



TEMPLE OF MYSTERIES

A Supernatural Mystery Thriller of Myth,
Science, and Obsession

Aaroh Dev



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Any resemblance to any person, living or deceased, or to actual events is purely coincidental and unintentional.

The views, thoughts, and emotions expressed by the characters belong solely to the fictional narrative and should not be interpreted as representations of real individuals.

Dedication

I dedicate this novel to my late brother,

The person I loved the most in my life.

His love, strength, and memories continue to guide me every single day.

Though he is no longer physically present, his presence lives forever in my heart.

My late mother who was the love of my life .

She always protected me and that care and emotion I will never be able to find again.

I also dedicate this work to my family—

My father, Bhaiya, Bhabhi, and my niece—

Who have loved me unconditionally and stood firmly by my side during the most difficult phases of my life.

Their support, patience, and faith in me gave me the strength to keep moving forward, even when life felt overwhelming.

This book is as much theirs as it is mine.

— Aaroh Dev

Introduction

On the outskirts of Bhandargarh stands an ancient temple.

For centuries, stories have surrounded its ruined walls—stories of serpents, forgotten rituals, a mysterious pond, and knowledge that belongs more to legend than history.

Most have dismissed them as superstition.

Until the deaths begin.

The victims leave behind evidence that makes little sense. No conventional weapon explains what happened. Science offers possibilities, but no certainty. And with every new discovery, fragments of an older story begin to surface.

A story connecting ancient mythology, unexplained phenomena, and secrets that perhaps should have remained buried.

As the mystery deepens, one question becomes increasingly difficult to ignore:

Are the legends merely stories passed down through generations—or do they preserve the remnants of something the modern world has forgotten?

Temple of Mysteries is a supernatural mystery thriller that moves through the uncertain territory between science and mythology, reason and belief, discovery and obsession.

Because sometimes the most dangerous mystery is not one without an answer.

It is one whose answer may be better left undiscovered.

About The Author

Aaroh Dev is an author whose writing explores human emotions, mystery, resilience, and the complexities of the human mind.

A keen observer of people and life, he draws inspiration from personal experiences, history, science, mythology, and the unanswered questions that often lie beyond conventional explanation. His stories move across genres while retaining a strong interest in human motivation, obsession, belief, and the choices that shape individual lives.

Apart from writing, he has deep interests in teaching, painting, research, and creative exploration. These varied interests frequently influence the worlds, ideas, and characters that appear in his fiction.

Aarohan Express, a novel of loss, resilience, and redemption, was his debut novel.

Temple of Mysteries is his second novel and marks his exploration of the supernatural mystery thriller genre.

Chapter 1

The temple stood in silence amid the ruins of crumbling buildings.

It had witnessed centuries of decay, yet time seemed unable to touch it—as though some unseen force had protected it through the ages.

No one truly knew when it had been built. Some believed it to be among the oldest temples ever constructed.

Countless myths surrounded it.

The most extraordinary spoke of an elixir of youth concealed somewhere within its sacred grounds.

Centuries of invasions and plunder had stripped the temple of priceless scriptures, manuscripts, and ancient knowledge. Later, during British rule, the small library adjoining it was destroyed.

Yet one tradition survived.

For generations, the priests had belonged to the same family.

The present pujari was believed to possess a vast collection of ancient texts, carefully preserved and hidden from public view.

After Independence, development gradually closed in around the temple. Roads, institutions, and concrete structures rose where open land had once stretched for miles.

What had once been a magnificent complex was reduced to a small precinct of weathered stones, broken walls, and scattered ruins.

Beside the temple had once stood a mysterious pond, famous for its healing powers.

Now, it had almost dried up.

Stories of the pond survived in whispers. Some claimed its waters had once been connected to the legendary River of Youth.

The construction of engineering colleges and a nearby deemed university further pushed the temple into obscurity.

Students passed the ruins every day without a second glance.

To most, it was simply another forgotten structure trapped between expanding institutions.

But the locals knew better.

On the nights of Purnima and Amavasya, strange sounds were said to emerge from within the temple precinct.

Low vibrations.

The scraping of stone.

At times, something resembling a distant chant rising from beneath the ground.

The locals claimed that the temple awakened on those nights.

Science had never offered an explanation.

Still, the mystery endured.

Those living nearby appeared to know far more than they were willing to reveal. Whenever outsiders asked too many questions, conversations ended abruptly.

Doors closed.

Eyes turned away.

Perhaps they feared what might happen if the temple's secrets became known to the world.

Researchers, treasure hunters, and foreigners would descend upon the region searching for answers.

And some secrets, the locals believed, were better left buried.

Meanwhile, the nearby university had advertised a vacancy for the post of Assistant Librarian.

Numerous applications reached the selection board.

Most were unremarkable.

One stunned everyone in the room.

The applicant's qualifications far exceeded the requirements of the position.

He was an engineer with a PhD from the United States—a man once regarded as an authority in his field.

Yet he had applied for a modest university library post.

The board members exchanged puzzled glances.

Why would a man of such distinction want this job?

Unless the job itself did not matter.

Unless he had come to the university for something else.

Something hidden inside the temple.

Chapter 2

Folklore surrounding the temple had always been abundant.

The massive structure, once believed to be indestructible, had gradually been reduced to rubble, fractured pillars, and scattered stones. Yet even in ruin, it retained an imposing presence—as though something beneath it had survived every invasion, every storm, and every attempt to erase its history.

Some traced the temple's origins to the time of King Parikshit and linked it to the legend of Takshak, the mighty serpent king.

According to one version of the story, thousands of sadhus had once gathered at this very place, seeking a way to prevent Takshak from fulfilling a deadly curse.

King Parikshit had incurred the wrath of a young sage.

One day, exhausted and thirsty after a hunt, the king approached a meditating sadhu and asked for water. When the holy man failed to respond, Parikshit's frustration turned to arrogance.

In anger, he lifted a dead snake with the tip of his bow and placed it around the sadhu's neck.

The insult did not go unanswered.

When the sage's young son learned what had happened, rage consumed him.

He pronounced a curse upon the king.

“O mighty king, you take pride in ruling this vast land. Let that pride be humbled by Takshak, lord of serpents.

“On the seventh day, he shall bite you.

“No palace, army, physician, or holy man shall be able to protect you.”

News of the curse spread throughout the kingdom.

To save himself, Parikshit ordered the construction of a tall, isolated palace, far from ordinary settlements and guarded from every direction.

Every entrance was watched.

Every visitor was searched.

No snake, insect, or unidentified object was permitted inside.

But the seventh day arrived.

And so did Takshak.

The serpent king entered the palace in a form no guard could recognise.

Before sunset, Parikshit was bitten.

The curse had been fulfilled.

The king died.

Some legends claimed that after his death, sadhus collected traces of Takshak’s venom and brought them to the temple. Others believed they had discovered a way to preserve it without diminishing its potency.

No evidence had ever been found.

Centuries of invasion and destruction erased almost every written record associated with the temple.

What remained was folklore.

And fear.

Now, surrounded by universities, roads, hostels, and modern buildings, the temple stood beneath the shadow of progress.

Its mysteries, however, had not disappeared.

They had merely learned to remain silent.

~

The university selection board had called the shortlisted candidates for interview.

Raj sat across from five panel members in a brightly lit conference room.

One of them adjusted his glasses and studied the application again.

“Mr. Raj, there is something we fail to understand.”

Raj remained still.

“You have an exceptional academic record. You graduated from one of the country’s most reputed engineering institutions and later completed your doctorate in the United States.”

He turned a page.

“Your research received international recognition. At one stage, you were regarded as an authority in your field.”

He paused.

“Then you disappeared.”

The other panel members looked towards Raj.

“For seven years.”

The room fell silent.

Raj offered no explanation.

Another panelist leaned forward.

“And now you have applied for the position of Assistant Librarian—a post bearing almost no relation to your qualifications or professional experience.”

He tapped the application.

“You are extraordinarily overqualified, Mr. Raj.”

Raj’s expression remained unchanged.

“A qualification in library science would ordinarily be expected for this position,” the panelist continued. “Under normal circumstances, your application might not even have reached the interview stage.”

A woman seated at the far end of the table opened another file.

“However, your application was accompanied by a recommendation from a highly influential authority. The university has therefore agreed to consider you.”

Raj remained motionless.

No nervousness.

No excitement.

No gratitude.

Only an unnerving calm.

The first panelist removed his glasses.

“Would you care to tell us why you want this job?”

Raj looked at him.

“I prefer quiet places.”

His voice was steady, almost mechanical.

The answer satisfied no one.

After a brief exchange among themselves, the chairman closed the file.

“You may join next week.”

Raj nodded.

“Thank you, sir. I need a few days to make arrangements before shifting here.”

“You will be allotted the staff quarter you requested,” the chairman said. “It is situated at the far end of the campus.”

He checked a document.

“The house is open on both sides. The road behind it leads directly towards the old temple ruins.”

He smiled faintly.

“Though hardly anyone goes there anymore.”

For the first time, something changed in Raj’s expression.

Only slightly.

“Perfect,” he said.

He rose and walked towards the door.

The thick stubble covering his face concealed much of his expression.

But not his eyes.

There was something disturbing in their stillness.

Something patient.

Something that had waited for years.

Raj had not returned for the job.

He had come for the temple.

Chapter 3

Night had fallen, bringing with it a darkness that felt unusually dense.

A week had passed since Raj had moved into the university staff quarter.

The job was tiring in ways he had not anticipated. For a man once accustomed to sophisticated technical systems and complex scientific research, the repetitive routine of cataloguing felt strangely exhausting.

Still, the transition had been smooth.

The library assistants were cooperative, the campus was quiet, and no one asked unnecessary questions.

During the day, Raj appeared to be settling into an ordinary life.

The nights were different.

After sunset, the ancient temple seemed to acquire a presence of its own.

That evening, after dinner, Raj decided to visit it.

He stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

The campus was completely dark.

There had been a power cut.

It was also Amavasya. With no moon in the sky, the road behind the staff quarters had almost disappeared into the darkness.

Raj switched on a small torch and began walking.

For the first few minutes, nothing moved.

Then the wind rose.

What began as a faint breeze quickly turned into violent gusts. Dry leaves lifted from the ground and spun around him. Branches scraped against one another with unsettling force.

Then came the cries.

Jackals.

Their howls pierced the silence from somewhere beyond the ruins.

The darkness, the violent wind, and the distant cries would have shaken most men.

Raj continued walking.

Then a voice emerged from the darkness.

“Kahaan ja rahe ho?” (Where are you going?)

Raj stopped.

A tall figure stood several feet ahead.

An old man.

His long white beard moved in the wind. His dark, loose clothes almost merged with the night.

Only his eyes remained clearly visible.

Sharp.

Piercing.

The old man stared directly at Raj.

“Jo tum dhoondh rahe ho, woh kuch samay ke liye tumhein shakti de sakta hai... lekin ant mein wahi tumhare vinaash ka kaaran banega.”

(What you seek may grant you power for a while... but in the end, it will become the cause of your destruction.)

Raj remained silent.

The old man stepped closer.

“Aur yaad rakhna... yeh mandir akela nahin hai.”

(And remember... this temple is not alone.)

Something changed in Raj's expression.

The old man lowered his voice.

“Iski pratidhwani ek doosri nagri mein bhi jeevit hai.”

(Its echo still survives in another city.)

Before Raj could question him, something moved above the temple.

A vast shadow crossed the sky.

Raj looked up.

A creature was circling overhead.

At first, it resembled a bird.

But its wings were far too large.

Its body appeared elongated and unfamiliar, unlike any species Raj recognised.

For a brief moment, it passed through the beam of his torch.

Ancient.

Predatory.

Almost prehistoric.

Most men would have recoiled in terror.

Raj did not.

Instead, a faint smile appeared on his face.

Not one of relief.

It was the smile of a man whose deepest suspicion had just been strengthened.

He looked towards the old man again.

The road was empty.

The figure had disappeared.

Raj turned towards the temple.

For several moments, he considered continuing.

Then he stepped back.

Slowly.

Silently.

He returned to his staff quarter and bolted the door.

No one knew what Raj truly hoped to find inside the temple.

Perhaps even Raj did not yet understand what awaited him.

He lay on the bed, but sleep refused to come.

The old man's words repeated themselves in his mind.

This temple is not alone.

Its echo still survives in another city.

Minutes turned into hours.

The wind continued to strike the windows while the cries of jackals gradually faded into the distance.

Eventually, exhaustion overcame him.

Raj fell asleep.

Morning arrived with an unnatural calm.

Under the pale daylight, the temple appeared peaceful.

Silent.

Still.

Almost harmless.

There was no sign of the old man.

No trace of the enormous creature.

Only broken stones, weathered pillars, and the remains of a forgotten structure.

Raj stood at the window and stared at it.

Then his gaze shifted towards the university library.

The old man had given him more than a warning.

He had given him a clue.

Raj got ready and left for work.

Chapter 4

Raj rarely spoke, even to the library assistants.

He remained immersed in his work, responding to students and faculty members with little warmth. Issuing books, receiving returns, and examining old records seemed to be the only things that interested him.

At times, his detachment appeared almost inhuman.

Three months had passed since his appointment.

By now, Raj had acquired a reputation across the campus.

Cold.

Short-tempered.

Unapproachable.

He avoided staff functions, celebrations, and departmental gatherings unless his presence was compulsory. He arrived on time, completed his duties, and returned to his quarter without unnecessary conversation.

Yet his apparent dedication to routine library work concealed another purpose.

Whenever he was alone, Raj examined the oldest accession registers, survey reports, and uncatalogued documents stored in the archives.

Most contained little more than administrative records, construction plans, and faded correspondence from the university's early years.

But Raj searched them carefully.

As though he knew that somewhere among those forgotten pages, the temple had left a trace.

At thirty-seven, age had not yet fully caught up with him. Behind the heavy stubble, his expressive eyes still carried faint remnants of the man he had once been.

Those traces appeared rarely.

That afternoon, the silence of the library was suddenly broken.

"Bro, today is the final submission day!"

"We still haven't solved the torque calculation for the rover."

Raj lifted his eyes from the brittle register lying open before him.

A group of engineering students sat in one corner of the library. Laptops were open, calculations covered the table, and frustration was visible on every face.

"Naina, we've been working on this for three days," one of them said. "The values still don't match."

"I know," Naina replied, rubbing her forehead. "This torque mismatch is ruining the simulation."

Raj watched them for a moment.

The library was almost empty.

Slowly, he rose from his chair.

The students noticed him approaching.

Uneasiness spread across the table.

Raj's reputation was well known.

To make matters worse, pizza boxes, burger wrappers, and half-empty soft-drink bottles lay scattered among their notebooks.

Eating inside the library was prohibited.

Raj stopped beside them.

The students immediately fell silent.

To their surprise, his voice was calm.

“What is the problem?”

Naina looked up nervously.

“Nothing serious, sir. We’re just having some trouble with our project.”

Raj glanced at the simulation running on the laptop.

“May I see it?”

Naina hesitated.

“Sir... it’s slightly complicated.”

One of the students looked down, embarrassed.

“Even some of our professors haven’t been able to identify the error,” she added.

She pointed towards the screen.

“It’s a rover designed for an international science exhibition.”

“For extraterrestrial exploration,” another student said.

For the briefest moment, a faint smile touched Raj’s lips.

“So torque is the problem?”

The confidence in his voice changed the atmosphere instantly.

Raj extended his hand.

“Let me see.”

Naina moved aside.

Raj pulled the laptop closer and studied the calculations.

His eyes moved rapidly across the specifications—the rover’s weight, wheel radius, motor efficiency, payload, gear ratio, and estimated terrain resistance.

His fingers moved across the keyboard.

Fast.

Precise.

For several minutes, no one spoke.

Raj altered the equations, entered new values, and restarted the simulation.

“You’re using the wrong gear ratio,” he said.

He pointed towards the screen.

“You calculated the required torque under ideal conditions. You haven’t properly accounted for the additional resistance from loose terrain and the distribution of the payload.”

He entered another value.

“For this wheel radius and total mass, the motor speed should stabilise at approximately three hundred and one revolutions per minute.”

The simulation restarted.

The rover moved across the virtual terrain without stalling.

Silence filled the room.

The students stared at the screen.

Then at Raj.

Naina leaned forward.

“It worked...”

She checked the calculations again.

“How did you—”

Raj gently pushed the laptop back towards her.

“Your basic design is good. You were only approaching the calculation from the wrong direction.”

For a brief second, warmth returned to his face.

Almost paternal.

Almost human.

Then it vanished.

“Continue with your project,” he said. “I hope it is selected for the exhibition.”

His eyes moved towards the food scattered across the table.

“And remove all this before someone notices.”

A few nervous smiles appeared.

Raj turned and walked back to his desk.

Soon, students began entering the library again.

But something had changed.

For the first time, the campus had seen a glimpse of the man Raj had once been.

A scientist.

An engineer.

Perhaps even a genius.

Naina continued staring at him from across the room.

Raj paid no attention.

He reopened the old register the students had interrupted him from reading.

A loose, yellowed sheet was lodged between two pages.

Raj carefully pulled it free.

It appeared to be part of a survey conducted during the final years of British rule.

Two nearly identical architectural drawings had been printed side by side.

The first was unmistakable.

The ruined temple behind his quarter.

The second had the same central chamber, the same arrangement of pillars, and what appeared to be a similar pond beside its eastern wall.

Beneath the drawings, a faded handwritten note remained partially legible:

Twin structures constructed upon a common alignment.

Primary site: Bhandargarh.

Secondary site: location withheld.

Raj's eyes narrowed.

At the bottom of the page, both structures carried the same unfamiliar symbol.

A serpent encircling a dark circle.

The old man's words returned to him.

This temple is not alone.

Raj folded the sheet carefully and placed it inside his notebook.

That afternoon, the students had discovered something about Raj.

Raj had discovered something far more important.

Chapter 5

Almost nothing was known about Raj's family.

In truth, very little was known about Raj himself.

His technical brilliance had earned him a certain respect among the students, especially after the rover incident. Those who had once dismissed him as an irritable librarian now regarded him with curiosity.

Some even admired him.

Yet Raj's cold and distant nature remained unchanged.

He rarely interacted with anyone unless his work required it. Even his conversations with the library staff were brief and formal.

Six months passed.

Life on campus settled into a predictable routine.

But the temple remained an enigma.

Stories surrounding it began spreading beyond Bhandargarh. Photographs of the ruins appeared on social media alongside accounts of strange sounds, unexplained power failures, and creatures supposedly seen on moonless nights.

Rumour became speculation.

Speculation became sensation.

Soon, international content creators began taking an interest.

Two independent bloggers from Belgium—Jason and Steven—arrived in Bhandargarh to document the mystery.

By the time they reached the town, dusk had fallen.

Streetlights illuminated busy roads. Markets remained crowded, vehicles moved continuously, and the modern buildings surrounding the university gave Bhandargarh the appearance of an ordinary town.

Modern.

Busy.

Safe.

Yet beyond the lights stood the temple—an unsettling remnant of another age.

Near midnight, Jason and Steven decided to visit it.

Although development had surrounded most of the region, a stretch of nearly one kilometre behind the temple remained strangely neglected.

Dense vegetation had reclaimed the land.

Bushes crowded the narrow path.

Tall grass brushed against their legs.

Beyond the beams of their torches lay only darkness.

They continued cautiously.

Then, without warning, the entire area went dark.

A power cut.

For the locals, such interruptions were routine.

For Jason and Steven, the sudden darkness felt far more disturbing.

Their torches became the only source of light.

The wind began to rise.

Bushes rustled beside the path.

Something moved through the grass.

Jason stopped and directed his torch towards the sound.

Nothing.

“Probably an animal,” Steven said.

Jason remained silent.

They reached the temple gate.

It opened with a long metallic creak.

Beyond it lay the ruins.

Broken pillars rose from the ground like fractured bones. Ancient stones were scattered across the courtyard, while deep cracks ran through the remaining walls.

Yet the main sanctum appeared largely intact.

Its heavy door remained closed.

Nearby, the nearly dried pond reflected the trembling beams of their torches.

Frogs croaked from the darkness.

According to local belief, no one except the hereditary priest could open the sanctum.

Only the head pujari possessed the key.

Jason looked around.

“Steven, I don’t think there’s anything here.”

Steven laughed.

“It’s all social-media nonsense.”

He pointed his camera towards the sanctum.

“Temple curses, monsters, secret powers—it’s ridiculous.”

Then the atmosphere changed.

The frogs fell silent.

The wind rose violently across the courtyard.

Jason raised an arm to shield his face.

Steven’s torch slipped from his hand.

It struck the stone floor and rolled away.

The beam swept across the broken walls.

For a fraction of a second, it illuminated something behind him.

Scaled.

Massive.

Impossible.

Steven froze.

“Oh God...”

A hiss erupted from the darkness.

Deep.

Rough.

Primal.

Something moved between the pillars.

Fast.

Far too fast.

“Steven...” Jason whispered.

Before Steven could turn, an enormous shape struck him.

Something coiled around his torso.

His body lifted from the ground.

Steven screamed.

“RUN, JASON!”

Jason ran.

He did not look back.

Branches struck his face and tore at his clothes as he forced his way through the overgrowth.

He kept running until the temple disappeared behind him.

By the time he reached the nearest police station, he could barely stand.

His clothes were torn.

His hands trembled uncontrollably.

It took several minutes before he could speak coherently.

When he finally described what had happened, the officers initially assumed he was either intoxicated or in severe shock.

Nevertheless, a police team was sent to the temple.

By the time they arrived, the electricity had returned.

The wind had stopped.

The frogs had begun croaking again.

Everything appeared normal.

Too normal.

The officers searched the temple grounds.

Steven was nowhere to be found.

Near the rear wall of the sanctum, they discovered several pale fragments scattered across the stones.

Bones.

Clean.

Almost unnaturally white.

There was no blood.

No clothing.

No body.

Nothing else.

The surrounding area was searched extensively, but no further trace of Steven was found.

The remains were sent for forensic examination.

The Belgian embassy was informed through official channels.

Within hours, news of the disappearance began spreading.

Over the next few days, reporters arrived in Bhandargarh. Television debates erupted. Experts offered conflicting explanations.

Some blamed wild animals.

Others called it an elaborate hoax.

Fear spread through the town.

When Raj heard the news, he showed no shock.

No sadness.

Only a faint, cold smile.

Fifteen days later, he submitted his resignation.

There was no explanation.

No farewell.

No visible emotion.

Given the unusual circumstances surrounding his appointment, the university processed his resignation without delay.

Meanwhile, media attention gradually shifted elsewhere. Official statements became less frequent, and the investigation appeared to lose momentum.

Steven's death remained unexplained.

Officially.

But the temple had not finished with them yet.

Chapter 6

Raj had left the university without offering any explanation.

His resignation was processed quickly, the staff quarter was vacated, and within days, almost every trace of his presence had disappeared from the campus.

Life moved on.

The temple, however, remained a mystery.

The death of the Belgian blogger had attracted attention from across the world. News channels, social-media investigators, paranormal researchers, and self-proclaimed experts offered endless theories.

Some blamed a wild animal.

Others suspected murder.

A few claimed the entire incident had been staged for publicity.

But none of the explanations accounted for the clean white bones found near the sanctum.

The local administration tightened security around the temple.

Metal barricades were erected at the main entrance. Warning boards appeared, public access was prohibited, and police patrols increased after sunset.

Even the hereditary pujari reduced his visits.

He entered only on selected days to clean the sanctum and perform essential rituals. His visits took place under administrative supervision, although no officer was permitted beyond the inner gate.

His family had guarded the temple's secrets for generations.

And they intended to continue doing so.

Among the countless stories surrounding the ruins, one began to surface repeatedly.

It spoke of an ancient presence.

Something that had not been born within the temple but had once been brought there.

Something preserved.

Something awakened only under specific conditions.

Some dismissed the story as folklore.

Others refused to discuss it.

Whenever reporters questioned older residents, doors closed and conversations ended abruptly.

No one knew where history ended and mythology began.

Six months passed.

Gradually, media attention faded.

The reporters left.

The barricades gathered dust.

Public curiosity shifted elsewhere.

Bhandargarh returned to normal.

Or so it appeared.

~

Far away from the university, an old family house was being demolished.

Its rooms had once echoed with conversation, laughter, and the footsteps of people who believed they would remain together forever.

Now heavy machinery tore through its ageing walls.

The roof had already collapsed. Wooden doors lay broken beneath piles of rubble, while clouds of dust rose whenever another section gave way.

A lone man stood at a distance, silently watching.

He carried a suitcase in one hand and a worn leather bag over his shoulder.

No emotion appeared on his face.

Then the final pillar collapsed.

Something changed in Raj's eyes.

For a moment, the coldness disappeared.

Pain surfaced.

Not fresh pain.

Something much older.

Then it was gone.

Raj adjusted the strap of his bag, turned away from the ruins, and began walking.

He did not look back.

An auto-rickshaw approached from the far end of the road.

Raj raised his hand.

"Station chaloge?" (Will you take me to the station?)

"Ji, saab." (Yes, sir.)

Raj placed his luggage inside and sat down.

Within minutes, the auto disappeared into traffic, leaving the demolished house behind.

At the railway station, an announcement echoed across the crowded platform.

“The Rajdhani Express bound for Mumbai will depart shortly.”

Raj checked his ticket and walked towards the First AC coach.

Passengers hurried around him, dragging suitcases and calling out to relatives. Vendors moved through the crowd while announcements merged with the metallic sounds of arriving trains.

Raj appeared unaffected by the chaos.

He entered the compartment, found his berth, and placed his suitcase beneath the seat.

Then he opened his leather bag.

Inside were a few clothes, several handwritten notes, the folded architectural survey showing the two temples, and a single hardcover book.

Raj removed it carefully.

Its title read:

Strange Reptilian Behaviour

He opened it to a marked page.

A detailed illustration described how certain reptiles could alter their metabolism, survive extreme environments, and remain dormant for long periods before becoming active again.

Raj studied the page.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

Outside, the guard raised the green flag.

The whistle sounded.

With a sudden jerk, the Rajdhani Express began moving.

The platform slowly receded as the train gathered speed.

Its destination was Mumbai.

But Raj's journey was taking him towards something far darker.

Chapter 7

The Rajdhani Express reached Mumbai early in the morning.

Raj stepped out of Mumbai Central station carrying his small suitcase and worn leather bag.

The platform was crowded.

