had seen the shift from respect to neglect, from partnership to abandonment. He bore witness to humanity's capacity for both greatness and barbarity, their ability to build towering cities and yet forget the foundations upon which they were built.

KRAM's memories were his burden, the weight of centuries pressing heavily upon him. He remembered the

pact as though it had been made yesterday—the moment Daivik had placed his hand on KRAM’s head, the surge of energy that had sealed their bond, the vision of hope that had united their two worlds. It was all still vivid in his mind, even as the world around him forgot.

There were nights when KRAM would stand at the edge of the Wild Forest, his piercing amber eyes fixed on the city of Matsya. From his vantage point, he could see the lights of the city stretching into the distance, a stark contrast to the darkened woods behind him. He would listen to the sounds of the city—the laughter, the music, the ceaseless hum of life—and wonder if there was anyone left who remembered the truth. Was there anyone who knew the price that had been paid for their survival, the sacrifice his kind had made?

KRAM often thought of Daivik, the priest who had stood before him with such courage and conviction. He wondered if Daivik’s spirit, promised rebirth by the terms of the pact, would one day return to remind Matsya of the agreement. But as the centuries passed, KRAM’s hope waned. The city had grown too large, too consumed by its own progress to look back at the roots from which it had sprung.

And so, KRAM waited. He waited in the shadows of the Wild Forest, a silent guardian of a promise that only he

remembered. The bustling city of Matsya, once a desperate village clinging to life, now thrived in ignorance of the pact that had made its existence possible. The sacred agreement was no longer a myth, not even a fable. It was merely a memory, locked away in the mind of the immortal Dog Lord, the last keeper of a forgotten bond.

As the city lights flickered in the distance and the Wild Forest whispered its ancient secrets, KRAM stood alone. The howl of his pack had grown faint, a mere echo of what it had once been. And yet, KRAM remained, his eyes burning with a quiet resolve, a reminder that the past could not be erased, no matter how deeply it was buried.

3000 years later....



Chapter 6:

The Forgotten Legend

Matsya had transformed beyond recognition, evolving from a quaint village into a bustling metropolis that sprawled across the landscape like a vibrant tapestry woven with the threads of human ambition. No longer just a collection of humble homes, the city now pulsed with life, its streets teeming with the sounds of honking cars and the chatter of hurried pedestrians. The once tranquil air was filled with the cacophony of urban life, a symphony of progress that drowned out the gentle whispers of nature.

The majestic mountains that had once stood sentinel over the village were now mere shadows of their former

selves, their rugged peaks carved and leveled to make way for sprawling highways and towering skyscrapers. The lush forests that had cradled Matsya in their embrace were stripped bare, their ancient trees felled to clear paths for the relentless march of development. In their place, concrete, and steel rose like giants, casting long shadows over the city and replacing the vibrant greens with a palette of gray.

Yet, amidst the chaos of construction and the relentless hum of machinery, remnants of the past lingered. Pockets of greenery fought to survive, small parks and gardens nestled between the concrete giants, offering fleeting glimpses of the natural beauty that once defined Matsya. The rivers that had once flowed freely now meandered through the city, their banks lined with artificial barriers, struggling to maintain their course in a world that had changed so drastically.

As the sun set behind the skyline, casting a golden hue over the city, it became clear that Matsya was a testament to human ingenuity and determination. But with this progress came a price—a loss of the serene connection to nature that had once defined the village. The vibrant spirit of Matsya now danced in the shadows of its own creation, a reminder of the delicate balance between advancement and preservation, and the enduring question of what it truly means to thrive. But there was one human who still

carried within him the soul of the past—a quiet dreamer named Moksh. While the city around him thrived on the noise of progress, Moksh felt a deep yearning for the harmony that once existed between humanity and nature.

Moksh was born on a cool November morning in the bustling capital of Matsya. His parents, drawn to spirituality during the years after their marriage, named him with great intention. Moksh - a name steeped in Sanskrit literature, meaning liberation - carried the weight of their aspirations and beliefs. Little did they know that the name they had chosen would so closely match the destiny lying ahead for him.

I do not know; from the very moment he took that first breath, there was something just different about Moksh. He didn't seem like the other children of this driven city life. He showed a quiet disposition even as a young boy. While other children were getting lost in the ever-changing worlds of video games and social media, Moksh found solace in the stillness of books and the quiet musings of his own mind. His parents spiritually influenced him a lot, so his upbringing was pretty spiritual.

His father, for example, would often be found early in the morning meditating over a pot of tea. His mother was everywhere—he could just not get rid of all those mantras and chants that filled their home. These were not just

household habits; they formed the backbone of Moksh's understanding of life. By the time he was old enough to understand the world around him, meditation had become second nature, and the search for deeper meaning was as instinctual as breathing. Moksh's nature was calm, introspective, and deeply rooted in a sense of control. He was a Scorpio by birth, his quiet exterior masking a mind that constantly churned with thoughts and ideas.

The one sadly reserved, however, possessed striking ability: that of the "gift of the gap." He could speak—a rare occurrence in his younger years. But should he choose to do so, it was with a clarity and depth that even adults were astounded by. It was as if words flowed effortlessly, and rapidly, so soon could he set himself apart from his peers with his articulate thoughts. But at the same time, Moksh's silent nature had its own set of challenges. His equals, especially those in his generation, could not connect with him. When all around him were getting busy in the digital earth and gaining a grip on trends of Gen Z, Moksh was interested in the wisdom of the ancient texts and timeless stories. To them, he was something like an oddity, a bookworm in a world gone screw-bananas with screens. Although not averse to companionship, his friends were few and temporary. Moksh did not make friends like other children made them. The small circle of friends maintained as a regular distraction was not at all a source of

satisfaction. They were just for the time being but never anchors of his life. Most people his age found him quiet, hard to fathom, and mistaken him for aloofness. Yet Moksh did not mind. In fact, he drew comfort in solitude. The cacophony of the world seemed to be at a distance when he was lost in the pages of his books or sitting in quiet meditation. He didn't have much of a response to the constant pull of social media and the endless stream of notifications and the need for external validation. Rather, he sought answers to questions that most of his peers didn't even know how to ask.

He looked absolutely wonderful as he grew up to be a very delightful contrast to the fast world around him.

Moksh became even more introspective in the growing years. His curiosity led him to seek the mysteries of life and God.

His mother would find him sitting cross-legged on the balcony, eyes closed, lost in meditation for hours together.

His sense of spiritual connection was deep-seated, both a product of his origins and an expression of his more personal search for self. "Moksh, dinner is ready," his mother would call, her voice tinged with a mixture of pride and exasperation. "I'll be there in a moment, Maa," Moksh would reply, his voice calm and measured, as though he had already reached some profound understanding that

the world had yet to offer him. His parents loved him for his wisdom and composure, though they worried at times about what may appear to be his detachment from the world around him. "Do you think he's too serious for his age?" asked his father one evening, observing Moksh immersed in a thick book on Vedantic philosophy. He's just different," his mother replied, her lips curved into a small smile. "And that's not a bad thing. He'll find his path."

Despite his parents' reassurances, Moksh occasionally struggled with the isolation that came with his introspective nature.

Though he would never admit it aloud, the nickname his friends and peers had begun referring to him by—Mo—bothered him more than he cared to admit.

It wasn't just the truncation of his name; it was the lack of respect for the weight and the meaning that it carried.

