

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE WILD

UDAYACHANDRAN



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Dedication:

This book is dedicated to my wonderful children, Ramu and Vinu.

You are the constant light and inspiration that guides my pen.

Thank you for your magic, your laughter, and for making every chapter of my life—and this book—a joy to write.

Author Intro



Udayachandran (71) hails from Parali in Palakkad, Kerala. After his graduation, he began his career as an Officer in United India Insurance Company.

Udayachandran used to write in his college days (1970s). Some of his English poems were published in The

Illustrated Weekly of India.

In his late sixties, he returned to his passion of writing. He has a Malayalam short story collection "Oru Pidi Nunakkathakal" (A Handful of Fibs, 2023) and a poetry collection "STRAY THOUGHTS – Poetic Epiphanies" (2024).

His two Malayalam novels are awaiting publication.

He lives in Ernakulam, with his wife Jayalakshmi; their two sons work abroad.

Chapter-1

An island in the Bay of Bengal, roughly 10° North latitude and, 92° East longitude. High up from the skies, the island gave a charming look. It was silent, deep and peaceful.

Closer down, it gave a different picture.

The foliage in the rainforest was so thick and crammed that it gave a feel as if each single tree, shrub and vine was virtually choked and was fiercely struggling for a simple space to hang onto life. Dampness, heat and a mixture of odours pervaded the whole expanse.

The resounding long and short calls of birds in the teeming jungle acted as the backing music. Loads of cicadas and beetles were quick to merge in the theme with their never-ending shrill and drones. The scattered roars and howls of different animals blended slickly to give it an air of a symphony only the wilds could conceive and play.

It was getting to be 9 o' clock in the morning. Droopy morning rays were reluctantly peeking inside through tiny gaps in the canopy. A small settlement lay hidden in a small gap within the woodland, but it was not easy for unversed eyes to spot the feeble silhouette of the colony. Like a hazy blanket overhanging on the small colony lay a layer of mist and smoke.

The settlement had about 50 wooden huts, all within a common wooden fencing. All the huts were made of bamboo and straw and their roofs were cone shaped. They were all carefully spread out in an annular manner inside the enclosure. For entry and exit, there was just a single door. All the huts looked alike, except three which were slightly bigger in shape.

Yes, they were shaped alike, but they were bigger in size. The central one belonged to the clan Chief and the two on either sides were that of the high priest, and the chief of the tribal war team.

Right in the centre of the settlement stood their sacrificial Stone. An imposing stone, black in colour. Just behind the Stone stood the sacred Mast. The longish pole had two large faces looking in opposite directions, donning colourful headgears with antler horns. There were a number of small faces tied on to it looking at all directions in a haphazard manner below the two large ones. The eyes on each face were larger in proportion to the size of faces and their stare had an imposing effect.

The abrupt drumbeats that boomed completely disrupted the still and silent ambience. Instantaneously, the settlement turned bustling.

This peculiar style of drumbeat was meant for urgent meets of seniors. One by one, seniors from each hut moved out and started assembling before the sacrificial stone and sacred mast with a quizzical face. None of them could guess what the motive was for this sudden call in the morning itself.

Lelevu, the right hand of the Tribal Head and war-chief of the group, announced to the flock, “The Chief and the High-priest have had a talk together, just now. They will soon come and address us all. Be patient.”

The seniors were puzzled and started looking at each other.

One of them asked the other with a surprised look in his face, “What’s the matter? The Chief has any health issues?”

Another one aired this question, “Has he had any mishap or what?”

“I don't think so. He returned from a hunting trip yesterday with no apparent health issues,” an instant reply came from someone else.

Another person commented, “How long does it take for the body to be affected, if the mind is continually disturbed.”

“Doesn't he look sprightly now? But mental worries do not take long to cast a toll on the body! And it shows up all of a sudden.” That was a hushed murmur from the rear.

A note of protest came in, “No, he does look perfectly active and agile now. Let's see.”

The village chief, Mahaba, had actually survived 35 annual spells of monsoon so far, but his body looked much fresher and younger. His trunk was sturdy and had the look of a matured rose wood tree. His dark skin was so tight and oily that it almost shone in the dark. His nose was short and had a bulbous end. Kinky was his hair and it grew in little clusters of peppercorn bunch.

Mahaba had no evident creases on his forehead, but the tribe knew the agitation that ate his mind unceasingly. The Chief has two wives. He is entitled to only one, as per traditions of the tribe. His first knot was with Ipili, done strictly as per the customs of his tribe, the Onge. They were paired together as he approached the 18th monsoon cycle after his birth. The tribe remembered the celebration clearly well. It was a mammoth event.

The second one was a meek affair. And it could hardly be termed a union. It was a tie of chance and compulsion. Suru belonged to another tribe known as the Shompen, inhabiting islands nearby. The Onges were wary of the barbaric Shompen tribe.

Fifteen years back, a dark event occurred with the Onges. The younger brother of Mahaba was captured, taken away and killed by the Shompens. Mahaba was incensed and he sneaked into the island with a group of warriors stealthily in the night, and burnt the entire settlement of Shompen in a swift move. An only girl who had gone into the woods to have a wee in the night returned shrieking. The team was stumped. The shivering girl kneeled in front of them.

Killing a lone defenceless girl was unthinkable. And they had no mind to leave her to her fate in the island. The team decided to take her along and seek the advice of the High-Priest.

The Priest decided to let her stay on condition that she would abide by the Onge customs and that the girl stay under the protection of Mahaba himself. She was allowed to stay in a small hut near the chief's dwelling. Only the Chief had the privilege to pair with a girl from out of the tribe. She thus became the Chief's second wife.

Mahaba didn't have progeny to carry on. No, that's not the real truth. He does have offsprings. It's that he doesn't have a boy to pass on his succession. Ipili has bore him five daughters, and no boys. Only two of them remain, Akuva and Sensibu, by name. He has to have a boy to pass on his title. This is his prime concern and fierce anxiety.

In Suru, he has seven children: two boys and five girls. The eldest is Kireeba, who is now past thirteen cycles of monsoon. But he looks sturdy and a solid sixteen. The rest are below him. Except the last one who is a boy named Kapo, all are girls, named Matomi, Sakoto, Momo, Lopu and Nosimu, respectively.

The whole jungle could sense what was tormenting the mind of Mahaba. The tribal tradition was clear. A line of descent was

established only through a male offspring in a woman united with tribal approval.

Yes, Kireeba is born of Mahaba. But he could never be handed down the role of the tribal chief. He is an outsider. For the tribe to accept that Mahaba has an heir, Ipili, and Ipili alone, should beget him a male child, the great Spirits condescending!

“Here they come, the chief and the high priest,” announced the War Chief.

Silence pervaded the gathering at once. Anxiety intensified. All eyes and ears turned sharper.

Lelevu opened out, “Just before the day-break, in the still of the night, the high priest had a bizarre episode. This meeting is to share with you all about that strange event. The high priest himself will put it across to you in his words.”

The high priest, Sebu, raised his sacrificial wand towards the heights as if seeking grace from skies above. The wand was brought down with a thud, and shifted to his left hand.

He began addressing the gathering before him, with his right hand raised as if blessing the flock, “The reason for this gathering is a straight off incident that took place the night before. It’s nothing but a signal by them, our ancestral spirits. It’s their bidding. Oh, mighty spirits, guide us!” He looked up in supplication.

Sebu turned towards the sacred mast again, raised the wand up, and stood with his head bowed and eyes closed, displaying obeisance. He turned back to face the assemblage and said, “Something stirred within me to shake me out of my sleep early in the morning. I reluctantly opened my eyes. It was just about day break. The night was still hanging around. All of a sudden, the hut was filled with a dazzling light. The glare was so intense

that my eyes were nearly blinded. As I lay with my eyes closed, I could hear a booming voice.”

Cries of wonder and disbelief filled the air.

Waving his wand to contain the rising hubbub, he continued, “As I continued to lie down, unable to open my eyes in the blazing light, the thundering voice continued: ‘Now, be attentive, Sebua. I will speak once and only once. Listen to me carefully. The sky will spit fire. A huge flying bird will come down. On the wings will be a boy. The boy would have a black amulet on his right hand. Protect him. He will lend his hands in keeping the tribe’s lineage alive.’

He stopped briefly and restarted, “I could feel a chilly touch on my forehead, and instantly, the voice faded out. I slowly opened my eyes as the early rays of morning started entering the hut so hesitatingly. I touched my forehead. It was so cold like it was rubbed with hailstones. I lit the lamp and tried to replay what I just saw and heard. Was it real or just my imagination? The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that it was a signal. A signal from the spirits of the invisible world. For the cues given, I thanked intensely all our elders who are no more with us now.”

Sebua took a moment’s break in order that the entire assemblage comprehend the message clearly.

He resumed, “It was too early for any interaction or dialogue. But I couldn’t wait. I dashed off to the Chief’s hut. He needed to be told this. At once. This is a revelation that should reach all the folks. It’s our obligation to know and be ready for the singular event as and when it happens. It’s not just an unfulfilled craving of the chief. It’s as much a collective dream of this flock. We cannot be sure when this prophecy is to take place, but we have to be ready for it. The continuity and lineage of the clan depends on the prediction unfolding. We are here to

acknowledge the elders' words. We will commence our ceremony."

Once again, Oooh's and Aaah's from the assemblage filled the air. There were bated breath conversations also rising.

Sebua arrested them all with his wand raised high in the air. As he was bringing the wand down, someone carefully placed a collection of white and red flowers on an outspread leaf just beside him, at an arm's length. Flambeaux were lined up on either sides of the sacred mast, giving the patch a spectral look. The high priest picked up a reddish flower garland from within the bunch of flowers and wore it himself.

Soon, he went into a trance. He was now shaking, shivering, running around, screaming vague and jumbled utterances. He picked up flowers placed on the leaf at random and sprinkled them around the sacrificial stone and the mast in obeisance.

"Sacrifice,"

The Priest cried out.

The cry shook up the entire gathering, and imparted a new energy to them. Forming two concentric rings, the women forming a circle in the inner and the seniors joining the outer, they started their native hoofing to the accompaniment of big and small drums. The rhythmic beats flowed out into the vast expanse of the forest, like waves spreading out into the sea. The claps and the spiralling tempo of the dancers with occasional shouts of "Hoi, Hoi" imparted the ritual a magical feel.

"Sacrifice for the spirits"

The frenzied priest hollered out, as the dancers' movement reached a dizzy height.

"Accept this offering, oh, spirits of the jungle!"

Just as these words were uttered, a black rooster was pushed to the waiting hands of Sebua. With a sharp stone tool kept behind the sacrificial stone, he cut the neck of the bird. The high-priest took the bird-head dripping with blood in his hand and raised it upwards, seeking blessings and goodwill from the resident spirits up on the sacrificial mast.

Hollering in a unified voice, “Hoi.....hoi, Hoi.....hoi, Hoi.....hoi,” the dancing band reached the peak of their feverishness, and concluded their ceremonial dance, perfectly timing it with Sebua’s final act of propitiation. Once he was through with the rituals, they all lined up to receive blessings of the high-priest.

Only the elders have the right to receive the blessings of the high-priest in a ritual like this. And it includes a drop of sacrificial blood collected in a pot, dropped onto the tongue of the elders. The meat of the sacrificed bird was what was to be delivered to the common kitchen to be cooked, shared and consumed by one and all. That’s the tribal custom and decree.

That also was a day of feast and merriment. After all, revelations do not manifest every day!

Chapter-2

“Hey, hey, look at this, mom. Look at this!”

Santhosh had a shining trophy raised in his hands. And, he ran into the open arms of Aparna with a face glowing with pride and happiness.

He gasped for breath, as he screamed with emotion, “The National Olympiad Trophy that we won!” His lips were quivering with excitement as he said that.

Yes, it was a thin margin that separated his team and the runners up. A mere five points! The duo - Santosh - Ram Mohan team - of the Pride of Orient School, Bangalore overtook the Mumbai St. Xaviers in the last leg with 145 points against the 140 that the latter scored. It was a surprise dark horse win! And, it was indeed a war of nerves!

Premjit, their English teacher, was the coach on behalf of the School, as well for this event. He was given the charge of the School contestants in the national inter-school quiz competition and had accompanied them in their journey to Mumbai where the finals was held. He later confessed that the tension that built up in the match was so high that he was virtually biting his nails in the final moments.

Aparna was, in fact, aware of all these and more. Shiv Ram had given her a running sketch of the entire sequence as if a commentator reporting a live telecast of a match. She had a factual account of the ebbs and surges of Santosh-Ram Mohan team, their dazzling last-minute fight back, and the moment of glory. She could feel her entire body tingling just visualising about the thrilling moment of Santosh-Ram Mohan team making their mark!

Aparna did know well that her triumphant son would be arriving at Apar Villa with the trophy that day. Yet, watching her son darting towards her with that trophy in his hands, almost like a baby Alexandar returning home, having vanquished the mighty opponents, was a moment of unsurpassed joy. It was difficult to say who was more thrilled than the other, Aparna or Santosh!

After handing the trophy over to his mother, he hugged her so tightly. Aparna took the trophy into her hands, gazed at the Trophy for a few moments intently and slowly kept it down. She then gently caressed the young one's head, cheeks and took his face into her hands, and looked raptly at the oval-shaped face, the slightly upturned nose, the small lips, and the dark naughty eyes, as if she was seeing them for the first time!

She pressed her lips on his soft cheeks and muttered,

“Mama's precious one.”

Her voice was nearly choked with emotion.

“Mama's sweetie pie!”

As Shiv Ram was taking the suitcases one by one from the car that brought them home from the airport, the mother and son were exchanging smooches, completely oblivious of everything else.

While rolling the suitcases and bags inside the home, he ogled at them and hollered out, “Hey, Santhu, do not ignore that I too am around here. If you pass on all the smooches over to mom without sparing any for me, I may be compelled to wrest my share from mama then.”

Santosh's teasing retort was quick to come, “I know, I know. You are a smarty when it comes to stealing kisses from Amma!”

He turned once again to Aparna, “Amma, midway, at one point, we thought that we would never make it. We were in the third

position. The team from St. Xaviers, Mumbai was at 110 and we were only 90, while SBOA school team stood at 105. Our spirits fell, but we didn't want to accept defeat and fought back. The whole turnabout was in the penultimate round, when we could push SBOA out, but we never ever imagined that we could beat the team from Saint Xavier's. Finally, in the last round....."

Shiv Ram intervened, "Santhu, isn't the telecast of the finals slotted on coming Sunday? Why do you want to narrate the whole story before the telecast and let the steam off? Aren't we going to watch the whole episode then?"

And he turned towards Aparna, "It's almost 9:30 now. Appu." Appu was his pet name for his wife.

"Do call up Santhosh's school and tell them that Santhosh is reaching the school a bit late. Maybe, by noon with the trophy. And inform also that Premjit and Rammohan are travelling by train and will be reaching Bangalore only tomorrow."

He continued, "Let me take a quick wash and try to reach the office. Two to three days in Mumbai have upset my office schedules entirely."

"You have scarcely stepped inside. And you are concerned about the office schedules," Aparna complained. "Of the three days, you didn't spend even one full day for him. Yet, you are in a hellish hurry to reach office."

"Appu, I guess you realise the charged demands of this software business! Don't you agree that timelines are crucial in this line? Not sticking to schedules might affect the business. It's not just one deal, Appu. It will have a cascading effect on the standing and rating of the company! Don't you recognise that our new company, Apar Info Tech is the result of three years of our sustained and intense efforts and labour? The steady growth of

the Company is our joint call and obligation, no? Do you not feel that the success of the new firm is foremost in my life, yours and that of our young one.....?” Shiv Ram stopped halfway and looked at Aparna.

Aparna nodded silently. She could well understand what Shiv Ram meant.

Shiv Ram was, in fact, working as a top executive in a software giant in Bangalore. He was the executive vice president of a formidable firm, Infotech software Ltd, by name. Quite snug and secure, he was holding a key role in the entity and more than that, an indispensable part of the core team.

Many of his friends were left guessing why Shiv Ram chose suddenly to quit his cushy assignment and take on the challenge of setting up a new company by himself, exactly when both he and the company were on a bull-run! Of course, he was thoroughly conscious of the fact that his abrupt move to walk out of the cosy career and float a new start-up by himself was fraught with risks and challenges.