Passengers rushed towards the exits, porters called out for customers, and taxi drivers waited beyond the station gates.

Raj moved silently through the chaos.

He hired a taxi and travelled to a modest hotel he had booked in advance.

After checking in, he remained inside his room for several hours.

He rested briefly.

Then he opened his leather bag.

Beside the book titled Strange Reptilian Behaviour lay several handwritten notes and an old map of the Western Ghats.

A small valley had been marked on it.

At its centre was a lake.

By late afternoon, Raj left the hotel carrying only his leather bag and hired another taxi.

The valley lay deep within the Western Ghats and was a popular tourist destination. On weekends, visitors came to picnic among the surrounding hills and enjoy the natural beauty of the region.

Small shops and food stalls lined parts of the roadside during the day.

But the lake itself remained largely untouched.

No one knew its true depth.

Attempts to measure it had produced contradictory results. Local stories claimed that instruments lowered into the water sometimes malfunctioned before reaching the bottom.

One theory suggested that the lake had been created by an ancient meteorite impact.

The older folk tales offered a darker explanation.

They spoke of a passage beneath the water.

A gateway connecting the surface world to the netherworld.

During the day, such stories entertained tourists.

After dark, few locals were willing to approach the lake.

The roadside stalls closed before nightfall, and the valley gradually emptied.

Raj's taxi continued along the highway.

Dusk had begun to engulf the hills.

At first, the weather appeared calm.

Then, without warning, it changed.

Dark clouds gathered above the mountains.

Lightning tore across the sky.

Thunder followed.

Within minutes, rain began falling with tremendous force.

The road ahead became difficult to see.

Water rushed down the slopes and spread across the highway. Headlights reflected against the rain-covered windshield, making visibility worse.

The driver leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel.

“Saab, mausam bahut kharab ho raha hai. Aage jaana theek nahin hoga.”

(Sir, the weather is getting very bad. It may not be safe to go further.)

Raj continued staring through the window.

“Bas, yahin aage rok do.”

(Just stop a little further ahead.)

The driver looked at him through the rear-view mirror.

“Par saab, aap itni baarish mein aage kaise jaayenge?”

(But sir, how will you go ahead in this rain?)

Raj did not answer.

The driver slowed the taxi.

“Aap kahen toh main ruk jaata hoon. Baarish kam ho jaaye, phir—”

(If you want, I can wait. Once the rain becomes lighter, then—)

“Nahin.”

(No.)

Raj took out a bundle of notes and handed it to him.

The driver stared at the money.

“Saab, itna—”

(Sir, this much—)

“Rakh lo.”

(Keep it.)

The taxi stopped beside the highway.

Raj opened the door.

A violent gust of wind sent rain into the vehicle.

The driver looked towards the darkness ahead.

“Saab, wahan aas-paas kuchh bhi nahin hai.”

(Sir, there is nothing around there.)

Raj stepped outside.

Within seconds, his clothes were drenched.

He lifted his leather bag over his shoulder and closed the door.

The driver lowered the window.

“Kam se kam torch toh le jaiye.”

(At least take a torch with you.)

Raj raised the bag slightly.

“Mere paas jo chahiye, sab hai.”

(I have everything I need.)

The taxi remained there for a few moments.

Then the driver turned around and disappeared into the rain.

Raj stood alone beside the highway.

The storm intensified.

Broken branches lay scattered along the roadside, while the narrow path leading towards the valley had become slick with mud.

Traffic was almost nonexistent.

Occasionally, the headlights of a distant vehicle appeared through the rain before vanishing again.

Raj began walking.

The path grew steeper.

Mud clung to his shoes as rainwater rushed around his feet. Each flash of lightning illuminated the mountains for a fraction of a second before darkness swallowed them again.

Most travellers would have turned back.

Raj continued climbing.

Rain.

Cold.

Violent wind.

None of it stopped him.

Nearly an hour later, he reached the highest point of the path.

The lake lay somewhere below, hidden beneath rain, mist, and darkness.

Raj stopped.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

Far below him, something had remained hidden for centuries.

And Raj had finally come to find it.

Chapter 8

The rain had become torrential.

Wind struck Raj from every direction, while rainwater streamed down his face and blurred his vision. Thunder rolled across the mountains.

It was almost as though nature itself was trying to stop him.

Raj continued.

From the upper ridge, a narrow trail descended towards the valley basin. The path was slippery and uneven, covered with loose stones and thick mud.

He lost his footing more than once but managed to regain his balance.

The beam of his torch was his only guide.

Trees shook violently on either side of the trail. Their branches twisted in the wind, illuminated for brief moments by flashes of lightning.

Then Raj stopped.

For the first time that night, fear entered his eyes.

Something stood on the path ahead.

A wolf.

But it was larger than any wolf Raj had ever seen.

Its wet fur clung to its muscular body. Its head remained lowered, while its pale eyes reflected the beam of Raj's torch.

Raj slowly moved one hand towards his leather bag.
The animal growled.
Then it charged.
Raj barely had time to react before the beast leapt at him.
The impact threw him backwards.
His torch fell into the mud.
The wolf's claws tore through his sleeve and cut deeply into his arm.
Raj struggled to push it away, but the animal pinned him against the ground.
It raised one enormous paw.
One strike could have crushed his skull.
Raj stared into its eyes.
For a moment, he believed his journey had ended.
Then a deafening sound erupted above the valley.
Louder than thunder.
Deeper.
Almost like the roar of some enormous living creature.
The wolf froze.
Its head snapped upwards.
The sound came again.
The animal released Raj immediately.
It backed away, whimpering, then disappeared into the bushes.
Raj remained motionless in the mud.
Rain poured over him.

He looked towards the sky.

Nothing was visible.

“How could a wolf be frightened by thunder?” he whispered.

Deep claw marks ran across his arm. Blood mixed with rainwater and flowed towards his wrist.

The wounds were painful, but not life-threatening.

Raj dragged himself beneath a rocky overhang and opened his leather bag.

He had carried a compact first-aid kit.

His hands trembled slightly as he cleaned the wounds, applied antiseptic, and wrapped a bandage tightly around his arm.

For several minutes, he rested against the cold stone.

He had nearly died.

But the attack had not weakened his resolve.

If anything, it had strengthened it.

Raj retrieved his torch and continued down the trail.

Nearly an hour later, the vegetation began to thin.

The valley opened before him.

And there it was.

The lake.

It lay at the centre of the basin, dark and strangely calm despite the storm raging around it.

Rain struck the surrounding rocks and vegetation, yet the surface of the lake showed surprisingly little disturbance.

Raj approached slowly.

The torchlight revealed black water stretching beyond the reach of its beam.

Ancient.

Silent.

Almost alive.

He placed his leather bag beneath a rocky ledge and opened it.

Inside were handwritten notes, the folded map, the book on reptilian behaviour, and a compact instrument protected by a waterproof covering.

Raj removed the device and moved towards the water.

“It must be somewhere here,” he whispered.

For the next half hour, he adjusted the instrument and compared its readings with markings on the old map.

At first, nothing unusual appeared.

Then the readings changed.

Raj moved towards the eastern edge of the lake.

The signal strengthened.

He stopped beside a cluster of black rocks partly concealed beneath mud and vegetation.

The instrument vibrated in his hand.

A faint smile appeared on Raj's face.

He had found what he had come searching for.

Something that had remained hidden for centuries.

Above him, thunder rolled again.

The wind intensified.

The lake remained strangely calm.

But Raj had already come too far to turn back.

Chapter 9

Time passed quietly in Bhandargarh.

The temple remained surrounded by barricades, rumours, and unanswered questions.

The creature described by Jason had never been found. Despite extensive searches, Steven's death remained unexplained.

The investigation had reached a dead end.

But the incident revived an older legend connected to the temple.

No one knew whether it was history, mythology, or merely a tale transformed through centuries of retelling.

It concerned a learned Brahmin who lived during the time of King Parikshit.



The Brahmin walked quickly through a dense forest.

King Parikshit had announced a magnificent reward for anyone capable of saving him from the curse that threatened his life.

It was the seventh day.

Before sunset, Takshak—the mighty serpent king—was destined to bite him.

The Brahmin carried a small vessel containing water consecrated through sacred mantras.

He believed it could neutralise even the deadliest poison.

Some versions of the legend claimed it could do something far greater.

Restore life itself.

As the Brahmin continued towards the palace, a huge man suddenly appeared on the path.

Tall.

Broad.

Unnaturally powerful.

The stranger looked at the vessel in his hand.

“Where are you going?”

“To the palace of King Parikshit.”

“Why?”

“To save him from Takshak.”

The stranger smiled.

“And you believe you possess that power?”

“Yes.”

The air around them changed.

The stranger’s human form began to disappear.

In its place emerged an enormous serpent.

Its massive coils wrapped around a nearby tree.

“I am Takshak.”

The Brahmin remained still.

Takshak sank his fangs into the tree.

Within moments, the leaves shrivelled.

The bark blackened.

The tree collapsed into ash.

Takshak looked towards him.

“This is the power of my venom.”

The Brahmin knelt beside the ashes.

He removed a small quantity of water from his vessel, whispered a series of mantras, and sprinkled it upon the ground.

For several moments, nothing happened.

Then a green shoot emerged from the ashes.

It grew rapidly.

A trunk formed.

Branches spread.

Leaves appeared.

Before them stood the tree once again.

Alive.

Takshak understood immediately.

If the Brahmin reached the palace, the curse might still fail.

The serpent king resumed his human form.

“Why undertake such a difficult journey merely for a reward?”

He opened a cloth bag filled with gold and precious stones.

“Return home. I will give you more than Parikshit ever could.”

The Brahmin stared at the treasure.

Duty struggled against temptation.

Temptation won.

“I accept.”

But before leaving, the Brahmin looked at the vessel in his hand.

“This water cannot simply be discarded.”

According to the legend, he buried the vessel deep beneath the earth, concealing it beneath soil and stones.

Then he returned home with Takshak’s treasure.

Takshak continued towards Parikshit.

Before the seventh day ended, the curse was fulfilled.

The king died.



What happened to the buried vessel depended entirely upon who told the story.

Some claimed it remained underground for generations.

Others said wandering sadhus eventually discovered it and carried it to a sacred temple.

Another version claimed that the consecrated water was poured into a pond beside that temple.

Over centuries, the story became linked to miraculous healing.

Then to the River of Youth.

And finally to an elixir capable of defeating age itself.

There was no evidence that any of it had happened.

No surviving document.

No proof that the vessel or its extraordinary water had ever existed.

There was only the temple.

The dried pond.

And the clean white bones discovered beside the sanctum.

After Steven’s death, the old legend no longer sounded entirely harmless.

Chapter 10

Gifted people were often difficult to understand.

But Raj had not always been unusual.

He had grown up surrounded by the affection of loving parents. His childhood was stable, secure, and remarkably ordinary.

Only his intelligence set him apart.

From an early age, Raj displayed an exceptional ability in mathematics and physics. Problems that took others hours to understand seemed almost instinctive to him.

A future in engineering appeared inevitable.

For his parents, Raj's brilliance was a source of immense pride.

Like many middle-class Indian families, they wanted their son to receive opportunities they themselves had never enjoyed.

Their dream was simple.

Raj would graduate from a reputed engineering institute, secure a position in a leading company, and build a successful life.

Their financial resources were limited, but they never allowed Raj to feel those limitations.

They reduced their own expenses, postponed personal needs, and invested whatever they could in his education.

Eventually, their sacrifices bore fruit.

Raj secured admission to one of the country's leading engineering institutes.

When he received the branch of his choice, it felt as though a long-held family dream had finally been fulfilled.

At college, Raj exceeded even the expectations placed upon him.

He consistently ranked among the best students in his class. His professors admired his intelligence, discipline, and ability to approach technical problems from unexpected directions.

Some believed he would become an exceptional engineer.

Others expected him to become a scientist of international standing.

Raj appeared destined for greatness.

Then tragedy entered his life.

His mother was diagnosed with cancer.

At first, the family remained hopeful.

Doctors were consulted.

Hospitals were visited.

Every available treatment was explored.

Raj tried to understand the disease in the only way he knew.

He read medical books.

Studied research papers.

Questioned doctors about cellular mutations, therapies, survival rates, and experimental treatments.

But intelligence could not save her.

Despite everything the family did, his mother's condition deteriorated.

Eventually, she died.

Something inside Raj changed.

The warmth that had once come naturally to him began to disappear.

His laughter became rare.

The excitement with which he had once discussed ideas and inventions faded into silence.

His father tried to persuade him to concentrate on his future.

Campus placements were approaching. Leading companies were offering excellent positions, and Raj was expected to receive one of the best offers in his batch.

Raj refused to participate.

His father pleaded with him.

His professors tried to reason with him.

Friends reminded him of his parents' sacrifices and the future still waiting for him.

Raj remained unmoved.

Students far less gifted than him accepted prestigious positions and impressive salaries.

Raj showed no envy.

No regret.

Success, recognition, and money seemed to have lost their meaning.

His decision shocked everyone who knew him.

No one understood why one of the brightest students in the institute would walk away from the opportunity for which he had worked for years.

Then, on the morning the placement interviews began, Raj was nowhere to be found.

His room was locked.

His phone was switched off.

No one on campus knew where he had gone.

The placement drive continued without him.

By evening, several students had secured their futures.

Raj had disappeared.

Chapter 11

Raj's disappearance had devastated his father.

He had once imagined watching his only son graduate, secure a prestigious position, and build the successful life for which the family had sacrificed so much.

Instead, Raj had vanished without a word.

Having already lost his wife, his father found the disappearance almost impossible to bear.

At first, he believed Raj simply needed time alone to deal with his grief.

But days became weeks.

Weeks became months.

No one knew where he had gone.

His father contacted friends, classmates, relatives, and professors. He travelled to the engineering institute and searched Raj's hostel room, hoping to find some clue.

There was nothing.

Eventually, he filed a missing-person report.

Photographs were circulated.

Railway stations and hospitals were checked.

Every possible avenue was explored.

All of it proved useless.

Raj had disappeared completely.

As the months passed, darker thoughts entered his father's mind.

He had already lost his wife.

Now he feared he might have lost his son as well.

Then, almost a year after Raj had vanished, a letter arrived.

His father recognised the handwriting immediately.

His hands trembled as he opened it.

Dad,

I know I have disappointed you. You wanted me to participate in the placement drive and secure my future.

After losing Mom, everything that once seemed important suddenly felt meaningless. I needed to leave.

I have now received admission to a doctoral programme in the United States. I will return home before leaving for America.

Please do not ask me where I spent the past year or what I was doing. I am not ready to speak about it.

I miss Mom.

And I miss you too.

Raj

For a man who had spent an entire year searching for his son, the letter brought the only news that mattered.

Raj was alive.

A few days later, he returned home.

His father stood at the doorway as Raj approached carrying a small bag.

Raj appeared thinner. His beard had grown, and there was a new stillness in his eyes.

For several moments, neither spoke.

Then his father stepped forward and embraced him.

“Beta, tu hi mera eklauta parivaar hai.”

(Son, you are the only family I have left.)

Raj closed his eyes.

“Dobara aise gayab mat hona. Shayad main seh nahin paaunga.”

(Don’t ever disappear like this again. I may not be able to bear it.)

For a moment, Raj’s expression softened.

“I am sorry, Dad.”

His father wanted to ask where he had been.

He wanted to know why Raj had cut himself off from everyone and how he had survived for almost a year without contacting anyone.

But he remembered the request in the letter.

He asked nothing.

Raj stayed home briefly and completed the remaining formalities connected with his engineering degree.

Soon afterwards, he left for the United States.

There, he entered a doctoral programme focused on advanced materials and electronic systems under extreme conditions, including the behaviour of materials at very low temperatures.

Once again, his brilliance became impossible to ignore.

His professors recognised the same extraordinary ability that had distinguished him in India. His research progressed rapidly, and

within a few years, he began contributing to work of considerable scientific importance.

To the outside world, Raj's life had returned to its expected path.

But one part of it remained untouched.

The missing year.

His father never learned where Raj had gone.

And Raj never spoke about it

Chapter 12

Marriage and the honeymoon that followed were often remembered as some of the most beautiful moments in a couple's life.

They represented more than the union of two individuals. They marked the beginning of a shared existence—two lives, two families, and two futures coming together.

The marriage of Priya and Dipankar had been one of the most celebrated events among their families and friends.

They had been married barely a month earlier and, to everyone who knew them, appeared perfectly suited to each other.

Dipankar worked in the Merchant Navy.

Priya was a software professional employed by a leading technology company.

Their careers were demanding, and they knew that time together would often be limited. Dipankar was due to report for duty aboard his ship within a few days, making their honeymoon even more precious.

They had chosen the Western Ghats.

Their plans included visiting ancient temples, trekking through the hills, exploring old forts, and spending a few peaceful days away from the noise of city life.

By the time they reached their resort, it was late at night.

The property stood amid thick trees overlooking the dark outlines of the Western Ghats. Its cottages were connected by narrow stone pathways, while the surrounding forest created an atmosphere of almost complete isolation.

Priya stepped onto the balcony.

The hills were barely visible in the darkness.

Only the distant sounds of insects and wind moving through the trees disturbed the silence.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

Dipankar stood beside her.

“And very quiet.”

Exhausted from the journey, they soon retired for the night.

The following morning, sunlight streamed through the curtains.

The hills outside appeared completely different in daylight—green, peaceful, and inviting.

Priya looked towards Dipankar.

“Deep, what would you like for breakfast?”

“Nothing heavy,” he replied. “Keep it simple.”

The excitement of marriage had not yet faded. Every conversation, photograph, and shared plan still carried the freshness of a new beginning.

They had planned a full day of sightseeing.

Their first destination was a local temple situated near the top of a mountain. From there, they intended to continue towards an old fort standing on a neighbouring hill.

The climb towards the temple was steep.

The narrow road curved repeatedly along the mountainside. Small shrines and faded direction boards appeared at intervals, while deep valleys opened beyond the protective railing.

Near the beginning of the final ascent, two vendors had set up temporary stalls selling tea, biscuits, and fried snacks.

Priya and Dipankar stopped there.

They drank tea, clicked photographs, and took several selfies with the mountains behind them.

“This one is perfect,” Priya said, examining a photograph on her phone.

Dipankar smiled.

“You said that about the last twenty photographs.”

“That’s because all twenty were perfect.”

They laughed and resumed walking.

The temple stood at the end of a long flight of stone steps.

It was small and weathered, its walls darkened by age and years of monsoon rain. A brass bell hung above the entrance, moving gently in the breeze.

Only a few devotees were present.

Priya folded her hands and entered.

Dipankar remained outside for a moment.

Something had caught his attention.

A man stood near the lower steps.

His face was partly concealed beneath a hood, and he seemed to be looking directly at them.

Dipankar narrowed his eyes.

Before he could get a clearer look, a group of pilgrims crossed the path.

When they passed, the man was gone.

“Deep?”

Priya was calling him from inside the temple.

Dipankar looked once more towards the steps.

No one was there.

He entered the shrine without mentioning what he had seen.

After offering their prayers, they began walking towards the old fort on the neighbouring hill.

The path narrowed as they moved away from the temple. Tall grass grew on either side, while dense trees blocked much of the sunlight.

The fort rose above them in the distance.

Its crumbling walls and watchtowers stood against the sky, making it a popular destination for trekkers and photographers.

Priya walked ahead, taking pictures.

Dipankar repeatedly glanced behind them.

“What happened?” she asked.

He lowered his voice.

“Priya, I have a feeling someone is following us.”

She turned and looked along the empty path.

“There’s nobody there.”

“I saw someone near the temple steps.”

“Maybe it was another tourist.”

“Possibly.”

But Dipankar did not sound convinced.

They continued climbing.

For several minutes, nothing unusual happened.

Then Dipankar heard footsteps behind them.

Slow.

Measured.

He stopped.

The footsteps stopped too.

Priya looked at him.

“What is it?”

Dipankar turned around quickly.

The path was empty.

Only the branches moved in the wind.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hear what?”

“Footsteps.”

Priya listened.

Nothing.

“You’re probably tired from the climb,” she said gently. “Come on. We’re almost there.”

Dipankar nodded.

But the uneasiness remained.

They continued towards the fort.

Whenever they walked, the footsteps seemed to return.

Whenever Dipankar stopped, they disappeared.

Someone—or something—was following them.

And it did not want to be seen.

Chapter 13

The ambulance raced along the highway.

Its flashing lights cut through the darkness while the siren echoed across the deserted road.

Inside, Dipankar sat beside Priya's stretcher.

She lay unconscious, her face unnaturally pale and her body completely still.

Dipankar held her hand tightly.

Tears filled his eyes as he repeatedly kissed her forehead.

"Nothing will happen to you, Priya," he whispered. "I'm here. Please open your eyes."

There was no response.

The paramedic continued monitoring her pulse, blood pressure, and oxygen saturation.

Her vital signs appeared stable.

Yet she remained unresponsive.

Nearly half an hour later, the ambulance reached the nearest hospital.

The moment it stopped outside the emergency department, attendants rushed forward with a stretcher.

Priya was taken inside immediately.

Dipankar followed until a nurse stopped him at the entrance to the examination area.

“Please wait outside, sir.”

“My wife—”

“The doctors are examining her. We’ll call you as soon as we know something.”

The doors closed.

Dipankar stood motionless in the corridor.

He had already informed both families, though he had barely managed to explain what had happened. His voice had broken repeatedly during the calls.

Inside, a junior doctor examined Priya.

There were no obvious external injuries apart from a few scratches on her arms.

No significant bleeding.

No visible sign of serious physical assault.

Yet she neither spoke nor moved her limbs.

After the initial examination, the doctor came outside.

“Mr. Dipankar?”

Dipankar immediately approached him.

“How is she?”

“Her vital parameters are stable,” the doctor replied. “But she is unresponsive, and at present there is very little movement in her arms or legs.”

Dipankar stared at him.

“Paralysis?”

“It’s too early to say. We first need to rule out a neurological problem or injury. The senior consultant will examine her, and we’ll arrange imaging and blood tests.”

The uncertainty made the situation even more frightening.

Dipankar sat outside the emergency room, repeatedly looking towards the closed doors.

Every minute felt endless.

Around half an hour later, the senior physician arrived.

He examined Priya’s pupils, reflexes, sensation, and muscular responses.

Her pulse, blood pressure, and breathing remained stable.

But the cause of her condition was still unclear.

After completing the examination, he came outside.

“At the moment, we cannot say exactly what has happened,” he told Dipankar. “There is no obvious head injury, but we need a brain scan and further investigations before reaching any conclusion.”

Dipankar nodded.

The doctor studied him carefully.

“Tell me exactly what happened before she collapsed.”

By then, one of Dipankar’s local friends had reached the hospital and stood beside him for support.

Dipankar took a deep breath.

“Everything was normal until tonight, sir.”

He wiped his eyes.

“We came here for our honeymoon. During the day, we visited a local temple and trekked towards an old fort. Priya was completely fine.”

“What happened after that?”

“We returned to the resort before evening. After dinner, Priya said she wanted to explore an old pathway behind the property. She had noticed it earlier and thought it led towards an abandoned house lower down the hill.”

“You didn’t go with her?”

“I was exhausted from the trek. I suggested we go together the next morning, but she said she would only be gone for ten or fifteen minutes.”

“How long was she away?”

“Almost an hour.”

Dipankar lowered his eyes.

“Then she came running back.”

The doctor leaned forward.

“In what condition?”

“Her clothes were covered in mud, and there were scratches on her arms. She looked terrified.”

“Was anyone following her?”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

“Was anything stolen?”

“No. Her phone, jewellery, and wallet were still with her.”

Dipankar paused.

“She’s also trained in martial arts. If someone had attacked her physically, she would have tried to defend herself.”

“Did she tell you what happened?”

“Not clearly. She kept looking back towards the pathway. She could barely breathe.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she had found an old house among the trees.”

“She went inside?”

“I think so. She said the door was partly open and that she had seen something.”

“What?”

Dipankar’s face tightened.

“She couldn’t explain it properly. She kept saying that something inside the house had been watching her.”

The doctor remained silent.

“What happened then?”

“She had already reached the resort when her legs suddenly gave way.”

Dipankar’s voice began to tremble.

“She collapsed in my arms. At first, she was still conscious, but she said she couldn’t feel her legs.”

“And her arms?”

“A few minutes later, they stopped responding too.”

“What did you do?”

“I called the resort staff and asked them to arrange an ambulance. While we were waiting, she became weaker.”

“Did she lose consciousness immediately?”

“No. She remained conscious for a few minutes.”

“Did she say anything else?”

Dipankar hesitated.

“One word.”

“What word?”

He looked towards the emergency-room doors.

“Serpent.”

The corridor fell silent.

The doctor exchanged a brief glance with the junior resident.

Then he looked back at Dipankar.

“She may have experienced something extremely traumatic. Severe fear or psychological trauma can sometimes produce profound physical symptoms, but we cannot consider that explanation until neurological and other medical causes have been excluded.”

Dipankar looked through the glass panel towards Priya.

She remained motionless on the hospital bed.

Far away, the pathway behind the resort lay deserted.

At the bottom of the slope, the abandoned house stood hidden among the trees.

One of its windows remained open.

Behind it, there was only darkness.

Chapter 14

Raj completed his doctorate with a thesis that immediately impressed his mentors.

His primary research concerned superconducting and advanced electronic materials under extremely low-temperature conditions. His ability to connect theoretical physics with practical engineering applications distinguished him from many researchers of his generation.

His work attracted considerable attention.

But alongside his official research, Raj had begun exploring something entirely different.

Poisons.

More specifically, he became fascinated by the behaviour of certain toxins and animal venoms under extreme conditions.

Could their chemical structures remain preserved for centuries?

Could very low temperatures suppress their activity without destroying them?

And if preserved long enough, could they become active again when returned to suitable conditions?

His mentors found the questions unusual and far removed from his principal field of research.

Some advised him to abandon the subject.

Raj listened.

But he did not stop.

After completing his doctorate, he joined a prestigious research organisation in the United States, where he worked on advanced materials and high-performance electronic systems.

His professional future appeared secure.

He had achieved almost everything his parents had once dreamed of for him—scientific recognition, financial stability, and the possibility of an exceptional career.

His father visited him once in the United States and stayed for several weeks.

He was proud of his son's achievements.

But he also saw how much Raj had changed.

The warmth that had once come naturally to him had faded.

Raj rarely smiled.