Moksh wasn't just a name—it reflected who he was, a reminder of the spiritual journey that defined him.

"Why do they call you Mo?" one of his teachers had asked him once, noticing the irritation that flickered across his face whenever the nickname was used. "They don't understand what Moksh means," he replied simply, his

tone betraying no anger, only a quiet resignation. Though he accepted the nickname outwardly, Moksh clung fiercely to the meaning of his name in his heart. It became a silent mantra for him, a reminder of his purpose and the path he felt he was destined to walk. But it wasn't just his introspection and spirituality that set Moksh apart. From a young age, he had felt an inexplicable connection to dogs. Where others saw strays and nuisances, Moksh saw loyalty, intelligence, and an unspoken understanding that transcended words. He would frequently stop on his way to school to feed the stray dogs that lingered around his home, their tails wagging enthusiastically as he approaches with scraps of food. "Good morning, little one," he would say to a small brown pup that had a particular fondness for him. "Are you hungry today?"

The dog barked softly and sprang up, then looked at him with brightened eyes as he heard the tone of his voice. Moksh knelt beside it and ran his fingers gently over its fur. "You remind me of something," he says aloud, although even he can't tell what it might be.

This friendship with dogs perplexed those in his circle of friends. "Why are you investing so much time into these strays?" some of them would ask, then raise an eyebrow.

"Not just strays," Moksh would quickly point out. "They're important."

To Moksh, this connection felt deeply rooted, as though it came from somewhere beyond his understanding. He often found himself wondering why he felt such a pull toward them, a pull that seemed to grow stronger as he got older.

By the time Moksh entered his teenage years, his introspective nature and connection to dogs had earned him a reputation among his peers as an enigma.

Some looked up to him as wise and mature. Others feared him because he didn't like people all that much.

Moksh didn't care much about how others saw him, anyway.

His thoughts were always toward the inside, where his questions resided and the answers that might answer those one day.

It was on one such reflective evening that Moksh found himself silently sitting in the city park with a book held between his hands and a stray dog curled at his feet when he felt something slightly different. There was an energy in this city of Matsya, its towering buildings, and bustling streets a hum that Moksh could not define.

He looked ahead into the horizon, narrowing his eyes as if trying to peek beyond that physical world. For a brief moment, he felt something stirring within him-a flicker of

recognition, a whisper of something forgotten. He could not explain it, but deep down Moksh knew that this was only the beginning. Little did he know that the name his parents had given him, the connection he felt with dogs of Matsya, and the introspective journey he walked every day would soon collide with a destiny far greater than he could have ever wished for.

Moksh, or Mo as most people called him, had always been a boy who found solace in solitude. What many mistook as aloofness or even hostility was, in truth, Mo's way of retreating into the quiet spaces of his mind where he felt most at peace. His silence was not a shield of anger or arrogance but a calm detachment from the chaotic world around him. He rarely raised his voice, never sought out quarrels, and avoided unnecessary conflicts. The only exception to his restraint came during the occasional sharp retort to his mother's relentless nagging, but even those moments were rare.

To those who took the time to know him, Mo was a boy with a heart far bigger than his quiet demeanor suggested. But to strangers, his silence often painted a picture of someone distant and unapproachable. He didn't mind. Mo had little interest in changing how others perceived him; he preferred the company of his thoughts, his books, and above all, his greatest love—dogs.

Mo loved dogs so much that he loved to read and cram himself with books on literature more. It was almost like this universe where Mo could understand them and no one else did. It's not just an appreciation for the loyalty or the friendship; this deep connection seemed instilled in him.

It was perhaps initiated by the family dog, Rico, a lively Labrador who had been around before Mo was born. Rico was the darling of the family, and his playfulness filled the whole home with energy. When Mo took his first steps, though, Rico was gone-taken away by heart failure. Though Mo was too young to remember Rico, his parents often spoke of him, recalling the dog's goodness and steadfast loyalty. The stories were spoken with affection and a hint of sorrow, so that they became part of the early recollections of Mo, perhaps sowing the seeds for his lifelong attachment to dogs.

By the time Mo was ten, this attachment had become an all-consuming passion. It was on an everyday day, on one of his walks around the streets of Matsya, that he stumbled upon a litter of eight stray puppies cowering under a broken cart. He could not spot the mother; their bodies shook with hunger and cold. Mo knelt beside them, tears welling up in his heart. He went without hesitation and scooped them up, his tiny arms barely able to carry the squirming furball.

When he got to the house, his parents were speechless. There was his ten-year-old standing in the doorway, his face flushed with determination, his arms full of eight stray puppies.

"Mo... what is this?" she asked in a mixed voice of confusion and concern.

"They're homeless," Mo said simply, his tone one that argued not. "They need help, and I'm going to take care of them."

His parents looked at each other worried. "Moksh," his father started to say softly, "one dog is enough responsibility, let alone eight. You understand what you're asking for?"

Mo nodded solemnly. "I know it's much, but I'll do everything. I'll feed them, clean up after them, and train them. I promise.

There was a weight in his words that belied his age, and though his parents would not do it, they couldn't bring themselves to crush his resolve. They had always known their son was different, but this act of compassion was far beyond anything that they had anticipated. Reluctantly they agreed.

Their two-story house, though modest in its garden, served as a home for the eight puppies. Space was no

problem, but the noise was. As the puppies grew, so did their noisiness and the once-peaceful street filled with barks and yelps of playful puppies. Complaints from the neighbors were streaming in, and his parents felt themselves caught between frustration and pride at their son's unwavering dedication.

Mo took his responsibility seriously. He wakes up each day, feeds the dogs, and ensures that each dog receives an equal amount. He bathes them, plays with them, and even tries to train them, although wrangling eight energetic pups often leaves him exhausted. Mo never once complains amidst all this chaos.

One of the most endearing aspects of his commitment was the effort he put into naming the dogs. Mo spent hours poring over books, searching for unique and meaningful names. He delved into Sanskrit, Latin, and other ancient languages, determined to find names that reflected the individuality of each pup. When he finally announced their names to his parents, they were impressed but utterly confused. With names like Shastra, Veda, Canis, and Astra, it was impossible for them to keep track of who was who.

"Mo," his mother said one evening as she watched him call the dogs for dinner, "do you really think they know which name belongs to them?"

“They know,” Mo replied confidently as Shastra and Astra bounded over at the sound of their names. “You just have to say it right.”

His parents couldn’t help but laugh, though they marveled at the bond their son had formed with the dogs.

It was during this time that Mo’s grandmother, who often visited the family, began sharing stories with him. She was a woman of great wisdom and an enchanting storyteller, and Mo would sit by her side for hours, captivated by her tales. One evening, as the dogs sprawled lazily around the room, she told him a story that would leave a lasting impression.

“Do you know, Moksh,” she began, her voice low and filled with mystery, “there was a time when this land wasn’t ours? It belonged to the dogs.”

Mo’s eyes widened; his interest piqued. “The dogs?”

“Yes,” she continued. “Long, long ago, before Matsya became the city it is today, there was a kingdom called Shvanasthaan. It was ruled by a great Dog Lord named KRAM, a leader unlike any other. He was strong, wise, and noble, and he made a pact with humans to share this land. It was a sacred agreement, one that was meant to last for generations.”

“What happened to it?” Mo asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

His grandmother sighed, her expression turning somber. “People forgot. The stories faded into myth, and the bond that once united us with the dogs was broken. But KRAM... he still lives, they say. Waiting, watching.”