Relinquishing the position in Infotech meant not just surrendering the benefit of regular and solid monthly pays plus the associated perks like a home and car etc., attached to the position, but also the safe and secure working environment that he was used to, for such a long time.

The truth is that he didn't have a mind to wait indefinitely, when dreams and aspirations beckoned him. Aparna is one person who could read his mind. And she always stood by and encouraged him to achieve what ever he was aiming at.

Shiv Ram had that exceptional knack to go after his desires and achieve them, she knew. He loves to face challenges and surmount them. She would certify that. It is a trademark trait of Shiv Ram.

Her face lit up, as her thoughts flashed back to those stormy days in the past. It was just a few days after her engagement ceremony with another person! Her parents had found out a suitable match for her from the same caste: an Iyengar boy and a doctor by profession, like her father. It was all fixed and set.

And then entered Shiv Ram in the scene. It was an evening party connected with the engagement of a friend of her, the week following her own engagement. The chance meeting with him so quickly unfolded into an intimate and enduring bonding, without Aparna even knowing it.

He was unmindful of the engagement. He maintained, “Aparna, a true relationship can only happen. It’s never planned, let me assert. I am in love with you. And I do believe you hold me dear to you too. I would love to spend my life with you. But it’s your choice. You shouldn’t feel guilty for having decided in my favour. If you are going to be unhappy perpetually for having hurt your parents, you’re free to go by their decision. Either way it’s going to be your decision in your life.”

As her parents were vehemently against her and her new relationship, Aparna had to sneak out of her home, and register her marriage with Shiv Ram stealthily. Her parents had filed a police case of abduction, and her marriage became a news and hot conversation topic for some time, till everything slowly died down.

She never turned back, and she had no regrets. Recalling those tumultuous days brought out a smile on to her lips. She had no doubt, it was a bright decision in her life!

But her parents never forgave her. They couldn’t swallow the public loss of face they had to suffer at the hands of their only daughter. They declared, “We don’t have a daughter who defied and walked out on us.” And they quietly severed all connections with her.

The thoughts about her parents, especially that of her mother momentarily stirred up some sad thoughts too.

Shiv Ram approached her and gently slid his fingers through her flowing hair, and asked, “What’s bugging you? Come on, cheer up. Don’t you worry. I will have lunch with you all and drop Santhu at school. Only then will I go to the office. Is that okay with you? Are you happy now?”

“Wonderful.” That reply was not from Aparna, but Santhosh. He ran to Shiv Ram, gripped the hands of his father and bounced gleefully.

Santhosh was impatient to go to the school with his father. The winners were supposed to keep only the medallion and the certificate given to them. The trophy that was handed over to the winning team was meant for the school. And, going to the School with the Trophy in hands, in the company of one’s father is a matter of pride, isn’t it?

Before rushing off to the bath, Shiv Ram asked Aparna, “Appu, why don’t you inform the School authorities about our arrival?”

Aparna nodded and called up the school.

“Hello, is it the Pride of Orient School principal’s office? Can I be connected to the principal, please? I am Aparna Shiv Ram speaking. Yes, Sir. This is Aparna, mother of Santhosh Shiv Ram. Good morning, sir. Yeah, Santhosh reached back half an hour ago by the Bombay Bangalore flight. Indeed, he will be reaching the school soon, Sir, after a quick wash and snacks. Yes Sir, Ram Mohan and Premjith Sir will be coming by Udyan express, which will be reaching here tomorrow morning. As advised by Premjith Sir, Santhosh will be bringing and handing over the champions trophy to you today noon itself. Yes, Sir. The runners up are Bombay Saint Xaviers school. The telecast

of the event is scheduled on Sunday evening at 8 o'clock, Sir. Bye, Sir. Thank you."

Before she put the phone down, Santosh rushed down to the dining table, with his bath done and he dressed up to go to the School. Shiv Ram too came down, sat beside Santosh and nagged him, "Listen, Appu, this smart one just got ready quick, without taking a bath."

Santosh retorted, "Amma, this smart one is putting his flaw on to me. Look at my hair. It's still wet here and there, after my bath."

He jumped up, went near Shiv Ram, sniffed him and shouted, "Oh, Amma, Achan (Dad) smells awful. Acha (Dad), Go, get up, take a bath and come back quick."

Aparna was laying the plates in front of them, and quipped, "C'mon, stop this funny act, and get ready to go. The Principal is waiting anxiously for you."

She yelled out to Lakshmi Amma in kitchen, "Lachimma, please bring the stew to the dining table."

51-year old Lakshmi Amma or Santosh's Lachimma, as is she called, had been there with them for some time now. Over twelve years to be exact, which is just about Santhosh's age. Lakshmi Amma stepped into their house along with Shiv Ram's parents who had come down to Bangalore immediately after the arrival of their first grandchild, Santosh.

Childless Lakshmi Amma had lost her husband about 14 years back. Her husband slipped his feet and fell onto a rocky surface while taking bath in the local temple pond. His head hit a sharp edge of the rock and the fall turned fatal. Lakshmi Amma was living on the mercy and help of her close ones.

Lakshmi Amma also happened to be a distant relative of Shiv Ram's mother. Once on a visit to her ancestral home at Mannarghat, in Kerala, Janaki Amma heard about the plight of Lakshmi Amma, and decided to lend a helping hand to her by offering her a job plus living space in "Vaanaprastham", an Old Age Home for destitute that Raman Nayar-Janaki Amma couple were running near their locality.

It was after two years that Aparna gave birth to Santosh, and Lakshmi Amma's migration to Bangalore as a help to the Shiv Ram-Aparna family happened.

Potato-stew is a favourite dish of both Santhosh and Shiv Ram, especially the way Lachimma prepared it. Santosh doted on her from his infant days, and started calling her Lachimma. The name got stuck.

"Here's Lachimma's special gift to Santhu, for the achievement you have cornered," Lakshmi Amma brought the steaming stew which spread its soft aroma in the dining room. Before she could place the pot on the table itself, Santosh started drawing in the soft smell of the stew. "Ahh..., ahhhh, what an inviting smell! Great, Lachimma, great!"

Lakshmi Amma's gracefully benign face beamed with happiness.

"Why don't you speak up, Achan?" Santosh egged on his father. "What's your gift to me for this sparkling tribute? For quite a long time, you have been giving us a dream of an overseas tour. This trophy definitely calls for celebration like that. A tour to Singapore, Mauritius, Bali or some such marvellous spot!"

"Indeed, Indeed. Lemme think up of something once my immediate office bustle is over." Shiv Ram turned to Lakshmi Amma. "Lachimma, please get me some water."

“C’mon, Shiv. This office rush and scramble and so on is some excuse to put us off. As long as you work, is it ever going to end?” That was Aparna trying to provoke Shiv Ram.

“No, no. Not at all. Honest.....!”

Before he could complete his remark, Shiv Ram’s cell phone left in the drawing room, started ringing.

“Lachimma, can you please bring me the cell phone? I left it in the drawing room.”

Lakshmi Amma hurriedly picked up the mobile phone from the drawing room and handed it over to Shiv Ram.

Shiv Ram responded to the call. “Hello, Shiv Ram here. Yes, the MD of Apar Infotech, Bangalore. Oh, my, really? Wow, you mean that our quote gets your approval? We are honoured to be awarded the job. Let me thank you for the faith and confidence you have placed on us. We will live up to your expectations and assure you that we will fulfill our responsibilities with the utmost diligence. You have our word that the task entrusted to us will be completed on time and to perfection. Yes, Sir, we can send our assessment team in the May and we may be able to complete the job max in another 7-8 months as committed. Yeah, sure, I will respond to your mail and confirm the acceptance immediately. Yes, Sir, I will send a time schedule soon after our confirmation. We are deeply honoured to be associated with you. Our heartfelt gratitude for your trust on the capability of Apar Infotech. Bye.”

No sooner than he kept the phone on the table, Shiv Ram jumped up thrilled, did a fist pump quickly, and exclaimed, “Yeah! We have done it, Appu. We are getting into the “Big League.” The call I got just now was from the Australian airline company Qantas confirming their order with us. They were looking for a software package for their travel booking network.

That order has come to us beating giants in the field like, TCS, CTS, Accenture, Infosys etc. I am elated, Appu, really feeling elated.”

Shiv Ram winked at Santosh, and asked him, “How’s that, man?”

“Marvellous, pop!” Santosh ran to Shiv Ram, hugged him tight and then the son-dad team did a fist bumping first, followed by a high-fiving with each other.

“No excuses now,” Santosh said at the top of his voice, “This has to be celebrated. No question of avoiding the overseas tour. Two capital accomplishments! My Olympiad trophy followed by Achan’s great feat of a major order!”

“Oh no, it may not work out so quickly, my cutie pie. This new order will put me into a bit of strain and stress in the immediately following months.”

Suddenly a new gleam came into the eyes of Shiv Ram. He immediately added, “Okay, I have an idea. This task has to start in the month of May next year. The HQ of Qantas is in Sydney. I may have to go to Sydney in the first week of May with my core team. My core team will stay back, but I am scheduled to return after 15 days of my stay in Sydney. Before I come back, both of you can fly to Sydney, join me in Australia and then we can enjoy a few days in Australia and return. Doesn't it sound great?”

It was the turn of Santhosh to do the fist pumping now. A wave of exhilaration swept through him, and he cried out, “Magnificent, I will decide the locations in Australia. Let us wait till my exam is over for the final announcement. Let me keep it as a suspense till my exams are over,” and he jumped up and down.

Aprana looked on at the expressions and acts of the son-dad duo with a curious smile.

“Yet...., yet....,” Santosh’s face glowed with a naughty smile, as he was saying that.

“What? Why that ‘yet’?” Shiv Ram was curious to know.

“Yet, nothing can match Lachimma’s stew and the relish it gives!” He gave a naughty smile as he said it.

Both Lakshmi Amma and Aparna burst out laughing, as Shiv ram was running after Santhosh giving a few fake whacks on his bum.

Chapter-3

Suru and her kids were housed in the hut just adjacent to that of the Chief.

She had a sleepless night that day. If the revelation that the high-priest bared before the tribe was to be a reality, her plans would flop. What she came to know during the day was quite disturbing an out-turn and a direct threat to her dark plans!

Ipili had no male offsprings, and it would ensure that the privilege would finally land on Kireeba, with no choice left before the tribe. A vicious smile spread on her lips when the thought of Kireeba, borne outside of Onge tribe, was to assume the title. For that to become a reality, Ipili should never be able to bear any male successors to the Chief, Mahaba.

The custom demands that the Chief not having any male offsprings in his wedlock, the nearest male related to him gets the role. Kireeba naturally has to be the choice of the clan. It must have the approval of both the Priest and the War-lord, which she was sure of. There was no alternative before them. A sneaky smile widened on her lips. She would do everything to ensure that no alternatives did ever exist!

She was already doing it. She had been engaging in this sly gambit for quite some time since she planned out her strategy. She was ready to go to any extent for the sake of realising her dreams. If Ipili should not give birth to a baby boy, she should not.

For that, the best way out is that Ipili should not conceive. And if ever she does, she should not be able to carry on with it. They all should be purged out in time.

By hook or by crook!

Suru does hardly have any doubts on it. Ipili should not give birth anymore.

Suru had been making it certain too, for some time now.

As she thought about it, her smile widened. A smile filled with vileness! The poison in her mind was spreading slowly into the thoughts that sprouted within.

Mahaba should not beget any male issues in Ipili. He should be denied the prospect of family lineage and continuity.

His seniors and elders in the sky should never be remembered and their annual obeisance ceremonies by the rightful male offsprings disrupted. Those distressed souls should weep and wander endlessly with no peace of mind.

Mahaba must be cursed by those anguished souls, and his mind scarred and scorched ceaselessly. He should be made to suffocate in the sea of woe, so set up. He should.

She would not mind going to any length to amend the gory massacre of her parents at the hands of Mahaba. He used to tom-tom that he has avenged the shame on the tribe for the stealthy capture and slaughter of his dear younger brother.

Indeed, the Chief should be made to shed tears unceasingly. With no male progeny to offer prayers and obeisance for his predecessors, he and his tribe should stay perennially unhappy. She was particular that she should witness the flowing tears of Mahaba!

So determined she was. She should stay alive at whatever cost, though it was painful to live under Mahaba, whom she hated to the core.

It was this exact thought that took root in her mind, the very moment she fell at the feet of Mahaba. It was this raging fire

that consumed her, the very moment she fell at the feet of the Onge chief.

Staying alive somehow would provide her the scope of making amends for the grave setback in her life, brought about by the ruthless killer. She was sure that her mastery over herbal medicines and black magic would help her find a way to achieve her designs.

“But, no rash acts, no hurries. Wait patiently. These are things that should not be rushed at all,” She was telling her repeatedly, every single day, as she was getting more firm on her job.

She had it schemed all. Her first act on reaching the colony was to capture the minds of the war chief and the priest in a quiet yet planned manner.

“Wow! This woman maybe an outsider to us, but what a modest and humble air about her?! What a care.....! What a warm-hearted approach! What a vim? What a spirit?”

The War-Chief was thoroughly impressed. Sebua too, readily agreed with the observations.

Suru's next target was Ipili. It was much easier than thought.

Ipili had minor health issues relating to her gut and legs. Suru could easily manage them with the help of a few herbal medicines that she knew well. Ipili's afflictions got the better, thanks to Suru's intervention. Suru's concern and her effective cure convinced Ipili that Suru was a genuinely helpful person.

An outsider, strictly speaking, but an aid and bonus indeed to the tribe!

Suru was shrewd enough. The hidden hostility in her was nowhere evident in her words or acts as she interacted with Ipili. Ipili was in fact overpowered with so much attention and love

that she considered herself to be fortunate to have Suru as a part of the family.

Her younger kin, as Ipili used to consider Suru, used to share some special dishes every day that she made within her own hut. The special preparations would reach Ipili without fail every day. Suru would feel bad and even complain, in case Ipili left out even a tiny portion of the stuff uneaten from what was sent across.

Ipili was overwhelmed by the love and attention of Suru, and thanked her stars for the late blessing in her life to have such a caring sister, like Suru.

For some queer reason, even as Suru delivered a child almost every year, Ipili did not. Not that Ipili did not become pregnant, but somehow, even when she did, she would quickly lose them. Almost like a routine! Upset at the steady miscarriages, Ipili would curse her fate, and sought the intervention and blessings of the spirits in the sky.

Suru gave birth to 10 children over the years. Only seven endured. Three were snatched away by calamities and illnesses. The senior most was a boy named Kireeba. Past 13 monsoon cycles, he looked much bigger in size. The remaining five were girls with the last one, a boy again.

Kireeba almost looked like Suru, but in a manly way. His nature and disposition too mimicked that of Suru. He knew quite well how to wheedle elders and to keep them on his side, while being oppressive and tyrannical to folk of his age or junior to him. Most of the children knew this and were afraid of him. He would manage to inflict pain and harm stealthily just for his pleasure, leaving no trace or evidence connecting to him.

If somebody went to an elder with a complaint about Kireeba, the elders would instantly retort, . “C’m on, stop lying. Kireeba

wouldn't have done that. Never. And if he did, you might have done really something to provoke him.”

Everyday, Suru, in hushed tones, would hammer into his ears.

“You should know that you are Shompen from mother’s side. You are only Onge, in part, because of circumstances. Not out and out an Onge, which is what this tribe is. Take it from me, you will never be acceptable to the Onges as a sterling member of the tribe. You would be a taboo to the Onge tribe in any tribal ceremony or function that they perform. You would never be a part of the sacrificial function that they do undertake.”

She would stress the remaining part. “Do learn the language and the customs of Shompen I teach you slyly. Remember, once you master what I am imparting to you and once you are confident with our language and customs, you would certainly be acceptable to our tribe, when the time comes for you to join them. There’s always a place for you in Shompen. I am absolutely certain about it. But you must take in virtually every thing that I teach you, sharp and quick.”

He was conscious of his mother’s craving. Her words were pretty clear, “Without any male heir apparent in the Onge clan through Ipili, the chief would not have a successor. Choosing you, half-Onge, half-Shompen yet, would be their only choice. Their only choice.”

He could see her eyes lighting up with a vicious lustre, as she said that.

Obviously, she wanted him to be the next chief.

Kireeba had no misgivings about his mother’s intents and desires. Her words were a frank reflection of her mind and there must be a clear reason for her deductions. He believed his mother to the last word.