Material success appeared to mean little to him.

His father occasionally raised the subject of marriage.

Several proposals had already come from families in India, and Raj had met accomplished women through friends and colleagues.

He remained indifferent.

Romance did not interest him.

Marriage did not attract him.

His mind was fixed elsewhere.

For nearly two years, Raj worked at the research organisation and earned admiration for his scientific ability.

Privately, however, his fascination with venoms continued.

He studied toxin stability, preservation, suspended biological activity, and the possibility that certain compounds might survive for extraordinary periods under unusual environmental conditions.

Most scientists around him considered such questions speculative.

Raj considered them unfinished.

Then, without warning, he disappeared.

He left his position abruptly.

His apartment was almost empty.

His phone was disconnected.

Colleagues who tried to contact him received no response.

His father once again searched for him.

Friends were contacted.

Former professors were called.

Every possible lead was followed.

This time, no letter arrived.

One year passed.

Then another.

For nearly seven years, Raj remained absent from professional and family life.

No one knew where he had gone.

Then, at the age of thirty-seven, he reappeared in India.

And applied for the position of Assistant Librarian at the university in Bhandargarh.

No explanation was offered.

No account of the missing years.

Nothing.

His return to Bhandargarh, the months spent inside the university library, and his resignation after Steven's death were not random events.

Raj had returned with a purpose.

After leaving the university, he had watched an old family home being demolished.

Then he had boarded the Rajdhani Express for Mumbai.

From Mumbai, he travelled into the Western Ghats.

Through torrential rain and violent winds, he climbed towards the mysterious lake hidden within the valley.

He survived the attack on the mountain trail.

Then he found the location indicated by his readings.

But reaching the lake had only been the beginning.

Raj entered its freezing water.

The darkness beneath the surface was almost absolute.

His equipment behaved erratically.

Depth readings fluctuated.

Temperature measurements changed without explanation.

Yet Raj continued.

When he finally emerged from the lake, he was bruised, exhausted, and barely able to steady himself.

But there was satisfaction in his eyes.

He had found something.

High in the surrounding hills stood a broken cottage concealed by thick vegetation.

Its roof was partially damaged, and dampness covered the cracked walls. From outside, it appeared abandoned.

Inside, beneath the weak light of an old lamp, sat Raj.

His injured arm remained bandaged.

Wet clothes hung near a small fire, while scientific instruments, handwritten papers, and old maps covered a wooden table.

The architectural survey of the twin temples lay open among them.

Beside it rested the book titled Strange Reptilian Behaviour.

Raj studied the readings recorded near the lake.

The temple.

Takshak.

The Brahmin's water.

The twin structure.

The lake.

Ideas that had once belonged to separate worlds were beginning to converge in his mind.

Science and mythology.

Evidence and belief.

For Raj, the boundary between them was becoming increasingly thin.

After several minutes, he rose.

At the most secluded corner of the cottage stood an old wooden cupboard.

Raj pushed it aside.

Behind it was a narrow door.

He unlocked it and entered a concealed room.

Inside stood a sealed container surrounded by a thin layer of frost.

Something rested within it.

Something Raj had brought back from the depths of the lake.

He stepped closer.

The container trembled.

Only slightly.

But enough to make him smile.

Chapter 15

The mutilated body of Ramnath Ji, the head pujari, lay near the inner courtyard of the temple.

With his death, the last living guardian of its secrets appeared to be gone.

Amavasya was approaching.

According to an ancient family tradition, the temple precinct had to be opened and cleaned before the moonless night. The sanctum itself remained inaccessible to everyone except the hereditary head priest, who performed the required rituals alone.

Several residents living near the ruins had seen Ramnath Ji enter the temple shortly after sunset.

No one had seen him come out.

For generations, the temple's rituals, manuscripts, and hidden traditions had been guarded by the same priestly lineage.

Ramnath Ji was the last surviving member of that line.

He had never married and lived alone in a modest house near the temple grounds. Although public entry had been prohibited after Steven's death, the administration still permitted him to enter on selected religious days to clean the precinct and perform essential ceremonies.

No police officer was allowed to accompany him into the sanctum.

That evening, Ramnath Ji had entered carrying a small cloth bag, a brass lamp, and the ancient key that had remained in his family for generations.

By morning, he was dead.

His body had been brutally mutilated.

Deep wounds covered his torso and limbs. Several bones had been crushed, and parts of his clothing were torn.

Yet, as in Steven's case, there was surprisingly little blood at the scene.

The injuries suggested an attack by an enormous animal.

But the police found no paw prints.

No fur.

No trail leading into or away from the temple.

The barricades around the outer gate were undamaged.

There was no clear evidence that any large creature had entered the premises.

The killing sent shock waves through Bhandargarh.

Ramnath Ji had been among the most respected figures in the region. People knew him not only as the guardian of the temple but also as an exceptionally gifted astrologer.

Many believed his predictions were uncannily accurate.

Warnings he gave about approaching difficulties were remembered for years. His favourable predictions, too, were said to come true with remarkable precision.

Politicians, senior bureaucrats, businesspeople, and ordinary families regularly waited outside his small house for consultations.

But Ramnath Ji had always remained selective.

He examined no more than three horoscopes a day and received visitors only three days a week.

Even powerful people were required to wait.

His death therefore shook not only Bhandargarh but much of the surrounding region.

Senior police officials arrived at the temple.

Forensic teams examined the courtyard and adjoining areas. Search dogs were brought in, but they became unusually restless near the sanctum and refused to proceed further.

The state administration formed a special investigation team.

The two deaths were compared immediately.

Both victims had entered the temple at night.

Both had suffered extraordinary physical damage.

There had been very little blood.

And in neither case had investigators found convincing evidence of the creature supposedly responsible.

The similarities were impossible to ignore.

But there was one crucial difference.

Steven's remains had been reduced almost entirely to clean white bones.

Ramnath Ji's body had been left behind.

It was almost as though whoever—or whatever—had killed him wanted his death to be discovered.

During the search, an officer noticed that the door of the inner sanctum was slightly open.

The investigators stopped several feet away.

According to local residents, the sanctum door was never left open after a ritual.

The ancient key was missing.

So was the cloth bag Ramnath Ji had carried inside.

A senior officer stared towards the dark opening.

“Whoever killed him may not have come here only to murder him.”

He paused.

“They may have come to take something.”

The last guardian of the temple was dead.

The key had disappeared.

And for the first time in generations, the sanctum stood open without a priest to protect it.

Chapter 16

Raj walked slowly towards the concealed room at the far end of the cottage.

Outside, the weather had begun to change again.

Dark clouds gathered above the hills, swallowing the last traces of daylight. Thunder rolled across the valley, and rain began tapping against the damaged roof.

Inside the hidden chamber, the sealed container remained covered in frost.

Raj stood before it for several moments.

What he had recovered from the depths of the lake remained preserved inside.

His first objective had been accomplished.

Now came the next stage.

“The second phase begins,” he whispered. “The phase that will redefine everything we understand.”

He returned to the main room and spread his papers across the wooden table.

Old maps.

Scientific calculations.

Copies of temple records.

References to Takshak's venom.

The architectural survey of the twin temples.

And handwritten notes gathered during the missing years of his life.

Raj began arranging them in a precise sequence.

His eyes moved rapidly from one page to another.

Then he stopped.

The confidence disappeared from his face.

He checked the papers again.

Once.

Then a second time.

"No," he whispered. "That cannot be."

He opened his leather bag and emptied its contents onto the table.

Nothing.

He searched the cupboard, examined the pockets of his coat, and unfolded the maps again.

Something was missing.

His breathing grew heavier.

"But I had everything. Every calculation. Every component. How could I have overlooked it?"

Raj returned to one of the oldest documents.

A section near the bottom had been damaged, leaving several words illegible. Until now, he had considered the missing passage unimportant.

He read the surviving words again.

Then again.

Slowly, he understood.

The process described in the records required another element.
Without it, what he had recovered from the lake was incomplete.
Whatever Phase Two required, he did not yet possess all of it.
Raj gripped the edge of the table.
“I’ll have to find it.”
The thought disturbed him.
It would cost time.
Money.
And resources he could not afford to waste.
More importantly, it meant returning to questions he had believed were already answered.
For several minutes, he remained motionless.
Then he looked towards the concealed chamber.
“My brilliance was not wasted,” he said quietly. “It was the greatest gift I was ever given.”
His expression hardened.
“Without it, the second phase cannot proceed.”
Raj opened a thick notebook and wrote across an empty page in capital letters:
SCIENCE WILL FINALLY MERGE WITH MYTHOLOGY
He stared at the sentence.
Outside, the rain intensified.
But the excitement he had felt earlier was gone.
For the first time since reaching the valley, uncertainty had entered his mind.
Raj closed the notebook.

He now knew that something was missing.

The question was whether he could still find it.

At the hospital, Priya had undergone every investigation the doctors considered necessary.

Brain imaging revealed no obvious structural injury.

Her blood investigations showed nothing that could explain her condition.

There was no clear evidence of infection, significant poisoning, spinal injury, or other major physical trauma.

Yet Priya remained unresponsive.

She showed no voluntary movement in her arms or legs.

Dipankar sat outside the consultation room with members of both families. The exhaustion of the previous days had left his face pale and hollow.

Eventually, the senior doctor called him inside.

“Mr. Dipankar,” he began carefully, “we have received the results of Priya’s investigations.”

Dipankar searched his expression.

“What have you found?”

“So far, the tests have not revealed a physical abnormality that explains her present condition.”

Dipankar stared at him.

“You mean everything is normal?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite that way. What I mean is that we have not found a structural brain injury, spinal damage, or another obvious neurological cause for what we are seeing.”

“Then why isn’t she waking up? Why can’t she move?”

The doctor paused.

“At this stage, one possibility is that the extreme psychological trauma she experienced may be contributing to her condition. Severe trauma can sometimes affect consciousness and voluntary movement in profound ways.”

“So it’s psychological?”

“It is one possibility,” the doctor replied. “But I don’t want you to treat it as a final diagnosis. We will continue monitoring her and reassessing her condition.”

Dipankar’s voice trembled.

“How long will she remain like this?”

“That is impossible to predict with certainty.”

“A day?”

“Possibly.”

“A week?”

“It could be longer.”

“A month?”

The doctor remained silent for a moment.

“Recovery can vary considerably. She may begin responding soon, or it may take much more time.”

Dipankar felt the room closing around him.

“What are we supposed to do?”

“She needs continued medical supervision, physiotherapy to prevent complications from prolonged immobility, and further evaluation by specialists.”

Tears filled Dipankar’s eyes.

“She was completely normal that morning.”

“I understand.”

“No, doctor,” he said, struggling to control his voice. “We had just begun our life together.”

The doctor allowed him a moment before continuing.

“If your family wants to move her closer to home, we can consider it once she is medically stable. The transfer will need to be properly arranged, and her treatment must continue under specialist supervision.”

Outside the consultation room, both families waited anxiously.

After a long discussion, they decided that once Priya was stable enough to travel, she would be shifted to their hometown, where she could remain surrounded by family while continuing treatment.

The decision gave Dipankar little comfort.

He returned to Priya’s bedside and sat beside her.

Her eyes remained closed.

He placed his hand over hers.

“We’re going home, Priya,” he whispered. “You won’t face this alone.”

Her fingers remained still.

Then, beneath her closed eyelids, her eyes moved.

Only for a moment.

As though somewhere inside her mind, she was once again standing before the abandoned house.

And seeing whatever had been waiting inside.

Chapter 17

The murder of the head priest raised serious questions about the competence of the police.

They had failed to solve Steven's death.

Now another victim had been killed within the same temple precinct under equally mysterious circumstances.

Public anger was growing.

Television channels openly criticised the investigation. Opposition leaders accused the administration of suppressing facts, while local residents questioned how a heavily barricaded temple could become the scene of another unexplained death.

Under mounting pressure, the police turned their attention towards the small house where Ramnath Ji had lived.

The last hereditary head pujari had occupied it for almost fifty years.

The house stood near the temple grounds and consisted of only two rooms, a narrow kitchen, and a small open courtyard.

A police team entered early in the morning.

The first room was sparsely furnished.

A wooden cot stood against one wall. Beside it was a low table containing prayer beads, an oil lamp, astrology charts, and bundles of handwritten horoscopes.

The kitchen was equally simple.

Brass utensils were arranged carefully on a shelf. A clay stove occupied one corner, while jars of rice, lentils, and spices stood nearby.

Ramnath Ji had prepared his own meals and lived without servants.

Nothing in the visible part of the house suggested that he possessed wealth or anything worth killing for.

The second room was different.

Its wooden door had always remained locked.

According to neighbours, no visitor had ever been allowed inside. Even those who came regularly for astrological consultations were received only in the front room.

A large, unusually heavy lock hung from the door.

“There’s no key,” a constable said.

None of the smaller household keys found inside the house fitted the lock.

Because the room formed part of a hereditary religious property and might contain sacred objects or manuscripts, the officers were instructed not to force entry without written authorisation.

Permission arrived several hours later.

A locksmith was called.

He tried repeatedly but failed to open the lock.

“It’s an unusual mechanism, sir. Something inside may have jammed.”

The investigating officer finally ordered the door to be broken.

Two constables struck it with a heavy iron tool.

The old wood cracked.

A final blow tore the lock from its frame.

The door opened into darkness.

The room was small and almost completely sealed from outside. A narrow opening near the roof allowed only a thin line of daylight to enter.

Even during the day, the interior remained intensely dark.

This puzzled the officers.

The front portion of the house had windows, electrical wiring, and ample natural light.

The inner room appeared deliberately isolated.

A constable switched on his torch.

Dust moved through the beam.

The room contained very little.

A small metallic trunk stood against one wall.

Beside it lay a worn carpet and a low wooden stool, suggesting that Ramnath Ji had spent long periods sitting there.

The officers had expected manuscripts, valuables, or hidden religious objects.

Instead, their attention was drawn towards the walls.

Every surface had been painted.

The images depicted scenes from the legend of King Parikshit and Takshak.

One showed the king placing a dead serpent around the neck of the meditating sage.

Another portrayed the sage's son pronouncing the seven-day curse.

On the third wall, Takshak appeared as an enormous serpent coiled around a burning tree.

The final wall showed a Brahmin carrying a vessel while a heavily built stranger watched him from the forest.

The paintings varied in style but were remarkably detailed.

They appeared to have been created over many years.

“It looks as though Ramnath Ji painted these himself,” one officer said.

The investigating officer moved his torch across the final wall.

There, the Brahmin was shown burying the vessel beneath the ground.

Behind him stood two temples.

Almost identical.

One was surrounded by ruins.

The other stood near a small hill, its surroundings unfamiliar and difficult to identify.

The officer stepped closer.

“Photograph the entire wall.”

The forensic photographer began recording every image.

The metallic trunk was opened next.

Inside were old clothes, ritual objects, several blank sheets of handmade paper, and a few astrology books.

No ancient manuscripts.

No jewellery.

No documents explaining why anyone might have wanted Ramnath Ji dead.

And no trace of the cloth bag he had carried into the temple on the night of his murder.

The search had produced no obvious answer.

But the paintings raised a troubling question.

Why had Ramnath Ji painted two nearly identical temples?

And where was the second one?

The investigating officer studied the wall again.

“This wasn’t merely a prayer room,” he said.

“It was a record.”

The only place that might contain further answers was the temple itself.

Police had already examined the courtyard and the area where Ramnath Ji’s body had been found, but they had not yet conducted a complete forensic search of the inner sanctum.

Until now, religious authorities and local residents had strongly resisted such an intrusion.

Ramnath Ji’s death changed everything.

A formal request was prepared seeking permission to enter, document, and search every part of the sanctum.

For generations, it had been opened only by the hereditary pujari.

Now the last priest was dead.

The key was missing.

And the police were preparing to enter without him.

Chapter 18

Despite fierce opposition from local residents, the state authorities finally granted permission for a complete investigation of the temple.

Although it was rarely visited, generations of belief had surrounded the structure with an almost sacred inviolability.

It had endured centuries of invasion, destruction, and neglect.

Kingdoms had fallen.

Buildings around it had crumbled.

Yet the inner structure of the temple had survived.

For generations, only members of the hereditary priestly family had been permitted to enter the main precinct and the garbhagriha—the innermost sanctum.

Now the last head priest was dead.

Tradition could no longer prevent the investigation.

A complete search was scheduled for Monday morning.

Senior police officers, forensic experts, archaeological representatives, and district officials would enter under heavy security.

Until then, the temple was to remain sealed.

Two armed constables were posted outside throughout the night to prevent journalists, local residents, or unidentified intruders from entering.

It was Saturday.

The night before Amavasya.

There was almost no light in the sky.

A faint breeze moved through the ruins, carrying dust and dry leaves across the deserted courtyard. Beyond the barricades, dense bushes surrounded the rear wall of the temple.

The two constables sat near the entrance.

Ramesh looked into the darkness and shifted uneasily.

“Yaar, aaj itna andhera hai ki kuchh dikhai bhi nahin de raha.”

(It's so dark tonight that I can barely see anything.)

Sher Singh adjusted the rifle resting beside him.

“Amavasya ki raat hai. Andhera toh hoga hi.”

(It is the night of Amavasya. Of course it will be dark.)

Ramesh looked towards the temple.

“Pata nahin is puraane mandir ki rakhwali karke humein kya milega. Koi yahan aata bhi nahin.”

(I don't know what we achieve by guarding this old temple. Nobody even comes here.)

“Bhai, duty hai. Karni toh padegi.”

(Brother, it's our duty. We have to do it.)

For several minutes, neither spoke.

The temple stood before them in complete silence.

After Ramnath Ji's body had been recovered, the entrance to the inner precinct had been secured and sealed by the police.

No one was supposed to enter before Monday.

Ramesh stood.

“Main das minute mein aata hoon. Ek bidi pee loon.”

(I'll be back in ten minutes. Let me smoke a bidi.)

“Door mat jaana.”

(Don't go far.)

“Bas barricade ke paas hi hoon.”

(I'll stay near the barricade.)

Ramesh walked towards the side of the temple, where the outer wall concealed him from the main road.

Sher Singh remained near the entrance.

The breeze gradually strengthened.

Within moments, dry leaves were spinning through the courtyard. Branches struck against one another, while a loose sheet of metal from a nearby structure rattled violently.

Sher Singh stood.

“Ramesh?”

No answer.

Something moved in the bushes behind the temple.

Sher Singh directed his torch towards the sound.

The vegetation shook.

Then became still.

“Kaun hai wahan?”

(Who's there?)

Silence.

A short distance away, Ramesh had heard it too.

He threw his bidi onto the ground and switched on his torch.

“Kaun hai?”

(Who's there?)

Something shifted deeper inside the bushes.

Ramesh moved closer.

His torch revealed crushed grass and broken branches, as though something heavy had passed through them.

He raised his rifle.

“Bahar aao!”

(Come out!)

A shape moved briefly in the darkness.

Ramesh froze.

His torch slipped from his hand.

A scream tore through the night.

“Bachao!”

(Help!)

Sher Singh spun towards the sound.

“Ramesh!”

“Sher Singh! Mujhe bachao!”

(Sher Singh! Save me!)

The scream came from behind the temple.

Sher Singh seized his rifle and ran.

“Ramesh! Kahaan ho?”

(Ramesh! Where are you?)

Another scream echoed through the ruins.

Then it stopped.

Sher Singh forced his way through the narrow passage beside the outer wall. Thorny branches tore at his uniform as he pushed towards the bushes.

“Ramesh!”

No response.

His torch beam swept frantically across the ground.

Then stopped.

Something lay among the bushes.

At first, Sher Singh thought it was an animal carcass.

Then he moved closer.

There were no recognisable limbs.

No face.

No visible bones.

Only a shapeless, gelatinous mass spread across the mud and vegetation.

Sher Singh stared at it in horror.

“What is this...?”

His torch shifted slightly.

Something metallic was embedded within the mass.

A police badge.

Ramesh's badge.

The colour drained from Sher Singh's face.

He stepped backwards.

Then the mass seemed to shift.

Sher Singh tried to raise his rifle, but his hands were trembling uncontrollably.

He screamed.

His legs gave way.

Sher Singh collapsed and lost consciousness.

At that exact moment, the wind struck the temple with tremendous force.

The barricades shook.

The lamps outside went dark.

Then came a sharp metallic crack from somewhere inside the ruins.

The police seal across the entrance to the inner precinct tore apart.

Slowly, the heavy wooden door began to open.

No human hand touched it.

Beyond the doorway lay complete darkness.

Chapter 19

Repeated radio calls to the two constables guarding the temple went unanswered.

A patrol unit was immediately sent to investigate.

When the officers reached the temple, they found a scene unlike anything they had encountered before.

Sher Singh lay unconscious among the bushes, his rifle several feet away.

His breathing was shallow, but he was alive.

Beside him lay an enormous translucent mass.

It covered the mud and vegetation like a thick layer of jelly.

There was no sign of Ramesh.

“Where is the other constable?” the senior officer demanded.

No one knew.

The team searched the bushes and the narrow passage behind the temple.

They found Ramesh’s extinguished bidi.

His fallen torch.

Several broken branches.

But no footprints leading away.

No blood.

No body.

Then an officer noticed something embedded within the gelatinous substance.

A police badge.

Ramesh's badge.

Sher Singh was placed on a stretcher and rushed to the hospital.

The remaining officers turned towards the temple.

The entrance to the inner precinct stood open.

The official police seal had been torn apart, and part of the locking mechanism lay broken upon the stone floor.

Beyond it stretched a dark passage leading towards the garbhagriha.

The officers stopped.

For generations, no one except members of the hereditary priestly family had been permitted to enter the innermost chamber.

Now there was no priest.

And the way inside stood open.

The senior officer switched on his torch.

“We go together. No one touches anything unless instructed.”

The team entered cautiously.

Despite the dilapidated condition of the outer temple, the inner structure appeared astonishingly well preserved.

There were no major cracks in the walls.

No fallen stones.

Little visible damage from rain, moisture, or age.

The carvings along the pillars remained remarkably intact.

It seemed almost impossible that the chamber belonged to the same ruined structure surrounding it.

At the end of the passage stood the entrance to the garbhagriha.

Its heavy door was partially open.

The officers entered.

At the centre of the sanctum stood an extraordinary idol of Lord Vishnu reclining upon Sheshnag.

The serpent's many hoods rose protectively above the deity's head. Every ornament, scale, and fold of clothing had been carved with remarkable precision.

Beside Vishnu stood an idol of Goddess Lakshmi.

It appeared to be fashioned from gold.

The officers stared at it.

If it was indeed solid gold, its value would be enormous.

Yet despite centuries of invasion and plunder, it had survived untouched.

Near the idols stood an ancient brass lamp.

Its metal had darkened with age, but it remained remarkably well preserved.

Nothing inside the sanctum appeared to have been stolen for its material value.

The Lakshmi idol remained in place.

The lamp was untouched.

The ritual objects were still arranged around the chamber.

Whoever had entered the sanctum had not come for treasure.

A forensic photographer began documenting everything.
Then one of the officers directed his torch towards the walls.
“Sir, look at this.”
A series of ancient paintings covered the stone.
The curse of King Parikshit.
The king placing a dead serpent around the meditating sage’s neck.
The sage’s son pronouncing the seven-day curse.
Takshak appearing as an enormous serpent.
The Brahmin restoring the destroyed tree with consecrated water.
And finally, the vessel being buried beneath the earth.
The scenes closely resembled those found inside Ramnath Ji’s locked room.
But these paintings were much older.
Their colours had faded and parts of the surface had darkened, yet the images were more intricate and detailed.
The implication was obvious.
Ramnath Ji had not created the story depicted on his walls.
He had reproduced something already present inside the temple.
The final mural contained another detail.
Behind the Brahmin stood two almost identical temples.
A narrow line appeared to connect them beneath the ground.
Between the two structures was a dark circular symbol surrounded by seven serpent-like forms.
The investigating officer stepped closer.
“Photograph every inch of this wall.”

While examining the floor beneath the mural, another officer noticed fragments of old material trapped between two stones.

Using forceps, he carefully removed them.

They appeared to be torn pages from an ancient manuscript.

No page was complete.

Some fragments contained faded diagrams.

Others carried lines of writing in an unfamiliar script.

“It doesn’t look like Sanskrit,” one officer said.

“Not any script I recognise either,” another replied.

On one fragment was a familiar symbol.

A serpent encircling a dark circle.

The same symbol that had appeared on the old twin-temple survey.

The fragments were placed inside protective evidence covers.

A complete search of the garbhagriha revealed no intact manuscript.

There was also no trace of the missing temple key or the cloth bag Ramnath Ji had carried on the night of his death.

By then, forensic specialists had arrived.

Samples of the gelatinous mass were carefully collected and sealed for laboratory examination.

The manuscript fragments were taken into custody.

Experts in ancient scripts and regional languages would be consulted.

Until then, the meaning of the pages would remain unknown.

At the hospital, Sher Singh gradually regained consciousness.

A doctor permitted the investigating officer to speak to him briefly.

“What happened after Ramesh went behind the temple?”

Sher Singh's voice trembled.

"I heard him screaming."

"And then?"

"I ran towards the bushes."

"What did you see?"

Sher Singh swallowed.

"That... thing."

"The gelatinous substance?"

He nodded.

"Did you see Ramesh's body?"

"No."

"Did you see anything attack him?"

"No."

"What happened next?"

Sher Singh stared at the officer.

"It moved."

The officer leaned closer.

"How?"

"I don't know."

Sher Singh's breathing quickened.

"It felt as though it was coming towards me."

"Like an animal?"

Sher Singh shook his head.

"No."

He closed his eyes.

“Like it knew I was there.”

The doctor immediately intervened.

“That’s enough for now.”

The questioning ended.

Ramesh remained missing.

The substance recovered from the bushes offered no immediate explanation.

The manuscript fragments were written in a script no one present could understand.

But the investigators had discovered something important.

The garbhagriha had not merely been a place of worship.

For generations, it appeared to have protected something else.

Knowledge.

And someone had taken most of it before the police arrived.

And from somewhere deep within the temple came a sound like a long, heavy breath.

Chapter 20

Priya's condition had stabilised, but she remained unconscious.

Dipankar had shifted her to a hospital in their hometown, where she could remain close to both families and continue treatment under the supervision of neurologists and trauma specialists.

Her vital signs were stable.

She breathed without assistance.