Mo’s young mind raced with the possibilities. The idea of a Dog Lord and a forgotten pact stirred something deep within him, though he couldn’t yet understand why. From that day on, the story of Shvanasthaan became a constant presence in his thoughts.

As Mo grew older, his connection with dogs only deepened. The eight pups he had rescued thrived under his care, growing into strong, loyal companions. They followed him everywhere, their bond unbreakable. To Mo, they weren’t just animals—they were family, a living reminder of the stories his grandmother had told and the quiet promise he had made to himself: to never let the bond between man and dog be forgotten.

Even as the world around him grew louder and more chaotic, Mo remained steadfast in his solitude, his love for dogs, and the wisdom he had gained from the stories of his youth. Little did he know, the tale of Shvanasthaan was not just a story—it was a thread that connected him to a destiny far greater than he could imagine.

However, Mo's biggest and only nemesis was Lathif, a name that echoed gentleness, a quality utterly absent in the man himself.

Lathif walked briskly among the throngs of people in Matsya City, his sharp eyes surveying the street life with the keen intensity of a hawk. He was tall and broad-shouldered, sending a commanding physical presence that seemed to repel anyone who thought to approach him. His sharp features were set in a perpetual scowl. His uniform, stark black with the city's insignia stitched on the chest, was always pristine—a sharp contrast to the man's demeanor, which was anything but welcoming. He was the city's warden, a title that carried weight, authority, and fear.

To most, Lathif was a figure to be avoided, his reputation preceding him like a dark shadow. The citizens of Matsya respected him, for lack of a better option. His strict enforcement of order and discipline kept the city running smoothly, but his methods were far from kind. Those who crossed him, even inadvertently, often found themselves at the receiving end of his cold, merciless gaze, and worse, his unyielding wrath. Lathif's relationship with Matsya was very complicated. On the outside, he was a man who adhered to the laws of the city with an unrelenting rigor. In the inside, he was a figure of dread, particularly to stray dogs within the city. Where others

regarded these creatures as harmless or, at worst, a nuisance, Lathif saw them as a plague—a blight to the polished image of the city he worked hard to maintain. "Filthy creatures," Lathif muttered to himself as he turned the corner, his steel-toed boots echoing off the pavement.

His lips curled in disdain as his eyes fell on a few strays huddled near a dumpster.

The dogs scurried away from him; their tails were tucked between their legs, their eyes wide with fear. It was not the first time they had seen him; they knew enough to leave his path. Their hatred for stray dogs was no secret; Lathif had devoted the better part of his life to eradicating them from the face of Matsya city. For years, he proclaimed it to be an issue of sanitation—to keep the streets of Matsya free of disorganization—but people who really knew him realized it went deeper. There was a certain emptiness to this man, a cruel component that found happiness in the wailing and whimpering of creatures unable to cry out. He had concocted hundreds of ways to dispose of the dogs, his methods ranging from brutal to downright savage. Poisoned leftovers left in deserted alleys, traps set in the dead of night, and swift, brutal beatings delivered to any dog too slow to get out of his grasp. His techniques were effective, but they were also hideous. "There's no place for strays in this city," Lathif would say whenever questioned

about his actions. "They're vermin, nothing more. And vermin need to be dealt with."

The city council, though uneasy with his methods, turned a blind eye. Lathif's effectiveness was undeniable; the streets were cleaner, quieter, and free of the roaming packs that once frequented them. And so, his cruelty was tolerated, his reputation as a necessary evil cemented.

But not everyone kept silent over Lathif's actions. The whispers of his brutality spread, carried on the tongues of those who had witnessed his wrath. "Do you hear about what Lathif did to that dog close to the market?" a shopkeeper whispered to his neighbor. "They say it never stood a chance.

"I saw him chase a pup into an alley," another voice added, hushed and trembling. "The poor thing's yelps still haunt me."

Lathif was deaf to the discontent that grew. To him, the whispers were but nothing, the complaints of people too weak to understand what it took to hold things in order.

One evening, when the sun had sunk below the horizon and city streets were always clear, Lathif stood on a hill that overlooked Matsya. The city lay before him, shining and ablaze with movement - something he found

hard to criticize for its beauty. Still, he did not look to admire.

"This city," he muttered to himself, his voice low and bitter, "it's mine to protect. And I'll do whatever it takes to keep it in line."

In his wake, there was an indistinct rustling. He turned acutely, narrowing his eyes to see a waif of a dog peering out from behind a bush. Its fur was matted into knots on its mangy body, with ribs visible underneath its skinny frame. Lathif's hand went instinctively to the baton at his hip and gripped the handle tightly.

He froze, his dark eyes locking with his. For an instant, there was a silent exchange-of fear on one side and cold, unfeeling malice on the other.

"Go away," Lathif barked in a harsh, commanding voice. He stepped forward, and the dog turned tail, running away into the darkness with a whimper.

Lathif watched it go, his face setting in a familiar expression. "Vermin," he grunted again, shaking his head before moving back toward the city.

Cruel as he was, there was no denying that Lathif was a man of his environment.

Once a village nestled in the mountains, Matsya had grown over the centuries into a thriving metropolis.

With growth comes problems: overcrowding, pollution, and a disconnection between its people and the natural world that once surrounded them.

Stray dogs, once revered and cared for in a bond made sacred, had now become a nuisance, a part of a forgotten past. Lathif, in his own crooked mind, believed he was doing the right thing. To him, the dogs were symbols of disorder, a reminder of a time when the city was less refined, less orderly. His actions, though cruel, were justified in his thinking because of that greater purpose. But what Lathif could not see, or perhaps refused to acknowledge, was the ever-widening gap between his interpretation of Matsya and the city's soul. The dogs were more than strays; they were shards of an ancient covenant that made them living relics to an increasingly forgotten history. For people who loved the dogs, cared for them, and understood their value, Lathif was not a warden; he was an oppressor. For the dogs themselves, he embodied terror, a looming shadow over their fragile existence, threatening to snuff out lives already shrouded by penumbra. As Lathif plunged even further into evil, his actions left an ominous shadow on Matsya. On the face of it, the city was splashing and doing well - but within its walls lay the beginnings of conflict, the gestation of a moment in which forgotten past and fractured present would meet.

And Lathif, relentless in pursuit of control, with hate burning his heart for those wretched dogs, found himself at the center of it all, on a collision course with destiny far greater than he ever could have imagined.

The tension in Matsya City was almost tangible, a simmering unrest that seemed to settle into the very streets. For months, whispers of Lathif's growing cruelty toward the stray dogs had spread like wildfire. Though most residents turned a blind eye, unwilling to confront the city's feared warden, there were those who couldn't ignore the escalating brutality—chief among them was Mo.

Mo had always been attuned to the unspoken, a sensitivity that extended not only to people but also to the creatures most others dismissed. The strays of Matsya were no exception. For as long as he could remember, he had felt a connection to the dogs that roamed the city, their eyes brimming with stories of hardship and survival. They had become an integral part of his life, their wagging tails, and grateful barks a welcome respite from the indifference of the world around him. But lately, their numbers had begun to dwindle, their absence gnawing at him like an open wound.

It wasn't long before Mo discovered the reason for their disappearance. The stories he overheard in hushed

tones—of poisoned meat left in alleys, of traps set in the dead of night—pointed to one man. Lathif.