If his mother wanted him to be the Chief of the Onge clan by hook or crook, he should do it, by means fair or foul.

If that act was to give her gratification, he would go to any extent to fulfil her desire. If his mother had any such aspiration in her mind, he had to work with her to making it a reality. Kireeba was always prepared to walk the extra mile to realise his mother's dreams.

That night, as Kireeba listened to Suru's concerns about the morning revelation of the high priest, he too was jolted initially. But he steadied his mind soon after. He was resolute to win the game even by stealth.

Thoughts crossing the mind of Mahaba just then were, needless to say, at odds and conflicting to what was running in the mind of Suru. The revelation that happened in the morning was as unpredictable and sudden as the first shower after a scorching summer.

True, Mahaba was constantly flustered at the very distant thought of Kireeba succeeding him. Handing over the Onge lineage to Kireeba, an outsider by birth, was unthinkable. The options, however, were narrowing down with every year passing. Why was Ipili not able to beget him a son?

"Isn't it a disgrace for the clan to hand down the privileged title of the Chief to a boy not belonging to it? The departed souls would never condone this affront. Nor would they ever forgive this grave lapse! The ancestral spirits would scorch and burn and keep away from the mast, leaving the clan to the mercy of pests and pestilences," His thoughts used to wander every time Ipili lost her battle to sustain her pregnancy.

The spirits are supposed to descend from the skies for a brief stopover on the mast to bestow blessings on the clan during their annual ritual. The mast abruptly turns alive with every single

face on it gleaming and glowing! The eyes on the faces suddenly start glittering too!

The spirits return to their abode solely on the power and potency of the rituals offered by their true progeny. The spirits dwell in their ethereal sanctuary till the next term purely on the strength of prayers and the sacrifice offered regularly by the clan. Mahaba was feeling distressed every now and then, caught in his thoughts and the unnerving questions raised.

He knew. For the spirits, invocation by a person outside the clan can never be a faithful and potent invocation at all. Such services, unfortunately, can never reach or touch them and help them in their journey back.

Denied entry into their ethereal shelter after the annual ceremony, the disturbed and uneasy spirits, would wander endlessly, swearing and cursing him eternally for the wretched state of theirs. The curses will continue to haunt him and sear him while he lives and perennially after his death too!

He will be hounded for the unpardonable wrong and guilt even after his death!

He knew it well. That was why the abrupt revelation in the morning that a boy is coming down from the skies to help the clan was a solace to his mind, though he found it hard to swallow. No doubt, it's a disclosure coming from the High-priest, and it should work.

But doubts and reservations persisted in the mind of Mahaba. It was not so easy to buy into the story. How can an outsider come on the wings of a big bird? Even if some thing happens like that how would he be ever able to help the clan get a successor? How would he help Ipili to complete her term and deliver a boy?

Was the revelation a real message of the spirits? Or was it just a morning dream of the High-priest?

What if the revelation itself was just a day-dream? What will happen if the dream does not turn into reality?

Mahaba woke up perspiring and sat up on the mat with a huge cry. "Oh me, Oh my!!!,"

Ipili was startled out of her sleep.

"Chief," That was how he called him. She shook him up, "Chief, did you see some nightmare?"

"Yes, it was a nightmare. And a real nightmare. But forget it, it's okay now. Don't be upset. You go back to your sleep."

Ipili reacted quickly to his response. She pretended to close her eyes right away, and to act as if she went into sleep.

She did not. She kept looking at him with half closed eyes. She could perceive the evident fright on his face. She could identify the storm in his mind.

In contrast, her mind was at ease now and on a different air. She was fully convinced of the high priest's revelation in the morning.

Maybe, all that he talked of sounded like a fairy tale. But, whatever divined and forecast by the High-priest so far had never gone wrong.

What did the High priest mean by this revelation? She had no clue.

Her grandma had told of mammoth birds in her childhood days. The tales talked of huge birds which could even lift heavy animals. But were they real? She was not sure. True, she had not witnessed any such events. But it did not mean that those stories could not be real!

Can a boy be carried by a bird at all, however mammoth the bird is? She also wondered how a free bird can remain friendly to a human being, be it a boy or a baby?

Birds usually do not befriend men. Men are only known to snare and kill birds! And come to think of it, the boy who comes down on the Bird-Wings also would be an outsider for all purposes. How can an outsider help the sustenance of the tribe? All these questions foxed her.

Tears slowly rolled out of her eyes thinking why her womb failed her every time after the initial sprout. How come she lost each one of her foetus before they matured?

What was the wrong that she had done to the living or the the dead, so far in her life? She couldn't find any answers to any these questions.

Suddenly her left eye started twitching. It's a good omen, elders would say. Left eye twitching for women, and the right one for men!

Especially when you are thinking about something that casts a gloom upon you. It indicates that your upset is getting resolved. That you are moving into better times.

She wasn't sure. But she chose to cling on to her belief, handed down by her elders. Before long, her heart lightened. Her eyes became droopy.

Mahaba was yet not asleep. For him too, that day's morning revelation was as much an enigma.

Mahaba had to choose. Resolve a conundrum. Or, believe in simple interpretations.

Like any other ordinary human being, he too accepted the latter.

Sleep eventually approached him on tiptoes!

Chapter-4

A Sunday in mid-March. About 10:30 in the morning, Santosh was in his room on the first floor, thoroughly immersed in final preparations for his year-end examinations. The tests were to start the following day.

His room was pentagon shaped, on top of the extended car porch, facing the gate and garden. The windows on the outer walls angled at 60° offered a wide open view of the carefully raised garden and the front-end of the house, right up to the gate.

The way from the gate to the car porch cum entrance had two lovely shrub walls, three-feet high, on either sides. On one side of the hedge was a landscaped garden with a fountain at the far end. A baby watercourse ran over coloured pebbles laid on the stream bed. There were a few thick clusters of eye-catching yellow Chinese bamboo grown on the either sides of the water course.

On the other side of the shrub wall were neatly aligned ornamental plants like, anthurium, orchids, interspaced with bunches of rose plants, all of them bearing flowers of various hues.

“Ding dong....., ding dong.....”

The sudden clang of doorbell broke his concentration. Santosh put his book down and thought for a moment.

His next reaction was instant. He pushed the book away, jumped up and ran down with his hands up in the air. He knew who were expected that day. He knew who must have pressed the doorbell.

“Grandpa and grandma.....,” he shouted out in glee, as he ran down the stairs to reach the drawing room before anyone else. But Aparna had already reached and opened the door for Shiv Ram’s parents.

He sneaked past Aparna and hugged his grandpa, Raman Nayar, who gave a quick smack on Santosh’s cheeks. Before he could turn to his grand mother Janaki Amma, Aparna chided, “Santhu, allow them to get inside first. Let them relax. They might be travel-fatigued!”

Aparna had, in fact, expected them much earlier at 8:00 in the morning. The train, Island Express, usually doesn’t get this delayed. Its actual arrival time was seven in the morning at the city junction railway station. Even the time to cover the distance from the rail station by the car considered, they must’ve been here a lot earlier.

“Acha, was there any particular reason for the delay?” Before she could finish the question, she noticed that there was a third person standing behind them.

She stood clueless. Neither of them had given any indication that they were bringing a third person along with them. She couldn’t place him.

He looked in his 50s. Grey-haired and close-cropped, he had a clean-shaven face with no moustache. Golden eyeglasses, Khadi dhoti and saffron kurta. He wore a necklace made of gold-plated Rudraksha beads.

Raman Nayar quickly noticed the perplexity on Aparna’s face.

“Appu dear, allow me to explain. As we reached Salem, it was announced that a goods train had derailed somewhere ahead of us. We were informed that there would be some delay till the track was cleared out. We lost about three hours because of that.

Our running time further got extended as a result. That's how we got delayed to reach here.”

He smiled and added, “But every thing has a good turnout too. Meet this gentleman. He is ‘Sree Nilayam Janardhana Panicker’, a well-known astrologer from Mannur in Palghat. You might not have heard of him, but he is an acknowledged authority in his field and highly regarded in Kerala and the neighbouring states. The funny thing is that the delay and the clutter the derailing caused offered us a chance to talk and get acquainted with each other.”

Raman Nayar added, “Invited to Bangalore by someone for an astro-consultation, his stay was to be in Woodlands Hotel. The car from the hotel also did not turn up, perhaps because of the unpredicted upset in train’s in arrival. So I invited him home, requesting to spend some time with us. Let him take a wash, have breakfast, rest and later, as it suits him, we can arrange to drop him at Woodlands. His astro-consult is scheduled only towards late evening.”

Aparna readily gave him an instant ‘Namaste’. “That’s fine. You are welcome, Mr. Panicker. Please step in and make yourself comfortable. Let me take you to the room upstairs. Freshen up with a bath and come down as soon as you are ready for breakfast in the dining room, just across. Please follow me to your room.”

Panicker returned the Namaste, smiled, picked up his bag, and followed Aparna.

Even as Aparna returned, Shiv Ram’s parents had not moved out of the drawing room. Santosh had them captured in his derring-do exploits of Olympiad Championship. He was rattling animatedly like old war veterans bragging about their former escapades.

“C’mon Santhu, why are you cramming the entire story in the first few minutes of their arrival itself? Your gramps are going to be with us for a few days more. Can you not stretch out the whole story comfortably over the rest of the days? And then, you have your exams starting from tomorrow, right? Why don’t you go up and wrap up your preparation?” Aparna’s voice was stern.

An unwilling Santosh got up and walked past Aparna.

Once he was sure he was out of her eyeshot, he turned back silently, winked at his grandpa, and gesticulated to indicate “Will catch up later”.

Raman Nayar responded with a covered smile and shook his head. Before Aparna could guess what was going on, Santosh ran up the stairs.

Aparna turned to Janaki Amma, “Amma, You know your room. Be comfortable. Immediately after your bath, do come to the dining room for breakfast. I will be waiting for you. Lakshmi Amma has already set your breakfast based on your tastes. Your favourite Dosa and Achan’s Puttu and steamed bananas are waiting since early morning.”

Lakshmi Amma knows the preferences. She knew what the first choices of Raman Nayar and Janaki Amma were. Raman Nayar was a person who liked variety. If it was Dosa one day for breakfast, he would like to have Idli the next day or Rice Noodles the other day.

Janaki Amma was different. She had fixed choices, and she didn’t brook changes! Her breakfast choice was Dosa and Dosa alone. If she didn’t get Dosa for breakfast, she had rather fast than having a substitute. She would be content with just a cup of coffee, that was all.

Departure from rules was not something that Janaki Amma relished. She was not made out for compromises. And that was not limited to breakfasts alone!

It was nearly 11:30 hrs by the time, the three of them got up from the breakfast table. As was their wont, after the breakfast, Janaki Amma and Panicker turned to their betel nut chewing binge together for a few minutes. Actually, it was this common habit that sparked off the bonding between the two during their travel.

After a few chomps, she turned to Panicker, “if we start now, will we be able to complete the process of horoscope examinations in time?”

Panicker nodded in agreement.

“Baby,” that was how Janaki Amma used to call Aparna. “Take all the three horoscopes out. Quick. Our guest has so kindly agreed to do an astrological scrutiny of all three charts, for our sake. It’s been a long time since we have been looking for such an opportunity. Just to ensure everything’s going to be okay! And it’s sheer luck that we got a chance now. The tide of events starting from the derailment and delay and so on in fact turned out to be a blessing in disguise to us.”

“Yes, indeed,” Panicker agreed.

Unlike customary alliances, the traditional horoscope matching was out of question in the stormy love story ending in the union of Shiv Ram and Aparna.

It was Raman Nayar’s fixation to and belief in horoscope that was behind his act of carefully collecting Aparna’s birth location and timing for the sole purpose of preparing a

horoscope chart of his daughter-in-law. Let the chart be prepared and preserved just in case an examination was possible in future. That's how Raman Nayar put it.

Aparna knew it well. It was Raman Nayar who got the birth charts prepared at the hands of astrologers from home. Raman Nayar had the chart of Shiv Ram, but the other two charts were prepared with accompanying notes, and handed over to Aparna for safe-keeping in Bangalore.

The folder never saw daylight, as Shiv Ram was not warm to horoscopy and future predictions. He secretly used to make fun of his parents' fetish as astro-obsession!

He had the folder containing the birth-charts playfully named as "The future folder!"

Aparna too had no leaning towards future divination. Their raging life course and events were also not supportive of such fetishes. Their integration was more on the strength of their intense will to be together and the mental harmony between them, rather than the grace and backing of the stars and planets up in the sky.

Shiv Ram never accepted that life events are set and that it follows a pattern already ordained.

He had a clear understanding about what life is and how achievements are made. He maintained that life is what you create through your evident aspirations and consistent efforts.

Instead of making a peek at the future and waiting for favourable time and tidings to flourish and win, Shiv Ram believed in working tirelessly till one attains the designated dream and triumphs.

He did not even feel it worthwhile to go into the speculation whether astrology was unscientific or not. For him, the future is

what one creates through one's strife and not one that is placed on a platter.

Aparna too shared the same mindset.

"Okay, do we go ahead and set the lamp alight?" Janaki Amma asked Panicker for his permission. She had kept the traditional temple lamp ready for lighting up with oil poured and the wicks done up.

"Please do."

Janardhana Panicker opened his bag and spread out the ready-made 12-squared sidereal chart before him on the floor. He took out a handful of cowries out of a small bag and held them close to his chest, as he looked up at the skies to invoke the ethereal presence. He closed his eyes for a moment and prayed silently before emptying all the cowries to make three heaps of them just in front of the chart.

"Om, harisree Ganapathaye namah.....", he began the scrutiny.

He eyed the birth charts of both Shiv Ram and Aparna and started arranging the cowries on the board in line with the patterns expressed in the charts.

His eyes opened wide in wonder, looked intently at the duo, and asked them, "Was it a "Gandharva" sort of wedding? My reading is that it was a marriage of partners' own accord, with no consent from the families!"

Aparna's reply was limited to just a covered smile and a nod.

Janaki Amma's response was immediate.

"Indeed, it was, Panicker. Aparna's parents had a strong opposition to their union. These two ran away, officially registered their marriage in Bangalore itself. Of course, our consent was not sought, but we were informed of their decision.

And we did insist that they come down to Mannarghat after the registration. At home, we managed to organise a wedding ceremony in line with our traditional style. It's a long story. Will talk about it later. We are getting the first ever chance to examine their horoscopes together. Please do a meticulous evaluation."

"Surprisingly rare, Janaki Amma. The horoscopes complement each other and agree so well. Excellent match! Nine and three quarters out of ten elements possible. I have hardly seen more than four such matches in the last 35 years of my life."

He looked carefully at the charts in front of him once again.

"It's remarkable that both horoscopes provide brilliant support to each other. The ascendant sign of the man's horoscope starts with the 'Northern Lunar Node (Rahu)'. Jupiter's period of influence (Dasa) begins at the age of 17 and holds till 33. This period of 16 years is an extremely favourable period when every act, every work undertaken by the person cannot fail to bear fruit. But I do see a 'Rajju' flaw too out there. This can cause a bit of misery and upsets. The consolation, however, is that it's temporary and it withers away to an auspicious ending."

Panicker closed his eyes for a moment as if calculating something mentally, and continued,

"Saturn makes its entry at the age of 33 for Shiv Ram. Saturn's period of influence is not a favourable time for anyone, and so it is for the person and family. The member plus his family may undergo many adversities and misfortunes, yet the intensity is considerably lightened, thanks to the presence of two elements, the Sun and Venus. The person may be compelled to go through many dire plights because of this, but under the watchful eyes of the benign objects, he would make successful strides in life and achieve great feats even during this adverse time....."

Some of Panicker's observations about Shiv Ram's past made a ripple in Aparna's mind. "Were the resemblances incidental? Am I trying to attribute meanings to meaninglessness? Am I not generalising and reading too much just because a few of the comments casually reflected the facts?"

She started connecting the observations and life events mentally.

Was it chance that Shiv Ram quit his plush job to start his own venture after he turned 33? It was in that year they had to move out of a company sponsored swanky house to an ordinary 2-BHK apartment!

She had moved initially into a small apartment carrying a load of alarms and apprehensions quietly in her mind.

More than the losing the company provided amenities like an accommodation, a car and other perks, it was the act of putting even the last penny of their savings into a thoroughly risky venture that rattled her.