Repeated examinations had revealed no structural injury to the brain or spinal cord and no obvious physical explanation for her continued unresponsiveness.

Yet she did not wake.

The doctors could offer no definite timeline.

She might regain consciousness within days.

Or weeks.

Perhaps even months.

No one could say with certainty.

Dipankar spent most of his time beside her bed.

Every morning, he spoke to her as though nothing had changed. He described the weather, read messages from friends, and reminded her of the plans they had made before their marriage.

Sometimes, he thought he noticed movement beneath her eyelids.

Once, he believed her fingers had tightened around his hand.

But whenever he called the doctor, the answer remained the same.

There was no clear evidence of meaningful improvement.

Priya appeared trapped somewhere beyond their reach.

And somewhere within that silence remained the memory of the abandoned house.

Meanwhile, the investigation into the murder of Ramnath Ji and the disappearance of Constable Ramesh continued.

Police called an experienced linguistic scholar to examine the fragments recovered from the temple's garbhagriha.

Professor Devendra Pathak had spent more than four decades studying ancient Indian scripts, inscriptions, tribal languages, and religious manuscripts. He had worked with archaeological departments, museums, and universities across the country.

But the torn pages left even him uncertain.

For several hours, he examined them beneath magnifying lenses and specialised lighting.

Some symbols bore a distant resemblance to early Brahmi forms.

Others appeared closer to ritual markings or pictorial symbols.

A few resembled serpents, circles, flames, trees, and human figures.

Yet the fragments followed no grammatical structure he could confidently identify.

The investigating officer waited impatiently.

Finally, Professor Pathak removed his glasses.

"I cannot identify this as one established language."

The officer leaned forward.

“What does that mean?”

“It may be a composite script. Several systems could have been combined deliberately.”

“Can you read any of it?”

“Not with certainty.”

Professor Pathak carefully arranged the fragments across the table.

“Some portions may represent words. Others could be symbols, coded instructions, or visual references rather than conventional sentences.”

“How old is it?”

The professor hesitated.

“It would be irresponsible to assign an exact age without proper material analysis.”

“Could it be extremely ancient?”

“Possibly. But we cannot date a script merely because we fail to understand it.”

He pointed towards one of the fragments.

“It may also have been deliberately modified or encoded by the priestly lineage to prevent outsiders from reading it.”

The officer looked towards the evidence covers.

“If the writing was so secret, did Ramnath Ji understand it?”

Professor Pathak studied the fragment containing the serpent encircling a dark circle.

“If his family preserved such material for generations, someone within that lineage may once have known how to interpret it.”

“But Ramnath Ji left no translation.”

“Perhaps not in words.”

The officer looked at him.

“What do you mean?”

Professor Pathak placed photographs of the murals beside the fragments.

“The paintings inside his locked room may not have been merely decorative.”

He pointed towards the images.

“The Brahmin. The vessel. The two temples. The repeated symbols.”

The officer understood.

“You think the paintings may have interpreted parts of the manuscript?”

“Possibly.”

“So they were a record?”

“A visual one, perhaps.”

The officer stared at the photographs.

“Was the legend of the Brahmin true?”

Professor Pathak gave a restrained smile.

“Legends sometimes preserve memories of older events. But whether this one represents history, mythology, symbolism, or a mixture of all three, I cannot tell you.”

The manuscript remained unreadable.

The priest who might have understood it was dead.

And most of the original material appeared to be missing.

Later that afternoon, the investigating officer received a call from the state forensic laboratory.

“Sir, we have completed the preliminary analysis of the substance recovered behind the temple.”

“What did you find?”

There was a pause.

“I think you should come to the laboratory.”

“Tell me over the phone.”

“I would prefer to show you the findings directly. They are extremely unusual.”

Within an hour, the officer and two members of the investigation team reached the laboratory.

They were taken into a secured examination room.

Several sealed containers rested on a stainless-steel table. Inside them were samples of the translucent mass recovered from the bushes.

A forensic specialist stood beside a monitor displaying microscopic images and preliminary biochemical findings.

“Sir,” he began, “the substance is not an unidentified organism.”

The officer frowned.

“Then what is it?”

The specialist looked towards the samples.

“Human tissue.”

For several seconds, no one spoke.

“Human tissue?” the officer repeated.

“Yes.”

“Whose?”

“We compared the DNA profile with reference samples provided by Constable Ramesh’s family.”

The specialist paused.

“The results are consistent with the tissue belonging to Ramesh.”

The officer stared at him.

“That entire mass?”

“What remained of him.”

The words seemed impossible.

The specialist changed the image on the monitor.

“His body appears to have undergone an extraordinary degree of tissue breakdown. The hard structures—particularly the bones and teeth—are largely absent.”

“How could that happen?”

“Under ordinary biological conditions, not in this way and certainly not within such a short period.”

“Acid?”

“We found no evidence suggesting exposure to a common industrial corrosive capable of producing this pattern.”

The officer remembered the bushes.

“There was no major damage to the surrounding vegetation.”

“Exactly.”

“Could an animal have done this?”

“Not any known animal in a way that would explain the findings.”

“Venom?”

The specialist hesitated.

“Certain venoms contain enzymes capable of producing severe tissue damage. Some biological agents can also break down tissue rapidly.”

“But?”

“But nothing we have identified so far explains the near-total loss of hard tissue while leaving behind this kind of gelatinous material.”

The officer looked towards the evidence container.

“Was Ramesh alive when this happened?”

“We cannot determine that yet.”

“Did you find any toxin?”

“We detected unusual proteins and enzymatic activity, but the results are preliminary. We have not matched them confidently to a known source.”

The room fell silent.

The specialist changed the image again.

Tiny dark particles were visible within the tissue.

“There is something else.”

“What are those?”

“Minute particles distributed throughout the sample. Preliminary analysis suggests that at least some of them contain mineral material.”

“From the temple?”

“We don’t know yet.”

The officer stared at the screen.

Ancient murals.

A coded manuscript.

A dead priest.

A constable whose body had been transformed into something forensic science could barely explain.

Every answer seemed to produce another question.

The manuscript could not be read.

Ramesh's death had no known mechanism.

Ramnath Ji's killer remained unidentified.

And the temple continued to conceal more than it revealed.

Something lay at the centre of the case.

Something ancient.

Something deliberately protected.

The investigators had uncovered fragments of the truth.

But the complete picture remained hidden.

Chapter 21

The cottage was filled with relics.

Old manuscripts.

Fragments of inscriptions.

Photographs of temple walls.

Maps covered with unfamiliar markings.

Copies of archaeological records lay scattered across the wooden table beside Raj's scientific notes and calculations.

He had been studying them since morning.

Now evening had arrived.

Hours had passed without his noticing.

Outside, the fading sunlight disappeared behind the hills, but Raj remained seated beneath the weak yellow glow of the lamp.

He picked up another brittle sheet and examined it carefully.

Nothing.

He compared it with his handwritten notes.

Still nothing.

"Since morning..." he muttered. "I've been going through all of this since morning, and it has led nowhere."

He searched another bundle.

Then another.

His frustration grew.

Suddenly, Raj stood and swept several papers from the table.

“No!”

His voice echoed through the cottage.

“I did not spend all those years studying this for nothing.”

He struck the table with his fist.

“Everything happened exactly as the records suggested.”

The temple.

The lake.

What he had recovered from beneath its waters.

Every stage had corresponded with fragments of information gathered over years.

Until now.

“The first phase worked.”

Raj looked towards the concealed chamber.

“But the second phase...”

His voice faded.

“A dead end.”

He dropped heavily into the chair and lit a cigarette.

Smoke slowly filled the room.

Raj leaned back and closed his eyes.

For the first time in years, his thoughts returned to the life he might once have lived.

There had been a time when his future seemed almost certain.

He had been young.

Brilliant.

Ambitious.

A successful engineering career appeared inevitable.

Prestigious companies would have competed to recruit him. Money, recognition, and professional status—everything his parents had dreamed of seemed within reach.

Then his mother died.

Cancer had destroyed more than her body.

Something inside Raj had changed with it.

After her death, the ambitions that had once driven him began to feel strangely insignificant.

Salary packages.

Corporate success.

Social recognition.

None of them could answer the question that had begun consuming him.

Why did the human body surrender so completely to death?

His fascination with Bhandargarh had actually begun earlier.

During his engineering years, an academic internship had brought him to the region for a short period.

It was there that he first heard casual references to an ancient ruined temple.

A temple associated with impossible stories.

Healing waters.

Serpents.

Unusual powers.

And, in some versions of the legend, something resembling freedom from ageing itself.

At first, Raj dismissed the stories.

He was an engineering student.

A man of mathematics, physics, and measurable reality.

Myths belonged to another world.

Yet the temple remained somewhere in his mind.

Then his mother died.

And the old stories changed.

What had once seemed absurd began to provoke questions.

What if the legends contained something real?

Not immortality in the magical sense.

Not divine intervention.

But forgotten knowledge.

A biological mechanism.

A chemical process.

Something ancient people had observed but could explain only through mythology.

The possibility refused to leave him.

While his classmates prepared for campus placements, practised interviews, and compared salary packages, Raj increasingly withdrew into his own thoughts.

His friends believed grief had changed him.

His professors assumed he had temporarily lost interest in his career.

Neither explanation was complete.
Raj had become obsessed with a possibility.
Then came the placement drive.
Everyone expected him to sit for the interviews.
Accept one of the finest offers on campus.
Begin the successful life for which he had been prepared.
Raj chose differently.
He walked away.
He did not participate in the placement process.
And then he disappeared.
For almost a year, his father, professors, and friends had no idea where he was.
But Raj had not vanished without purpose.
During that missing year, he followed the first trail that had begun during his internship.
A trail leading back towards Bhandargarh.
Towards forgotten records.
Towards stories everyone else had dismissed as superstition.
And somewhere along that journey, curiosity became something stronger.
Belief.

~

Raj opened his eyes.
The cigarette had almost burnt down between his fingers.
He looked at the papers scattered across the floor.

Years had passed since that young engineering student first heard about the temple.

Since then, Raj had gone further than he could ever have imagined.

The temple.

The lake.

The substance hidden beneath its waters.

He had reached them all.

Yet the final process remained incomplete.

Raj crushed the cigarette into the ashtray.

“No,” he whispered.

“I did not sacrifice everything to stop here.”

He bent down and began gathering the papers.

Whatever was missing existed somewhere.

And he would find it.

Chapter 22

It had not been one event that changed Raj.

It had been a combination of many.

His extraordinary intellect.

His curiosity.

The death of his mother.

And his growing fascination with questions that science had not yet answered.

The first seed had been planted much earlier, during his engineering internship.

Raj had never entered the ancient temple then. In fact, he had barely paid attention when he first heard about it.

The stories began as casual conversations.

A few local students spoke about an old temple standing amid the expanding buildings of Bhandargarh.

Someone mentioned King Parikshit.

Another spoke of Takshak, the mighty serpent king.

There were whispers of healing water, strange rituals, and a hereditary priestly family believed to possess knowledge unavailable to outsiders.

Raj listened.

Then dismissed it.

He was an engineering student with an exceptional academic record. His future lay in mathematics, physics, technology, and research—not in legends.

At the time, his attention remained firmly fixed on his career.

The campus placement drive was approaching, and Raj had every reason to prepare for it.

His father spoke to him often.

“Beta, tumne itne saalon tak bahut mehnat ki hai. Ab tumhare bhavishya ki shuruaat hone wali hai.”

(Son, you have worked very hard for all these years. Now your future is about to begin.)

Raj understood.

His parents had sacrificed too much for his education.

Although his mother’s absence could never be filled, life still had to continue.

At least, that was what he tried to tell himself.

But after her death, something inside him had changed.

Questions he had once ignored became increasingly difficult to silence.

Why did the human body deteriorate?

Why did disease destroy one person while sparing another?

Was death an absolute biological certainty—or merely a limitation science had not yet learned to overcome?

And somewhere within those questions, the forgotten stories of Bhandargarh returned.

King Parikshit.

Takshak.

The Brahmin.

The mysterious water.

Was it merely mythology?

Or had an ancient observation been transformed into legend because people of another age lacked the language of modern science?

For some time, Raj resisted the thought.

He tried to concentrate on his studies.

But curiosity had already taken hold.

After withdrawing from the placement process and disappearing from campus, Raj returned secretly to Bhandargarh.

No one—not his professors, his friends, or even his father—knew where he had gone.

At first, he tried to approach the temple directly.

He failed.

The hereditary priest refused him entry.

Raj then began visiting the modest house of Ramnath Ji.

During his first few visits, the old priest tolerated his questions patiently.

“Ramnath Ji, kya sach mein mandir ke neeche kuchh chhupa hua hai?”

(Ramnath Ji, is there really something hidden beneath the temple?)

The priest smiled.

“Jo bhi hai, usse tumhara koi lena-dena nahin.”

(Whatever there is, it does not concern you.)

“Takshak ki kahani ka kya?”

(What about the story of Takshak?)

“Ek kahani hai.”

(It is a story.)

“Aur woh Brahmin jo uske zehar ka asar khatam kar sakta tha?”

(And the Brahmin who could neutralise the effect of his venom?)

“Woh bhi ek kahani hai.”

(That too is a story.)

Raj refused to stop.

He returned again.

And again.

Eventually, even Ramnath Ji lost patience.

“Beta, yeh sab cheezen kisse-kahaniyon mein hi achchi lagti hain.”

(Son, these things are best left to tales and legends.)

Raj remained standing at the doorway.

“Lekin agar kahani ke peeche kuchh sach ho toh?”

(But what if there is some truth behind the story?)

For the briefest moment, Ramnath Ji’s expression changed.

Then he shook his head.

“Inka sachchai se koi lena-dena nahin hai.”

(They have nothing to do with reality.)

He pointed towards the road.

“Tumhari poori zindagi tumhare saamne padi hai. Padhai par dhyan do. In cheezon ke peeche apna bhavishya barbaad mat karo.”

(Your whole life lies ahead of you. Concentrate on your studies. Do not ruin your future chasing these things.)

The door closed.

To Ramnath Ji, Raj was merely an excessively curious young student.

Bright.

Grieving.

And temporarily fascinated by an old legend.

But the priest's refusal had the opposite effect.

It intensified Raj's curiosity.

If there was truly nothing to hide, why did every question end in silence?

Why was access to the temple so carefully controlled?

Why had the same priestly lineage guarded it for generations?

Raj changed his approach.

If the temple would not surrender its secrets directly, he would search elsewhere.

Bhandargarh had two very old libraries.

Both predated the modern university and contained neglected collections of regional histories, handwritten records, colonial documents, religious texts, and materials donated by local families.

Raj began visiting them almost every day.

Morning became afternoon.

Afternoon became evening.

He searched anything remotely connected to the temple.

Old gazetteers.

Land records.

Accounts of travelling monks.

British administrative reports.

Fragments of local folklore.

Most of it led nowhere.

Weeks passed.

Then months.

Raj refused to stop.

Nearly six months into the search, he finally found something.

Not a complete manuscript.

Not even a book.

A reference.

Buried inside an old handwritten catalogue was an entry connected to the legend of the Brahmin.

Beside it was a reference to a distant settlement associated with descendants of an old Brahmin community.

Raj read the line repeatedly.

For the first time, the legend had given him something tangible.

A place.

A trail that could actually be followed.

He copied the details into his notebook and carefully closed the catalogue.

Until that moment, Raj had been chasing a story.

Now he had his first real clue.

And from that day onward, there was no turning back.

Chapter 23

Nearly six months had passed.

Six months during which Raj had chased rumours, fragments of folklore, forgotten records, and references that repeatedly seemed to lead nowhere.

The handwritten catalogue had finally given him his first tangible clue—a distant settlement associated with an old Brahmin community.

But it offered little else.

No precise location.

No explanation.

No surviving account of what had happened there.

Raj continued searching.

Then, almost by accident, the trail became clearer.

It happened inside one of Bhandargarh's oldest libraries.

Raj had already searched most of its catalogued collection several times. That afternoon, while walking through a neglected section at the rear of the building, he noticed a pile of books awaiting disposal.

Most were damaged beyond repair.

Some had been eaten by termites.

Others had lost their covers and several pages.

Raj would ordinarily have walked past them.

Instead, something made him stop.

Buried beneath the pile was an old, badly damaged volume.

Its cover had almost completely disintegrated.

There was no visible author's name.

Most publication details had disappeared, although a partially legible date suggested that the book was nearly two hundred years old.

Raj carefully removed it.

Many pages were missing.

Others were torn, faded, or stained by moisture.

For several hours, he struggled through the surviving text.

Most of it appeared irrelevant.

Then he reached three consecutive chapters.

Raj became completely still.

King Parikshit.

Takshak.

The Brahmin.

The same legend he had been pursuing for months.

But this version contained details he had never encountered before.

It described the Brahmin not merely as a wandering holy man, but as someone associated with a distant settlement in the east.

One name appeared repeatedly.

Pragjyotishpur.

Raj read it again.

Then again.

The name pointed towards the ancient region associated with present-day Assam.

The earlier catalogue entry had given him a trail.

Now the damaged book had given that trail a direction.

His exhaustion disappeared.

Raj copied every surviving passage into his notebook.

Perhaps the legend was not merely mythology.

Perhaps somewhere beneath centuries of exaggeration, religious symbolism, and oral storytelling lay the memory of something real.

Raj opened a fresh page and wrote:

CURIOSITY HAS BECOME OBSESSION.

Below it, he added:

SCIENCE MEETS MYTHOLOGY.

He stared at the words for several moments.

Something fundamental had changed within him.

Throughout those months, Raj had maintained complete secrecy.

Even from his father.

Back home, the man who had already lost his wife was desperately searching for his only son.

Friends had been contacted.

Relatives questioned.

Police complaints filed.

Hospitals and railway stations checked.

At first, Raj did not know the full extent of the search.

Later, when fragments of information reached him, guilt began to trouble him.

Several times, he considered calling home.

Several times, he reached for a telephone.

Each time, he stopped himself.

Just a little longer.

That was what he kept telling himself.

Once I know whether any of this is real, I will return.

But every clue created another question.

And every unanswered question pulled him further from the life he had known.

Raj had changed physically as well.

His hair had grown longer.

A thick beard covered much of his face.

He had lost weight through months of irregular meals, sleepless nights, and constant travel.

Someone who remembered the cheerful engineering student might have struggled to recognise him.

But the greater transformation was taking place within.

The guilt about his father remained.

The memory of his mother still hurt.

Yet both were slowly being pushed aside by the search.

Raj's sensitivity had not disappeared completely.

Not yet.

But obsession was beginning to occupy the space where other emotions had once lived.

The discovery of the damaged book finally offered a path beyond Bhandargarh.

Assam.

The destination was distant, and Raj possessed very little money.

During the previous months, he had survived by taking occasional technical and computer-related assignments for students and small businesses. His engineering skills allowed him to earn enough for food, inexpensive accommodation, and travel.

He required little else.

Almost everything he earned went into his search.

A few days after discovering the book, Raj purchased a railway ticket.

He carried only a backpack containing a few clothes, his notebooks, copies of the surviving pages, and whatever money he had managed to save.

When the train began moving eastwards, Raj sat beside the window.

For hours, towns, cities, and fields passed before him.

The journey was long.

But for the first time in months, he felt he was moving towards something definite.

Gradually, the landscape changed.

The greenery became denser.

Rivers widened.

Hills appeared in the distance.

Raj watched silently as the train entered Northeast India.

Assam stretched before him—a land of ancient traditions, temples, forgotten kingdoms, and legends older than many of the records he had been studying.

Eventually, the train approached Guwahati.

Raj opened his notebook.

One name had been circled repeatedly.

Pragjyotishpur.

Somewhere in this region, he believed, lay the next fragment of the Brahmin's story.

Perhaps a village.

Perhaps another manuscript.

Perhaps nothing at all.

But Raj had already travelled too far to turn back.

For months, the trail had seemed almost invisible.

Now it was leading him east.

Chapter 24

Priya's condition had begun to improve.

The progress was slow, almost imperceptible at first, but after weeks of uncertainty, even the smallest response felt miraculous to her family.

Alongside the treatment prescribed by her doctors, the family also turned to a few traditional and complementary practices for comfort, while ensuring that her medical care continued uninterrupted.

Priya remained unconscious.

But she had begun responding to stimuli.

Her fingers occasionally moved when Dipankar held her hand.

Her eyelids reacted to light.

At times, there appeared to be faint changes in her expression when familiar voices spoke beside her.

The doctors considered these encouraging signs.

Then, one afternoon, something happened.

Dipankar was sitting beside her bed when Priya's eyelids moved.

He immediately leaned forward.

"Priya?"

For a brief moment, her eyes opened.

Only slightly.

Then they closed again.

Dipankar froze.

“Doctor!”

The medical team arrived within moments.

After examining her, the senior physician turned towards Dipankar.

“This is the most encouraging response we have seen so far.”

Dipankar looked towards Priya.

“She opened her eyes.”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean she is regaining consciousness?”

“It suggests that her neurological responsiveness is improving. We should remain cautious, but it is certainly a positive sign.”

For the first time in weeks, Dipankar felt genuine hope.

The doctor placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Hopefully, this is the beginning of her recovery.”

He left the room.

Dipankar returned to Priya’s bedside and held her hand.

“You heard me, didn’t you?” he whispered.

There was no response.

But the silence no longer frightened him as much as before.

Something had changed.

A week later, Priya opened her eyes again.

This time, they remained open.

For several seconds, she stared blankly at the ceiling.

Then her eyes slowly moved towards Dipankar.

He was sitting beside her.

The moment he realised she was looking at him, tears filled his eyes.

“Priya...”

Her lips moved, but no words emerged.

Dipankar pressed the call button beside the bed.

Within minutes, doctors and nurses surrounded her.

After nearly two months, Priya had finally regained consciousness.

The news spread quickly through both families.

After weeks of fear, uncertainty, and helplessness, there was finally something to celebrate.

Yet the doctors remained cautious.

Priya was extremely weak.

Her responses were slow.

Her speech had not yet returned properly, and voluntary movement remained limited.

Most importantly, the memory of what had happened in the Western Ghats appeared to remain buried somewhere inside her.

For the moment, no one questioned her about the abandoned house.

There would be time for that later.

Hundreds of kilometres away, Raj sat alone inside the cottage.

The papers surrounding him had become an obsession.

“The missing passage has to exist somewhere,” he muttered.

“It has to.”

The first phase had succeeded.

What he had recovered from the lake was real.

His calculations had brought him this far.

But the second phase remained incomplete.

Somewhere within the lost records was a missing instruction—something without which everything he had accomplished would remain unfinished.

Desperation was beginning to replace confidence.

Raj paced across the room.

His eyes repeatedly returned to the maps, copied manuscripts, and handwritten notes accumulated over years of research.

Then his thoughts travelled backwards.

Back to Assam.

Back to the journey that had begun with a damaged two-hundred-year-old book discovered almost accidentally in Bhandargarh.

He remembered arriving in Guwahati with little more than a backpack, a notebook, and copies of the surviving passages.

The clue had been small.

Almost insignificant.

But it had pointed him towards the ancient name Pragiyotishpur.

And towards a legend about a lost Brahmin community believed to possess extraordinary knowledge of snake venom.

According to fragmented accounts, members of that community were said to understand methods of treating snakebite victims even when the effects of venom appeared far beyond the reach of ordinary healers.

One story stood above all the others.

The Brahmin who had encountered Takshak.

The same Brahmin who, according to legend, had restored a tree destroyed by the serpent king's venom.

The same Brahmin who had supposedly buried a vessel of consecrated water rather than carry it back with him.

For centuries, the account had been dismissed as mythology.

Raj had begun to wonder whether that interpretation was too simple.

Perhaps ancient observers had witnessed something they could not explain scientifically.

Perhaps what later generations called a mantra had accompanied a forgotten process.

Perhaps the so-called sacred water had contained something biological or chemical.

Perhaps what mythology described as restoration had been an extraordinary form of recovery.

Raj looked towards the concealed chamber.

The possibility that had once fascinated him now consumed him.

Myth and science were no longer separate worlds in his mind.

They were two different languages that might, under the right conditions, describe the same phenomenon.

And somewhere within the trail that had begun with Pragjyotishpur, Raj believed another piece of the puzzle was waiting.

He had followed that trail once before.

Now, sitting amid the scattered papers, he forced himself to remember every detail.

Guwahati.

The temples.

The questions.

And the strange old man who had eventually shown him where to look next.

Chapter 25

Raj's journey had finally brought him to Assam.

He arrived in Guwahati carrying little more than his backpack, notebooks, and photocopies of the damaged pages that had led him there.

The ancient reference to Pragjyotishpur had seemed like his strongest clue yet.

But once he reached the city, certainty quickly gave way to confusion.

Raj visited old libraries, spoke to local scholars, searched regional histories, and questioned anyone who might know something about the Brahmin community mentioned in the damaged book.

Nothing led anywhere.

The village appeared to have vanished from history.

Perhaps its name had changed.

Perhaps it no longer existed.

Or perhaps it had never existed at all.

After several days of fruitless searching, Raj began to question everything.

Had he misunderstood the old text?

Had six months of obsession brought him across the country in pursuit of nothing more than folklore?

For the first time since leaving Bhandargarh, doubt began to overpower his curiosity.

During his stay in Guwahati, Raj visited the Kamakhya Temple.

He was not searching for another clue.

He simply needed somewhere to escape from his thoughts.

The atmosphere affected him unexpectedly.

For a man whose mind was constantly analysing, questioning, and searching for explanations, there was something deeply calming about the place.

For a short while, Raj stopped thinking about Takshak.

The Brahmin.

Bhandargarh.

His mother.

His father.

Even the future.

He simply sat in silence.

The restless machinery of his mind seemed to slow.

But the peace did not last.

The mysterious village remained undiscovered.

Days passed.

Raj exhausted every lead available to him.

Eventually, disappointment turned into resignation.

“Shayad yeh sach mein sirf ek kahani hai.”

(Maybe it really is only a story.)

He decided to return home.

That afternoon, Raj packed his belongings and began walking back towards his lodging.

The road was crowded.

Vehicles moved continuously through the city, while pedestrians passed him in both directions.

Raj was lost in thought.

Then someone seized his wrist.

Hard.

Raj stopped instantly.

The grip was extraordinarily strong.

The hand around his wrist felt rough and unnaturally cold.

Raj turned.

An old man stood beside him.

He was enormous.