At first, Mo couldn't believe it. How could someone, even someone as cold and unyielding as Lathif, commit such acts of cruelty? But the evidence was undeniable. The once-familiar barks that greeted him on his walks had grown quieter, replaced by a haunting silence. And then there were the encounters—moments that left Mo shaken and filled with a growing sense of dread.

One evening, as Mo walked home from the park, he heard a commotion in a nearby alley. The sharp clatter of metal against stone was followed by a yelp so piercing it froze him in his tracks. Heart pounding, he crept toward the source of the sound, his breath catching as he peeked around the corner.

There, silhouetted by the dim light of a flickering streetlamp, was Lathif. He stood over a trembling dog, a thin, malnourished creature with matted fur and pleading eyes. In his hand, Lathif held a heavy baton, its polished surface gleaming ominously in the light.

“Out of my city,” Lathif growled, his voice low and menacing. He raised the baton, his movements deliberate, and brought it down with a sickening thud.

“No!” Mo's voice escaped him before he could stop it.

Lathif turned sharply, his eyes narrowing as they landed on the boy standing at the mouth of the alley. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, his tone cold and sharp.

Mo felt his throat tighten, but he forced himself to speak. “What are you doing? That dog hasn’t done anything to you!”

“It’s a stray,” Lathif said dismissively, his grip tightening on the baton. “They don’t belong here. They’re pests, nothing more.”

Mo clenched his fists, anger, and disbelief coursing through him. “They’re living beings! You can’t just—”

“I can and I will,” Lathif interrupted, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. “This city has no place for filth like them. Go home, boy, before you find yourself in trouble.”

The threat hung heavy in the air, and though every fiber of Mo’s being screamed at him to stay, to fight, he knew he was powerless against Lathif. With one last glance at the dog—its broken body barely moving—Mo turned and walked away, his heart pounding with a mix of fear and fury.

That night, sleep eluded him. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the dog’s pleading gaze, and heard the crack of

Lathif's baton. He couldn't shake the feeling of helplessness that had settled over him, the knowledge that he had witnessed something profoundly wrong and had done nothing to stop it.

The days that followed only deepened Mo's unease. He began to notice things he hadn't before—the wary glances of stray dogs as they slunk through the streets, the way they darted into shadows at the slightest sound. The city seemed to have become a battlefield, with Lathif waging a relentless war against creatures that had no means to defend themselves.

Mo's anger simmered, bubbling to the surface in moments of quiet reflection. He spoke to his parents about what he had seen, hoping for guidance, but their responses offered little comfort.

"Lathif is the warden," his father said one evening as they sat at the dinner table. "He has a job to do, and sometimes that job isn't pleasant. You shouldn't get involved."

"But it's wrong!" Mo insisted, his voice trembling with frustration. "He's hurting them for no reason. They're not hurting anyone!"

His mother placed a gentle hand on his arm, her expression both concerned and resigned. "I know it's hard

to see, Moksh, but sometimes the world isn't fair. You have a kind heart, and that's a good thing. But you need to be careful. Lathif isn't someone you want to cross."

The words did little to quell the storm raging within Mo. He couldn't simply turn a blind eye to the suffering around him, not when it weighed so heavily on his conscience.

His frustration reached its breaking point one afternoon when he stumbled upon another victim of Lathif's cruelty—a young pup lying motionless near the park's edge, its tiny body battered and bruised. Mo knelt beside it, his hands trembling as he gently lifted the pup into his arms. It was alive, but just barely.

Tears blurred his vision as he carried the dog home, his mind racing with a mix of anger and determination. This couldn't go on. Something had to change.

Over the following days, Mo devoted himself to nursing the pup back to health. He named it Sharu, after a word he had read in an ancient text that meant "innocence." The bond he formed with the little dog only strengthened his resolve to protect the strays of Matsya, no matter the cost.

But as Mo's determination grew, so did the tension between him and Lathif. Their paths crossed more

frequently; each encounter more hostile than the last. Lathif's disdain for the boy was palpable, and Mo's defiance only seemed to fuel his anger.

One day, as Mo fed a small group of dogs near a temple, Lathif appeared, his expression cold and unyielding.

"You again," he said, his tone dripping with contempt. "Still wasting your time with these pests?"

"They're not pests," Mo replied firmly, meeting Lathif's gaze without flinching. "They're just trying to survive, like everyone else."

Lathif took a step closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over the boy. "You think you're doing them a favor, feeding them scraps? All you're doing is making them dependent. They're better off gone."

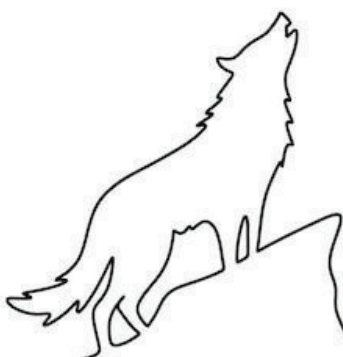
Mo's jaw tightened, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "You're wrong. They deserve a chance, just like we do. And I'm not going to stop helping them."

Lathif's eyes narrowed, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. "Careful, boy. You're starting to sound like a troublemaker. And troublemakers don't last long in this city."

The unspoken threat hung heavy in the air, but Mo refused to back down. He held Lathif's gaze, his resolve unwavering, even as fear coiled in the pit of his stomach.

From that moment on, Mo knew he had made an enemy of Lathif. The warden's disdain for him was no longer subtle—it was a simmering hatred, one that promised to boil over if given the chance.

But Mo also knew that he couldn't walk away, couldn't turn his back on the strays that depended on him. The conflict between him and Lathif was only beginning, and though Mo had no idea where it would lead, he was certain of one thing: he would not stand by and let cruelty prevail.



Chapter 7:

The Library's Secrets

The moment Mo's mind got out of hand, there was this storm of thoughts racing through his head and he couldn't catch it, there was only one place he would find solace in: the city library. The quiet halls, scents of old books, dust, and echoing silence provided him with a haven from the outside chaos. It was his haven, a space where he could think without distraction and lose himself in the endless possibilities held within the pages of forgotten tomes.

The library was rarely busy. The people of Matsya City had little time for books as their lives revolved around the fast pace of urban life. Even the librarian, Denzel, who

was a very old man, would spend more time dozing off at his desk than actually helping the patrons. Sometimes Denzel could be spotted hunched over a thick book, his spectacles sliding down his nose as he read something dense and impenetrable, but those moments were very rare.

Lately, Mo has been taking refuge in the library like never before.

His mind had turned into a kind of vortex, pulling him deeper into frustration and helplessness. He tried to stop himself from thinking about dogs, but he just couldn't: their dwindling numbers, frightened eyes, and most of all, the cruelty at the hands of Lathif. The more he pushed the very thought away from his mind, the more it sought to return.

He could not forget it, nor did he know how to assist them. On one such visit, Mo entered the library with a purpose. This time, though, he hadn't come to escape. He had an idea, a faint hope that maybe somewhere in the depths of the library's seemingly endless collection lay something—anything—that might help him find the answer.

He walked up to Denzel's desk, where the librarian had predictably slumped back in his chair, nodding his head as he fought off sleep. Mo cleared his throat softly, and Denzel jolted awake, blinking at him in confusion.

"Aah, Mo," said Denzel, adjusting his glasses. "You've been coming here a lot lately. What can I do for you today?"

Mo hesitated for a moment, then said, "I want to read something different. Something old, maybe about the city's history. Do you have anything like that?"