In the early days of the start up when income was unstable, the sight of Shiv Ram struggling to run the new establishment distressed her.

"Will the venture flourish? Or will the life turn into a big question mark?" These were the questions that raged in her mind in the arduous initial years of Shiv's gamble with his start up, named 'Apar InfoTech.'

It was Janaki Amma's call that brought her back out of her mind trip. "Baby....., Baby..., C'mon, where are you? In some reverie? Pour some more oil into the lamp. Else, it'll die out."

Meanwhile, after an intense examination of Aparna's chart, Panicker resumed.

“The horoscope of the female partner renders such solid support to that of the male partner that it reduces the downsides and hard knocks so well. Literally, it’s on the strength and support of the horoscopic chart of the lady at home that the family is able to stabilise and advance. Such wonderful blend is rare to see.”

He added, “Both horoscopes show a common dearth in the number of off-springs. Though I can read a higher number of childbirths happening, the indication is that the couple will be left out with just two progeny. How many children do you have now? One or two?”

The reply from Janaki Amma was instant. “Just one, Panicker, just one so far. You said it. She conceived thrice so far, but she lost two of them.”

Panicker smiled and continued his exploration.

Aparna’s mind instantly turned big-eyed. Yes, it was true that she got Santosh after two lost gestations. The first one was a tubal pregnancy and it landed her in a medical emergency. A surgery in time was what saved her.

The second one was an awful tragedy. A full term pregnancy delivered normally, but the umbilical cord strangled the baby. Out came the little one, blue and lifeless. She had deliberately kept her eyes away to avoid seeing the cold, listless face of her own tiny chunk. She didn’t even want to think about that sordid episode.

Aparna’s face turned sombre.

“Amma, what’s the uncle talking about? Amma, Ammaaaaa....,” Santosh mumbled into her ears.

His voice brought Aparna back from her reverie.

She kept the forefinger on her lips and instantly quipped, “Shhhhh....., Quiet, keep quiet, Santhu. Our guest is examining the birth charts. Do not disturb the astrological forecast going on.”

Aparna turned her attention to Panicker again.

“Both the partners are, as a rule, blessed and fortunate. And as I explained earlier, Shiv Ram’s Saturn-dominant period is relatively stable and free of upsets, thanks to the cross influence of Sun and Venus. Yet, there’s a particular patch in their life which is rather choppy. The female partner is having a cross over from one planetary control to another, exactly when Saturn is lording over the life events of Shiv Ram. The influence of Southern Lunar Node wanes and Venus dominates. It’s a period of extremes. Notably that of misery and bad luck. The evil outcome of the negative influences of the planets unfortunately fall on the scion of the family. The boy is likely to go through a mishap or suffering.”

“Oh Lord, when is it likely to happen?” The anxiety was explicit in the question Raman Nayar.

Panicker looked at the Charts again and did a mental calculation. “Eleven months post January last is the crucial period. The might of Southern Lunar Node in fact keeps rising for another six months. The effect wanes afterwards. Add to the cross over of planetary dominion, and the Saturn creating upheavals in Shiv Ram’s course of life. Once a week, on every Saturdays, a special Navagraha Puja for all nine planets would be advisable to pare the losses and reverses. It’s a venomous eye, and it is almost always directed at the nearest and dearest. The offsprings are often the targets. Starting from mere ailments and injuries, it can lead to grave mishaps. Even threats to life.”

“Oh my God! Panicker, we do value your words. We will seek the blessings of our family-deity, through regular prayers and

rituals. Oh Lord, please save us from severe trials,” Janaki Amma said looking up with folded hands.

Meanwhile, Aparna’s cell phone started ringing. Before Aparna could pick up the phone, Santosh sprang up, picked up the phone and responded to the call.

“Yes, Acha? What’s it? Okay, here’s Amma.” He handed the phone over to Aparna.

Aparna instantly responded to Shiv Ram, “No, Achan and Amma are busy listening to a horoscopic study by an astrologer named Janardhana Panicker, who travelled with them in the delayed train. Yeah, it is nearly through. You will join them for the lunch, no? The astrologer needs to be dropped to Woodlands Hotel, after lunch. C’mon, I will let you know what he revealed about the future comfortably later, not over the phone.”

By the time Aparna completed the call and returned, Panicker had completed his abstraction and was returning the cowries back into the bag.

Janaki Amma turned to Aparna and said, “Panicker has assured us that he would make a special lucky charm once he reaches back home for the sake of Santosh and have it delivered here. He should wear it on his right upper arm. That ought to protect him or at least reduce the potency of evil eyes.”

Janaki Amma was explaining to Aparna and perhaps consoling herself.

Janaki Amma continued, “We humans can hardly avert a tragedy in life. What we can do is to help reduce the impact of catastrophes, may be with the help of a talisman, done after intense prayers. What the astrologer says are not all favourable for Santosh. Keep an eye on Santosh, Aparna. Be on the watch. Oh Lord, please be merciful to us.”

No-one could get the hang of the choppy mind of Aparna! Thoughts and doubts were rising and ebbing like a high tide in her mind.

Despite her traditional upbringing, she somehow had not placed much credence on horoscopes.

Both Aparna and Shiv Ram shared the common conviction that life-course was primarily unpredictable. Life was hardly a pre-determined story cast in a birth chart.

But what took her by surprise was how her mind was getting agitated at the disturbing predictions made by the astrologer! It was true that there were incidental similarities between certain events in their life and some of Panicker's divinations!

But wasn't she overdoing it?

Wasn't her mind trying to create a pattern out of the incidental similarities and trying to generalise that the entire prediction was abiding and certain to happen?

Why was her mind leaning on to the absurdity of horoscope? Was she conceding her entire future to this outlandish bunk? Her mind was literally in a boil.

She was now trying to evaluate the argument from both sides. Those heeding horoscoping divination, she had noticed, tend to maintain that planetary movement is sterling science and clean logic.

The position and movement of a system of stars and planets have a definite impact on living beings, according to them. True, Like earth's gravitational force, rest of the celestial objects also may exercise their own power of attraction on the living beings in varied ways.

But how can they influence the life course of living beings? Just because the movement and position of those extraterrestrial

objects are determined using mathematics, how does it make astrology a predictive science?

While there are millions and millions of stars and planets out there, she used to speculate why astrology considered only the effect of nine planets of the solar system, on the human beings!

And then, the sun is, strictly speaking, not a planet. And How does it stand to logic that only eight planets and one star alone have such impact on human life course?

And how does it soften the negative impact on human lives or boost the good fortune with auspicious prayers and appeasement of the planetary bodies?

Both Shiv Ram and Aparna were of the same mind on divination. It was the human anxiety and uncertainty about the un-ponderable times that urges the human mind to turn to stars and planetary bodies in one's effort to decipher and stabilise one's prospects and destiny, they would maintain.

Yet, she couldn't contain her surprise how the astrologer could mention the past events in her life so sharply and meticulously! Didn't that mean he could make a reasonable guess about their future events too? She couldn't resist the thought.

Aparna was honestly confused and baffled!

"C'mon, what's this, Baby? Are you in some reverie? The divination is almost over. Why don't you extend the Astrologer a salutation and present our customary offering to him?" The sharp words of Janaki Amma brought her back to her senses.

Raman Nayar was waiting by the side of Panicker ready with the traditional combo of betel-leaf and areca nut along with cash honorarium.

Aparna was to present it reverentially to the Astrologer for the special service rendered.

“Don’t you worry too much about the downsides and negatives in Panicker’s predictions. We shall seek the blessings and favour from our home deity. I have already asked Panicker to do whatever atonement rituals are required for remedies and relief, as soon as he reaches home. He knows the ways and modes,” Raman Nayar assuaged her feelings.

Panicker nodded in agreement.

As she was handing out the honorarium, Aparna’s mind was a hornet’s nest. “Oh, no, I could have avoided this silly astrological forecast on some excuse. It is a freaky and quasi scientific stuff, as I look at it. I do know the concerns are unfounded, yet I cannot push put them clean out of my mind. Shiv Ram would, no doubt, chide me, if I share my anxieties arising from the astro-predictions with him. I have nowhere to turn to!”

Chapter-5

Spending a few delightful days in Bangalore, Raman Nayar and Janaki Amma had left for Mannarghat.

It was a late evening. Aparna and Lakshmi Amma were both in the dining room sitting and enjoying a TV show. Shiv Ram was yet not home.

Santosh was in his room. The year-end examinations were almost there. He was acting like he was busy in the preparations for the tests. But Aparna was having a vague feeling that Santosh was not wholly engrossed in the act. Without her supervision, may be, he might not focus enough! He seemed to be more absorbed in reading multidisciplinary stuff outside his curriculum, especially after his triumph in Olympiad Quiz contest.

Aparna used to raise the concern before Shiv Ram, “Isn’t Santhu spending more time these days in front of the TV and computer?”

But Shiv Ram would brush it aside. His counter-question was, “Shouldn’t growing kids spend some time on topics outside of their school stuff? Let him try to expand his horizon. Besides, they need some fun too.”

All of a sudden, a vague feeling of wooziness and nausea overcame Aparna, “Lachimma, get me a glass of water. In a flash. I am going to throw up.”

She blamed herself for binging on those rice-fritters fried in ghee, a specialty of Lakshmi Amma. That might have created this gastric upset. Every time she fell for the same temptation. It was a weakness from her childhood. And Lakshmi Amma had

a knack of making such delicious rice fritters, it was impossible to control her when it came to gorging on them.

Lakshmi Amma was aware of Aparna's occasional bouts of gastric upsets. She quickly ran to the fridge and took a bottle of water and fetched a couple of antacid tablets too from the medicine box. But before Lakshmi Amma could reach her, Aparna fainted and slumped out of the chair to the floor. Her lips were bruised and were bleeding.

Lakshmi Amma was deeply disturbed and called out loud, "Santhu, sonny Santhu, come quick, Amma's not well!"

Santhosh rushed down with his mind agog to see his mom lying down on the floor with blood oozing out of her lips. He opened the bottle of water lying nearby and sprayed a few drops on her face and gently tapped her face, "Amma, Amma, open your eyes..... open your eyes."

Aparna opened her eyes sluggishly.

"Lachimma, please help me. Let's shift Amma and put her onto the bed."

Lakshmi Amma was rushing down from the kitchen with honey on her hands. She rubbed the honey on Aparna's bleeding lips and said, "Let's not move her. Let her stay where she is, for the time being, till she feels comfortable. You call your dad meanwhile and ask him to take her to the hospital for a check up."

Santosh took Aparna's mobile phone and called up Shiv Ram, "Hello, Acha, where are you? Can you reach home quickly? There's an emergency."

Shiv Ram was in the midst of his weekly top-level-review-meeting in the office. It was to take some more time to finish the exercise. Containing his impatience, he replied in a hushed

tone, “What's it Santhu? I will take Half an hour more to complete my work. I will call you back after sometime.”

Santhu pleaded seconds before Shiv Ram was to put his phone down, “Acha, please don't cut the line. Amma fell down unconscious and she has to be removed to the hospital instantly. Please hurry home.”

“Oh no! What happened? Okay, let me hurry home immediately. No, no, better still, I will quickly arrange for a taxi for you to reach Naidu hospital . You should take her to the hospital straight from there. I will come straight to Naidu hospital from here. That would be better, Santhu. You should try to handle it cool, like an adult, okay. Let me cut the conversation, and book a taxi instantly for you.”

By the time the taxi reached the hospital porch, Shiv Ram was, in fact, waiting for them. Aparna was taken inside the hospital by a stretcher. Both Lakshmi Amma and Santosh were asked to wait outside. Shiv Ram followed the stretcher to the Casualty ward.

Shiv Ram had sounded out Dr. Gajanan Naik, who was the key physician of Naidu hospital. Dr Gajanan was the family doctor of Shiv Ram family. In fact, their bonding was beyond the usual doctor-patient relationship. They were family friends.

Naidu hospital was a venture run jointly by Dr Gajanan Naik and his friend Dr Pradeep Naidu who was a well known gynaecologist in the city. Sounding out Dr. Gajanan Naik made things easier for quick attention of the patient.

Dr. Gajanan asked Aparna, “What’s happened, Aparna? I understand you fell unconscious at home? You had not fasted or neglected drinking water, I guess.”

He instructed the nurse standing beside, “Check her temperature, pressure and pulse, Sister.”

Meanwhile he continued his questions to Aparna. “Have you had any gastric upsets? Any bouts of indigestion, nausea or gas recently? Any heavy feeling or pain on the chest?”

Aparna’s reply was a ‘NO’. She didn’t remember any such incident in the recent past. Meanwhile the nurse appraised the doctor, “Doctor, the temperature is normal. Pulse is 98 and BP readings are 140 upon 90.”

“Shiv Ram, Aparna’s pulse is slightly higher, but it can be a temporary spike. Except some minor issues like flatulence and bloating in the gut, she does not appear to have any major issues. Her blood and urine must be taken for certain investigations. Meanwhile, I shall prescribe some medicines for her immediate gastric issues. But do take her for a gynaecological evaluation by Dr. Pradeep too, and meet me again once the gynaec consultation is over. Her blood and urine basic investigation results would be ready by that time. We must rule out all possibilities, right?”

On his way to Dr. Pradeep’s cabin, Shiv Ram was engrossed in thoughts. What could have caused Aparna to faint? His mind was anxious to know the reason. Did she have any serious health issues?

Dr. Pradeep could gauge the tension on the face of Shiv Ram. He smiled and consoled him, “Shiv Ram, there is no need to be so tense. Give me a few minutes to examine her. By that time, we would receive the blood and urine test results too. Stay cool now.”

Meanwhile the nurse took Aparna to the examination area. Dr. Pradeep put on medical gloves and followed her.

After a few minutes of examination, the doctor returned to his seat, and addressed Shiv Ram, “The examination did not reveal

anything serious. She has a missed period, but let's look at the medical check reports, and then come to a conclusion."

And he started looking into laptop screen to read the investigation results made available to him from the hospital laboratory. Shortly, he shifted his eyes from the screen and told Shiv ram with a naughty smile on his lips, "Oh, yes, she has contracted an ailment. But the upside is there is a definite treatment to it. It may take eight and half months more for it to resolve. Shiv Ram, congrats. Your wife is pregnant. About six weeks old now."

Aparna's face brightened. And Shiv Ram was visibly relieved.

Dr. Pradeep continued, "But, care should be exercised. High BP during gestation is not a good sign. It ought to be controlled. Let her take rest. I will prescribe medicines for the nausea and high BP. And vitamin support during pregnancy."

Dr. Gajanan too was aware about the developments. He suggested periodical checks for Aparna and sent them back with good wishes.

Only after all of them boarded the car was the glad news shared with Lakshmi Amma and Santosh. Lakshmi Amma was elated to hear it, "Thank God. That Aparna is carrying is indeed a good news. Oh, my Thirumandham Kunnu Bhagavathy, do extend your protection over the family."

Santosh was confused. "What's it Acha?"

Shiv Ram turned to Santhosh and explained, "Santhu, your mother is carrying a small baby in her tummy. It could be your tiny brother or sister, and we would be able to know it only after about nine months. He or she would come out and meet us only after about nine months"

Santosh was excited and jumped up and down within the car. “Hey..., hey...lovely.” He hugged Aparna from behind the seat and gave her a smack.

Shiv Ram chided him. “Santhu, hold it. Stop the frenzy. This is the inside of a running car, not home.”

The first thing that Shiv Ram did after reaching home was to call up his parents to share the good news about Aparna's pregnancy. Had they been of Santosh's age, they too would have sprung up and down on hearing the news. They were so glad to extend a welcome to another grandchild coming into their family.

Meanwhile, Santosh grabbed the mobile phone from the hands of Shiv Ram and told him, “Acha, let me speak to grandma. Let me speak now.” Shiv Ram let him have his way.

Santosh gave a graphic account of the episode to Janaki Amma. Starting from Aparna's falling unconscious at home, his taking her to the hospital, the happy return to home, and he repeated the news of a young one hiding in his mom's tummy.

After capping it with an earnest wish that the little one be his cute sister, he handed the phone back to Shiv Ram. Raman Nayar noticed the colour of Janaki Amma's face changing as the conversation progressed. He asked, “Apart from the minor disorders of early pregnancy, is there anything that bothers Aparna?”