Raj stood close to five feet ten inches, yet the stranger appeared almost a foot taller.

Long white hair fell around his deeply wrinkled face.

A thick white beard covered his jaw.

But it was his eyes that unsettled Raj most.

Dark.

Piercing.

Almost black.

For perhaps the first time during his search, Raj felt genuine fear.

He tried to pull his hand away.

The old man tightened his grip.

“Chhod dijiye.”

(Leave me.)

The stranger continued staring at him.

Then he spoke.

“Tum bahut door se us cheez ko dhoondhne aaye ho jise tum abhi tak samajh nahin paaye.”

(You have travelled a long distance searching for something you do not yet understand.)

Raj froze.

“Aap kaun hain?”

(Who are you?)

The old man ignored the question.

“Tumhein lagta hai tumhari talaash khatam ho gayi.”

(You believe your search has ended.)

Raj’s expression changed.

“Aapko kaise pata main yahan kyun aaya hoon?”

(How do you know why I came here?)

Again, the stranger gave no answer.

He leaned slightly towards Raj.

“Yahan se lagbhag do sau kilometre door tumhein us sawaal ka jawaab milega jo tumhein Assam tak kheench laaya.”

(About two hundred kilometres from here, you will find the answer to the question that brought you to Assam.)

Raj stared at him.

“Kahaan?”

(Where?)

The old man loosened his grip.

“Sadak tumhein sirf kuchh door tak le jaayegi.”

(The road will take you only part of the way.)

“Gaon ka naam kya hai?”

(What is the name of the village?)

“Jab pahunchoge, samajh jaoge.”

(You will know when you reach it.)

Raj stepped closer.

“Kam se kam naam toh bata dijiye.”

(At least tell me its name.)

For the first time, the old man smiled.

It was not a comforting smile.

“Kuchh jagah isliye bachi rehti hain kyunki duniya unke naam bhool chuki hoti hai.”

(Some places survive because the world has forgotten their names.)

A group of pedestrians moved between them.

Raj was forced to step aside.

It lasted only a few seconds.

When the path cleared, the old man was gone.

Raj looked around frantically.

There was no sign of him.

He searched the nearby shops and pavement.

Nothing.

It was as though the stranger had vanished into the crowd.

Raj looked down at his wrist.

The marks of the old man's fingers remained clearly visible on his skin.

For several minutes, he stood motionless.

He should have dismissed the encounter.

He should have returned to his lodging, collected his belongings, and boarded the next train home.

Instead, something inside him awakened again.

The despair that had consumed him only minutes earlier disappeared.

A direction.

A clue.

Two hundred kilometres away.

Raj cancelled his return journey.

The following morning, he began travelling deeper into Assam.

The roads became narrower.

Settlements grew smaller.

Eventually, the motorable road ended.

Beyond it lay dense forest, hills, and a region largely cut off from the outside world.

Somewhere within that wilderness was the village.

Raj could not have known it then, but the journey ahead would alter the course of his life.

Years later, on an Amavasya night in Bhandargarh, he would stand before the same old man again.

Only then, the old man would not guide him towards the mystery.

He would warn Raj to turn away from it.

Chapter 26

It was a village hidden from the eyes of the world.

No proper road led to it.

The motorable route ended far away, and beyond that point the journey could be completed only on foot. The path wound through dense forests, steep slopes, and narrow mountain trails that seemed to disappear into the wilderness.

Raj had no guide.

Only fragments of information.

And an intuition that refused to let him turn back.

For two full days, he walked through the remote terrain of Assam.

The journey was exhausting.

At times, the forest became so dense that sunlight barely reached the ground. Elsewhere, the path narrowed into dangerous ridges where a single careless step could have sent him tumbling down the hillside.

He stopped only occasionally to rest, drink water, and recover his strength.

Raj was still young, and his physical endurance helped him withstand the journey.

But by the end of the second day, even he had begun to weaken.

Then, as daylight started to fade, he saw it.

A small settlement spread across the slopes of the low hills.

The village.

Relief flooded through him, but his body had already reached its limit.

Raj stumbled forward a few more steps.

Then collapsed.

Almost immediately, villagers came running.

Someone gave him water.

Another brought food.

Several men lifted him and carried him into one of the houses.

Raj drifted in and out of consciousness before finally falling into a deep sleep.

When he awoke properly, he found himself lying on a woven cot inside a simple mud-and-wood house.

The air smelled of smoke, herbs, and damp earth.

An elderly woman handed him a bowl of warm food, while a middle-aged man gestured for him to eat.

Raj did so silently.

Only after several hours of rest did his strength begin to return.

The village was small.

Perhaps twenty or thirty houses stood scattered across the hills.

There was little evidence of modern infrastructure.

The people lived simply, following customs that appeared to have changed very little over generations.

Raj spent his first day observing quietly.

Then he saw the village temple.

It was small, ancient, and far simpler than the temple at Bhandargarh.

Yet the moment Raj entered, the suspicions he had carried for months began to strengthen.

The walls were painted.

And the scenes upon them were unmistakable.

The Brahmin.

Takshak.

The serpent king destroying the tree.

The Brahmin sprinkling water upon its remains.

The tree restored to life.

Raj stood motionless before the mural.

The same legend.

The same sequence.

Repeated hundreds of kilometres away from Bhandargarh.

The coincidence was becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss.

Another detail caught his attention.

The forests surrounding the settlement were known for snakes.

Snakebites were common across the wider region.

Yet, according to the villagers, deaths from snakebite within their own community were remarkably rare.

Raj wanted to know why.

Communication was difficult at first.

Most villagers spoke a local dialect he could barely understand.

Fortunately, one of the younger men knew enough Hindi to communicate with him, and through him Raj gradually began asking questions.

The villagers remained cautious.

They revealed little.

They watched Raj carefully, uncertain of his intentions.

Raj did not force them.

He waited.

Over the following days, some of their reserve began to soften.

What he heard fascinated him.

The community had preserved generations of knowledge connected with snakes, venom, medicinal plants, and methods of treating snakebite.

Much of it had never been written down.

It had passed orally from one generation to the next.

Some practices sounded perfectly plausible.

Others bordered on the impossible.

Raj listened to all of them.

He asked questions.

Observed.

Compared what he heard with the damaged book he had found in Bhandargarh.

The similarities disturbed him.

The village was not merely repeating the legend.

It appeared to have preserved fragments of a tradition connected to it.

Yet Raj still lacked what his scientific mind demanded most.

Proof.

The paintings could be coincidence.

The stories could have travelled across generations.

Even the unusually low number of snakebite deaths might have several ordinary explanations.

Raj understood that.

And that was precisely why he remained.

By the end of the first week, he had abandoned all thoughts of returning immediately.

Something about the village told him that he had not yet seen what he had travelled so far to find.

So Raj stayed.

He watched.

He listened.

And waited.

He did not know that very soon, something would happen inside that isolated settlement that would challenge almost everything he believed about the boundary between life and death.

Chapter 27

The ashtrays in the government offices were filling almost as quickly as the case files.

Bhandargarh had become a nightmare for the administration.

The temple remained sealed.

Ramnath Ji's house remained under police protection.

The forensic reports had produced more questions than answers.

And despite weeks of investigation, the authorities were no closer to understanding the deaths associated with the temple.

The first victim had been Steven, the Belgian blogger.

His remains had been reduced almost entirely to clean white bones.

Then Ramnath Ji, the hereditary head priest, had been found brutally mutilated inside the temple precinct.

After that came Constable Ramesh.

His body—or what remained of it—had been transformed into an inexplicable gelatinous mass from which almost the entire skeleton had disappeared.

Three deaths.

No identifiable killer.

No known weapon.

No convincing motive.

The local police intensified security around both the temple and Ramnath Ji's house.

Officers were posted in rotating shifts.

Barricades were reinforced.

Visitors were prohibited.

Every movement around the two locations was monitored.

For several days, nothing happened.

Then came the fourth death.

It was shortly after midnight.

Two constables had been stationed outside Ramnath Ji's house.

One remained near the entrance while the other patrolled the rear of the property.

The night was quiet.

Too quiet.

At approximately twelve-thirty, communication with the constable behind the house stopped.

His colleague called him over the wireless.

No response.

He called again.

Still nothing.

Assuming the radio had malfunctioned, he moved towards the rear of the building.

The back door stood open.

The police seal had been broken.

He immediately alerted the control room.
Within minutes, additional officers arrived.
They entered the house together.
The front room had been disturbed.
Books lay scattered across the floor.
Astrological charts had been pulled from shelves.
The metallic trunk in the inner room had been overturned.
Several pieces of furniture had been moved away from the walls.
Someone had searched the house thoroughly.
Yet nothing of obvious monetary value appeared to have been taken.
The officers moved deeper inside.
Near the entrance to the inner room, one of them stopped.
Something lay on the floor.
At first, it resembled a large translucent sack.
Then the torchlight revealed fragments of a police uniform embedded within it.
A belt.
A piece of fabric.
An identity badge.
The missing constable.
The senior officer stared at the substance in horror.
No recognisable human form remained.
Only a gelatinous mass of tissue.
The similarity to Constable Ramesh's death was impossible to ignore.

The house was sealed immediately.

Forensic teams arrived before sunrise.

Preliminary examination confirmed what everyone already feared.

The remains belonged to the missing constable.

Once again, almost every hard structure had disappeared.

Bones.

Teeth.

Much of the cartilage.

What remained was largely soft tissue in a gelatinous state.

No known weapon explained it.

No recognised poison accounted for it.

No conventional chemical exposure had yet been identified.

The fourth death shattered whatever confidence remained in the investigation.

News spread rapidly.

Television crews arrived before noon.

Reporters gathered outside the barricades.

Questions were shouted at police officials from every direction.

“How can four people die around a guarded temple?”

“Is the administration hiding something?”

“Why has no suspect been arrested?”

“Are the deaths connected to the temple legends?”

The state government came under intense pressure.

Opposition leaders demanded an independent inquiry.

Some local residents accused the authorities of violating sacred traditions.

Others demanded that the temple be permanently sealed.

Rumours spread faster than facts.

Some claimed that an ancient curse had been awakened.

Others spoke of an unknown creature living beneath the temple.

A few suggested that secret experiments were being conducted somewhere in the region.

The police publicly dismissed such speculation.

Privately, even experienced officers were struggling to explain what they had seen.

The fourth death became the final blow.

The state administration decided that the investigation could no longer remain solely with the local police.

The case was transferred to a central investigative agency.

Two days later, a convoy of official vehicles entered Bhandargarh.

The special investigation team was headed by DIG Sneha.

Her reputation had preceded her.

She had spent years handling complicated investigations involving organised crime, disappearances, corruption, and cases in which political pressure often outweighed the available evidence.

She was known for one quality above all others.

She did not frighten easily.

Sneha stepped out of the vehicle and looked towards the temple.

The ancient structure stood beyond multiple barricades.

Its broken walls appeared almost harmless beneath the afternoon sunlight.

Nothing about it suggested that four people had already died in its shadow.

A senior local officer approached her carrying a thick file.

“Ma’am, this contains the complete investigation so far—post-mortem findings, forensic reports, witness statements, photographs, laboratory results. Everything.”

Sneha accepted it.

“How many theories?”

The officer hesitated.

“Ma’am?”

“How many explanations have been proposed?”

He gave an uncomfortable smile.

“Several.”

“Animal attack?”

“Yes.”

“Chemical exposure?”

“Yes.”

“Ritual murder?”

“That has also been considered.”

“Supernatural activity?”

The officer remained silent.

Sneha looked at him.

“Someone has written it somewhere, I assume.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She closed the file.

“Good.”

The officer appeared surprised.

“Good?”

“It means enough time has already been spent deciding what people think happened.”

She handed part of the file to a member of her team.

“We do the opposite.”

“Ma’am?”

“We assume nothing.”

Sneha looked towards the temple.

“No curses.”

“No monsters.”

“No convenient explanations.”

“Only evidence.”

The officer nodded.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I want the investigation reconstructed from the beginning.”

“From Steven’s death?”

“From before Steven arrived.”

The officer paused.

Sneha continued.

“I want everything about this temple. Who controlled access to it. Who entered it. Who opposed the investigation. What disappeared. What remained untouched.”

She turned towards Ramnath Ji's house.

“And I want that house preserved exactly as it was found after the fourth death.”

“It has already been sealed.”

“No one enters without my authorisation.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Sneha opened the case file again.

Four photographs appeared on the first page.

Four victims.

Four unexplained deaths.

Behind them stood an ancient temple.

A dead priest.

An undeciphered manuscript.

And forensic evidence that seemed to resist ordinary explanation.

For the first time in her career, Sneha was entering an investigation in which the facts appeared stranger than the rumours.

But facts, she believed, always formed a pattern.

No matter how deeply that pattern was buried.

She looked towards her team.

“We begin tonight.”

The investigation had changed hands.

And the secrets of Bhandargarh were about to face a very different kind of scrutiny.

Chapter 28

The investigation team began work immediately after arriving in Bhandargarh.

The government guest house allotted to them was converted into a temporary operations centre. Files, forensic reports, crime-scene photographs, witness statements, maps, and laboratory findings were brought there from the local police headquarters.

DIG Sneha wanted everything.

Nothing was to be ignored merely because an earlier investigator had considered it insignificant.

She spent almost the entire first evening studying the case.

Four deaths.

Steven, the Belgian blogger.

Ramnath Ji, the hereditary head priest.

Constable Ramesh.

And another policeman killed while guarding the priest's house.

Different victims.

Different circumstances.

Yet every incident appeared connected, directly or indirectly, to the same temple.

That troubled her.

By midnight, one wall of the guest house had been converted into a large investigation board.

Photographs of the victims were arranged chronologically.

Below them were images of the temple, Ramnath Ji's house, the manuscript fragments, and the gelatinous human remains recovered after the attacks.

Sneha stood before the board for several minutes.

There was evidence everywhere.

But no explanation connecting it.

The following morning, she visited the forensic department.

The senior doctor who had examined the victims received her in his office.

Sneha placed the reports on the table.

"Doctor, I've read your findings."

"Yes, Madam."

"But I don't want you to repeat what is already written here."

The doctor looked at her.

"What would you like to know?"

"Your assessment."

She leaned slightly forward.

"Not only as a forensic specialist. As someone trained in science."

The doctor remained silent for a moment.

Then he exhaled slowly.

"Madam, both as a doctor and as a student of science, I have never encountered anything like this."

Sneha opened Ramnath Ji's report.

"The priest?"

"His death was brutal, but the injuries themselves are not scientifically impossible. They indicate tremendous physical force. Several bones were crushed, and the body was severely mutilated."

"Animal attack?"

"Possible from the nature of some of the injuries. But we recovered no convincing animal evidence from the scene."

"No fur?"

"None."

"Paw prints?"

"No."

"Blood trail?"

"Very little blood considering the extent of the injuries."

Sneha turned to the reports concerning the constables.

"And these?"

The doctor's expression changed.

"These I cannot explain."

Sneha looked directly at him.

"Try."

"In both cases, almost the entire skeleton had disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Bones. Teeth. Much of the hard tissue."

"What remained?"

"Predominantly degraded soft tissue. Almost a gelatinous mass."

Sneha frowned.

“Could acid produce that?”

“Not in this manner.”

“Why?”

“A chemical powerful enough to dissolve an entire skeleton so rapidly should also produce severe damage to the surrounding soft tissue. It should affect the clothes, soil, vegetation—everything around the victim.”

“But that didn’t happen.”

“No.”

“Venom?”

“I considered that possibility.”

The doctor opened another file.

“We detected unusual proteins and enzymatic activity in the samples. The findings were referred to a toxicology specialist.”

“And?”

“He couldn’t identify a definite source.”

Sneha remained expressionless.

“Could it belong to an unknown snake species?”

The doctor hesitated.

“Certain venoms can cause devastating tissue injury, bleeding, paralysis, or organ failure. But I know of nothing documented that would selectively produce what we found.”

Sneha closed the file.

“So medically?”

“A mystery.”

“Scientifically?”

The doctor gave a tired smile.

“Still a mystery.”

Sneha rose.

“One last question.”

“Yes, Madam.”

“You’ve worked in this region for many years?”

“Nearly thirty.”

“Then you must have heard the stories surrounding the temple.”

The doctor nodded.

“Everyone has.”

“Do you believe them?”

He smiled faintly.

“Madam, doctors are not supposed to believe in haunted temples.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

The smile disappeared.

The doctor considered his answer carefully.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

Sneha remained silent.

“According to the locals,” he continued, “the only person who truly knew the history of that temple was Ramnath Ji.”

“The priest.”

“Yes.”

“And now he’s dead.”

“Yes.”

“Anyone else?”

“There are elderly residents in some of the surrounding areas. They know fragments of the folklore. Whether any of them know something useful, I cannot say.”

Sneha nodded.

“Arrange their names for me.”

Later that afternoon, Sneha visited Ramnath Ji’s house.

The structure was modest.

Two rooms.

A tiny kitchen.

A narrow courtyard.

Hardly the home one would associate with a man consulted by politicians, bureaucrats, businesspeople, and wealthy families from across the state.

Sneha entered the front room.

Nothing appeared unusual.

A cot.

Astrological charts.

Religious books.

A small wooden table.

The inner room was different.

The broken lock had been preserved as evidence.

Inside, the chamber remained dark even during daylight.

Sneha switched on her torch.

The beam travelled slowly across the walls.

She stopped.

King Parikshit.

The meditating sage.

The curse.

Takshak.

The burning tree.

The Brahmin restoring it.

And finally—

Two temples.

Sneha stepped closer.

One was surrounded by ruins.

The other stood near a small hill, but the landscape revealed nothing that could identify its location.

“Were these paintings documented before the house was attacked?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” an officer replied.

“And afterwards?”

“We photographed everything again.”

Sneha compared the images on a tablet.

Some objects had been moved.

The trunk had been overturned.

Documents had been scattered.

Parts of the room had clearly been searched.

But jewellery and religious objects remained untouched.

Sneha lowered the tablet.

“This wasn’t robbery.”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Whoever entered this room was looking for something specific.”

The officer nodded.

“What?”

“That is what we need to discover.”

She looked towards the metallic trunk.

“Did Ramnath Ji keep manuscripts here?”

“A few papers and books. Nothing that appeared particularly valuable.”

“Appeared?”

The officer understood.

“We don’t know what might have been valuable to the person who searched the room.”

“Exactly.”

From Ramnath Ji’s house, Sneha proceeded towards the temple.

Police personnel surrounded the premises.

For the first time, she entered the inner precinct.

The contrast between the exterior and the garbhagriha immediately caught her attention.

Outside, centuries of neglect had reduced much of the structure to ruins.

Inside, the sanctum remained remarkably preserved.

Sneha examined the idol of Lord Vishnu reclining upon Sheshnag.

Beside it stood the golden image of Goddess Lakshmi.

Ancient ritual objects remained untouched.

The brass lamp was still in place.

Sneha looked towards the accompanying officer.

“How much would that gold idol be worth?”

“Impossible to estimate without examination, Ma’am. A fortune.”

“And yet nobody took it.”

“No.”

Another indication that theft had never been the motive.

Then Sneha saw the murals.

They closely resembled those inside Ramnath Ji’s locked room.

Only these were far older.

She studied each scene carefully.

“The priest copied these.”

“That is what the earlier investigation concluded.”

“Which means he understood their significance—or at least believed they were important.”

Sneha stopped before the image containing the two temples.

“What is this line?”

The officer looked at the mural.

“We don’t know. It appears to connect the two structures.”

Sneha moved closer.

Beneath them was the strange circular symbol surrounded by serpent-like forms.

“Where are the manuscript fragments?”

“In forensic custody.”

“And the language expert?”

“Unable to decipher them.”

“Completely?”

“He believes it may be a composite script. Some characters appear ancient, while others seem symbolic. He couldn’t identify it as any single known language.”

Sneha stared at the paintings again.

“What if it isn’t a language in the ordinary sense?”

The officer looked at her.

“Ma’am?”

“What if someone developed a coded system using words, symbols, and images together?”

“To keep outsiders from reading it?”

“Possibly.”

She pointed towards the murals.

“Then the paintings could be part of the key.”

The officer considered the possibility.

“If Ramnath Ji understood it, his death may have made decoding it almost impossible.”

Sneha remained thoughtful.

“Not necessarily.”

“Ma’am?”

“He may have been the last hereditary priest.”

She turned towards him.

“But that doesn’t mean he was the only person who ever tried to understand this temple.”

~

That evening, Sneha returned to the guest house.

Photographs of the murals from both locations were placed side by side on the investigation board.

Beneath them, she arranged images of the manuscript fragments.

She stepped backwards and studied the complete picture.

Something was missing.

Not evidence.

A link.

Whoever had killed Ramnath Ji had taken the temple key and the cloth bag he had carried that night.

Later, someone had searched his house.

The gold idol inside the sanctum remained untouched.

So did other objects of obvious monetary value.

Ancient material connected to the temple, however, was missing.

The motive did not appear to be wealth.

It appeared to be information.

Sneha turned towards her team.

“I want the history of this temple reconstructed.”

One officer began taking notes.

“From what period, Ma’am?”

“As far back as the records allow.”

“Religious history?”

“Everything. Archaeological surveys. Land records. University archives. Newspaper reports. Researchers. Visitors. Anyone who ever tried to study this place.”

Another officer spoke.

“That could involve hundreds of people.”

Sneha looked towards him.

“Then begin with the unusual ones.”

“Unusual?”

“Anyone who came repeatedly. Anyone who asked about the priestly family. Anyone who searched old manuscripts. Anyone who showed more interest in the temple than an ordinary visitor should.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And check the university records.”

The officer looked surprised.

“The university?”

“It surrounds the temple. Thousands of students and employees have passed through that campus.”

Sneha looked once more at the photographs.

“If someone outside Ramnath Ji’s family learned even part of this story, the trail may have passed through those libraries.”

The team began working.

Sneha remained alone before the investigation board.

The murders were real.

The forensic evidence was real.

The manuscript fragments were real.

Whether the ancient legends themselves had anything to do with the deaths remained impossible to establish.

Sneha had spent her career investigating crimes committed by human beings.

Human beings left motives.

Patterns.

Mistakes.

This case had to contain them too.

She simply could not see them yet.

Sneha looked towards the image of the two temples.

Somewhere, she felt certain, another person knew more about Bhandargarh than the police did.

Someone had followed this trail before her.

She simply did not know who.

Not yet.

Chapter 29

Priya was recovering.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

But after nearly two months of uncertainty, even the smallest improvement felt significant.

She had regained consciousness and could now recognise Dipankar and other members of the family. Her doctors had gradually started her on liquids and soft food while continuing to monitor her condition closely.

Her vital signs were stable.

Her physical strength, however, remained poor.

Her speech was also affected.

She could utter a few words, but they were weak and often unclear, as though her mind knew exactly what she wanted to say while her body was still struggling to obey.

Dipankar remained beside her almost constantly.

During the morning round, the senior doctor examined Priya and appeared satisfied with her progress.

“Mr. Dipankar, she is improving.”

Dipankar looked towards Priya.

“Her speech is still not clear, doctor.”

“That will take time. She has been unconscious for a prolonged period, and her body has undergone considerable stress.”

“Will she recover completely?”

The doctor paused.

“At present, the signs are encouraging. Her speech should gradually improve, and so should her strength. But you will have to be patient.”

Dipankar nodded.

“If she continues progressing like this, we may be able to discharge her next week.”

A faint smile appeared on his face.

“Thank you, doctor.”

The doctor looked once more at Priya’s reports.

“One thing still puzzles me.”

“What?”

“We have never established precisely what caused such a sudden and profound loss of movement and responsiveness.”

Dipankar’s expression changed.

“All the major investigations remained reassuring,” the doctor continued. “There was no structural neurological injury that adequately explained the severity of her condition.”

“Then it was the shock?”

“That remains one possibility. Severe trauma can sometimes produce profound physical symptoms.”

He closed the file.

“We’ll continue with physiotherapy, speech exercises, medication where necessary, and a gradual rehabilitation programme. Recovery may take time.”

Dipankar looked towards Priya.

She was watching him.

Her eyes were tired, but they were alive.

That alone meant everything.

One week later, Priya was discharged.

Both families gathered at the hospital.

A wheelchair was brought to her bedside, but Priya insisted on trying to stand with assistance.

Her legs trembled.

Dipankar held her firmly.

“Slowly,” he whispered. “There’s no hurry.”

Priya managed two uncertain steps before exhaustion forced her back into the chair.

But everyone smiled.

It was progress.

For the first time since that terrible night in the Western Ghats, Priya was going home.

Later that evening, Dipankar made a phone call.

It was answered after several rings.

“Di?”

Sneha moved away from the investigation board inside the Bhandargarh guest house.

“Yes, Dipankar?”

“Priya has been discharged.”

Sneha’s expression softened immediately.

“That’s wonderful news.”

“She’s home now. Still very weak, but the doctors are hopeful.”

“Can she speak?”

“A little. The words aren’t always clear, but she recognises everyone.”

“That’s what matters right now.”

Dipankar remained silent for a moment.

“Di...”

“Yes?”

“My leave can’t be extended indefinitely. I may have to report back to the ship soon.”

Sneha understood immediately.

“You’re worried about leaving her.”

“How can I go when she’s still like this?”

“Don’t make any decision today. Let her recover a little more first. We’ll manage things when the time comes.”

Dipankar sighed.

“When will you be back?”

Sneha looked towards the photographs and documents covering the wall.

“I don’t know.”

“The case is that serious?”

“Yes.”

Dipankar hesitated.

“Is it the temple case?”

Sneha’s eyes moved towards the photograph of the ancient sanctum.

“Yes.”

“The one with all those deaths?”

“The same.”

“I’ve seen it on television.”

Sneha remained silent.

“Di, be careful.”

A faint smile appeared on her face.

“I always am.”

Dipankar almost laughed.

“That’s exactly what you always say.”

For a few seconds, the conversation felt normal again.

Then Dipankar’s voice became quieter.

“Something has been troubling me.”

“What?”

“Priya’s incident in the Western Ghats.”

Sneha’s expression changed.

“What about it?”

“The house she entered. Whatever she saw that night.”

Sneha remained still.

Until that moment, she had treated Priya’s ordeal entirely as a family tragedy.

“What exactly did she tell you before she collapsed?” Sneha asked.

“Hardly anything.”

“Think carefully.”

Dipankar paused.

“She said she had entered an abandoned house.”