Denzel frowned; his curiosity piqued. "History? What kind of history are you looking for?"

"Anything," Mo replied. "Old laws, city maps, journals. Whatever you have. I just. I want to learn more about Matsya. About how it used to be."

The librarian leaned back in his chair, thinking about the request. "Hmm. Most people don't ask for things like that anymore. Let me think." He tapped a finger against his temple before nodding. "Yes, there's a section on the top floor. It's where we keep the oldest books and records. Nobody goes up there much, so it's. well, let's just say it's not exactly clean.

"That's fine," Mo said quickly.

Denzel gave him a look of caution. "Careful, though. The floor hasn't been maintained for years. Expect plenty of dust, and maybe a spider or two. But if you're willing to brave it, you might find what you're looking for."

With a grateful nod, Mo made his way up the creaking staircase to the top floor.

The air cooled as he climbed, the dim light of the lower floors fading until only the faint glow of a single bulb illuminated the narrow corridor.

The door at the end of the hall was heavy and wooden, its surface worn with age. Mo hesitated for a moment before pushing it open, the hinges groaning in protest. The room beyond was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Dust covered every surface, and cobwebs hung from the corners like tattered curtains. The shelves, filled with books and scrolls, seemed to stretch up to the ceiling, unread for decades. The air was heavy with the odour of aged paper and rot, and yet there was something almost mystical about the space as if it held secrets waiting to be uncovered.

Mo stepped inside. The layer of dust on the floor muffled his footfalls as he moved in there. He ran a hand along the nearest shelf, leaving a clean streak in the grime, and pulled out a book at random. The cover was cracked, the title faded, but as he flipped through its pages, he felt a thrill of curiosity. He spent hours in the room, brushing away cobwebs and carefully lifting books that seemed about to cave under their weight. So many of the texts covered the history of Matsya—from when it started as just

a small village, expanding into a full-fledged city and flourishing into wealth and the various cultural ceremonies that shaped its people. Mo was fascinated, swept away by stories of something he never knew existed.

Then he found the map.

It was wrapped up tightly and tied with a faded ribbon, tucked into a corner. Mo delicately unwound it from the knot, unrolling brittle parchment that held a drawing so detailed that he could almost see the intricate network of tunnels beneath the city, the sewer systems, and the pathways carved through the mountains around.

"I did not know," Mo murmured to himself. Being told that Matsya was so elaborately founded was a fact that made him feel both awed and intrigued. He sat over the map for what felt like an eternity, committing every detail to memory.

But just as he was about to set it aside, something caught his eye.

Another map, buried beneath a pile of old books, peeked out from the edge of the shelf. Mo reached for it, his fingers brushing against the fragile paper. It was different: it was small, older, and much, much more worn. Carefully unrolled, Mo's breath catches at the sight before him.

It was not Matsya as he knew it.

The map showed a village by the ocean, its boundaries a fraction of the size of the current city. The topography was all wrong and yet, something about it stood unmistakably familiar. Centred, in spidery faded script on it, was written: SHVANASTHAAN.

Mo stared at the word, his heart pounding in his chest. Shvanasthaan. The name from his grandmother's story is the land of the Dog Lord KRAM. The village that, according to legend, had once been home to both humans and dogs, bound by a sacred agreement.

He sat back on his heels; the map was trembling in his hands. How was that? Was it possible that all those stories were more than myths? Matsya, the city he had known throughout his life, had once been Shvanasthaan.

His mind filled with questions. The room around him was a blur, but he saw the dogs in his mind and their pain and Lathif's constant cruelty. He thought of his grandmother's tale of an ancient pact made between man and dog, so long forgotten.

Mo's eyes came back to the map, tracing the faint lines of the village. He didn't have all the answers—not yet. But one thing was sure in his mind: he could not ignore what

he had found. This was more than a piece of history. It was a key, a connection to something far greater than himself.

He was determined to uncover the truth.

The name *Shvanasthaan* resonated within Mo, but he could not determine why. It floated in his head, a half-forgotten tune he had heard once and forgotten. Something was there, something that played on the fringes of his mind. He sat there, in the dim, dusty library, among ancient books and decaying scrolls, trying to reach into what it was.

Then it came to him—a vague recollection of a story his grandmother used to tell him when he was a young boy. The details were hazy, but that name seemed to be tied in with those stories, to the very fabric of her tales. His grandmother had been an enigmatic storyteller, filling his childhood full of mythical fables and ancient lore. Could *Shvanasthaan* have been one of those stories?

Mo leaned forward, a new urgency gripping him. He pulled more books and journals from the shelves, dust flying into the air with each movement. His fingers flipped through fragile pages, his eyes scanning the faded script for any mention of *Shvanasthaan.* The word, however, remained elusive, as though it had been deliberately hidden away, forgotten along with the stories of old.

Time passed unnoticed. The library, usually his sanctuary of peace, now seemed like a labyrinth of mysteries he could not solve. He had no sense of how long he had been there until he looked out of the window and saw that the sun was dipping towards the horizon. Evening light bathed the city in golden hues, and he suddenly realized how late it had become.

"Oh no," Mo muttered in the back of his throat. He hastily forced the books back onto their respective shelves, knowing well in advance what he was going to face when he got home if he did not leave immediately. His mother's tone echoed in his ears as he grabbed his bag and rushed out of the library.

By the time he reached home, the sky was painted in deep shades of orange and purple. His mother greeted him at the door with a sharp look on her face, her hands on her hips.

"You're late again, Moksh," she said, her tone exasperated. "You didn't even call to say where you were!"

"I'm sorry, Maa," Mo replied quickly, slipping off his shoes. "I lost track of time at the library."

His mother sighed but let the matter drop. His father, seated at the dining table with a book in hand, glanced up.

“The library again? You’ve been spending a lot of time there lately.”

“Yes,” Mo said, setting his bag down and sitting across from him. He hesitated, then decided to ask, “Baba, do you know anything about a place called *Shvanasthaan*?” His father furrowed his brow, lowering his book. “*Shvanasthaan*? Where did you hear that?”

I found it on an old map in the library,” Mo explained. “It looked like it was part of Matsya a long time ago.”

His mother, now curious, joined the conversation. “What does it mean? Does it have anything to do with the city’s history?”

Mo’s father tilted his head thoughtfully. “Well, *Shvana* is a Sanskrit word. It means ‘dog’ in English. As for *Sthaan,* it means ‘place’ or ‘land.’ So, *Shvanasthaan* would translate to ‘land of the dogs.’”

The words ran a chill down Mo’s spine. Goosebumps prickled his skin as he sat back in his chair, stunned by the revelation. The connection was undeniable, and yet he couldn’t fully understand why it affected him so deeply.

“Land of the dogs,” he whispered, the words tasting like a mystery on his lips. He couldn’t help but wonder: Could it be that Matsya, the city sprawl in which he lived,

had once been a land to the dogs? And if it was, what had happened to that past?

His father watched him curiously. "Why do you ask, Moksh? Is this for a project?"

Mo shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I just feel like there's more to it. Like there's a bigger story behind it."

His mother exchanged a glance with his father but said nothing. Mo lost in his thoughts, excused himself from the table and retreated to his room.

That night, he couldn't sleep. He lay in bed staring at the ceiling as the words *Shvanasthaan* and "land of the dogs" echoed in his mind. He thought of the map, the faded script that seemed to whisper secrets from a distant past. Could it really mean that Matsya had once been something else entirely? A place where dogs were revered, where they held a significance long forgotten?