Janaki Amma nodded her head, as she continued to listen to Shiv Ram. She asked, “If you want us to be there to be of help, don't you worry, don't feel bad telling us. We will!”

She said okay, cut the line and turned to Raman Nayar.

Raman Nayar repeated the question, “What’s the matter? Are there any health issues to Aparna? Does he want us there to be of help to them?”

“She has some issues which are said to be manageable. Apart from a disturbing nausea, she has also hypertension which is not good for her or the baby. She has been advised to take rest. But Shiv feels that they can manage it without us. We have barely returned from Bangalore, and he is not keen to disturb us again. He feels they will be able to manage it themselves with Lakshmi Amma around.”

Raman Nayar suggested, “Why don’t we call Lakshmi Amma and check it out firsthand?”

Lakshmi Amma answered the call, “Glad to receive a call from you, Janaki Amma. Back home and happy, aren’t you? Shiv Ram must have given you the good news, right? Aparna is fine, Janaki Amma, but she has to take bed rest and go for periodical medical checks too. I am here, no? You have returned from Bangalore only a few days back! It would be difficult for you to be here all the time. And you have the old-age shelter also to manage. You can think of coming back when it’s okay with you. Aparna will certainly be more comfortable and happier with you around. Take your time to decide.”

Janaki Amma disconnected the call and thought for a moment. She said, “Let us make special pujas in the temple for a smooth and eventless period. We will also celebrate the event in the old-age shelter with a special feast for the inmates. We will think about going to Bangalore after a few days of watch. If she does not show signs of improvement, let’s think of something.”

“Yes, that’s better,” Raman Nayar agreed. He was happy in sharing his glee with the inmates of Vanaprastha with a special treat. The old age shelter was, in fact, an inseparable part of their life journey.

The inmates of Vanaprastha old-age shelter did celebrate the event in a splendid manner. All of them joined together in their prayers for the well-being of Aparna and safe advance of her gestation and delivery. They had a sumptuous Kerala style banana-leaf meal as well.

As for Raman Nayar, his mind was always engrossed in what he was engaged in. Other worries and upsets always stayed out. But, Janaki Amma was different. For her, once disquiets entered her mind, they kept on churning in her head, till they are cleared up. One by one.

Janaki Amma's mind could not discard so easily the worrying forecast of the astrologer that the immediately following phase of Shiv Ram's life was sort of peppered with adversities. She knew Shiv Ram would not give a damn about remedial measures or pujas suggested by the astrologer. Her presence in Bangalore alone would ensure that these are abided by, especially when Aparna was in the family way.

She was almost decided about it. She should go back to Bangalore at the earliest opportunity, even at the cost of leaving Raman Nayar alone at home. She could be helpful to Aparna during her period of rest. It also gave her an early opportunity to carry the special Amulet done for Santosh, to ward off evil outcomes.

Janaki Amma contained herself for a few days with difficulty. But, she could not hold it for long. She couldn't help herself asking Raman Nayar, "Should we not think of going to Bangalore? The Astrologer had promised to get us the miracle Amulet meant for Santosh after necessary rituals somewhere about next week or so. Once it is in our hand, can we not be by the side of Aparna to be of help to her? My mind would also feel at ease once the Amulet is tied on to the hand of Santosh. It

should offer protection to the child against the any evil portents.”

With the year closure fast approaching, Raman Nayar was however fully tied with the settlement of bills and finalisation of accounts connected with Vanaprastha. He was a stickler for discipline and wanted to keep records clean and updated. His key support and aide, Mahadeva Iyer, was away with his daughter in Hyderabad. Iyer was not expected back soon. He would not feel easy and comfortable with no-one to take care of the Vanaprastha affairs during a critical period like this.

Raman Nayar thought for a moment and suggested an alternative, “Excuse me for this time and you go ahead with the travel plans. Stay there till Aparna’s delivery is over. You will understand why it’s difficult for me to be stay away from Mannarghat now. Mahadeva Iyer is away and may not return soon. In his absence, there’s no-one I can entrust the work with confidence. I will join you once Iyer is back here.”

And he reassured, “Don’t you worry about my food and all. My day time is spent at the Old age shelter. I can easily manage with my share of food from Vanaprastha on a daily basis. And sure enough, I will do regular medical checkups too. You know that Dr. Hari makes regular visits to examine our Shelter inmates.”

He stopped for a moment to listen to his wife’s nod. Then he continued, "I will talk to Shiv. He will understand us. He will also arrange for your air tickets to Bangalore.”

Janaki Amma stayed silent. She was considering the options carefully. Her silence was indicative of approval.

Chapter-6

It was from Janaki Amma that Aparna learned Santosh's annual exams were over. In the past years, she had always taken special care during this crucial time — watching over him, helping with his studies, and making sure he felt supported. But this year, the wretched bed rest had confined her completely. She couldn't even get up, let alone be by his side through the examinations.

All she could do now was trust that everything had gone well — that Santosh had prepared sincerely and written his papers with confidence.

Shiv Ram's mother couldn't have been of much help either, and Aparna knew there was no point feeling resentful. The fact that she had agreed to come to Bangalore, leaving Shiv's father alone at home, was in itself an act of affection and kindness. Still, without Amma around, even a small medical emergency could have turned into a difficult situation.

Now, however, there was a more immediate concern — how to keep Santosh meaningfully and skilfully engaged during the long annual vacation. With school closed and Shiv Ram away on his Qantas project, much earlier than expected, Santosh was sure to feel lonely and restless.

If only he could find some course or activity that might benefit him later in life! Aparna made up her mind to discuss the matter with Shiv Ram soon.

Just as these thoughts occupied her, Santosh came running in — as if he had read her mind.

“Amma, are you worrying about me again?” he asked, his face glowing. “My exams went really well! And now that the vacation’s started, I’ve got lots of free time. Can I join the Karate summer camp? The Shotokan Karate Centre in Malleswaram is holding a two-month long intensive course. If I join, I might even move up from my Green belt to Purple! Please, Amma? It’s every weekday morning.”

Aparna didn’t have to think twice. It was a godsend — the perfect way to keep Santosh happily engaged. She nodded with a smile.

“Talk to the driver and find out the timings — how you’ll be dropped and picked up. I’ll call him to confirm. Have you checked the course fee?”

Santosh’s eyes lit up. He had half-feared she might say no. Overjoyed, he dashed off to fetch the leaflet with all the details. Handing it to her, he said, “I’ll tell my friends I’m joining too!” Then off he ran again, brimming with excitement.

Aparna smiled. She knew his passions well. Santosh was a dedicated ‘Karateka’ with a Green belt, and had been the runner-up in his school’s karate competition the previous year. His father’s enthusiasm for health and fitness had clearly rubbed off on him. The boy had inherited not just Shiv Ram’s energy, but his disciplined spirit too.

“What’s all this chatter between mother and son? I overheard some excitement,” said Janaki Amma as she entered Aparna’s

room after her bath and breakfast. “It’s good, though — he should be doing something that truly interests him.”

Every morning, Janaki Amma made it a point to check whether Aparna had taken her medicines on time. “Have you had your medicines, baby? Don’t forget them. It’s time you did your blood test this week. You’ll need to meet the gynaecologist with the results soon — I just wanted to remind you.”

“Oh, Amma, you’re so caring,” Aparna said affectionately.

“Yes, I’ve taken my medicines. Don’t you worry — I’ll ask the Surya Lab people to come home to collect the blood sample. And yes, what you heard is true. Santosh wants to join a karate camp during his vacation, and I’ve given him permission.

You’re right — it’ll do him good to stay busy with something he enjoys.”

“That’s for the best,” Janaki Amma agreed. “Let him follow his interests. Shiv isn’t here, and you’re confined to bed. Poor boy, he’ll be missing out on his usual vacation trips this year.”

Meanwhile, Santosh had already called his close friend Ram Mohan — his teammate from the Olympiad championship. Ram Mohan, a yellow-belt holder, was just as enthusiastic about karate. A few more of their friends had also enrolled, though most of them were beginners.

Early the next morning, Santosh arrived at the Shotokan Karate Centre, where Ram Mohan and five other friends were waiting eagerly. Together, they went in cheerfully to complete the admission formalities.

They were then led to a spacious hall filled with students — some chatting excitedly, others quietly stretching, all waiting for the first session to begin. Soon, a man and a woman, both dressed in ‘Keikogi’, entered the hall and made a formal standing bow. The students, in unison, bowed in return.

The man spoke first. “My dear Kohai students, let me introduce ourselves. I am Malleesh Hathangadi, your chief instructor, and this is Sensei Sharmila, my colleague and fellow master instructor. Many of you are new to this noble art, while others are already trained at the primary levels. This short but intensive camp is meant to ignite in both groups a lasting passion — to keep learning until you master what you do.

“Remember, the training never truly ends, even after you earn a black belt. Your agility and discipline will grow only through continuous practice. So, dedicate yourselves to steady improvement. Never ever stop training in what you learn here.”

“And my dear students, remember this well,” Malleesh continued, his voice firm yet calm. “Your physical agility is of great importance. But equally, if not more, vital is your mental strength. The power of the mind can surpass the power of the body.”

“The very first step in any combat is to gauge your opponent’s mental calibre. You must conquer the opponent’s mind before attempting to master him physically. So, train your mind as diligently as you train your body. Sharpen it through constant mental discipline, and let the body and mind grow in harmony.”

He paused, letting the words sink in, then looked around the hall with a measured smile. “All right. Let’s begin. Sensei Sharmila will guide the beginners, and I will take charge of the advanced

group. The next sixty days will demand your full commitment. There will be strain — on both mind and body — but together, we'll rise above it and reach new heights of strength and spirit. All the best!"

Even on the very first day, Mallesh found himself impressed by Santosh. The boy's keen observation and quick, precise movements stood out well beyond his years. His agility and mental sharpness were remarkable — qualities that Mallesh couldn't help but notice. In fact, Santosh's skill and composure seemed a step ahead of the belt rank he held.

Chapter-7

Shiv Ram was worried about Aparna's health. Being away from home, he couldn't actively keep an eye on her. He knew her well — her little quirks and lapses when it came to self-care. Ignoring regular checkups could prove harmful not only for her but also for the baby growing inside her. That was why he relied on his mother to ensure Aparna kept up with her medical visits and consultations with the gynaecologist.

Janaki Amma too believed firmly in the importance of timely medical care. She would never overlook the need for regular checkups during such a crucial phase — pregnancy and childbirth were no times for neglect.

Shiv Ram called home regularly, often reminding his mother to schedule Aparna's tests and follow-ups. On weekends, he usually made video calls. His calls came after 11 a.m. — evening time in Australia — a convenient slot for both of them.

"Hi, Appu! How are you doing? What did the doctor say after the check-up? Everything fine?" Shiv's cheerful tone carried through the speaker.

"Yes, honey," Aparna replied. "The baby's growth and position are normal. But my blood pressure hasn't stabilised yet. The doctor says it's still a matter of concern, so I have to continue the bed rest and medication."

Her voice softened, tinged with longing. "Honestly, I feel so lonely without you. It's all so quiet here. I wish you were with

us. How's work going there? On schedule? When do you think you'll be back home?"

"How do you expect me to hop back and forth from here?" he said gently. "The project has strict milestones — I can't just leave in between. This is our first major international contract, Appu. We have to see it through and make it a success. Please, be patient. I take comfort in knowing Amma's there with you — she'll give you strength and support."

Aparna sighed softly. "Hmm..." she murmured, her response more felt than spoken.

Her days were long and lonely without him. Yet, she knew he was right. The mind could reason, even when the heart rebelled.

Shiv Ram's tone lightened. "So, what's Santosh up to these days? His annual exams must be over. How's he spending his time now?"

"Shivu, yes, his exams are done. I felt so bad that I couldn't help him like I used to. His vacation's started, and he's joined a special karate camp," she said, a trace of regret in her voice.

"Oh, that's great!" Shiv said, reassuringly. "It's good for young minds to have something productive to focus on during holidays. But Appu, please don't worry about not being able to help him with studies this time. Maybe it's time to step back a little. Keep an eye on him, yes — but let him take responsibility for his own work. Let him learn to be independent."

Shiv Ram paused briefly, waiting for Aparna's response. But she remained silent, lost in her thoughts. So he continued.

"Oh, Appu, do you remember? I'd once told you about bringing all of you here to Australia for a short vacation. But now, with you expecting and unable to travel, I've had to drop that plan. I was thinking instead — maybe I could bring Santosh here for a short trip. We can plan a full family vacation later, once you've recovered after the delivery. What do you think?"

Her reply came almost at once. "Why not? That sounds wonderful. Santosh would be thrilled to hear it. His happiness is what matters most to us, isn't it? Go ahead — make the arrangements."

"Okay, Appu. Is Amma around? Can you hand the phone to her?"

Aparna called out, "Amma! Amma, it's Shiv on the line." She handed the phone to Janaki Amma.

"Hi Amma, how are you? And how's Achan managing? He must be alone there in Mannarghat. Is he feeling lonely or overworked?"

"Oh, not at all," Janaki Amma said with a light chuckle. "Achan never has time to feel lonely or tired. He's always busy with his work at the Shelter Home. I called him yesterday — he sounded cheerful and full of energy. He was asking after Aparna, of course. And you, how are things going at your end? How's the project shaping up?"

"I'm doing fine, Amma. I'll have to stay here for another month or so — at least until the initial trial run is complete. But in about fifteen or twenty days, a six-member team from my group will be flying back to Bangalore. They've finished their part of the assignment and have urgent work waiting for them in India."

"They'll be returning in a private aircraft, which will fly back to Sydney empty the next day. The pilot's agreed to bring Santosh along with him. That way, Santosh can travel safely to Australia, spend a few days here with me, and then return home when I do."

"You remember, Amma — I'd promised him a vacation trip. It was supposed to be a family outing, but with Appu on bed rest, that has to wait. Later, we can plan a proper family vacation — with you and dad too joining us. Doesn't that sound good?"

Shiv Ram paused, waiting for her response.

Janaki Amma's tone grew cautious. "But is it safe for him to travel alone in such a small aircraft — just him and the pilot, who's a stranger to him? It's a long journey, isn't it? Does it reach Sydney in one stretch? What about stopovers — where will he stay in between?"

"Don't worry, Amma," Shiv said reassuringly. "Do you think I'd overlook such things? The pilot works for our client company, and he's been specifically instructed to take good care of Santosh throughout the trip. Everything's been arranged — even his tour visa is ready."

Janaki Amma relented with a small sigh. “All right then, if you’ve checked all that and are confident about it, I’ll trust your word. It sounds fine.”

Chapter-8

Everything was set. A Beechcraft Denali was scheduled to carry the six-member software test-run team of Apar Infotech back to Bangalore. Alex Spencer had been designated as the pilot of the light aircraft.

However, just two days before departure, unexpected circumstances forced a change. Alex Spencer suffered a minor accident at home — a slip and fall that left him with a fractured right hand. With everyone else either tied up or away on other assignments, the responsibility fell to Marc Wheeler, the only available and qualified pilot.

Marc accepted the challenge readily. After all, it had been a while since he'd flown outside Australia, and the opportunity offered a refreshing change of scene.

Sixty-two-year-old Marc Wheeler had spent the last year and a half piloting small cargo plane for Qantas. Before that, he had been a seasoned captain flying Boeing 747 passenger aircraft across the globe. Two years earlier, after undergoing angioplasty surgery, he had requested reassignment to lighter aircraft — a move his superiors approved, considering his long and impeccable service record. Flying smaller planes was less demanding and suited his post-surgery health better.

The upcoming trip to Bangalore posed no real challenge for a veteran like him. In his earlier days, Marc had often flown to Indian cities — including Bangalore — as part of international routes. Returning there now, albeit in a much smaller plane, felt like revisiting an old chapter of his life in a gentler, more personal way.

At the moment, Marc's wife and son, along with the latter's family, were vacationing in Bangkok. He had been unable to join them due to work commitments, but this new assignment presented a happy coincidence — a chance to meet them on his way back from India and perhaps bring them home to Australia with him. The opportunity felt too good to pass up.

Meanwhile, back in Bangalore, Shiv Ram was making sure everything was ready for Santosh's first unaccompanied journey abroad. The young boy was both excited and anxious. Shiv had informed everyone at home that the aircraft would depart the following day with his six-member team from Sydney. Given the Beechcraft Denali's range, the journey would take about four days, with overnight halts and refuelling stops in Indonesia and Singapore before reaching Bangalore.