“Yes.”

“And that something was inside.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. She never managed to explain.”

Sneha tightened her grip on the phone.

“Anything else?”

Dipankar hesitated.

“One word.”

“What word?”

“Serpent.”

Sneha slowly turned towards the photograph of the temple mural.

Takshak.

The Brahmin.

The serpent.

The dark circle.

For several seconds, she said nothing.

“Di?”

“I’m here.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

But her voice had changed.

“When Priya is stronger, I want to speak to her.”

“About what happened?”

“Yes.”

“Of course.”

Sneha ended the call.

For several moments, she remained motionless.

Priya’s collapse had happened hundreds of kilometres away and, until now, had no established connection to the Bhandargarh case.

Perhaps it still did not.

Sneha refused to create connections merely because they appeared convenient.

But one detail could not be ignored.

She took a small piece of paper and wrote a single word:

SERPENT

Then she pinned it beside the photographs of the temple murals.

Sneha stepped backwards.

Another possible thread had appeared.

Whether it belonged to the same mystery remained to be seen.

Chapter 30

Raj was unusually pleased.

The small room was once again filled with cigarette smoke.

One cigarette burned between his fingers, while another lay crushed in the overflowing ashtray. Books, manuscript copies, inscriptions, diagrams, and handwritten calculations covered the table before him.

For once, the frustration had disappeared.

The coldness that usually dominated his face had given way to satisfaction.

Raj leaned back in his chair and looked at the papers.

“So I was right.”

A faint smile appeared.

“All these years... all that effort...”

He picked up one of the copied manuscript fragments and studied the symbols again.

The script that had confused linguists and scholars no longer appeared entirely meaningless to him.

It had taken years.

Mathematics.

Pattern recognition.

Comparative scripts.

Ancient symbolism.

And, above all, the ability to examine mythology through the mind of a scientist.

Slowly, Raj had begun to decipher portions of it.

Not perfectly.

Not completely.

But enough.

Enough to understand that the manuscript was not merely a religious text.

It contained instructions.

Processes.

Warnings.

And references to something deliberately concealed beneath layers of symbolism.

Raj smiled.

“I really am a genius.”

He said it without embarrassment.

“All that intelligence was not given to me for nothing.”

He rose and walked through the smoke-filled room.

“Thousands of people must have seen fragments of these writings over the centuries.”

“Priests.”

“Scholars.”

“Linguists.”

“Historians.”

He stopped.

“And none of them understood what was really there.”

Raj believed that even Ramnath Ji had possessed only fragments of the knowledge.

The priest had preserved the traditions.

Guarded the sanctum.

Reproduced the murals.

Perhaps he understood some of the symbols passed down through his family.

But Raj was convinced that Ramnath Ji had never understood the manuscript in its entirety.

“He protected it his entire life,” Raj whispered, “without knowing everything he was protecting.”

Whether that belief was true, Raj could not know.

But his confidence had grown to the point where doubt hardly mattered.

“Those years were not wasted.”

He looked around the cottage.

For a moment, his thoughts returned to the life he had abandoned.

What would have happened if he had followed the path everyone expected?

A prestigious career.

A large salary.

A beautiful house.

Recognition.

Then perhaps marriage.

Children.

Responsibilities.

Promotions.

Retirement.

A life millions of people would have considered successful.

Raj laughed quietly.

“And what would any of it have meant?”

Nothing.

Not to him anymore.

Material success had once represented achievement.

Now it seemed ordinary.

Predictable.

Small.

“I could have spent my life collecting things.”

His eyes moved towards the concealed chamber.

“Instead, I am close to discovering something that has remained hidden for centuries.”

His sense of purpose had gradually evolved into something more dangerous.

A belief that ordinary rules did not apply to him.

That ordinary lives were meant for ordinary people.

And Raj no longer considered himself ordinary.

“A mind like mine appears perhaps once in a generation.”

He paused.

“Maybe even less.”

His confidence had become arrogance.

Perhaps it had crossed that boundary long ago.

News from Bhandargarh continued to reach him.

The fourth death had forced the authorities to transfer the investigation to a central agency.

A special team had arrived.

Its head was DIG Sneha.

Raj recognised the name immediately.

Years earlier, she had been his senior at the same engineering institute.

He remembered her only faintly.

Disciplined.

Hard-working.

Academically respectable.

Nothing extraordinary.

At least, that was how Raj remembered her.

A dismissive smile crossed his face.

“So they’ve sent Sneha.”

He took another drag from his cigarette.

“An average student trying to solve something that generations failed to understand.”

He shook his head.

“Does she really think she can reach me?”

For a moment, the thought amused him.

Then his expression changed.

Arrogance was useful only until it became carelessness.

Raj knew that much.

Sneha might not possess his intellect, but she had reached the rank of DIG for a reason.

He could not allow her investigation to interfere with what remained.

“Not yet,” he whispered.

His attention returned to the second phase.

The first phase had brought him what he needed from the lake.

Years of research had allowed him to interpret portions of the manuscript.

But something remained incomplete.

Phase Two required precision.

One mistake could destroy years of work.

Perhaps even destroy him.

Raj turned towards the concealed chamber.

“If the second phase succeeds...”

He stopped.

The rest remained unspoken.

Whatever the manuscript promised, Raj believed it was greater than wealth.

Greater than professional success.

Perhaps greater than anything ordinary human life could offer.

He closed the notebook.

Nothing else mattered now.

Not the police.

Not Sneha.

Only Phase Two.

Raj extinguished the cigarette.

Smoke continued to hang heavily in the room.

He looked once more towards the concealed chamber.

“I have already crossed the boundary between science and mythology.”

A faint smile returned.

“Now I only have to cross the final one.”

Chapter 31

“Something is missing.”

Sneha stood before the investigation board, staring at the photographs.

“Something fundamental.”

She had gone through the forensic reports, witness statements, manuscript fragments, and crime-scene photographs repeatedly.

Still, the connection remained beyond her reach.

For the first time in her career, she felt genuinely frustrated.

“There is no such thing as a perfect crime,” she murmured. “Whoever is behind this is leaving something behind. We simply haven’t recognised it yet.”

She decided to visit the temple and Ramnath Ji’s house once more.

The paintings remained one of the most unusual links between the two locations.

King Parikshit.

Takshak.

The Brahmin.

The restored tree.

The two temples.

The scenes were almost identical.

Almost.

At Ramnath Ji's house, Sneha entered the dark inner room and examined the murals carefully.

Something about their execution bothered her.

"Ramnath Ji was right-handed?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am," an officer replied.

Sneha moved closer.

Given the narrow dimensions of the room, certain portions would have been awkward for a right-handed painter to complete with such precision.

She compared the wall with photographs taken before the house had been disturbed.

Most of the mural appeared consistent.

But not all of it.

Roughly one-fourth showed subtle differences in the direction and angle of the strokes.

Sneha stepped back.

"What if these paintings weren't completed by one person?"

The officer looked at her.

"You mean someone helped Ramnath Ji?"

"Possibly."

"Someone from the priestly family?"

"Maybe."

Sneha continued studying the wall.

“Or someone else who was trusted enough to enter this room.”

She pointed towards one section.

“And possibly someone who used the other hand more comfortably.”

It was only a hypothesis.

Nothing more.

But after days of uncertainty, even a fragile clue mattered.

“Have the paintings examined professionally,” Sneha ordered. “Brush direction, pigments, approximate age, differences in technique—everything.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Sneha looked once more at the mural.

For the first time, another possibility had emerged.

Ramnath Ji might not have guarded the temple’s knowledge entirely alone.

Someone else may once have stood inside that room.

Someone whose identity remained hidden.

Years earlier, hundreds of kilometres away, another mystery was unfolding before Raj.

The hidden village in Assam had already challenged many of his assumptions.

During his first days there, he had done little except recover from the exhausting journey and quietly observe the community.

Clouds drifted across the hills.

Rain fell almost every afternoon.

The isolation seemed complete.

Then came the incident that changed everything.

A man from a neighbouring settlement was carried into the village.

He had suffered a severe snakebite.

According to the people accompanying him, they had first taken him to a distant medical centre, where they believed he had been declared dead on arrival.

Raj assumed they had brought the body home for the final rites.

They had not.

Instead, the villagers carried him directly into the temple.

Raj followed at a distance.

The man was placed on the floor before the altar.

Several members of his family stood nearby.

Strangely, they did not behave as though the matter was over.

They appeared to be waiting.

About fifteen minutes later, the village priest entered.

He knelt beside the motionless man and began chanting in a language Raj could not understand.

Then a sacrificial animal was brought forward.

Raj watched uneasily.

The chanting intensified.

The priest raised an axe.

It fell.

Raj instinctively looked away.

When he turned back, something made him freeze.

The man's fingers had moved.

Raj stepped closer.

Impossible.

A few moments later, there was another movement.

Then a faint rise of the chest.

Someone cried out.

The family rushed forward.

The man began breathing.

Raj stood motionless.

His scientific mind immediately searched for explanations.

Perhaps he had never truly been dead.

Perhaps the original assessment had been mistaken.

Perhaps profound paralysis from the venom had made him appear lifeless.

Perhaps something administered inside the temple had affected the venom.

Raj did not know.

But he had seen enough to disturb every certainty he possessed.

The Brahmin.

Takshak.

The destroyed tree.

The legend of impossible recovery.

What if those ancient stories had preserved a distorted memory of something real?

Not resurrection.

Not necessarily.

But a process science had not yet understood.

Raj remained in the village for nearly two more weeks.

He observed.

Asked questions.

Remembered everything he could.

When he eventually left, the young man who had arrived there carrying only curiosity was gone.

Something stronger had taken its place.

Belief.

And once Raj began to believe that even death might contain boundaries science had not fully understood, there was no easy path back.

Chapter 32

The possibility of a second painter remained in Sneha's mind.

It might prove meaningless.

The differences in brushwork could have resulted from Ramnath Ji changing position, using a different brush, or returning to the mural years later.

But they could also mean something else.

Someone might have helped him.

Someone who had been permitted inside the room that, according to neighbours, Ramnath Ji had kept closed to almost everyone.

Sneha stood once again before the photographs of the mural.

Most of the brushwork appeared consistent.

Yet certain sections were subtly different.

Different angles.

Lighter strokes.

A change in movement.

The photographs and pigment samples had already been sent to a specialist.

Now she had to wait.

And waiting was something Sneha disliked.

If the expert confirmed that another person had contributed to the paintings, the investigation would gain an entirely new direction.

Someone outside the hereditary priestly line might have known more about the temple than anyone had realised.

Later that afternoon, Sneha called Dr Asim.

“Doctor, any progress?”

“Very little, Ma’am.”

“What about the toxicology findings?”

“They’ve been reviewed again. We still cannot identify the proteins or enzymes conclusively.”

“Could they have come from venom?”

“It remains one possibility.”

“From an unknown species?”

Dr Asim hesitated.

“Possibly. There are toxins and biological compounds that have not been fully characterised. But I don’t want to label this as venom without evidence.”

Sneha appreciated the caution.

“And nothing currently documented explains what happened to the two constables?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“The disappearance of the skeletal structures?”

“Not in the manner or time frame we observed.”

Sneha remained silent for a moment.

“So we still have an unidentified mechanism.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

She disconnected the call.

Back at the guest house, Sneha stood before the investigation board.

Four deaths.

An undeciphered manuscript.

A temple whose knowledge had been guarded for generations.

A murdered priest.

A house searched by someone who appeared to know exactly what they wanted.

One fact was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Money had never been the motive.

The golden idol remained untouched.

Valuable religious objects had not been taken.

Ramnath Ji’s modest house contained little worth stealing.

Yet both the temple and his private room had been searched.

Someone had been looking for information.

Knowledge.

Something preserved by the priestly lineage.

After Ramnath Ji’s death, everyone had assumed that whatever he knew had died with him.

Sneha was beginning to doubt that.

Perhaps someone else had learned part of the secret.

Perhaps someone had spent years following the same trail.

She looked towards the photographs of the murals.

Two temples.

A coded manuscript.

A second possible painter.

And four unexplained deaths.

The mystery was not impossible to solve.

It had simply been buried extremely well.

Sneha intended to dig until she reached it.

Chapter 33

“The Brahmin legend was never entirely a myth,” Raj murmured.

At least, that was what he had come to believe.

The hidden village in Assam had changed everything.

He leaned back in his chair, remembering another part of his missing year.

Ramnath Ji had initially refused to answer his questions.

Again and again, the priest had turned him away.

So Raj changed his approach.

He stopped presenting himself as the brilliant engineering student who wanted answers.

Instead, he became harmless.

Simple.

A young man seemingly fascinated by religion, rituals, and old stories.

For nearly three months, Raj maintained the deception.

He visited Ramnath Ji regularly.

Helped with small tasks.

Listened more than he spoke.

Asked fewer questions.

Gradually, the priest's suspicion weakened.

Perhaps Ramnath Ji felt sympathy for him.

Perhaps he simply began to trust the quiet young man who appeared to expect nothing from him.

Eventually, Raj was allowed inside the house.

Later, Ramnath Ji even permitted him to accompany him into certain parts of the temple precinct.

But never the garbhagriha.

That remained forbidden to everyone outside the hereditary priestly lineage.

Even so, Raj had gained something far more valuable than access to the sanctum.

Inside Ramnath Ji's house, he encountered two old books.

And, for the first time, the strange script that would consume years of his life.

Raj suddenly laughed.

"The poor priest never understood who he had allowed into his house."

He looked towards the papers spread across the table.

Perhaps Ramnath Ji had known more than Raj gave him credit for.

Raj no longer cared.

"If Phase Two succeeds, everything changes."

The laughter disappeared.

He returned to work.

In Bhandargarh, the painting specialist had begun examining the murals inside Ramnath Ji's private room.

For almost two hours, he studied the walls under different lighting, photographed individual sections, and compared the direction and pressure of the brushwork.

Finally, he stepped back.

“Ma’am, my preliminary opinion is that this mural may not have been completed by one painter.”

Sneha looked at him sharply.

“Two people?”

“Most likely.”

He pointed towards several sections of the wall.

“The stroke direction changes here. The execution is also slightly different. But I’ll need to compare the pigments, layering, and other details before giving you a firm opinion.”

“How long?”

“About a week.”

Sneha nodded.

Her earlier suspicion had gained weight.

Someone other than Ramnath Ji may once have worked on those walls.

Someone who had been allowed into a room that neighbours believed was closed to almost everyone.

Sneha looked towards the mural.

If there had been a second painter, that person might have seen things Ramnath Ji never intended the outside world to see.

And finding that person could bring her closer to the truth.

Chapter 34

Sneha had to leave Bhandargarh for two days.

The investigation was progressing, but Dipankar was preparing to return to his ship and wanted to see her before leaving.

At the same time, Sneha had been invited to a felicitation ceremony at her former engineering institute in Delhi.

Two days would allow her to manage both.

She handed temporary responsibility for the investigation to senior members of her team and left for home.

Priya was recovering steadily.

Physiotherapy continued, and she could now walk short distances with support.

Her speech, however, remained slow and occasionally broken.

When Sneha reached home, her parents and Dipankar were waiting for her.

“Di, aap sirf ek din ke liye aayi ho?”

(Di, have you come for only one day?)

Sneha smiled.

“High-profile case hai. Zyada time nahin mil sakta.”

(It’s a high-profile case. I can’t get much time away.)

She hugged him and then walked towards Priya.

Priya smiled faintly.

Sneha embraced her gently.

“You’re looking much better.”

Priya tried to respond, but the words came slowly.

Dipankar looked concerned.

“Di, kabhi-kabhi Priya raat ko darr kar uth jaati hai. Aisa lagta hai jaise sapne mein phir wahi bhayanak cheez dekh rahi ho.”

(Di, sometimes Priya wakes up frightened at night. It seems as though she is seeing that terrifying thing again in her dreams.)

Sneha glanced at Priya.

For a moment, the investigation returned to her mind.

The abandoned house.

The serpent.

But she did not question Priya.

Not yet.

“Sab theek ho jayega.”

(Everything will be all right.)

Dipankar nodded.

“My flight is tomorrow. The ship is presently docked in Shanghai. I’ll join it next week.”

“And after that?”

“Depends on the route.”

He looked towards Sneha.

“Aapka kya programme hai?”

(What is your schedule?)

“Tomorrow, I leave for Delhi. My college has organised a felicitation ceremony. After that, I’ll return directly to Bhandargarh.”

Priya sat quietly beside them.

Dipankar adjusted the cushion behind her and handed her a glass of water.

The tenderness between them brought a brief smile to Sneha’s face.

For one evening, she allowed herself to step away from the temple, the murders, and the unanswered questions.

But the case was never far from her thoughts.

Chapter 35

Dipankar flew to Shanghai to rejoin his ship.

That same morning, Sneha boarded a flight to Delhi.

By afternoon, she had checked into her hotel.

The felicitation ceremony was scheduled for the evening, so she used the remaining hours to rest and review updates from her investigation team in Bhandargarh.

The case was still moving slowly.

No major breakthrough had emerged.



That evening, Sneha dressed in a saree and left for her former engineering institute.

Returning after so many years stirred emotions she had not expected.

Professional success had brought recognition, rank, and responsibility.

But being honoured by the institution where her own journey had begun felt different.

Personal.

The campus had changed considerably, yet parts of it remained exactly as she remembered.

The auditorium was already crowded when she arrived.

Several professors from her student days were present, while others had long since retired. Students filled the hall, eager to hear from someone who had once sat in the same classrooms.

After the Head of Department delivered the introductory address, Sneha was invited onto the stage.

“May I request DIG Sneha Kulkarni to share her experiences with our students?”

The audience applauded.

After receiving the felicitation, Sneha spoke briefly about discipline, public service, setbacks, and the importance of thinking independently.

The formal programme was followed by an interaction with the students.

Questions came rapidly.

Career choices.

Civil services.

Handling pressure.

Leadership.

Failure.

Sneha answered as many as she could.

Later, during refreshments, she finally had a moment to herself.

Then she noticed a familiar face across the hall.

Older now.

Grey-haired.

But unmistakable.

Professor Kamath.

He had taught physics during her undergraduate years and had also served as the placement coordinator during that period.

Sneha smiled and walked towards him.

“Professor Kamath?”

The elderly professor turned.

For a moment, he stared at her.

Then recognition appeared in his eyes.

“Sneha Kulkarni.”

His face broke into a smile.

“So the student has finally returned as DIG Sneha Kulkarni.”

Sneha laughed.

“And you still remember me, sir?”

“I remember more students than they imagine.”

They shook hands.

Neither of them knew it yet, but the conversation that was about to begin would take Sneha’s investigation in an entirely new direction.

Chapter 36

Sneha sat across from Professor Kamath while the noise of the ceremony continued around them.

For a few minutes, they spoke about the institute, former professors, and how much the campus had changed.

Professor Kamath smiled.

“You’ve come a long way, Sneha.”

She laughed softly.

“Sometimes I still remember how nervous I was during those first few semesters.”

“You were nervous, yes. But you were also one of the most inquisitive students I taught.”

Sneha smiled.

“I remember you trying very hard to convince me to sit for the placement drive.”

“I did.”

“And I disappointed you.”

Professor Kamath shook his head.

“Not disappointed. Surprised.”

“UPSC had always fascinated me, sir. Corporate life never really attracted me.”

“I realised that eventually.”

He took a sip of tea.

“Many students opted out of placements during my years here. Most of them I barely remember now.”

He paused.

“But there was one student I never forgot.”

Sneha looked at him.

“Why?”

“He was about two years junior to you. Exceptionally gifted. One of the finest minds I encountered during my teaching career.”

“What happened to him?”

Professor Kamath’s expression became thoughtful.

“His mother died while he was still studying here. It affected him deeply.”

Sneha listened.

“He was expected to receive one of the best placement offers of his batch,” Kamath continued. “Instead, he refused to participate.”

“Just refused?”

“And then disappeared.”

Sneha’s attention sharpened.

“For how long?”

“Almost a year.”

“Did the institute know where he had gone?”

“No.”

“His family?”

“Not even his father.”

Sneha remained silent.

Professor Kamath continued.

“His father searched everywhere. The young man eventually returned, completed the remaining formalities connected with his degree, and later went to the United States for higher studies.”

“Did he ever explain where he had been?”

“Not that I know of.”

Sneha leaned back.

One unexplained year in the life of a brilliant student meant nothing by itself.

Still, something about the story interested her.

Her investigation was already pointing towards someone intelligent.

Patient.

Someone capable of recognising the value of material that an ordinary criminal might have ignored.

“Do you remember anything unusual about him before he disappeared?” she asked.

Professor Kamath thought for a moment.

“He changed after his mother’s death. Became quieter. More withdrawn.”

“Anything else?”

“He developed an interest in subjects far outside his engineering work.”

“Such as?”

“Old texts. Ancient stories. Myths. Things I never expected someone like him to take seriously.”

Sneha’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Do you remember what kind of myths?”

Professor Kamath shook his head.

“Not clearly. It was a long time ago.”

Sneha did not press him.

The conversation might still mean nothing.

A gifted student.

Personal tragedy.

An unexplained disappearance.

An interest in ancient material.

None of it constituted evidence.

But it was enough to justify another question.

Another search.

Sneha thanked Professor Kamath and rose.

As she walked towards the car waiting outside, her thoughts remained with the unnamed student.

A brilliant mind.

A missing year.

An unexplained fascination with ancient knowledge.

For the first time, Sneha felt that she might have found a thread worth pulling.

She still did not know his name.

And she had no idea where that thread would lead.

Chapter 37

The chanting filled the room.

Raj sat before the open manuscript, repeating the ancient words in a precise, measured rhythm.

He had been at it for nearly an hour.

His eyes remained fixed on the symbols before him while the chant continued without interruption.

Then something changed.

A faint vibration passed through the floor.

Raj stopped.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then water began seeping across the stone beneath him.

At first, only a thin layer.

Within seconds, it began rising.

Raj stared in disbelief.

The water climbed around the legs of the table.

Loose papers lifted from the floor.

Books began floating.

A wooden chair shifted slowly across the room and struck the wall.

Raj stood.

The water continued rising.

His reflection trembled across its surface, stretched and distorted until his own form seemed almost unrecognisable.

For several moments, the room itself appeared to lose all sense of reality.

Raj had spent his life searching for explanations.

Mathematics.

Physics.

Biology.

Chemistry.

Everything, he believed, ultimately obeyed a principle.

But what was happening before him belonged to no principle he understood.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, everything stopped.

The water disappeared.

Raj remained standing.

The floor was completely dry.

He looked around.

The books were back on the table.

The chair stood where it had been before.

The scattered papers had returned to their original positions.

Nothing appeared disturbed.

As though the previous few minutes had never happened.

Raj touched the floor.

Dry.

He looked at his clothes.

Dry.

For the first time in years, even he appeared uncertain.

Then his eyes returned to the manuscript.

Slowly, uncertainty gave way to excitement.

He dropped heavily into the chair.

Exhaustion had begun to overwhelm him.

Raj removed two cigarettes from the packet.

He lit both.

Smoke filled his lungs.

A faint smile appeared.

“Everything is finally falling into place.”

His fingers moved across the newly deciphered passage.

“This is the key to Phase Two.”

He read the final lines again.

Once.

Then a second time.

His expression changed.

“And after that...”

Raj whispered a single word.

“N.....lo.”

At that exact moment, thunder exploded above the cottage, drowning the rest of his voice.

Raj leaned back.

His exhaustion had vanished beneath something far stronger.

Triumph.

“Finally.”

Outside, darkness spread across the valley.

Inside, Raj continued staring at the manuscript.

Whatever Phase Two promised, he now believed he had found the path towards it.

Chapter 38

Sneha returned to Bhandargarh the following day.

Throughout the journey, one name remained in her mind.

Raj.

Before leaving Delhi, she had asked the institute administration to search its old student and placement records.

Professor Kamath had given her enough details.

A student approximately two years junior to her.

Exceptionally gifted.

Mother deceased during his engineering years.

Withdrew from the placement process.

Disappeared for almost a year.

The records had produced a name.

Raj.

Nothing she had discovered constituted evidence against him.

But the coincidences were enough to justify looking deeper.

Back at the guest house, Sneha began tracing his history.

The task proved surprisingly difficult.

Raj had left remarkably little behind.

A property in Delhi that had once been associated with his family had been sold. The present owner knew nothing about him; the transaction had been completed through a person legally authorised to act on Raj's behalf.

His father was dead.

Records from his father's former government department confirmed that the necessary death-related formalities had been completed and the pension account closed.

After that, the trail became thin.

No current address.

No reliable telephone number.

No obvious family contact who could tell the investigators where Raj was living.

Sneha stared at the file.

A man with such an extraordinary academic and professional background should not have been difficult to trace.

Yet large portions of his life appeared almost blank.

One trail remained.

The United States.

Raj had completed his doctoral research there before joining a prestigious research organisation.

If anyone could tell Sneha what kind of scientist Raj had become, it would be the professor who had supervised his doctoral work.

Professor Yang Li.

Sneha initially intended to approach him through formal channels.

Then luck intervened.

A younger researcher from her own institute was currently working with Professor Li.

His name was Vivek.

Through him, Sneha's team managed to arrange an online conversation with the professor.

She looked once more at Raj's old photograph.

Professor Kamath had given her a name.

The institute records had given her a history.

Perhaps Professor Li could now tell her something more important.

What Raj had been searching for.

And what he had become.

Chapter 39

Perhaps Sneha did remember Raj after all.

Only faintly.

She had been about two years senior to him, but somewhere in her memory remained the image of a tall, lanky young man walking across the campus or sitting quietly in the mess.

Nothing more.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the incoming video call.

Professor Yang Li appeared on the screen from the United States.

“Hello, Ms Sneha. I am Professor Li. Vivek told me you wanted some information about my former student, Raj.”

“Yes, Professor. Thank you for speaking with me.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Anything you remember about him.”

Professor Li paused.

“Raj was exceptional. Academically, perhaps one of the most gifted students I ever supervised.”

“Personally?”

“Reserved. Difficult to understand.”

He adjusted his glasses.

“Money and professional recognition never seemed to motivate him greatly. After completing his doctorate, he accepted an excellent research position. His future appeared secure.”

“But then he disappeared?”

“Yes. After working for roughly two years, he suddenly withdrew from professional life. Even people who worked closely with him had no idea where he had gone.”

Sneha leaned forward.

“Was there anything unusual about his research interests?”