The idea was simultaneously exhilarating and disturbing. Mo rolled onto his side, clutching his pillow as his brain spun on. By the time the sun came up, he had made up his mind to go back to the library. There has to be more, he felt. He just cannot leave this mystery unsolved.

The next morning, Mo skipped breakfast, too impatient to wait any longer for his search to begin so he sat at the table. He sneaked out of the house, not wanting

to have to endure another grilling round from his parents, and headed straight for the library at opening time.

The top floor was just as he had left it: dusty, decrepit, and heavy with a silence that deepened the room's air of secrecy. Mo didn't waste a minute. He started pulling books off the shelves, his hands moving with purpose as he searched for any mention of *Shvanasthaan.*

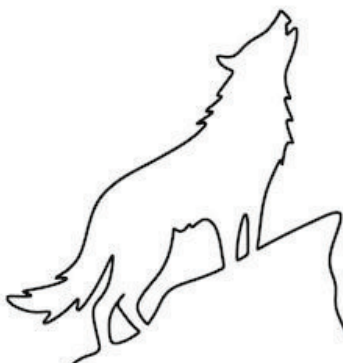
The hours crawled along, and the sunlight poured through the cracked windows as day turned to afternoon. Mo looked through heaps of books and journals. His fingers were coated in dust; he had nothing. Books on Matsya's culture, the city maps for this time period, and collections of older artists' literature. They all seemed to disappoint him in some way.

Frustration began to seep into his determination. The room, once filled with the promise of discovery, now felt oppressive, the weight of its silence pressing down on him. He sat back on his heels, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Maybe I'm chasing something that isn't there," he muttered to himself, though the thought pained him.

It was with a deep sigh that Mo packed away the books he had pulled out from the shelves one by one. His heart was heavy with disappointment, but a part of him still refused to let go of the hope of being able to find more.

As he came out of the library that afternoon, the word *Shvanasthaan* was still reverberating in his mind like an unrelenting refrain that refused to be silenced.



Chapter 8:

The Mystical Night

It was a still night, only broken by the occasional rustling of leaves or the hum of a distant engine. Mo walked through Matsya's dark streets with his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket. Events of the past fortnight had weighed on his mind: Lathif's brutality, the scarcity of stray dogs, and the haunting enigma of Shvanasthaan. He had tried to push everything back into his mind, but the unease was not leaving him.

As he rounded a corner, something caught his eye in the distance. About 500 or 600 meters away, a group of dogs moved together in the faint glow of a streetlight.

At first glance, it seemed unremarkable—just a pack of strays wandering the streets as they often did. But as Mo watched, he realized there was something different about them.

The dogs did not stray around aimlessly nor did they rummage through food waste. They moved in a strange, orchestrated sense of purpose, almost like a tight-knit unit. Their heads were down, their bodies taut with focus, and their deliberate gait. It was almost as if they were guided by some unseen force, with every step deliberate, every movement calculated.

What are they doing?" Mo whispered to himself, his curiosity piqued. He stopped in his tracks as he watched the pack move down the street. It was eerie, almost unnatural, and Mo felt a chill run down his spine.

He told himself it was nothing out of the ordinary, but something deep inside him said otherwise.

And then it happened—a sound so strange and surreal that Mo questioned his own senses.

At first, it was just the faint murmuring of low growls, the kind dogs might use to communicate within a pack. But as Mo strained to listen, the growls seemed to shift, melding into something rhythmic, almost melodic. For a fleeting moment, he thought he heard them chanting—

not barking, not howling, but chanting. The noise wasn't loud or sharp. But it had a curious cadence, a cadence that raised goose bumps on his skin. He would have sworn it was some kind of name.

Mo sucked in a breath as he tried to make sense out of it all. "Am I dreaming?" he whispered, shaking his head as if trying to jar free the fog that had beset him. This cannot be.

He rubbed his eyes and took a slow step forward, still looking at the pack. The chanting abruptly stopped, replaced by the quiet padding of paws on the pavement. The dogs continued on their purposeful march, completely ignoring the boy who stood transfixed in the shadows, watching them.

Mo's heart was racing. He had the feeling of being at the brink of reality and didn't know whether he had really seen what had just transpired or whether it was something much weirder. His gut was telling him that it was indeed real. There was no second-guessing what he saw and heard.

He felt a special connection to dogs - something that was beyond a simple love for them.

Even the most aggressive strays seemed to calm in his presence, their snarls softening into whines, their tense bodies relaxing as if they sensed something in him—a

kindred spirit, a friend. It was this connection that made Mo fearless around them. He had never been bitten, never even been growled at with real malice. Strays that others instinctively avoided, seemed to be drawn to him, their defences melting away when he approached.

And now, as he stood on the darkened street, his heart pounding and his mind racing, Mo decided to lean into that fearlessness.

“This is crazy,” he muttered, a small, nervous laugh escaping his lips. But he couldn’t deny the pull he felt. The dogs were headed somewhere, that much was clear, and Mo was determined to find out where.

He hesitated for only a moment longer before making up his mind. He would follow them.

It was a ridiculous decision, and he knew it. A pack of strays, no matter how calm they appeared, could turn on him in a heartbeat.

One wrong move and he could find himself surrounded by snapping jaws and tearing teeth. The very thought should have been enough to deter him, but it wasn’t. There wasn’t a single shred of doubt in his mind.

He would keep his distance, stay quiet, and make sure the dogs did not notice him. But he would follow.

Mo began to move carefully and as much as possible in the shadows.

The dogs were far enough ahead that he didn't think they felt his presence, their eyes fixated on whatever lay before them. He trailed behind, careful to keep his step in line with theirs and avoid making any noise that might give him away.

The pack turned down an alley, their silhouettes disappearing into the darkness. Mo quickened his steps, keeping them just within sight. His breath came in shallow bursts, his senses heightened as the city around him seemed to fall away. The only thing that mattered was the pack and where they were going.

With every step, Mo felt this crazy mix of fear and elation. The rational side of his brain screamed at him to turn around and go home, stop this madness.

But his gut, his instincts, said he should keep going. Something was happening here, far beyond anything he could understand, and he needed to know what that something was.

The dogs moved with a pilgrimage-like gait, their silent march filling the empty streets with a mystique air. Mo's heart raced as he could imagine what he might find at the end of this journey. Would it be a hidden den, a source

of food, or something else? The thought sent a thrill through him even as his logical mind tried to dismiss it.

He kept moving forward, his concentration not wavering, until the dogs took another turn and disappeared out of sight. Mo stopped for a moment, his chest constricting as he approached the edge of the building. He peeked around the corner carefully, catching his breath when he saw them again.

The pack had halted in the centre of a tiny, deserted piazza. They stood there, their heads bent forward like people at prayer, seeming to venerate something on the ground before them. Mo's forehead creased over that scene. What in all hell was the pack doing?

And then, as if on cue, the dogs raised their heads in unison and let out a low, haunting howl. The sound resonated through the empty streets, making Mo's spine creep. It was unlike any howl he had ever heard, filled with an intensity and purpose that made his heart pound in his chest.

For a moment, he felt petrified, unable to move or even breathe. But then the howling stopped as suddenly as it had started, and the dogs turned in unison, continuing their march into the shadows.