The decision to charter a private aircraft was made partly to give the weary team a touch of comfort — some leisure time and a chance to enjoy their journey back home.

At first, Santosh wasn't particularly excited about the trip. His mother wasn't mobile and wouldn't be joining. He had been hoping for a cheerful family vacation, but now that it seemed impossible, he tried to push the thought away.

Lately, his heart was elsewhere — entirely absorbed in his karate training under his Sensei, Mallesh Hathangadi. The discipline, intensity, and rhythm of the practice had hooked him completely.

Still, the gentle insistence from his parents began to soften his resistance. They urged him not to miss what might be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“This isn’t an ordinary flight,” Shiv Ram reminded him. “You’ll be sitting beside the pilot in a light aircraft. You’ll stop in different cities along the way, get to see places few others ever do. The pilot is someone we know — reliable and trusted. Think of it as an adventure.”

Aparna echoed the sentiment. “This trip is different, Santosh. It’s not about reaching a destination — it’s about the journey itself. You’ll get to explore new places, stay in different cities, and see how the world looks from above the clouds. Yes, I won’t be with you this time, but that can wait. For now, make this your journey. Your first solo adventure.”

Reluctantly, Santosh agreed.

The next day, he announced the news to his coach and friends. He explained that he would be flying to Australia in a light aircraft, all alone with the pilot. He confessed his regret about leaving the training camp midway but promised to return and continue once back.

Sensei Mallesh Hathangadi listened thoughtfully and smiled. “Santosh, this journey is a rare experience. Don’t give it up for the sake of routine. Life offers many lessons — each with its own colour and flavour. Don’t trade one meaningful experience for another. Go, enjoy your travel. And when you’re back, we’ll resume from where we stopped. I see in you a fine ‘Karateka’. Keep that fire alive.”

For the first time, Santosh felt two opposite feelings tugging at him — the thrill of a grand travel adventure and the sadness of stepping away from his newfound passion.

When he reached home that evening, he thought about his father's advice for the trip. March to May marked the autumn season in Australia — pleasant days and cool nights. "Pack a few light woollens," Shiv Ram had said. "And carry home remedies for cold and cough — plus something for stomach upsets. Keep a few packets of biscuits and nuts in your backpack too."

Santosh smiled. His father's fussiness about preparation was legendary. Shiv Ram always believed in packing early, listing every item carefully to avoid last-minute confusion. Santosh followed his example, neatly stacking his belongings and checking them off one by one.

The next morning, Shiv Ram called from Sydney. He informed Aparna that all arrangements for Santosh's airport transfer and formalities were complete. After a long conversation, Aparna passed the phone to Janaki Amma.

But Janaki Amma couldn't hide her anxiety. "Sending a small boy such a long distance, all alone in a small aircraft — with no one to accompany him! I can't rest easy about this," she confessed. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"Amma," Shiv Ram replied gently, "it's no different from hiring a taxi — except this one flies. Santosh will be with a professional pilot, one we know well. There's really nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry?" she shot back. "This isn't a city ride! He'll be flying for days, stopping in strange places. Who'll look after

him if something goes wrong? I won't sleep till he reaches you safely."

Shiv Ram laughed softly. "Please, Amma, don't lose sleep over this. The pilot is experienced, the aircraft reliable. He just flew six of my colleagues from Sydney to Bangalore safely. Everything's fine. And remember — Santosh and I will be back together just a few days after his return trip. We'll see you soon. Take care, Amma."

That same morning, Marc Wheeler landed at Bangalore International Airport at 6:30 a.m. with the Apar Infotech team. After a long shower and breakfast, he was set to rest for the day. Refuelling was scheduled for the afternoon, and he planned to take off again at 4 p.m.

The first stop on the return journey would be Bangkok, around noon local time — 10:30 p.m. in India. Marc's family was already vacationing there, and he looked forward to joining them.

A passionate rock climber before his heart surgery, Marc had never let his medical setback defeat his spirit. With his doctor's cautious approval, he continued to climb occasionally — always carrying his old climbing rope as a sort of lucky charm.

In Bangkok, he planned to spend a day with his family, perhaps make a short trip to Nam Pha Pa Yai for a bit of rock-climbing, rest overnight, and then continue to Ngurah Rai Airport in Bali. After two days of leisure and short excursions there, the final leg of his route would take him to Laverton in Western Australia — and finally home to Sydney, after a brief visit to the Aboriginal lands.

The entire journey, from Bangalore to Sydney, was expected to take five days — a blend of travel, exploration and adventure.

As instructed, the Public Relations Officer of Apar Infotech came with the office vehicle in time, to pick up Santosh from home. His mission was clear - to ensure that all official tasks and procedures at the airport were completed and the custody and charge of Santosh safely passed on to the pilot, Marc Wheeler, as directed by the Managing Director.

The officer personally took care of everything. He introduced Santosh to the pilot, made sure the boy was comfortably seated inside the aircraft, and confirmed to Aparna that Santosh was on board and in good spirits. He then handed the phone to Santosh, who repeated cheerfully, “Everything’s fine, Amma. Don’t worry.”

Before departure, the PRO double-checked that Santosh’s baggage was properly secured in the luggage rack. He wished both of them well, waved goodbye, and stepped down from the aircraft.

Santosh sent a short message from his phone to both his parents.

“Everything okay. On board with Captain Marc Wheeler. Will message after reaching Bangkok, and thereafter every morning and evening.”

Aparna exhaled deeply as she read the message. Relief, at last.

Janaki Amma, too, felt the weight lift from her heart. Folding her hands, she prayed aloud, “Oh, Divine Mother of Thirumandhamkunnu Temple, keep watch over my child. Protect him through this journey.”

Meanwhile, Marc called Shiv Ram directly.

“Sandoz is on board with me,” he confirmed in his calm, clipped tone. “We’re flying out of Bangalore exactly on schedule — 16:00 IST. I expect to reach Sydney as per plan. I’ll update you once we land in Bangkok.”

After ending the call, Marc turned to his young companion. His manner was warm and reassuring.

“Welcome aboard, young man! I’m Marc Wheeler — but you can call me Marc. We’ll be making this journey together. You might’ve heard me speaking to your papa just now. Get ready for an interesting flight. Our first stop is Bangkok, where you’ll meet my family. From there, we’ll all travel together to Sydney. So, shall we begin our adventure?”

Santosh smiled, eyes wide with excitement.

“I’m extremely happy to meet you, Captain Marc. Papa said you’re one of the best — and that this journey will be unforgettable!”

The aircraft taxied onto the runway and lifted smoothly into the evening sky. But barely half an hour after take-off, a call from the Air Traffic Control Centre brought a note of alarm. A sudden low-pressure system formed on their route, bringing strong, gusty winds and thunderstorms. The control tower recommended the light aircraft turn back and continue the journey another time.

Marc frowned slightly, glancing at his instruments. For a man who had spent decades flying across Asia and the Pacific, such alerts were far from unusual. He had weathered worse storms in

his long career. He replied confidently that he would adjust the route and altitude to steer clear of the worst of the disturbance.

Under normal conditions, the flight to Bangkok would take around four to five hours. But if he reached late, the rest of the plans could get upset.

Marc Wheeler decided to modify the route, skirting the turbulent zone rather than turning back. Turning to Santosh with a playful grin, he said,

“Sandoz, you’ve been on roller-coaster rides before, haven’t you? Thrilling, right? Well, get ready — you might soon have a similar experience, only higher up!”

Santosh chuckled, tightening his seat belt. Hardly any children disliked roller-coasters.

The boy was enchanted by everything around him — the panoramic view through the cockpit window, the dazzling array of dials and meters, the gentle hum of the engines. Marc took the time to explain the controls: which gauges showed altitude and air speed, and which lights meant warning and caution.

Soon, Marc gestured downward.

“Look down, Sandoz! We’re just leaving the Indian coastline and crossing into the Bay of Bengal. That’s Chennai, far below us.”

Santosh pressed his face close to the window. The white line of surf along the eastern coast looked like a ribbon of lace. In the fading light, the waves below gleamed like silvery snakes twisting over the dark sea. From up here, it felt as though the aircraft itself was some great bird gliding in the sky.

But on the horizon, the scene grew darker. Clouds were gathering — heavy, brooding masses that fused and swelled with every passing minute. Flickers of lightning flared within them, painting the sky in ghostly flashes.

The first jolt came suddenly. The aircraft lurched and dropped, its wings slicing through dense vapour. Marc glanced sideways at Santosh and shouted above the rumble,

“Don’t be scared, young man! That was just a small one. We’ll have to dance through a few more before Bangkok.”

As they approached the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the storm ahead had grown immense. Lightning now lit entire swathes of the horizon.

Marc pointed toward the thick wall of cloud in front of them.

“Listen carefully, Sandoz. We’ve crossed about half the distance. We should reach the Andamans in a few minutes. But the weather ahead is fierce. I’ve altered our route to skirt the worst of it, but we can’t avoid the turbulence completely. Brace yourself — it’s going to get bumpy!”

Before Marc could finish his words, a blinding streak of lightning split the sky right ahead. For a split second, the entire cockpit was drenched in white light. The aircraft shuddered violently — rattling like a toy in a child’s trembling hand — and then plunged.

Santosh gasped. His seat belt cut into his chest as the aircraft dropped, but within moments, Marc steadied the craft, fighting the controls with both hands. The plane levelled, yet the air was

thick with dread. Santosh's eyes clung to Marc — the man was his only anchor amid the fury outside.

But the respite was brief. The plane began pitching and rolling again, the wings slicing through sheets of rain. The cabin lights flickered. A strange heaviness filled the air; Santosh felt suddenly breathless, as though the oxygen had thinned. In the confusion, he didn't notice at first the strain etched across Marc's face — the tightened jaw, the shallow breaths, the hand clutching his chest.

Then came the cry.

"Sandoz! Quick—my medicine!" Marc's voice cracked. "In the blue bag—behind me! A green pouch inside—hurry! Chest pain—quick!"

Santosh's heart pounded. He fumbled with his seat belt, freed himself, and crawled toward the back as the aircraft swayed. He grabbed the blue bag — but at that instant, another blinding flash tore across the window. The plane lurched sharply downward. Santosh lost his footing, the bag slipping from his grasp. He slammed against a seat handle, pain shooting through his head.

Blinking through dizziness, he struggled up, scanning frantically for the fallen bag. The roar of the engines was deafening; thunder growled all around.

When he looked toward the cockpit again, Marc's face had changed. His hand, which moments ago had gripped the joystick, now trembled and fell limp.

"Captain Marc!" Santosh shouted. "Marc!"

No answer.

Marc's body sagged forward. His head struck the joystick with a dull thud. The aircraft tilted violently, then began to spiral downward, the sky and sea spinning outside the windshield. The boy's world turned into a whirl of flashing lights and chaos.

Loose papers, maps, and Marc's cap flew across the cabin as the plane shuddered and pitched. Santosh was hurled against the side panel, his hands clutching at thin air. A deafening crack ripped through the noise — perhaps a wing, perhaps the tail. He couldn't tell.

The last thing he felt was the sensation of falling — falling endlessly through air — before everything went black.

Chapter-9

It was 5:30 in the morning.

Shiv Ram was startled awake by the sound of his phone ringing. Still half-dazed, he glanced at the clock, then grabbed the phone. *It must be Marc.* Their flight from Bangalore was expected to touch down in Bangkok by 4:00 a.m. Sydney time. Marc had promised to call the moment they landed. Shiv had even turned his phone's volume up to the maximum, afraid he might miss the call in his sleep.

But it wasn't Marc.

A calm, official voice spoke from the other end.

"Hello, is this Mr. Shiv Ram? We're calling from Qantas Airways. The Beechcraft Denali that departed from Bangalore last evening, carrying your son and pilot Mr. Marc Wheeler, has lost contact since last night. It became untraceable while crossing the Bay of Bengal.

We are making every possible effort to re-establish communication with the pilot. We're deeply sorry for this distressing situation and the unexpected turn of events."

For a moment, Shiv Ram froze. The phone slipped from his trembling hands.

It felt as if an avalanche had erupted inside his mind — a storm of disbelief and panic. No... this can't be true. This has to be a nightmare.

He snatched the phone back and dialled Marc's number, desperate to hear his voice, desperate to prove the call wrong. But the automated response hit him like a hammer:

"This number is not reachable... This number is not reachable..."

Shiv Ram's body began to shake. His breath came in ragged bursts. He sank into a chair, his voice breaking into sobs.

"Oh God... no! This can't be true! My child... my Santhu... What happened to him? Oh God, please no... I can't take this!"

Suddenly, his instincts kicked in. He wiped his face and grabbed the phone again, dialling a familiar number.

"Manoj... this is Shiv Ram calling from Sydney."

Manoj, the company PRO in Bangalore, answered groggily.

"Sir? It's past midnight here. Is everything all right?"

"Manoj..." Shiv Ram's voice trembled. "I need your help. Right now. It's an emergency. I've... I've lost my son, Manoj. The aircraft carrying him to Australia has gone missing. Both Marc and Santosh are untraceable over the Bay of Bengal."

Manoj sat bolt upright.

"Oh no... Sir, I—I'm so sorry. Please hold on. I'll check immediately and call you back with whatever I can find out."

When the call ended, Manoj sat for a few seconds, stunned. His mind raced. *Who could help at this hour?*

Then it struck him — his friend Johnson, who worked with the Bangalore Airport Authority. He quickly scrolled through his contacts.

“Hi Johnson, sorry to wake you, bro.”

“Forget the sorry,” Johnson replied briskly. “I’m on duty. What’s the matter?”

“Listen — a Beechcraft Denali left Bangalore around 4 p.m. yesterday for Bangkok. It had only two people on board — the pilot and a 13-year-old boy, the son of my boss. The aircraft lost contact two or three hours after takeoff. Do you know anything about this?”

“Wait a moment...”

Johnson checked his system. When he returned, his tone had changed.

“Yes... this must be that case. The control tower had issued a warning to the pilot — severe weather ahead — and advised him to turn back. But he refused. That was the last flight path logged before communication was lost. The final transmission came from the Port Blair Tower before the link went dead.”

“Oh God...” Manoj murmured. “Johnson, please keep me updated. My boss is shattered. His son was on that plane.”

“I’ll get in touch with the Port Blair control team,” Johnson said.

“But the search can only start after daybreak, once the weather clears. Who did you say the passengers were?”

“A 13 year old boy. Santosh. Son of our Managing Director, Mr. Shiv Ram. And the pilot.”

“Got it. I’ll call as soon as there’s news.”

The moment the line went dead, Manoj called Shiv Ram again.

“Sir, I spoke with a contact in the Airport Authority. The case is confirmed — the aircraft lost contact over the Bay of Bengal. Port Blair Tower was the last to receive communication. Search operations can only begin after sunrise when the weather improves. I’ll monitor this constantly, Sir. Please... please don’t lose hope. We may still get good news.”

There was a long silence. When Shiv Ram spoke again, his voice was low and strained.

“All right, Manoj. Please inform Neethu Roshan — the Director of Projects — to fly to Sydney at once. She’ll take charge of operations here until further notice. Arrange her travel and stay immediately.”

“Understood, Sir.”

“Also, have a car ready at the Bangalore airport. I’m taking the first available flight back. I’ll send you the details once booked.”

“Yes, Sir. Please stay strong. We’re all praying for your son’s safety.”

“Thank you, Manoj... goodbye.”

Shiv Ram ended the call, his hand still trembling. The phone lay silent on the bed beside him. His world had already gone dark.

Chapter-10

For the past several days, the Chief and Ipili had been in high spirits — especially since the day of revelation.

But a few days later, Ipili began to feel unwell. Frequent retching and spells of exhaustion troubled her. She brushed it off as a passing indisposition, nothing serious. Even when the High Priest suggested calling the community-midwife, she wasn't convinced it had anything to do with that.

The midwife, after her examination, looked up with a smile.

“Take care, my child. There's life ticking inside your womb.”

Ipili's eyes widened in disbelief, then glowed with joy. The old woman's words rang in her ears like a song.

As the midwife stepped out confirming the glad news, Chief Mahaba's joy overflowed. He clasped the High Priest's hand and pressed it against his chest in gratitude.

“The souls above have heard my plea,” he said, his voice quivering. Stroking Ipili's belly gently, he whispered, “Our forefathers have seen our pain at last.”