Professor Li thought for a moment.

“Yes.”

Sneha waited.

“His official research involved superconducting and advanced electronic materials under low-temperature conditions. But privately, Raj developed another interest.”

“What?”

“Poisons.”

Sneha’s expression changed.

“More specifically?”

“Snake venom.”

For several seconds, she said nothing.

Professor Li continued.

“He collected books and scientific papers on reptiles, venom chemistry, and the behaviour of toxins under extreme conditions. I told him several times that the subject had little connection with his assigned research.”

“Did he ever explain why he was studying it?”

“Never clearly.”

Professor Li smiled faintly.

“With Raj, you often received another question instead of an answer.”

Sneha looked towards the files beside her.

“Anything else you remember?”

“One thing.”

“What?”

“Once, he asked me whether a biological toxin could remain preserved for centuries under the right environmental conditions.”

Sneha stopped writing.

“Centuries?”

“Yes.”

“And whether it could become active again?”

Professor Li nodded.

“That was exactly his question.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That under certain conditions, biological material can remain stable for extended periods, but his idea was highly speculative. There were too many variables to make the kind of claim he was suggesting.”

Sneha remained silent.

“At the time,” Professor Li continued, “I regarded it as intellectual curiosity. Raj asked unusual questions about many things.”

He looked directly into the camera.

“Why are you asking about him?”

Sneha hesitated.

“He may possess information relevant to an investigation.”

Professor Li nodded slowly.

“I wish I could tell you more.”

“You already have.”

“Good luck, Ms Sneha.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

The call ended.

Sneha remained motionless.

On her desk lay photographs of the temple murals.

Takshak.

The serpent.

The unexplained proteins and enzymatic activity recovered from the victims.

And now Raj’s private fascination with snake venom.

For the first time, the connection was no longer based entirely on instinct.

It was still not evidence of a crime.

But it was a lead she could no longer ignore.

Chapter 40

Could Raj be the connecting link?

Sneha was not ready to call him a suspect.

Not yet.

But too many separate threads were beginning to move in his direction.

His extraordinary intelligence.

The unexplained gaps in his life.

His private interest in snake venom.

And now the possibility that someone outside Ramnath Ji's family had once helped complete the paintings inside the priest's private room.

Her phone rang.

It was the painting specialist.

"Ma'am, I have the report."

Sneha straightened.

"And?"

"My conclusion is that the mural was almost certainly completed by two different painters."

"How much of it?"

“Approximately one-fourth appears to have been painted by the second person.”

“Can you tell me anything about them?”

“Nothing that would identify them. But the technique is slightly different. The strokes are lighter in some sections, and the direction of movement changes.”

Sneha listened carefully.

“Could Ramnath Ji himself have painted those portions at a different time?”

“It cannot be ruled out completely,” the expert replied. “But taken together, the differences strongly suggest another painter.”

“Anything else?”

“Whoever completed the second portion was skilled. The transition between the two styles is subtle enough that most people would never notice it.”

Sneha thanked him and ended the call.

The clue was no longer merely an impression she had formed while staring at a wall.

There was probably a second painter.

Someone who had spent enough time inside Ramnath Ji’s private room to contribute to the mural.

But there was still nothing linking that person to Raj.

She needed more.

Sneha contacted the records section of her former engineering institute and asked them to search Raj’s archived internship documents.

Most student information had been digitised, but records from that period were incomplete.

Several hours later, scanned copies arrived.

There was little of immediate interest.

Then Sneha found the internship record.

Raj's final industrial internship before the placement period had lasted approximately two months.

The company was a major multinational involved in semiconductor systems and advanced engineering technologies.

Sneha read the location twice.

Bhandargarh region.

She stopped.

Raj had been here before his unexplained one-year disappearance.

Long before he returned as an overqualified assistant librarian.

Before the temple murders.

Before his name had appeared anywhere in her investigation.

The internship did not prove that he had visited the temple.

It did not prove that he had known Ramnath Ji.

But it established something important.

Raj's connection with Bhandargarh went back years.

Sneha obtained the company details and contacted its management.

The organisation still operated, although most of the employees from Raj's internship period had either retired or moved elsewhere.

Her rank, combined with the seriousness of the investigation, gave her access to archived HR records.

For nearly an hour, Sneha examined the surviving documents connected with Raj's assignment.

Dates.

Project details.

The area in which he had been posted.

Nothing dramatic.

Yet enough to narrow where he had spent those two months.

When Sneha finally closed the file, a faint smile appeared on her face.

"Finally."

She now knew where to start asking about the young Raj.

Not the scientist.

Not the librarian.

The engineering student who had first arrived in Bhandargarh years ago.

Chapter 41

Amavasya was approaching.

This one mattered.

Raj stood beside the table, studying the final deciphered passage.

“The second phase must begin inside the temple,” he murmured.

“Only there will the final passage reveal itself.”

If the ritual worked, years of searching would finally reach their conclusion.

But one obstacle remained.

Sneha.

Raj had followed the investigation closely enough to know that she was moving steadily towards him.

He had underestimated her once.

He would not make that mistake again.

“I have to be careful until Phase Two is complete.”

His expression hardened.

“After that, nothing will matter.”

He closed the manuscript.

Then, unexpectedly, his eyes moved towards an old guitar resting in the corner.

Raj picked it up.

For several minutes, he played quietly.

The melody was simple.

Familiar.

Almost without realising it, he began humming along.

For a brief moment, something of the man he had once been returned.

The young student.

The son his parents had known.

The scientist whose life might have followed an entirely different path.

Then the music stopped.

Raj placed the guitar aside.

Amavasya was coming.

There was no room for distraction.

Sneha's investigation had finally begun producing results.

Raj's internship records confirmed that he had spent nearly two months in the Bhandargarh region during his engineering years.

The timing interested her.

His first known connection with Bhandargarh had occurred before the unexplained year in which he vanished from his family and institute.

His mother's death had followed during the same period of his life, and soon afterward Raj withdrew from the placement process and disappeared.

Sneha now had the outline of a possible sequence.

Bhandargarh.

The temple legends.

Personal tragedy.

Then the disappearance.

But a sequence was not evidence.

She needed proof that Raj had done more than simply complete an internship in the region.

Her team began speaking to elderly residents and shopkeepers who had been around the temple area during those years.

Most remembered nothing.

Then one elderly shopkeeper paused when Sneha showed him Raj's old student photograph.

He stared at it for several seconds.

"I have seen this boy."

Sneha leaned forward.

"Where?"

"Years ago. He used to come here."

"How often?"

"Several times."

"What did he want?"

The old man looked towards the distant ruins.

"He kept asking about the temple."

Sneha remained still.

"And Ramnath Ji," the shopkeeper added. "He wanted to know about the priest, his family, and the old stories connected with the place."

Sneha looked again at Raj's photograph.

This was different.

Raj had not merely passed through Bhandargarh as an engineering intern.

He had asked questions.

He had searched for information about the temple.

And about Ramnath Ji.

Years before the murders.

Sneha slipped the photograph back into the file.

For the first time, Raj's connection with the temple was no longer theoretical.

It was becoming a trail.

Chapter 42

Sneha continued questioning the elderly shopkeeper.

“How long ago was this?”

The old man thought for a moment.

“Lagbhag 8 saal pehle.”

(About eight years ago.)

“Was it only once?”

He shook his head.

“Nahin, Madam ji. Do-teen baar aaya tha. Shayad usse bhi zyada.”

(No, Madam. He came two or three times. Perhaps even more.)

“What exactly did he ask you?”

The shopkeeper glanced towards the distant temple ruins.

“Mandir ke baare mein. Pujari ji ke baare mein. Unke parivaar ke baare mein.”

(About the temple. About the priest. About his family.)

He paused.

“Puraani kahaaniyan bhi poochta tha.”

(He also used to ask about the old stories.)

Sneha’s attention sharpened.

“Did you ever see him with Ramnath Ji?”

The shopkeeper frowned, searching his memory.

“Saath mein toh yaad nahin. Lekin ek-do baar use Pujari ji ke ghar ki taraf jaate dekha tha.”

(I don't remember seeing them together. But once or twice, I saw him going towards the priest's house.)

Sneha said nothing.

That was more significant.

Still not proof.

But Raj's connection with Ramnath Ji was becoming harder to dismiss as coincidence.

He had not merely visited Bhandargarh during his internship.

He had returned to the temple area repeatedly.

Asked about its legends.

Asked about the hereditary priest.

And may even have approached Ramnath Ji's house.

Sneha called her team.

“Circulate Raj's photograph among the relevant police units. Start with Bhandargarh and the surrounding districts.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“I want him located and questioned. At this stage, that's all.”

“Understood.”

“If anyone finds him, they inform us immediately. No unnecessary confrontation.”

She ended the call.

Raj was now more than a name in an old college file.

His trail had begun years ago at the very place where four people were now dead.

Sneha looked towards the temple.

The question was no longer whether Raj had been interested in its secrets.

He clearly had been.

The question was how far he had gone to uncover them.

Far away, Raj sat alone beside the open manuscript.

Amavasya was drawing closer.

While Sneha reconstructed the beginning of his search, Raj was preparing for its end.

His notes lay arranged beside him.

Calculations.

Symbols.

Decoded passages.

And the material he had guarded for years.

He read the final instructions once more.

Phase Two was almost ready.

Raj smiled faintly.

“They are still looking at my past.”

His fingers rested on the manuscript.

“By the time they understand it, it will be too late.”

Chapter 43

The small bottle rested beside the manuscripts.

Raj stared at it almost reverently.

“How could something like this remain hidden from the world?”

The answer, he believed, had been beneath the lake.

A tourist valley visited by thousands had concealed something no visitor would ever have thought to search for.

Raj lifted the bottle carefully.

One of the passages he had deciphered described what appeared to be another version of the Brahmin legend.

After Takshak destroyed the tree, traces of the substance responsible for its destruction had supposedly been collected before the Brahmin restored it.

The residue was then preserved.

Hidden.

Protected.

And, according to the fragmented account, eventually carried far from the place where the legend had begun.

Raj had spent years trying to determine whether the passage described symbolism, ritual—or something biological.

Now he believed he knew.

He held the bottle towards the light.

Takshak's venom.

Or at least a surviving remnant of whatever ancient people had understood by that name.

There was no way to prove its origin.

Not yet.

But Raj had never needed absolute proof before moving to the next question.

The manuscripts had led him towards the lake.

His scientific training had allowed him to interpret clues that others might have dismissed as mythology.

During his years in the United States, his official research had focused on superconducting and advanced materials under extreme conditions.

Privately, however, he had studied venom.

Temperature.

Pressure.

Preservation.

Reactivation.

At the time, he had possessed only theories.

Now, in his mind, the pieces finally belonged to the same puzzle.

The temple.

The Brahmin.

The hidden village.

The lake.

The manuscripts.

And the bottle before him.

Raj smiled.

“One week.”

Amavasya was only seven days away.

Phase Two had to be completed inside the temple.

After that, Raj believed he would finally reach what had consumed years of his life.

In Bhandargarh, Sneha was moving just as quickly.

Raj’s photograph had been circulated.

His past was being reconstructed.

And each new piece of information was drawing the investigation closer to him.

Neither knew exactly how little distance now remained between them.

Raj was preparing to complete his search.

Sneha was preparing to understand it.

And both paths were leading towards the same destination.

The temple.

Amavasya was approaching.

Chapter 44

Sneha still could not understand Raj's motive.

She was increasingly convinced that the temple, its legends, Raj's past, and the unexplained deaths belonged to the same puzzle.

But how?

The condition of the two constables troubled her most.

No known poison or biological agent adequately explained the rapid destruction of so much hard tissue.

Her phone rang.

Dr Asim.

His voice sounded more animated than usual.

"Ma'am, my toxicologist colleague has consulted several senior experts."

"And?"

"They believe the samples may contain a combination of extremely potent toxins and enzymes."

"Can they identify the source?"

"Not conclusively."

"Could it be venom?"

“It remains one possibility. But the composition doesn’t match anything we can identify with confidence.”

Sneha frowned.

“How dangerous?”

“Potentially lethal in very small quantities. But without knowing exactly what we’re dealing with, even that assessment has limits.”

“Mode of transmission?”

“Still unknown.”

Sneha remained silent for a moment.

“So we have a possible toxic or enzymatic mechanism, but no source.”

“That would be the safest way to describe it.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

She ended the call.

Another clue.

Still no complete answer.

Raj had studied venom.

Unusual proteins and enzymes had been recovered from the victims.

The connection was becoming harder to ignore.

But suspicion was not proof.

And Sneha still had no idea what Raj ultimately wanted.

Then her phone rang again.

This time, Dipankar appeared on a video call.

“Hi, Dipankar.”

“Di, I need a favour.”

His expression was serious.

Sneha immediately straightened.

“What happened?”

“It’s Priya.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes. Medically, she’s fine.”

“Then?”

“She wants to see you.”

Sneha paused.

“Why?”

“She hasn’t told me properly. But she keeps insisting that you come.”

“Urgently?”

“Yes, Di. Please.”

Sneha studied his face.

“Has she remembered something?”

Dipankar hesitated.

“I think so.”

That was enough.

“I’ll come.”

“How soon?”

“As soon as I can manage.”

Sneha disconnected the call.

For several seconds, she remained still.

Priya.

The abandoned house.

The word serpent.

Until now, Priya had been too weak and traumatised to describe what had happened there.

Perhaps that was about to change.

Perhaps the past was finally ready to speak.

Chapter 45

Sneha reached home exhausted.

Priya's recovery had progressed considerably. Physiotherapy had strengthened her legs, and she could now walk short distances without assistance. The walker remained nearby, but even that might soon become unnecessary.

When Sneha arrived, Priya was asleep.

The journey and the constant pressure of the investigation had drained Sneha as well.

She went upstairs, closed the door of her room, put on some old music, and lay down.

Within minutes, she was asleep.

By the time she woke, evening had fallen.

After spending some time with her parents, Sneha went to Priya's room.

Priya was waiting for her.

Sneha hugged her gently and sat beside the bed.

“Di... mujhe aapse kuchh kehna hai.”

(Di... I want to tell you something.)

Her speech was still slightly slow.

“Aaram se, Priya. Take your time.”

(Easy, Priya. Take your time.)

Priya took a deep breath.

“That night... in the house...”

Sneha’s attention sharpened.

“What did you see?”

Priya’s expression changed.

“I had gone down the path for a walk. There was an old house among the trees.”

She paused.

“The door was partly open.”

Sneha waited.

“I looked inside.”

Priya’s hands began trembling.

“There was a tall man in the room. He was doing something... I couldn’t understand what.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Something like a ritual.”

Sneha leaned slightly closer.

“Did you see his face?”

Priya shook her head.

“No. It was too dark.”

Her breathing quickened.

“Then suddenly... the whole room filled with water.”

Sneha froze.

“Water?”

Priya nodded.

“It rose everywhere. The furniture started floating. Things were moving around the room.”

She closed her eyes.

“And inside the water... I saw something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

Tears appeared in Priya’s eyes.

“It wasn’t clear. Something huge. Like an image... or a shadow.”

She tightened her grip on Sneha’s hand.

“Something like a serpent.”

Sneha remained silent.

“What happened then?”

“I ran.”

Priya’s voice trembled.

“I ran back towards the resort.”

She swallowed.

“When I reached there, I couldn’t breathe properly.”

Sneha remembered Dipankar’s account.

Priya continued.

“Then my legs stopped responding.”

She looked towards Sneha.

“After that... my arms.”

Her eyes filled again.

“I remember trying to speak.”

Sneha already knew the word.

Serpent.

“And then?” she asked gently.

Priya shook her head.

“Nothing. I don’t remember anything after that.”

Sneha squeezed her hand.

“That’s enough for today.”

Priya closed her eyes.

Sneha remained beside her for several minutes.

A tall man.

A ritual.

A room inexplicably filling with water.

Furniture floating.

A vast serpent-like image.

She had heard nothing like it in any conventional criminal investigation.

Yet she could not dismiss Priya’s account simply because it sounded impossible.

Trauma could distort memory.

Fear could alter perception.

But the abandoned house was real.

And somewhere inside Priya’s fragmented memory might be something the investigation needed.

For the first time, her ordeal no longer seemed entirely separate from the Bhandargarh case.

Two mysteries that had begun hundreds of kilometres apart were slowly moving towards each other.

Chapter 46

Was Priya remembering something real?

Or had trauma altered part of what she remembered?

Sneha called the neurologist who had treated her.

“Doctor, could someone recovering from severe shock experience hallucinations or distorted memories?”

“Certainly,” he replied. “Trauma, altered consciousness, medication, and memory disruption can sometimes produce experiences that feel completely real.”

“So Priya may have imagined what she saw?”

“It is possible.”

“And it is also possible that she remembers the event accurately?”

“Yes. Medicine cannot determine that from her description alone.”

Sneha thanked him and ended the call.

There was only one useful way forward.

Find the house.

With assistance from the local authorities, Sneha reached the Western Ghats the following day.

The resort staff helped identify the old pathway Priya had taken that night.

At the bottom of the slope, partly concealed by trees, stood a small secluded cottage.

Its rear window faced the narrow path.

Priya could easily have noticed the house during her walk.

The cottage was empty.

The owner was located and brought in for questioning.

According to him, an unknown man had rented the place for a short period and paid several months' rent in advance.

"No agreement?" Sneha asked.

The landlord lowered his eyes.

"No, Madam."

"Identification?"

He hesitated.

"Nothing."

"You rented the cottage without taking any identification?"

"He paid the entire amount in cash. I didn't think—"

"That was your mistake."

The landlord said nothing.

A forensic team began searching the cottage.

Almost everything had been removed.

No papers.

No clothes.

No equipment.

No obvious fingerprints of immediate value.

Whoever had occupied the cottage had left very little behind.

Then an officer called from one corner.

“Ma’am.”

Sneha walked over.

Near the wall lay several discarded cigarette ends.

Beside them was a used inhaler.

Sneha crouched and examined both without touching them.

“Bag everything.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The items might prove useless.

Or they might yield DNA, fingerprints, brand information, or some other trace that could eventually identify the occupant.

More importantly, the cottage itself confirmed that Priya had not imagined the location.

Someone had been living there around the period of her ordeal.

Whether anything else she remembered had actually happened remained another question entirely.

Sneha slowly looked around the empty room.

The occupant had removed almost everything.

Almost.

The landlord was taken for formal questioning, and the cottage was sealed for further examination.

Outside, Sneha looked towards the dark valley below.

Someone had stayed here.

Someone who had chosen an isolated cottage, paid in cash, provided no identification, and left behind almost nothing.

That alone made the place important.

And for the first time, the Western Ghats incident had given Sneha a trail she could follow.

Chapter 47

Only a few days remained before Amavasya.

Raj had deliberately gone quiet.

He still did not consider Sneha his intellectual equal, but he had stopped dismissing her.

He remembered hearing about her during his engineering days.

Bright.

Disciplined.

Persistent.

Raj lit a cigarette.

“Maybe I have been too confident.”

He exhaled slowly.

“Underestimating her would be a mistake.”

At this stage, even a small error could destroy years of work.

He had to remain invisible until Phase Two was complete.

Raj walked towards the table and looked at the manuscripts.

“Nothing unnecessary now.”

His eyes moved across the pages.

Every calculation had been checked.

Every passage he could decipher had been studied repeatedly.

Every step had to occur at the right time.

Then a faint smile appeared.

“But before the final phase...”

He stopped.

There was still one precaution he wanted to take.

One final check before everything depended on a single night.

The warmth that had once existed in his eyes had almost completely disappeared.

Raj lit another cigarette and returned to his thoughts.

Talking to himself had become a habit over the years.

So had smoking.

Neither had been part of the young man who once walked through his engineering campus.

Both had grown with his obsession.

Sneha returned to Bhandargarh that evening.

She went directly to the guest house and called a meeting with her investigation team, district officials, and senior police officers.

The Western Ghats cottage had given them another trail.

Raj’s photograph was already circulating.

His history with Bhandargarh was becoming clearer.

But they still did not know where he was.

Or what he intended to do next.

Sneha looked around the room.

“Amavasya is only a few days away.”

No one spoke.

She continued.

“We still don’t know whether the lunar dates are relevant. But considering everything that has happened around this temple, I’m not taking unnecessary chances.”

She began assigning responsibilities.

The temple.

Ramnath Ji’s house.

The surrounding roads.

Any new information about Raj.

Everything would be watched more closely.

Sneha closed the file before her.

This time, she intended to be ready before the next unexplained event occurred.

Chapter 48

Vigilance around the temple had been intensified.

The streets and narrow lanes leading towards the ruins and Ramnath Ji's house were under constant surveillance.

Sneha was taking no chances.

The elderly shopkeeper had been questioned again, but he could add nothing beyond what he had already told them.

Raj had visited years earlier.

He had asked about the temple.

About Ramnath Ji.

About the old legends.

Beyond that, the trail ended.

His present whereabouts remained unknown.

Still, Sneha's teams were working day and night.

The nights had remained peaceful so far.

Yet an uneasiness lingered among the officers posted near the temple.

They had all heard what had happened there before.

That night, the darkness seemed deeper than usual.

The moon had thinned to a faint crescent as Amavasya approached, leaving the temple ruins almost completely swallowed by shadow.

For a long time, nothing moved.
Then the wind began.
At first, it was only a gentle current through the trees.
Leaves trembled.
Loose dust moved across the road.
A constable standing near one of the barricades looked towards the sky.
Something had passed above him.
He frowned.
Then another officer saw it.
So did several local residents watching from nearby houses.
A vast dark shape was moving through the sky above the temple.
No one could make out its form clearly.
The darkness concealed almost everything.
Some witnesses later described wings.
Others insisted they had seen nothing resembling a bird at all.
To one constable, it looked like an enormous mass gliding through the air.
Then came the sound.
A deep, unnatural cry echoed over the ruins.
People froze.
The shape circled above the temple.
Once.
Then again.

For several minutes, it remained visible only as a darker shadow against the night sky.

An officer reached for his phone.

Before anyone could react properly, the shape rose sharply.

And disappeared into the darkness.

Sneha's phone rang almost immediately.

"Ma'am, something has been seen above the temple."

"What?"

"We don't know. Something very large."

"A drone?"

"No, Ma'am. At least... it didn't look like one."

"Where is it now?"

"Gone."

Sneha stood.

"Keep everyone in position. Nobody leaves their post. Check the temple perimeter and the surrounding area. I'm coming."

She ended the call.

By the time she reached the temple, there was nothing unusual to see.

No object.

No animal.

No trace of whatever had crossed the sky.

Only frightened witnesses giving slightly different descriptions of the same event.

Sneha listened to each of them.

She did not use the word creature.

She did not use the word supernatural.
Witnesses could misjudge size in darkness.
Fear could alter perception.
Several people could influence one another without realising it.
There were many possible explanations.
Yet something had happened.
And it had happened above the temple.
Again.
Sneha looked towards the dark ruins.
She was disappointed that whatever had appeared was already gone.
But she was no longer as uncertain as she had been when she first took over the case.
The investigation was producing a pattern.
Raj.
The manuscripts.
The murals.
The unexplained deaths.
The strange events surrounding the temple.
And an Amavasya that was drawing closer with every passing hour.
Sneha still did not know what all of it meant.
But now she was certain of one thing.
She was getting closer.

Chapter 49

Raj could already be somewhere inside Bhandargarh.

That possibility troubled Sneha more than anything else.

Time was running out.

The cigarette ends and the used inhaler recovered from the Western Ghats cottage remained among the few physical clues left behind by its unknown occupant.

Sneha studied the photographs of the recovered items.

“If the same person uses this inhaler regularly, there is a chance he has needed another one since leaving the cottage.”

She turned towards her team.

“Check pharmacies across Bhandargarh. Show them the inhaler brand and Raj’s photograph.”

One of the officers hesitated.

“Ma’am, there could be hundreds of customers using the same medication.”

“I know. Don’t waste time trying to trace every buyer. Concentrate on recent purchases and on anyone the shopkeepers remember because he was unfamiliar, bought repeatedly, or behaved unusually.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And check cigarette vendors in the same areas.”

She pointed towards the photographs of the cigarette ends.

“We know the cottage occupant smoked heavily. If Raj is here and the two clues belong to him, someone may have noticed him.”

Two additional teams were sent to nearby towns.

Sneha looked around the room.

“I want every possible lead followed. Even the weak ones.”

The officers dispersed.

She knew exactly how uncertain the reasoning was.

There was no proof that the inhaler belonged to Raj.

No proof that the cigarette ends were his.

No proof that the Western Ghats cottage occupant and the man they were now searching for were the same person.

But Amavasya was only two days away.

At this stage, dismissing a possible lead could be more dangerous than following one that eventually proved useless.

As the meeting ended, Dr Asim and the painting specialist arrived.

Sneha looked towards them.

“Tell me what you have.”

Two days before Amavasya, Raj appeared strangely relaxed.

For once, cigarettes were not his only companions.

Before him lay a meal of shahi paneer, dal makhani, and hot tandoori naan.

He ate slowly, almost luxuriously.

For years, meals had been interruptions.

Sleep had been a necessity.

Comfort had been irrelevant.

Everything had been subordinated to the search.

That evening, Raj allowed himself to enjoy the food.

He tore a piece of naan, dipped it into the dal, and leaned back with a faint smile.

Perhaps it was a celebration.

Perhaps a farewell.

Not to life itself, but to the ordinary existence he believed he was about to leave behind.

His eyes moved towards the manuscript resting nearby.

Forty-eight hours.

That was all that remained.

Raj lifted another piece of naan.

For the first time in months, he seemed completely at peace.

Chapter 50

Dr Asim and Vijay Shanker took their seats across from Sneha.

“Anything more either of you can add?” she asked. “Even something that seemed insignificant earlier?”

Dr Asim shook his head.

“Nothing definite, Ma’am. The toxicology findings remain unchanged.”

Sneha turned towards Vijay Shanker.

The painting expert hesitated.

“There is one observation.”

“What?”

“We have already established that approximately one-fourth of the mural was probably completed by a second painter.”

“Yes.”

“I examined those sections several times after preparing my report.”

Sneha waited.

“The second painter seems to have worked with a lighter, more flexible hand. Some of the movements are quicker and more fluid than Ramnath Ji’s.”

“What does that tell you?”

Vijay Shanker considered his words carefully.

“It cannot establish age scientifically. Painting technique depends on many things—style, posture, physical condition, even the brush being used.”