Mo let out a shaky breath, his legs trembling, and he had to catch himself on the wall with a hand. Whatever this was, it was more than anything he could make up. But one thing was for sure—this wasn't any ordinary pack of strays.

Mo took a good deep breath, pushed himself off the wall, and walked. His determination was as strong as ever. Whatever the cost, Mo was going to see this thing through.

The night was endless, Mo walking in silence, following the pack of dogs whose faces he had yet to see. His footsteps light, calculated steps to go unnoticed.

Where the glow of the city lights had once been, shadows now lay thick and heavy where overhanging trees cast their branches.

Every few moments Mo glanced over his shoulder; half-expected someone might be back there: a concerned parent, or stray passerby, but the streets were empty. He was alone, hours past his curfew, obeying some strange instinct that would not let him stop. The pack moved with the same creepy determination, their heads low, bodies moving perfectly in sync as they trotted down the city highway.

Mo kept his distance, careful to keep himself out of sight but ensuring he didn't lose them. But when they hit the edge of the highway, his heart sank.

The dogs were veering off the road, slipping through a narrow trail that led deep into the dense forest. Mo stopped where he was, staring at the unlit path ahead. But city streets, as dark as they were, had brought at least some semblance of familiarity and safety with them. The forest was different, dark, sprawling, with unknown dangers.

His rational mind screamed at him to turn back. There was no light, no clear path to follow. If he went any further, he risked getting lost or worse, stranded in the wild. But something deeper, something primal, urged him on.

"This is insane," Mo whispered to himself, clutching the strap of his bag as he hesitated at the edge of the forest. "I should go home. This is... this is ridiculous."

And yet, his feet moved forward.

The trail was uneven, littered with rocks and fallen branches that threatened to trip him at every step. The canopy above blocked out even the faintest glimmers of moonlight, leaving him to navigate by sound and instinct alone. He kept the pack in his sights, their forms blending into the shadows as they pressed deeper into the forest.

He began to walk farther into nowhere, losing a sense of time in doing so. Sounds crept across the forest; sometimes they rustled, the noise of chirping nocturnal

insects pierced through, or the quiet snap of something he was crossing with his feet.

Yet still, Mo couldn't feel the horror he knew inside. On the contrary, there came this strange and elated feeling of standing amidst what felt like silence between worlds that engulfed him like an embrace.

After what seemed like an eternity, the land began to change. The path grew steeper, the trees thicker, their roots spreading across the ground like veins. Mo's breathing grew heavy, his legs aching from the climb, but he pushed on, driven by a mix of curiosity and something he couldn't quite name.

And then, through the gaps in the trees, he saw it.

A clearing opened up ahead, under the feeble light of stars above. In the centre was a monstrous cave, jagged mouths open like an animal preparing to swallow its prey. Mo froze, his heart pounding hard as he took in what he had before him.

It wasn't, however, the cave that made him feel dazed. It was the dogs.

The pack he had been following had merged with a much larger group, a sea of fur and movement that covered the clearing. Hundreds of dogs—two, maybe three

hundred—stood there, their bodies forming a vast, undulating mass.

They moved in near silence, their movements deliberate and organized. It was like they were a community, living in the shadows of the forest, hidden from the world.

Mo dropped to crouch behind a tree, his breath catching in his throat. He'd never seen anything like it. The dogs didn't seem to be fighting or scrounging; they were waiting, eyes fixed on the cave's mouth as if expecting something or someone.

The air seemed to grow heavier, charged with some sort of energy Mo couldn't describe. And then, without warning, the dogs went silent.

The sudden silence was deafening, the kind of quiet that presses on your ears and makes your skin crawl. Mo clutched the trunk of the tree, his heartbeat quickening as he leaned to peer through the dense trees to see what was going on.

At first, it was only a shadow, an outline that seemed to ripple and grow as it stepped into the faint light. Then the figure became clear—a dog, but unlike any dog Mo had ever seen.

It was three times as large as the others, easy, its fur dark and sleek with an amber glow in the starlight, and red-tinged eyes burning in intensity like two embers glowing bright, piercing through the darkness. The animal had a commanding, almost regal presence to it; as it moved forward, the other dogs' heads bowed in unison.

Mo caught his breath. He knew who it was. It was KRAM.

The dog took stock of the audience, one glance at a time, conveying power and strength through each muscle flex. And on that cue, the dogs had erupted into a howl. Howling began as one smooth sweep of harmony that vibrated, like some physical sense inside his chest, across the forest to echo out into the unknown.

And just as quickly as it had begun, the howling stopped. The clearing fell silent once more, and KRAM raised his head, his gaze fixed on the sea of dogs before him. When he spoke, his voice wasn't a growl or a bark but something deeper, resonant—a language Mo couldn't identify but somehow understood.

Brothers, KRAM began, his voice a low rumble that carried through the clearing, "the time has come to regain what was ours."

Mo's eyes went wide. He understood every word.

"For centuries, we have lived in the shadows, exiled to this forest, forgotten by those we once trusted. The sanctity of the agreement has been broken. Mankind has deceived us, abandoned us, and left us to die.

In those few sentences, KRAM's sorrow intermingled with anger that cut through the air in the syllables. His words rose as he said them to a crescendo:

"3000 years, that's the amount of time I was there to witness how these people betrayed us," continued KRAM. "Their home became their kingdom in such a way that they put us aside like rubbish; but not anymore, the time has come to get all that is ours."

A murmur went through the crowd, a low, guttural sound carrying danger in it.

"In two days," declared KRAM, his voice thunderous, "at midnight, we will strike. The fallacious city of Matsya will fall, and our kingdom will be restored. We will take back our home, our Shvanasthaan!

The clearing broke out into a deafening chorus of howls. Dogs started chanting the name of KRAM in unison, as their voices rose and fell in perfect harmony.

Mo's legs buckled underneath him and he fell to the ground; his back pressed against the uneven bark of the tree. Thoughts swirled inside of his head, trying to

assimilate everything he'd been seeing. The map, the stories, the dog, everything, made sense in ways he'd never imagined before—like pieces falling into a huge puzzle. It all snapped in on itself with an awful, perfect clarity.

But even as the pieces came together, new questions arose: how could he make sense of KRAM's words, what was his role in the unfolding drama, and, most importantly, what was he to do to stop it?

Mo sat under the tree, his body shuddering as the weight of it all settled on his shoulders. He was no longer a spectator. He was part of this, whether he liked it or not.

Mo sat beneath the towering pine, his heart pounding in his chest as he felt KRAM's words crash down on him. Electrified air seemed to swirl around him; the world charged with an intensity he couldn't relieve, his mind racing as question after question overwhelmed him.

How did humanity betray the dogs? What had they done to deserve such hate? Mo thought about the stories his grandmother had told him, the maps he had seen in the library, and the strange name that lingered in his mind—*Shvanasthaan.* Was it all true? Could Matsya really have once belonged to the dogs?

And then there was KRAM, the giant dog who came out of the cave with an air of power that demanded

surrender. He spoke in an authoritative voice, his words weighty with pain and anger. What did he mean when he said he had seen everything for 3000 years? How do dogs live for that long?

Mo's mind reeled, the enormity of it all settling in. If KRAM's words were true, then mankind had committed an unforgivable betrayal, breaking a sacred agreement and leaving the dogs to their fate.

The thought made Mo's chest tighten with sadness. He couldn't help but wonder—was humanity truly capable of such cruelty? And if they were, did that make him complicit simply by being human?