The first person Ipili longed to tell was Suru — her dearest friend and confidante. Suru had always poured compassion upon her barren grief.

“Don't let your heart burn over the seed that has not sprouted,” Suru would tell her. “When the mind burns, the body burns too.”

In scorched soil, no seed can grow. The Elders will guide you in time.”

Those words had become a balm to Ipili’s heart.

“True, I have no sister of my own,” Ipili often thought, “but in Suru, I’ve found one. How unfair it would’ve been to keep her away just because she comes from a rival tribe! She’ll be so happy to know about the life budding in my womb. Poor one — she’s been bedridden for days after that dreadful fall.”

Suru’s accident had shaken the entire village. She had gone alone to the ‘Chemana’ rocky formations, far beyond the reed forests, where the wild river curved through a deep ravine. It was there that a pack of wolves had surprised her. Usually, Suru was alert, cautious; she knew how to keep herself safe. But that day, the wolves had descended before she noticed.

To save herself, she had leapt down the steep river bank into the cold waters. The sudden drop saved her from their fangs but shattered her left heel against a rock. When Kireeba went searching for her later, he found her still stranded in the river, trembling, waiting for the pack to leave. With fire torches and drumbeats, he scared the wolves back into the jungle.

When the news reached the Chief, he was furious.

“What was she doing near ‘Chemana’? That’s beyond our boundary! There’s plenty of firewood near the village. Chemana’s groves bear only those lantern-shaped seeds — deadly poison! Nothing else grows beneath those trees.”

Suru explained that she had gone to collect rare herbs, the kind she couldn't find elsewhere. Indeed, she was known for her knowledge of healing plants. Ipili herself had been cured many times by Suru's herbal mixtures — the monthly cramps, the twitching pain in her legs, all gone because of Suru's remedies.

Yet, the question remained: What herbs do grow there? The elders always warned that the lantern seeds of 'Chemana' were dangerously toxic — so fierce that even grass refused to sprout under those trees.

Her disobedience had angered Mahaba deeply. To avoid his wrath, Suru had chosen to stay confined to her hut, nursing her injured leg in silence.

When Ipili heard the midwife's words that morning, she knew the glad news must reach Suru first.

As she entered the hut, the familiar pungent scent of crushed herbs and warm oils greeted her. Suru's daughter, Matomi, was gently massaging her mother's leg with steaming oil.

Seeing Ipili's radiant face, Suru asked,

"Chechima, your face is glowing! What is it?"

Ipili evaded the question, glancing instead at her bandaged leg.

"How's your foot now? Can you walk soon?"

"A few more days, maybe. The oil massages started ten days ago. If the bone joins well, I'll be walking again in a week."Suru repeated, smiling,

"Chechima didn't answer me yet!"

Ipili took her hand softly. “Baby, I am with child. The midwife confirmed it this morning. I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Suru’s hand flinched. She gasped, her face suddenly pale.

“What is it? Are you in pain?” Ipili asked quickly.

“Yes... just a sharp pang in the leg. It happens when bones begin to mend.”

Turning to Matomi, Suru said, “Warm the oil a little more. Hot oil heals faster.”

Then she turned back to Ipili and smiled faintly.

“Chechima, I am truly glad. Take care of yourself. Don’t wander too much in these early months. I’ll send you some herbal mixtures to keep your body strong. You must stay healthy for the life you carry.”

Ipili’s eyes filled with tears. Even in pain, Suru’s heart overflowed with care.

How can I ever repay such love? she thought, stroking Suru’s hand and kissing her cheek gently. “Do not worry, my dear one. Let your health recover first — we can think of it after that.”

“No, no, Chechima!” Suru protested. “It’s something I can do lying right here on my bed. I already have all the necessary herbs. I just need to tell my daughters which leaves and roots to mix, and in what proportion. My little ones will prepare it for you. Don’t you worry, I’ll make sure the medicine reaches you.”

“And Chechima, please be careful. Don’t strain yourself. Don’t move around too much. My herbal mix will surely reach you by this evening — or at the latest, before daybreak tomorrow.”

Ipili returned to her hut with a heart fluttering with hope.

That same evening, Matomi arrived carrying the herbal mix, just as promised. The High Priest’s words had already filled Ipili with renewed faith and trust in the prophecy. Suru’s emotional warmth and prompt help strengthened her hope even further.

But poor Ipili never imagined that her joy would be so short-lived.

Two weeks passed. One morning, she woke with a sharp pain in her lower belly. A few drops of blood oozed out, bringing with them a searing pain and unbearable discomfort.

“Oh... Ahhh... Ohhh!” she groaned in anguish.

Her heart sank. What she dreaded most had happened again. The cry jolted Mahaba awake.

“What happened?” he asked, alarmed.

Tears streamed down her face. In a broken voice, Ipili gasped, “Lost it... lost it again! It’s all over. My womb has emptied...

I’ve been denied again! The Elders have abandoned me. I’m cursed—an unlucky soul!”

Mahaba, though crushed inside, gently stroked her back. “Calm yourself, Ipili. It’s our misfortune. Don’t grieve. I’ll call the midwife granny right away.”

Ignoring the darkness of the retreating night, Mahaba dashed towards the midwife's hut. Each step he took echoed the shattering of his dreams.

The old woman was deep in sleep, and it took some effort to wake her and bring her back. By the time they returned, Ipili was weak and pale. Mahaba waited outside while the midwife went in to examine her. His body sat still, but his mind was in chaos — a storm of despair beneath a sky that showed no mercy.

Inside, Ipili drifted into a nightmare. Savage wolves were chasing her. Heavily pregnant, she struggled to run. The pack was closing in when she stumbled over a rock and fell flat on her belly. The impact was unbearable; she could feel her womb emptying, her baby slipping away.

She woke with a start, gasping — and realised that though the dream had ended, its anguish had already become her reality.

Why were the Elders punishing her so cruelly? What sin had she committed? Her wailing rose into the night, echoing through the jungle and unsettling every creature within earshot.

Outside, Mahaba sat lost in turmoil. How could this happen when the High Priest himself had foretold otherwise? If Ipili couldn't even carry a child to term, how could the prophecy of a male heir ever come true? His faith began to crumble. He sent for Sebu, the High Priest, desperate for answers.

When the faint chime of Sebu's ritual staff was heard, Mahaba rose, bowed respectfully, and spread a mat before him.

Sebu sat in silence, waiting.

"Her womb has emptied, O Priest," Mahaba said, his voice breaking. "The spirits have abandoned us again!"

Sebua placed his staff aside and rose. He put a hand on Mahaba's shoulder. "So it's true. What did the granny say?"

"Gone, O Diviner. She too could not explain. You spoke of the Elders' favour, but how has it turned to pain and loss?"

"Control your mind, Mahaba," Sebua said calmly. "Do not judge the ways of the Spirits. Their paths are beyond our knowing. What I told you was no fancy — it was a message from the unseen, and their word never fails."

"Forgive me," Mahaba said humbly, "but what we see and suffer contradicts the vision."

Sebua's eyes hardened. "And does that mean what you cannot see does not exist? Keep faith, Mahaba. Trust the wisdom of the departed. All will be well — in time."

Taking up his staff again, Sebua added, "Do not rely solely on what your eyes see or your ears hear. The Elders are watching. I will make a special offering to appease them. Fear not — their word will hold true."

When the priest departed, Lelevu stayed behind to console the shaken Chief. Then, hesitantly, he asked, "Chief, did the midwife say anything about what might have caused this? Could it be poison — or witchcraft?"

"She has suspicions," Mahaba said grimly, "but no proof!"

Lelevu frowned, his eyes narrowing. "Forgive me for asking... but could Suru have anything to do with this? Could she be practising black magic?"

Mahaba looked shocked. “Impossible! You’ve seen how devotedly Suru has cared for Ipili, especially during pregnancy. She would never do such a thing!”

Lelevu said no more, but his expression remained troubled. Something gnawed at his mind.

Moments later, the midwife returned. “She’s lost a lot of blood,” she said, “but the flow has stopped. She must rest for at least a week. And both of you must sleep apart for four weeks.”

Then, lowering her voice, she added, “There’s something strange about this miscarriage. She was perfectly healthy before. I suspect black magic — or some toxic brew. Beware! The villain’s inside the camp!”

The comment put a creepy thought into the mind of Mahaba, feeding the unease that had already taken root. “Could the midwife be right? Was Lelevu’s suspicion justified?”

Despite the High Priest’s assurances, fear crept into Mahaba’s soul. Had the Spirits truly forsaken him? Where had he gone wrong? His thoughts seethed like a swarm of hornets.

Even after the priest’s sacrifice to appease the Elders, nothing had changed. Ipili continued to miscarry, while Suru’s pregnancies were smooth and fruitful. Was this fate — or foul play?

Could the midwife herself be deflecting blame? Her son, after all, was strong and skilled — a hunter and a fighter. Could she be scheming to place him as Chief, if Mahaba died without an heir?

A darker thought flashed through Mahaba's mind — Kireeba.

If he had no male offspring, the next in line would be Kireeba — unpredictable, hot-tempered, and feared. There were already whispers about him — that a boy who challenged him had fallen to his death from a cliff, and many believed it was no accident. The parents had accused Kireeba before the tribal court, but the case collapsed for want of proof.

The memory lingered like a shadow. And now, as the jungle slept under a pale moon, Mahaba felt the same shadow tightening around his heart — the dread of betrayal from within.

Mahaba suddenly recalled that Kireeba often brought herbal medicines for Ipili — likely at Suru's suggestion. He had been unusually gentle with her, a change that left Mahaba puzzled. Skeptical though he was, Mahaba initially thought the boy might finally be mending his ways.

Yet his mind refused to rest.

"Am I misjudging him? Am I denying a genuine change? Or is the boy trying to outsmart us all?"

The more he thought, the more confused he became.

Restless and completely drained, Mahaba longed for some relief and relaxation. Then he remembered the pot of toddy he had kept aside in a corner of the hut. He fetched it, drank greedily, and soon his eyes grew heavy and his mind blurred.

In that hazy half-sleep, a vision took hold of him.

He saw a vast sky stretching above the forest canopy, and in it, a giant bird gliding gracefully with a boy astride its back. As the bird swooped lower, Mahaba recognised the boy — he was about Kireeba's age. The bird landed by the rivulet near their

settlement. The boy jumped down and ran straight into Ipili's arms, calling out joyfully, "Kaja! (Mama!)"

The word "Kaja," bursting from the boy's lips, sent a shiver through Ipili — and even in the vision, Mahaba's heart surged with happiness at the sight.

Then, suddenly, a deafening thunderclap shattered the dream.

Outside, the night had turned violent. The wind roared like a wild beast, tearing through the forest. Lightning blazed across, splitting open the dense canopy as if the sky had caught fire!

At that very hour, the High Priest Sebuā stirred uneasily in his hut.

The storm outside was fierce, but something even fiercer raged within him — an unexplainable disturbance that refused to quieten.

Every night, after supper, Sebuā would fall into deep sleep, only to rise before dawn to offer his prayers and rituals. But not this night. Sleep eluded him.

Each time his eyes closed, the same dream returned — the same vision.

A giant bird soaring high, a boy riding upon it. Then, without warning, the bird plummeting down — crashing into a cluster of trees to the east of the settlement. Both the bird and the boy struggled desperately to cling to a branch. The boy's cry for help pierced through Sebuā's heart, waking him in a cold sweat every time.

He was certain now that this dream was tied to his recent divination — but he could not yet grasp its meaning.

Then came the sound — a loud, earth-shaking crash somewhere to the east.

Sebua sprang to his feet, his mind sharpening into sudden clarity. Determination hardened his face. He took a betel leaf, grabbed his sacred staff, and rushed out into the storm, rain lashing against his skin.

As he approached the Sacrificial Stone, lightning illuminated the sky. He stood before the stone, eyes closed, and raised his voice above the howling wind.

“O ancient souls, we have only you to turn to in moments of trial. You alone can guide us when the path is dark. Reveal to me the truth — show me the way!”

He dropped the betel leaf just in front of the sacrificial stone.

If it fell right-side up, his vision was true. If it fell reverse, he was mistaken.

But before the leaf could land, a gust of wind swept it away. Sebua’s heart tightened.

“Where are you carrying it?” he cried. “Am I being abandoned by the very spirits who sent me their word? Have the Elders turned away from me too?”

Driven by faith, he ran after the swirling litter of leaves and debris, convinced he was following the sacred leaf itself.

Then — a blinding flash! A bolt of lightning tore across the forest, and in its glare he saw something astonishing.

A metallic bird — enormous, gleaming faintly — lodged in the treetops.

Sebua froze, breathless. The dream had come alive before his eyes. He rubbed his eyes and waited for the next flash to be sure

— and yes, there it was again, the same shining creature of metal and light.

As he looked down, something caught his eye — the betel leaf, lying by his foot, right-side up.

His heart swelled with awe and gratitude.

“The Elders have spoken!” he whispered.

Cradling the leaf carefully, Sebua turned and ran back toward the settlement, rain soaking his robes.

By dawn, the storm had weakened. The clouds drifted away, and the jungle glistened in the new light.

Mahaba, weary and bleary-eyed, stirred at the sound of hurried footsteps. The High Priest stood before him, eyes ablaze with purpose.

“What brings you here so early, Priest?” Mahaba asked, voice still heavy from exhaustion.

Sebua’s reply came firm and ringing.

“Do you think the Elders fail to see the sorrow in your eyes? The dream they sent me has returned — and last night, it became real. The storm, the lightning — I heard something fall to the east. A mighty crash. I went to see. It was a metal bird.

We must go now, without delay. If it is the same bird from the dream, the boy is there — somewhere — waiting!”

Chapter-11

Santosh opened his eyes painfully slow. Then, in a sudden flash, he shuddered.

Oh God... the flight! The light aircraft... Captain Marc Wheeler... the cloudburst... the thunderstorm... and the crash!

It was pitch dark around him. His vision slowly adjusted to the dim light. His shoulder felt stiff, and any attempt to move sent a sharp jolt of pain through him.

“Where the hell am I? What’s the time?”

He turned his wrist with effort and squinted at the watch dial.
05:48 AM.

Recollections came flooding back—scene after scene, like a film reel running backward in his mind. He had somehow survived a plane crash. But where exactly was he now? And what was he supposed to do next?

Then he remembered—the mobile phone. Maybe he could call his father.

With trembling fingers, Santosh fished it out of his pocket. As he held the phone, questions started hammering his mind: How do I even explain this to him? What do I say? Without knowing where I am, how will he find me?

After a moment’s hesitation, he decided to try anyway. His father would figure something out. He pressed the power button—only to realise the phone was dead. The battery was completely drained.

A wave of dread washed over him. He was cut off from everyone—utterly alone.

His mind began to spiral. Trapped inside a wrecked plane, what if I can't get out? What if something happens before anyone finds me? What if I never see home again?

Fear and anxiety coiled around him like wild vines strangling a tree. His body trembled.

Then, unbidden, the words of Sensei Mallesh echoed in his mind: “My dear Kohai students, the foremost thing to understand is that the mind holds a power unequalled in life. In many contests, victory does not belong to the strongest, but to the one whose mind refuses to yield. The weak can triumph if their will is unbroken. Countless battles were lost, not to a lack of might, but a failure of will. Remember—The will to fight is your strength; keep your mind sharp. Fight on, till the end!”

Clinging to those words, Santosh steadied his breathing. He tried to still the trembling inside him.

When his eyes adjusted further, he looked around. The cabin was tilted—disoriented.

“Oh God... where's Marc?”

He craned his neck forward and realized the aircraft was lying upside down. He was facing the tail section. Turning carefully toward the cockpit, he spotted Marc—still strapped into the pilot's seat, hanging inverted, motionless.

“Marc! Captain Marc!” he shouted.

No response. Not even a stir.

An eerie stillness filled the space. The plane itself seemed to be swaying slightly, as if suspended somewhere high. Could it be... caught in a tree?

A few pale shafts of morning light pierced through cracks in the fuselage, confirming his suspicion. Another sway—stronger this time—made his heart pound. The wreck creaked under shifting weight.

It could tilt any moment.

He had to get out—fast. But how? With his shoulder half-immobile and the plane perched precariously atop a tree, one wrong move could send it crashing down.

Still, there was no choice.