“But?”

He nodded.

“After thirty-five years of studying paintings, my impression is that the second painter may have been considerably younger than Ramnath Ji.”

Sneha leaned back.

A younger person.

Someone trusted enough to enter Ramnath Ji’s private room.

Someone skilled enough to reproduce sections of the same imagery found inside the temple.

Could that person have been Raj?

Perhaps.

But she still had no evidence connecting him to the paintings.

“Could you recognise the painter from another sample of his work?”

“Possibly, if we had something comparable. But I would not promise it.”

Sneha nodded.

“Fair enough.”

She turned towards Dr Asim.

“Anything changes, however small, call me immediately.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Vijay Shanker Ji.”

Both men left.

Another small piece had fallen into place.

But Sneha still needed something that would take her from possibility to proof.

~

Outside, Bhandargarh's pharmacies and cigarette vendors were being checked one by one.

Dozens of shops.

Hundreds of possible customers.

And only two days remaining before Amavasya.

By nightfall, Sneha was back at her files.

Raj's photograph lay beside the photographs of the murals.

She stared at them for several minutes.

A brilliant engineering student.

An old temple.

A missing year.

Snake venom.

A second painter.

The connections were multiplying.

But Raj himself remained invisible.

Then hurried footsteps echoed through the corridor.

Sneha looked up.

The door opened, and one of the inspectors from the search team rushed inside.

"Ma'am..."

He was breathing heavily.

Sneha immediately stood.

The expression on his face told her that something had happened.

“What did you find?”

Chapter 51

“We have a lead.”

The inspector placed Raj’s photograph on the table.

“A pharmacist in the labour colony recognised him. So did the owner of the paan shop next door.”

Sneha stood.

“Both of them?”

“Yes, Ma’am. We questioned them separately.”

“What did he buy?”

“An inhaler from the pharmacy. Cigarettes from the adjoining shop.”

The inspector paused.

“Not one or two packets, Ma’am. An entire carton.”

Sneha’s eyes narrowed.

“He was stocking up.”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“When?”

“Recently.”

“Had either of them seen him before?”

“No. Both said he appeared to be a first-time customer.”

“Anything unusual about him?”

“The pharmacist said he spoke very little. The paan-shop owner remembered him because he bought the whole carton at once and left without waiting for the change.”

Sneha looked down at Raj’s photograph.

The inhaler.

Heavy smoking.

A stranger buying enough cigarettes to avoid returning frequently.

Individually, none of it meant much.

Together, it was enough.

“Where exactly?”

The inspector pointed towards a map.

“The labour colony on the eastern side.”

Sneha studied the area.

Densely populated.

Rows of small houses and rented rooms.

Workers arriving and leaving regularly.

Few people asking questions about strangers.

A good place for someone who wanted to disappear into a crowd.

“If he chose it deliberately,” she said, “he chose well.”

She picked up the phone.

“Concentrate every available team around the labour colony. Rented rooms, vacant houses, small lodges, temporary accommodation—everything.”

There was a pause at the other end.

“Ma’am, we have a problem.”

“What?”

“A ministerial delegation arrived in the city this evening. Most of the district force has already been deployed for security.”

Sneha’s expression hardened.

“How many personnel can you give me?”

“Very few tonight. We can begin a full search at first light.”

“We may not have until first light.”

“I understand, Ma’am. But unless the security deployment changes, that is all we can spare.”

Sneha disconnected the call.

For the first time, Raj’s possible location had been narrowed to one part of the city.

And at exactly the wrong moment, manpower had become their biggest limitation.

She looked towards the officers in the room.

“Use whoever we have. Quietly. No unnecessary noise in the colony.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“If anyone sees Raj, they do not confront him alone. I want the location first.”

The officers left.

Sneha remained beside the investigation board.

The labour colony was large.

Raj might already have left.

The witnesses might even have remembered the wrong man.

But after weeks of uncertainty, she finally had something more immediate than an old record or a distant memory.

A recent sighting.

Outside, night settled over Bhandargarh.

The moon had almost vanished.

Amavasya was approaching.

Sneha walked to the window and stared into the darkness.

Somewhere within the city, Raj might already be preparing his final move.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 52

Sneha tried every senior contact she could reach in the district administration.

Nothing worked.

The ministerial visit had absorbed most of the available police force, and the remaining personnel were already stretched thin.

Sleep was impossible.

She returned to the investigation board and began studying the timeline again.

Steven.

Ramnath Ji.

Ramesh.

The second constable.

The strange disturbances around the temple.

Dates.

Intervals.

Patterns.

Then something caught her attention.

Sneha sat upright.

“Amavasya...”

She pulled the files closer and checked the dates again.

Not every incident matched perfectly.

But too many important events seemed to cluster around Amavasya, Purnima, or periods traditionally associated with unusual activity at the temple.

The pattern had been there all along.

“My God...”

Sneha stared at the timeline.

“How did I miss this?”

Until now, she had treated the lunar references largely as part of the temple’s folklore.

Perhaps that had been a mistake.

If Raj was connected with the temple—and if he had spent years studying its rituals—then the approaching Amavasya might not simply be another date.

It might be the date he had been waiting for.

Sneha looked towards the photographs from the Western Ghats cottage.

The inhaler.

The cigarette ends.

Priya’s account of the ritual.

The room filling with water.

If the cottage occupant had indeed been Raj, then whatever he was preparing might extend far beyond the four deaths already under investigation.

Sneha looked at the clock.

Almost five in the morning.

She had been working through the entire night.

Her eyes burned with exhaustion.

There was nothing more she could do until the search teams were reinforced at first light.

She closed the files and finally went to bed.

Elsewhere, Raj sat watching the first light spread across the sky.

A cup of tea rested beside him.

“Tomorrow...”

A smile appeared on his face.

“The moment I have waited for all these years.”

His eyes moved towards the manuscripts.

“Finally, the path to N...”

A locomotive thundered past nearby, swallowing the rest of the word.

Raj smiled.

He rose, prepared another cup of tea, and disappeared into the inner room.

Only one day remained.

Amavasya was almost here.

Chapter 53

Sneha woke after only a few hours of sleep.

Morning had never felt heavier.

As soon as she reached police headquarters, she summoned the search teams.

“I want the man who bought the inhaler and the carton of cigarettes traced today.”

The labour colony covered a vast area and housed a constantly changing population.

Workers came and went.

Rooms were rented informally.

Strangers attracted little attention.

Finding one man would not be easy.

“Be thorough,” Sneha instructed. “But no unnecessary confrontation. This is a sensitive area. We cannot create another problem while trying to solve this one.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The teams dispersed.

Sneha remained at headquarters, monitoring every update.

As a precaution, security around the main temple and Ramnath Ji’s house was strengthened again.

Amavasya was less than a day away.

~

Raj appeared almost disturbingly relaxed.

He prepared breakfast, ate slowly, and spent some time studying the manuscripts.

Then he went back to sleep.

No panic.

No hurried preparation.

No visible fear.

By the time he woke, evening was approaching.

Raj washed his face, made tea, and picked up the guitar.

A quiet melody filled the room.

For someone who knew the investigation was closing in on him, he seemed remarkably calm.

Almost as though everything was unfolding according to a timetable only he understood.

~

By evening, Sneha had received nothing useful.

The search teams were struggling.

Many residents were reluctant to answer questions. Others genuinely knew little about the people living several houses away.

The narrow lanes, crowded homes, temporary accommodations, and constantly shifting population made verification painfully slow.

Sneha stared at the map spread across the table.

Hour after hour was disappearing.

Amavasya was getting closer.

Waiting had become unbearable.

Finally, she stood.

“I’m going there myself.”

One of the officers looked surprised.

“Ma’am, the teams are already searching—”

“I know.”

Sneha picked up Raj’s photograph.

“But I’ve been looking at this colony on a map all day. I want to understand it on the ground.”

She turned towards the officer.

“If Raj is hiding there, someone has seen him. We just haven’t found the right person yet.”

Minutes later, Sneha’s vehicle left police headquarters.

Raj’s photograph lay on the seat beside her.

Ahead waited the crowded lanes of the labour colony.

And somewhere beyond them, perhaps, the man she had been chasing for weeks.

Chapter 54

The search continued until late evening.

Despite hours of effort, Sneha's teams found nothing.

The labour colony had yielded no confirmed trace of Raj.

By the time she returned to the guest house, frustration finally broke through.

She dropped the files onto the table.

Time was disappearing.

And somewhere, she felt certain, Raj was preparing for something.

That night, an unnatural calm settled over Bhandargarh.

The temple and Ramnath Ji's house remained heavily guarded, yet even the policemen posted there seemed uneasy.

No wind.

No distant cries.

No movement among the trees.

Only darkness.

Sneha stood at the window for a long time.

Tomorrow could decide everything.

Raj woke before sunrise.

There was no hesitation now.
He laid everything required for Phase Two across the table.
The manuscripts.
The deciphered pages.
The small bottle.
His notes.
The equipment he had prepared for the final ritual.
Each item was checked and packed carefully.
Nothing essential could be forgotten.
Nothing could be left behind.
By the time the first light appeared, Raj was ready.
He stood in the middle of the room and looked around one final time.
The place had served its purpose.
Years of searching had brought him to this day.
Amavasya.
The day on which he believed everything would finally be completed.
Raj picked up his bag and left.
Sneha reached police headquarters early.
The search teams were immediately redeployed.
Security around the main temple and Ramnath Ji's house was doubled.
Every available officer was instructed to report even the smallest development connected with Raj.
This time, Sneha did not remain behind.
She joined the operation herself.

Somewhere in Bhandargarh, a search was reaching its end.

And somewhere else, Raj had already begun the final journey of his own.

Neither yet knew exactly where their paths would meet.

Chapter 55

Raj left the house shortly after packing everything.

By the time Sneha reached the deeper lanes of the labour colony, he was already gone.

Her teams continued moving from house to house, showing Raj's photograph to residents, shopkeepers, and workers.

Then a young boy at a roadside dhaba stared at the photograph longer than the others.

“Madam ji, yahan se lagbhag bees ghar door ek makan hai.”

(Madam, there is a house about twenty houses from here.)

Sneha immediately became alert.

“Kaun rehta hai wahan?”

(Who lives there?)

“Ek mahina pehle ek saab aaye the. Kabhi-kabhi main unke liye khana dene jaata tha.”

(A gentleman came there about a month ago. Sometimes I used to deliver food to him.)

Sneha held out Raj's photograph.

“Is aadmi ko dhyaan se dekho.”

(Look carefully at this man.)

The boy stared at it.

Then nodded.

“Haan, Madam ji. Yehi hain.”

(Yes, Madam. This is him.)

Sneha’s expression changed.

“Aur kya yaad hai?”

(What else do you remember?)

“Zyada baat nahin karte the. Hamesha kitabon aur kagazon mein lage rehte the. Cigarette bhi bahut peete the.”

(He didn’t talk much. He was always busy with books and papers. He also smoked a lot.)

“Anything else?”

The boy thought for a moment.

“Kabhi-kabhi bahut khanste the.”

(Sometimes he used to cough a lot.)

Sneha was already reaching for her phone.

Within minutes, the teams searching nearby lanes converged on the location.

The house stood in an ordinary row of modest buildings.

Nothing about it attracted attention.

Exactly the kind of place a man like Raj might have chosen.

The surrounding lanes were secured.

Sneha approached the front door.

Locked.

“Open it.”

After repeated warnings received no response, the police forced their way inside.

“Search everything,” Sneha ordered.

The house was empty.

But it did not feel abandoned.

Dirty utensils remained near the sink.

A cup containing the remains of tea stood on the table.

The adjoining room told them more.

An open carton of cigarettes.

Several used inhalers.

A mattress.

A chair.

And faint marks where papers or equipment appeared to have been removed recently.

Sneha slowly looked around.

They had finally found Raj’s hideout.

And Raj was gone.

“How long ago did he leave?” an officer asked.

Sneha looked towards the cup.

“Impossible to say. But he didn’t intend to come back.”

The manuscripts were gone.

So were his notes.

Whatever Raj had been preparing, he had taken it with him.

“Where would he go?” another officer asked.

The answer seemed obvious.

The ancient temple.

Sneha took out her phone.

“Double the security at the main temple immediately. Nobody enters without clearance.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

A local constable standing near the doorway hesitated.

“Madam ji... ek aur jagah hai.”

(Madam... there is another place.)

Sneha turned.

“What place?”

The constable appeared uncertain.

“Yahan se lagbhag sau kilometre door ek puraana mandir hai.”

(There is an old temple about a hundred kilometres from here.)

Sneha stared at him.

“What about it?”

“Local log kehte hain ki woh Bhandargarh waale mandir ka judwa hai.”

(Local people say it is the twin of the Bhandargarh temple.)

For a moment, Sneha did not move.

Then the murals flashed through her mind.

Two temples.

Almost identical.

One surrounded by ruins.

The other beside a small hill.

The dark circular symbol.

The line connecting them.

“The twin temple?”

The constable nodded.

“Ji, Madam.”

(Yes, Madam.)

“Why wasn’t this mentioned earlier?”

“Bahut puraana aur sunsaan hai, Madam. Wahan ab koi regular pujari bhi nahin rehta. Zyada log jaate nahin.”

(It is very old and deserted, Madam. There is no regular priest there now. Very few people visit it.)

“How far from the main road?”

“There is a small hill. The last stretch has to be covered on foot.”

Sneha felt the entire investigation rearranging itself in her mind.

Raj had spent years studying the temple.

He knew about the murals.

He knew about the manuscripts.

And the main temple was now heavily guarded.

Perhaps they had been protecting the wrong place.

“How long to reach it?”

“If the road is clear, around two hours. Maybe more.”

Sneha was already moving towards the door.

“Alert the nearest police station. I want a team moving towards that temple immediately.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She turned towards her officers.

“One team remains here. Another reinforces the main temple.”

“And you, Ma’am?”

Sneha picked up Raj’s photograph.

“I’m going to the second temple.”

She headed towards the vehicle.

Time had become the one thing neither Sneha nor Raj could afford to lose.

Chapter 56

Two police teams moved simultaneously.

One remained at the main temple in Bhandargarh.

Sneha led the second towards the structure believed locally to be its twin.

The second temple stood nearly a hundred kilometres away, beside a small hill.

Years earlier, villagers from the surrounding region had visited it more regularly. But over time, the number of devotees had declined.

There was no permanent priest.

No major settlement nearby.

Only an old temple standing almost alone on the hillside.

What troubled Sneha was how little attention it had received during the investigation.

For weeks, witnesses had spoken about Ramnath Ji, the Bhandargarh temple, its legends, and the old priestly lineage.

Almost no one had mentioned the second temple.

Perhaps there was nothing suspicious about that.

A forgotten shrine with few visitors would mean little to most people.

But to someone who had spent years studying the murals and manuscripts, it might mean everything.

Barely minutes after leaving the labour colony, Sneha's convoy slowed.

Then stopped completely.

An accident had blocked the highway.

Traffic stretched far into the distance.

Sirens made little difference.

There was nowhere for the vehicles ahead to move.

Sneha looked at the line of stationary traffic.

"Damn it."

Every minute mattered.

Officers moved ahead on foot, coordinating with local traffic police and trying to clear enough space for the convoy to pass.

But the blockage was severe.

By the time a route was finally opened, nearly ninety minutes had been lost.

Evening was already descending.

Sneha called Bhandargarh.

"Keep maximum security at the main temple and Ramnath Ji's house. Nobody enters without clearance."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And inform me immediately if anything unusual happens."

"Understood."

The convoy accelerated towards the hills.

Sneha had eaten almost nothing since morning.

They stopped only once, for barely five minutes, to collect bottled water and packaged food.

Then they continued.

The city disappeared behind them.

The roads became narrower.

Buildings gave way to scattered houses, fields, and eventually long stretches of darkness.

Sneha looked repeatedly at the time.

Too much had already been lost.

By the time the vehicles reached the base of the hill, night had fallen.

The road ended there.

Above them, barely visible against the dark sky, stood the forgotten temple.

Silent.

Isolated.

Waiting.

Sneha stepped out of the vehicle and looked towards the path leading uphill.

Amavasya had begun.

Chapter 57

It was well past nine when Sneha and her team reached the top of the hill.

The temple stood nearly a kilometre from the road, accessible only by a narrow path cutting across the dark hillside.

Sneha moved cautiously.

This was the biggest gamble she had taken since assuming control of the investigation.

There were clues.

The twin murals.

The old temple records.

Raj's disappearance from his hideout.

The timing of Amavasya.

But there was still no proof that he had come here.

If she was wrong, she might be giving Raj exactly what he needed.

Time to disappear again.

But it was a chance she had to take.

The police advanced slowly.

Torchlight swept across trees, rocks, and uneven ground.

No houses were visible.

No lights.

Only the narrow path and the darkness surrounding it.

Then the temple appeared.

Sneha stopped.

Even in the weak torchlight, the resemblance was unmistakable.

The proportions.

The stonework.

The entrance.

The structure was remarkably similar to the ancient temple in Bhandargarh.

The same architectural language.

The same sense of age.

The resemblance explained why generations of locals had referred to it as the twin.

Yet there was one striking difference.

Much of this temple remained surprisingly intact.

And still, it had been abandoned.

Sneha raised her hand.

Everyone stopped.

“Listen.”

At first, there was only silence.

Then they heard it.

Chanting.

Low.

Rhythmic.

Continuous.

Someone was reciting mantras from somewhere deep inside the temple.

The sound rose and fell in a slow, relentless pattern.

In the silence of the hill, every syllable seemed to travel through the stone.

Sneha's expression hardened.

"Surround the temple. No one leaves."

The officers spread out.

She pointed towards the entrance.

"Two of you with me."

Then she reconsidered.

"You two go first. Check the passage. Stay in radio contact."

The two senior inspectors drew their weapons and moved towards the entrance.

Sneha watched them disappear into the darkness.

A few seconds passed.

Then one of their voices came through the radio.

"Ma'am, passage clear."

Another pause.

"We can see the inner chamber."

Sneha waited.

Then—

A scream tore through the temple.

Not surprise.

Not pain alone.

Terror.

A second cry followed almost immediately.

Then silence.

Sneha grabbed the radio.

“Report!”

Nothing.

“Inspector?”

Static.

She tried again.

“Respond!”

No answer.

The chanting had stopped.

For several seconds, no one moved.

Even the officers surrounding the temple seemed frozen.

Sneha stared towards the entrance.

Two experienced policemen had gone inside.

Neither had come back.

She drew her weapon.

“Everyone stay alert.”

Then she moved towards the darkness.

Whatever waited inside, she was going in.

Chapter 58

Fear was there.

Sneha could feel it in herself and in every officer moving behind her.

But she had reached the point where turning back was no longer possible.

Tonight, she needed answers.

She entered the temple with the remaining officers.

The chanting had stopped.

The silence left behind was somehow worse.

Sneha raised one hand.

“Stay together.”

The team advanced slowly.

Torchlight moved across the ancient walls.

Beyond the narrow passage, a wider chamber opened before them. It appeared to have once been used for rituals and larger ceremonies connected with the garbhagriha.

Smoke hung heavily in the air.

The smell of incense was overpowering.

Their torch beams struggled through the haze.

Then Sneha noticed something on the floor.

Pages.

She crouched.

Manuscript pages were scattered across the stone.

Some contained the same strange script she had seen in the fragments recovered from the Bhandargarh temple.

Her pulse quickened.

“Where are the two inspectors?”

No one answered.

They moved deeper into the chamber.

Then a constable stopped abruptly.

“Madam...”

His voice trembled.

Sneha followed his torch beam.

Two shapeless masses lay on the floor.

Human tissue.

Soft.

Collapsed.

No visible skeletal structure.

Beside one of them lay a service weapon.

Near the other was part of a police uniform and an identification badge.

No one needed to say what they were thinking.

The two inspectors had entered the temple only minutes earlier.

Now, whatever remained on the floor appeared horrifyingly similar to the condition in which the two constables at Bhandargarh had been found.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

One officer turned away.

Another whispered something under his breath.

Sneha forced herself to remain focused.

“Don’t touch anything.”

Her voice was steady, even if her breathing was not.

“Photograph the area. Nobody separates from the group.”

Then a torch beam drifted towards the far end of the garbhagriha.

The constable holding it suddenly froze.

“Madam ji... yeh kya hai?”

(Madam... what is that?)

Sneha turned.

The beam remained fixed on something beyond the smoke.

Her expression changed.

For perhaps the first time since entering the case, there was no immediate explanation available to her.

“Oh, shit...”

Something was there.

Chapter 59

Sneha signalled the remaining officers to move slowly.

“Quietly. Stay together.”

Smoke filled the garbhagriha.

For several seconds, they could see only a few feet ahead.

Then the haze shifted.

Sneha froze.

At the centre of the chamber stood a small sacrificial altar.

Fire burned upon it.

Beside the flames sat Raj.

The manuscripts lay open before him.

His eyes were closed as he chanted rapidly, completely absorbed in the ritual.

Sneha stared.

A tall man.

A ritual.

The scene echoed Priya’s account almost exactly.

Before Sneha could move, something changed.

Water began spreading across the stone floor.

At first, only a thin layer.

Then it rose.

Fast.

Within moments, water surrounded their ankles and continued climbing.

“Madam...”

One of the officers stepped backwards.

Sneha barely heard him.

Something was forming beyond Raj.

Not clearly.

Not completely.

A vast shadow appeared through the water and smoke.

Long.

Coiling.

Almost serpentine.

It twisted across the chamber, yet never became distinct enough for Sneha to understand what she was seeing.

Then she noticed something even more impossible.

The sacrificial fire was still burning.

The water had risen around the altar, yet the flames refused to die.

They twisted violently above the submerged stone as though the laws governing them had somehow ceased to matter.

Water poured through the doorway into the adjoining chamber.

“Raj!”

Sneha shouted.

His eyes opened.

For one brief instant, surprise broke through his concentration.

Sneha raised her weapon.

“Step away from the altar!”

Raj moved.

Sneha fired.

The shots struck the stone near him as he threw himself aside.

Then the enormous shadow twisted.

A deafening hiss filled the chamber.

Something shot towards Sneha.

She hurled herself sideways.

The substance struck the stone behind her.

A sharp vapour rose from the surface.

“Back!” one of the officers shouted.

But Sneha’s eyes had gone to the manuscripts.

Whatever Raj was attempting, the pages appeared to be at the centre of it.

She forced herself forward through the rising water.

Raj understood immediately.

“No!”

Sneha reached the altar.

Loose manuscript pages lay beside the flames.

She seized them.

Raj lunged towards her.

“Don’t!”

Sneha thrust the pages into the fire.

“NO!”

The ancient sheets caught instantly.

Despite the water surrounding them, the flames consumed the pages with astonishing speed.

Raj rushed forward.

Too late.

The manuscripts blackened.

Curled.

Collapsed into ash.

The chanting stopped.

The fire vanished.

And then—

the water disappeared.

Sneha crashed onto dry stone.

The enormous shadow vanished with it.

One moment the chamber had been flooded.

The next, there was nothing.

No water.

No serpent-like form.

No impossible flame.

Only smoke.

Stone.

Ash.

And silence.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Raj stared at the remains of the manuscripts.

Something inside him broke.

Years of calculated arrogance disappeared in an instant.

“You idiots!”

His scream echoed through the temple.

“You destroyed in minutes what took me years!”

He turned towards Sneha.

For the first time, there was no calculation in his eyes.

No superiority.

Only rage.

Raj reached towards the wall and seized a large ceremonial sword.

“Sneha!”

He raised it.

Then charged.

Something none of them had expected to see.

Chapter 60

Raj charged towards Sneha with the ceremonial sword raised above him.

The water had vanished.

So had the enormous shadow.

The garbhagriha looked ordinary again, as though nothing impossible had happened there.

Raj swung the sword.

Sneha moved aside.

The blade struck the stone floor with a violent clang.

Before Raj could recover, Sneha stepped inside his reach and drove a powerful kick into his side.

He lost his balance and crashed to the floor.

The sword slipped from his hand.

Sneha kicked it away.

The officers rushed forward.

Within seconds, Raj was pinned down and restrained.

For a moment, Sneha stood looking at him.

The brilliant young man from her engineering institute.

The scientist who might once have built an extraordinary career.

The man who had spent years pursuing something he believed the rest of humanity was too limited to understand.

Despite everything, Raj stared back at her defiantly.

Sneha stepped closer.

“You were my junior then.”

A faint smile appeared.

“Looks like I still get to keep the seniority.”

Raj laughed bitterly.

“You have nothing.”

Sneha’s expression hardened.

“You think so?”

“You can arrest me. Charge me with whatever you want.”

His eyes moved towards the ashes beside the altar.

“But your law will never explain what happened here.”

Sneha said nothing.

“And now,” Raj continued, “no one will ever know what those manuscripts contained.”

His old arrogance was returning.

“I will never tell you.”

He looked directly into Sneha’s eyes.

“And with your limited intelligence, you could never discover it yourself.”

Sneha stared at him for several seconds.

Then she turned towards the officers.

“Take him.”

Raj smiled.

“Make whatever case you want.”

Sneha looked back.

“Your greatest mistake, Raj, was not underestimating the law.”

She paused.

“It was overestimating yourself.”

For the first time, Raj had no answer.

The officers led him out of the temple.

Sneha remained inside for a few moments.

Her eyes moved across the chamber.

The dry stone floor.

The extinguished altar.

The ashes of the manuscripts.

Nothing remained of the water.

Nothing remained of the enormous serpent-like shadow.

Nothing that could explain what she and the others had witnessed.

She finally turned and walked outside.

As the group began descending the narrow path, one of the constables approached her hesitantly.

“Madam ji...”

(Madam...)

Sneha looked at him.

“Yes, Rajesh?”

“Jo humne andar dekha... woh sach tha ya bhram?”

(What we saw inside... was it real, or was it an illusion?)

Sneha stopped.

For a moment, she looked back towards the temple.

Its dark outline stood silently against the moonless sky.

“Rajesh ji... kuchh cheezon ko hum kabhi poori tarah samajh nahin paate.”

(Rajesh... there are some things we can never completely understand.)

She turned and continued down the path.

Behind her, the ancient temple slowly disappeared into the darkness of Amavasya.

Raj had been captured.

His search was over.

The manuscripts were gone.

But the question that had consumed him for years remained.

Where did mythology end?

And where did the unexplained begin?

THE END