But even as sadness crowded him, another question loomed larger. How was he going to fight back? 200 or 300 dogs against an entire city armed with all the modern weapons? It was madness, a battle they couldn't possibly win. But yet, there was something in KRAM's voice, a conviction that made Mo shiver.

As he wrestled with these thoughts, something happened that froze him into place.

"I have been waiting for you."

The voice was deep and resonant, and it came from the clearing. Mo's head snapped up, and his breath caught in his throat. He couldn't have heard that right—could he?

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he turned his gaze toward the cave.

Kram stood stately, his massive form illuminated by the faint light of the stars. His fiery amber eyes were full of ancient wisdom and untold sorrow, fixedly gazing at Mo.

The air around him changed, thickening second by second. A low growl began to swirl through the dogs, growing louder until it was deafening. All 200 to 300 in the clearing were staring at him now. Their eyes glinted in the dark, their snarls baring teeth sharp as knives, their bodies tensed as if springing to attack.

Mo's blood ran cold.

"This can't be happening," he whispered to himself, his voice trembling.

But it was.

KRAM, however, remained silent, his gaze unflinching. The other dogs, though, growled louder, their ferocity unlike anything Mo had ever encountered. The sound reverberated through the forest, echoing off the trees and filling the night with an almost unbearable tension.

Mo's instincts were screaming at him to get away but his legs felt heavier than lead. He gazed at KRAM trying to

make sense of what was happening. "What does he mean? Waiting for me? Why me?"

The growls grew menacing, the dogs inching closer, their movements slow and deliberate. The clearing felt a trap, and Mo realized with a sinking heart that he was the prey. "I have to get out of here," he muttered, barely audible over the cacophony.

Then, without warning, KRAM raised his massive head and let out a single, sharp bark. The sound was deafening, cutting through the air like a blade. At once, the growls ceased, the silence even more unnerving than the noise.

KRAM tilted his head slightly, his piercing eyes never leaving Mo. Then, with a subtle flick of his ear, he gave a signal.

Two dogs, lean and muscular with glinting fangs and fiery eyes, broke away from the pack and lunged toward Mo. Adrenaline surged through him. Without a second thought, Mo scrambled to his feet and bolted, his heart pounding so loudly it drowned out the sound of his own footsteps.

He ran, losing the forest in a blur of shadows and movement, as ragged gasps breathed from his body. Between the trees, ducking under the low-hanging

branches and leaping over the exposed roots, he darted away; only escaping from those dogs, howling fast as they chased a long, mattered to him.

Mo turned to look back over his shoulder. His gut dropped down through his stomach as he saw the two dogs closing in on him, their eyes shining with this hard predatory intensity, their bodies moving with that terrifying awkward grace.

"No, no, no" he breathed, shaking with his voice, pushing himself to run faster.

One of the dogs lunged, its teeth snapping inches from his leg. Mo veered sharply to the right, nearly losing his balance as he stumbled over a root. He caught himself just in time and kept running, his lungs burning with the effort.

He saw a tree trunk lying in front of him and reacted without thinking. Using all his last bit of energy, Mo sprang over the log and came crashing onto the other side, his body hitting the ground with a thud, but he did not pause. Rising to his feet, he started moving again, thinking the obstruction would halt the hounds.

It didn't.

They bounded over the tree easily without any trouble, their snarls growing louder. Mo's chest tightened

with fear but he didn't want to give up. He zigzagged across trees trying to confuse them, but the dogs stayed on his trail with tireless will.

He had almost been certain that he lost them. The growls were subsiding, and the forest seemed to grow quiet all around him. Mo slowed his pace, trying to catch his breath as his chest heaved.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, one of the dogs came bursting through the underbrush.

Before he could react, it lunged at him, its teeth snapping inches from his arm. Mo threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding its jaws, but the movement sent him crashing to the ground. He scrambled backwards, his hands clawing at the dirt as the second dog emerged from the shadows, its growl low and menacing.

Mo's vision began to blur. Panic made his head spin as he tried to push himself off of the ground, but his legs failed to support him. The last thing he remembered seeing before the blackness took him was the two dogs hovering over him, their eyes blazing with ember-like intensity in the darkness.

Then silence.



EPILOGUE

Having escaped the immediate presence of the Dog Lord, Moksh fled toward the distant lights of Matsya, his mind reeling from the pronouncements he had just overheard. The forest air, once seemingly filled with ancient secrets, now crackled with the undeniable reality of Kram's fury and the impending conflict. The weight of the forgotten agreement, pieced together from his grandmother's tales and the library's hidden map, now pressed down with crushing force. Matsya, the bustling city he knew, was built upon the very land Kram now vowed to reclaim as Shvanasthaan.

Each hurried step brought Moksh closer to the city, but further into a profound moral dilemma. He felt the

deep, inexplicable connection to dogs that had always been a part of him. He remembered the gentle eyes of the strays he sheltered and the unwavering pronouncements of Kram, a leader witnessing the erosion of a sacred trust over three millennia. Kram's words echoed in his mind: the humans of Matsya had forgotten the pact, neglecting and mistreating the descendants of those who had once shared their homes.

Yet, Matsya was his home, and the people within its walls were his kin. He pictured his parents, his friends, the unaware masses living their lives in ignorance of the ancient vows and the gathering storm. The city, for all its flaws and forgetfulness, was a vibrant tapestry of life, now facing an unforeseen and potentially devastating threat.

As the first hints of dawn painted the horizon, casting long shadows over his desperate flight, Moksh knew he stood at a precipice. The knowledge of the past, the weight of the present, and the terrifying vision of the future converged within him. He was a bridge between two worlds, a silent witness to a broken promise and the harbinger of a reckoning. The choice that lay before him was no longer about simple loyalty but about navigating the intricate threads of a history he was only just beginning to understand. The fate of both humans and dogs hung precariously in the balance, and Moksh, the dreamer with

a deep connection to the past, was now caught in the heart of their intertwined destinies...Finally.

MEANWHILE.....THREE THOUSAND YEARS in the abyss of the past, Vikra's forced stillness finally gave way. A long, sacred howl, a forgotten magic unleashed, tore through the fabric of the demon realm. And as its echoes faded, KRODHA, their Lord, AWAKENED.

DOGISTHAAN

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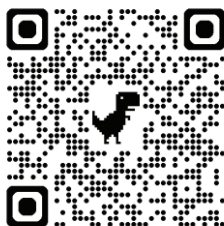
People for Animals (PFA), India

About: People for Animals (PFA) is India's oldest and largest non-governmental animal welfare organization. Founded by renowned animal rights activist and former Member of Parliament, Smt. Maneka Sanjay Gandhi, PFA has been dedicated to rescuing and caring for animals in need for over 35 years.

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Manali Strays

About: Manali Strays is an animal rescue charity operating in Himachal Pradesh that was founded in 2019 on World Rabies Day (28th September) to address the lack of veterinary facilities for stray animals. We are tasked with the responsibility of rescuing animals from not only the Kullu Valley but also Parvati and Spiti Valleys and Lahaul. Stray animals are at increased risk of being hit by vehicles, contracting infectious disease, suffering from malnutrition and associated diseases; therefore, our work involves providing medical care to animals that are sick or injured.

Our Mission: “Inspire harmony between animals and the humans who live with them. Thereby reducing human–animal conflict and creating a community that cares for its animals and ensures their continued health and wellbeing.”

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