He began crawling toward the cockpit, ignoring the pain that stabbed through his arm. Once near Marc, he shook him gently, then harder.

“Marc... Marc, wake up!”

Nothing.

With a sinking heart, Santosh placed his fingers on Marc’s chest—no heartbeat. He checked the nostrils—no breath. He touched the pilot’s face. It was cold.

A deep sorrow welled up inside him. Marc was gone.

For a moment, Santosh sat frozen. Then survival instincts took over again. He had to get out. Slowly, carefully, he reached for the pilot-side door latch.

A click—then a thud.

The door swung open and the aircraft lurched violently. Santosh lost his footing but managed to grab a seat handle just in time. The whole structure groaned and trembled.

He was breathing hard now, heart thumping wildly. Staying inside was too dangerous. He had to find a way down.

Then he remembered—Marc's rock-climbing rope. Marc always carried it with him. If Santosh could find it, maybe he could use it to rappel down to the ground.

It had to be somewhere. Maybe in Marc's backpack... or stowed away in one of the overhead lofts.

Santosh had to climb down again, since the storage lofts were now beneath him. The aircraft lay upside down, and every move had to be deliberate. He decided to start by checking the loft above the pilot's seat. His eyes widened when the very first bag he pulled out turned out to be the rock climbing rope bag!

He tore it open with trembling hands and pulled out the rope and the accessories in a rush. Relief flooded his mind when he found assisted braking devices inside as well — they could be a lifesaver, especially with his injured left arm. After a deep breath, he calmed himself, sat carefully, and began preparing for the descent. He tied several knots along the rope to prevent any sudden fall and selected a belay device that seemed easiest to handle.

Once he had mentally braced himself, Santosh peered out through the open door to locate a sturdy branch nearby. Taking the gear, he stepped gingerly onto it, balancing against the morning wind. He inched toward the main trunk and secured the rope firmly with a flawless knot, tugging it twice to test its strength. Then he tossed the free end down — it reached all the way to the ground.

Without waiting further, he began his descent, pain searing through his shoulder and back. His movements were careful, but exhaustion and strain were visible in every breath. Finally, he touched the ground, aching and weary, yet safe.

He scanned his surroundings cautiously. The forest was dense and eerily silent except for the distant calls of birds. He needed to find shelter — somewhere safe for the day and night, away from unseen dangers.

And then, his heart skipped a beat.

A small group of tribal people was fast approaching from a distance.

Terror froze him.

“What are they doing here? Are they drawn by the sound of the crash? Or are they just passing through? Would they capture me if they found me? Are they cannibals?”

There was no time to think. He ducked behind a giant tree, pressing himself tightly against the trunk, hoping the shadows would hide him.

The group was led by an elderly man — the High Priest — and they were scanning the area, pointing upward toward the tangled wreck above. Their speech was strange and guttural. Santosh’s heart pounded so violently that he feared they might hear it.

He crouched lower, his breath shallow, pain flaring again in his shoulder.

They were dark-skinned, with curly hair and lean, muscular frames. Some carried long pointed spears, others bows and arrows. One of them noticed the rope dangling from the aircraft and began pulling at it, even trying to climb a few steps up.

Panic gripped Santosh.

Are they checking if someone escaped? If I stay here, will they find me? Should I risk running?

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind, two strong hands suddenly grabbed him from behind, locking around his waist. Startled, Santosh pushed hard against the tree trunk, but the grip tightened around his chest and shoulder. Another man seized his left arm and wrenched it sideways to restrain him. The pain was blinding. His body convulsed — and everything went dark.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself lying on a leaf mat inside a dimly lit hut. The air smelled of earth and smoke. As his vision cleared, realisation struck — he was a captive.

Fragments of memory rushed back. The struggle, the hands, the pain — and then nothing. Now here he was, lying helpless.

“But... they didn’t kill me,” he thought. “So, they didn’t capture me for food.” That thought, oddly, comforted him. Still, anxiety gnawed at him. Why had they kept him alive? Was this a prison? Are guards outside?

No answers came. The more he thought, the deeper he sank into confusion. Alone and trapped, Santosh’s mind reeled in disbelief.

Is this real? Or am I dreaming? Am I part of some strange game?

The word game flickered something inside him — his school, his friends, the quiz competitions, and his favourite teacher, Premjit Sir. His teacher’s voice echoed in his head:

“In every game, there come moments when you feel lost and defeated. That’s when you must rise with renewed energy. Those moments define who you are — both in the game and in life. Push through them, for that’s the real victory!”

Gradually, his heartbeat steadied. Determination replaced despair.

He tried shifting his position, only to realize that his left arm was completely immobilised. He touched his shoulder with his right hand — it was stiff, bound tightly with bark and mud paste. His arm was strapped to his torso from neck to waist.

Looking down, he saw he was almost naked. Green herbal paste covered bruises and cuts across his body. His black amulet was still on his right wrist, and the black waist thread his mother had tied every year was still in place, though now decorated with leaves and fibres.

He felt a strange mixture of relief and vulnerability.

Then Premjit’s words echoed again: “Only a calm mind can see opportunity in adversity. An agitated one misses every chance that life offers.”

Santosh exhaled slowly, forcing himself to stay composed. He wondered about the time. Did they take my watch too? He couldn’t lift his left arm, so he sat up slightly and tilted it. The watch face glinted faintly — 12:27 PM.

“So, I’ve been out for nearly seven hours,” he thought.

Just then, he heard footsteps approaching. He quickly closed his eyes and feigned sleep. The bamboo door creaked open. Someone entered.

Through half-open lids, he saw a dark silhouette — a woman with long, curly hair, bare-chested, carrying a small earthen pot, a leaf plate, and a bundle wrapped in banana leaf. She sat beside him and opened the parcel, revealing a green herbal paste. Gently, she began applying it on his wounds.

Santosh stayed still. Then she touched his shoulder lightly and whispered, “Meej... Meej... Kaja..., Kaja.”

She pointed to herself, repeating softly, “Meej... Kaja,” then mimed feeding a baby at her breast.

Santosh blinked. She wasn’t a threat — she was introducing herself. “Meej” might mean me. Kaja — perhaps her name.

She then pointed to the fruits on the leaf plate and said kindly, “Ni thitta” (You eat).

Peeling a ripe plantain, she placed it gently in his mouth.

Hunger overcame hesitation, and Santosh ate quietly. The woman — Kaja, as she called herself — peeled cooked wild yams and offered them too. They tasted earthy, but pleasant.

Suddenly, a booming male voice called from outside, “Ipili! Ipili!” A tall, dark man entered, his physique like a black tree trunk. He spoke quickly in the same unfamiliar tongue. The woman replied, gesturing toward Santosh’s bound arm. After a brief exchange, both of them left.

Silence returned.

Santosh stared at the doorway, his mind swirling again. They didn’t seem intent on harming him — perhaps even the opposite. But how was he to communicate, to find out where he was, to find a way back home through this endless jungle?

The questions crowded in again, whispering fear into his mind.

Would he ever get back? Would he ever see home again?

Chapter-12

Shiv Ram dashed to the airport that very night. What mattered most was reaching Bangalore as quickly as possible. Only then could he learn more about the incident and intensify the search and rescue efforts for the missing plane.

Yet his mind kept rebelling against the news. Could it all be false — a misunderstanding, perhaps a communication failure? Even if there had been a crash, couldn't they have survived? But what if it was true? Could Santosh — his own Santosh — really be a victim of a plane crash?

As his thoughts swung wildly between doubt and despair, Shiv Ram cursed the day he had decided to bring Santosh down to Australia. “Oh God,” he thought, “how will I ever tell Aparna and the others?”

If the shock was unbearable even for him, how would Aparna take it? Would she be able to withstand the blow? What comfort could he possibly offer her — or his mother? How could he break this tormenting news without shattering their world?

It was early morning when his car pulled into the driveway. Manoj was waiting at the airport and had driven him home.

Shiv Ram got down quietly, saw Manoj off, and walked slowly to the front door. But he stopped short of pressing the bell. His hand trembled. Taking a deep breath, he finally forced himself to press the button.

Lakshmi Amma opened the door. Startled, she blinked in surprise. There had been no word of Shiv Ram returning so soon.

“Shivu! You’re back already? Without even telling Aparna? Where’s Santosh — unloading the luggage from the car?” She looked toward the porch and beyond.

Something in Shiv Ram’s face — the tension, the pale disquiet — made her uneasy. “What’s the matter, Shivu? Where’s Santosh?” she asked anxiously.

Hearing her tone, Janaki Amma came out. “Who is it, Lachimma? What’s going on?”

She stopped short at the sight of her son. “Shivu? You were supposed to be in Australia for another ten days! What’s happened? Why are you back so suddenly — and where is Santosh?”

Shiv Ram’s silence deepened their dread. The anguish on his face said what words could not.

“Why don’t you speak up?” Janaki Amma’s voice trembled. “What’s happened to Santosh?”

He choked as the words came out:

“Amma... Santosh... The aircraft he was travelling in — it’s gone missing. It crashed somewhere over the Andamans. We don’t know anything yet... whether he’s alive or... or...” His voice broke, and he burst into tears.

Janaki Amma went pale. Her body shook. “Oh no! Oh my God! What sin have we committed to deserve this? Why have you forsaken us, O Mother Goddess of Thirumandhamkunnu? How

could you be so cruel? Ayyo, Santosh, where are you? What has happened to you? Oh, what a black day!”

Her piercing cries filled the house.

Aparna, startled by the commotion, woke up and ran to the drawing room. “Amma! What’s the matter? What happened?”

Only then did she see Shiv Ram standing at the door. “Shivu! When did you come back? Why so suddenly — and why are you crying? Where’s Santosh? What’s going on? Tell me!” She shook his shoulders in desperation.

When he finally told her, it felt as if the world collapsed around her.

“What? The airplane — missing? And Santosh was in it?” Her voice rose into a scream. “No! No... Oh God, no! Ayyo... Ayyayyo!” Darkness swept over her, and she slumped.

“Good heavens! Aparna’s fainted. Lachimma, water — quick!”

Lakshmi Amma rushed in with a tumbler, sprinkled water on Aparna’s face, and gently tapped her cheeks. Slowly, Aparna opened her eyes — but her gaze was distant, her mind elsewhere.

“What’s the time now, Lachimma?” she asked softly. “Isn’t it breakfast time for Santosh? Why haven’t you called him down yet? He must be upstairs, pretending to study but lost in his own mischief again.”

The three looked at each other, horrified and confused.

“Aparna’s lost her senses,” Janaki Amma whispered.

But Aparna sat up abruptly. “It’s not me who’s lost her senses — it’s you, Amma! Don’t you hear him? He’s calling out for his coffee — Lachimma please take it to him. He always has his coffee before breakfast.”

Her voice was calm, almost cheerful — and it chilled everyone in the room.

Janaki Amma was bewildered by Aparna’s words. This isn’t the same Aparna!

Completely oblivious to the shock she had caused, Aparna called out cheerfully, “Okay, Santhu!”

In the drawing room, Shiv Ram sat with his face buried in his hands. Hearing her voice, he jumped up and hurried to her side. Struggling to keep his voice steady, he said gently, “Appu, listen to me. Please don’t get upset. Do you remember what the doctor told you? You must avoid any physical or mental strain. Come on now — go back to bed and rest.”

Aparna laughed, as though he had cracked a joke. “Me? Take rest? Why? Am I sick or something? What’s my ailment?”

Alarmed by her strange behaviour, Shiv Ram immediately decided to take her to the hospital.

All through the drive, Aparna kept questioning him angrily, “Why are you taking me to the hospital, Shivu? What’s wrong with me?”

Halfway there, his phone rang. It was Manoj.

“I’m really sorry, sir,” Manoj said. “There’s nothing promising in the information so far. The Search and Rescue team from Port

Blair combed the jungle twice, but haven't found any firm indications yet. They'll make a final search tomorrow. Let's hope for some positive news then, sir."

The line went dead.

Shiv Ram sat like a rock battered by waves — unmoving, expressionless — yet a volcano of anguish was churning inside him.

At the hospital, Dr. Pradeep began examining Aparna.

She asked Shiv Ram, frowning, "Shivu, what's wrong with me?"

"Doctor, tell him I'm perfectly fine, will you?"

Dr. Pradeep smiled gently. "You're right, Aparna. There's no illness as such. But I told you before — you must be careful until your delivery. Don't you remember? Are you taking the medicines as advised? We'll check your blood reports and make adjustments if needed."

Aparna's brows shot up. "What? Delivery? You mean I'm pregnant? Oh, come on, doctor! Let's think about that when it actually happens, shall we? Why worry about it now?"

Dr. Pradeep glanced questioningly at Shiv Ram, who leaned in and whispered, "Excuse me, doctor. Could we step out for a moment?"

"Take care of her," Dr. Pradeep told the nurse as he and Shiv Ram stepped outside.

The moment they were out of the room, Aparna called after them, “Shivu, please hurry! It’s time for Santosh to study. We must get back home soon!”

Shiv Ram forced a nod and stepped into the corridor. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he recounted everything — the flight, the disappearance, the missing plane, and Aparna’s collapse on hearing the news.

“I don’t know what’s happened to her,” he said, voice quivering. “She fainted after hearing about Santosh, and since then she’s been completely out of touch with reality. She doesn’t even remember she’s pregnant. Please, doctor... do something.”

Dr. Pradeep was visibly shaken. He patted Shiv Ram’s back. “I’m so sorry, Shiv Ram. This must have been a terrible shock — enough to unhinge anyone. I was wondering why her heart rate was so high despite the medication. It all makes sense now.”

He continued, “Her behaviour points to post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. It’s not uncommon after severe emotional trauma, and pregnancy can make it worse. You must take her to our psychiatrist, Dr. Dorai Swamy. He’s very experienced. But don’t tell her that she’s meeting a psychiatrist — she might resist. See him first, then come back to me.”

He paused, placing a comforting hand on Shiv Ram’s shoulder. “Look, Shiv Ram — I know this is the darkest hour of your life. You’ll need all your strength and courage to get through it.

Aparna will depend entirely on you now. If you falter, things may worsen for everyone. Be strong — and keep hope alive.”

Without delay, Shiv Ram took Aparna to meet Dr. Dorai Swamy. He first met the psychiatrist privately, narrating the entire ordeal — the disappearance of the aircraft, the emotional devastation, and Aparna’s subsequent detachment from reality.

Dr. Dorai Swamy listened intently, then met Aparna for a calm, unhurried conversation. After his assessment, she was sent back to Dr. Pradeep, while he asked Shiv Ram to stay behind.

The psychiatrist spoke gravely: “Yes, your wife has suffered a severe mental shock following the disappearance of her son. Apart from medication, she’ll need a nurturing and stable environment to recover. Your role, Shiv Ram, is critical. You’ll need immense patience and emotional strength. I know you’re suffering too, but your steadiness will be her anchor.”

He stopped for a moment and resumed, “Recovery won’t be quick — it could take months, or even years. Each patient responds differently. What matters most is that she feels safe, loved, and supported. Follow the treatment faithfully, and come for regular reviews.”

Shiv Ram took a deep breath, thanked the doctor, and walked slowly back to Dr. Pradeep’s room.

Dr. Pradeep went through the psychiatrist’s notes and adjusted Aparna’s medications. Then he turned to her with a gentle firmness. “Aparna, listen carefully. You’re right — you don’t have any major illness. But you are carrying a child. You must take care, for your sake and for the baby’s. Think of it — it could

be a lovely brother or sister for Santosh. Wouldn't he be thrilled to have one?"

A sudden light of joy flickered in Aparna's eyes. "Really, Doctor? Santhu would jump with joy, won't he, Shivu?"

Dr. Pradeep turned to Shiv Ram, who was staring at her with a heavy heart.

"Shiv Ram, you seem lost in thought," the doctor said softly. "You're just as responsible for protecting both your wife and the new life within her."

Shiv Ram forced a faint smile. "Sorry, Doctor. My mind wandered — office issues." Then he turned to Aparna and said gently, "Yes, Appu. He'll be overjoyed."

Dr. Pradeep smiled. "Good. Aparna, I'll see you at your next review. Take care — both of you."

Chapter-13

Santosh had been confined to the hut for over a week. He was barely allowed to step outside except to attend to his basic needs. Ipili took care to bring him food at regular intervals — ember-roasted fish and crab, wild tubers, and jungle fruits. When she noticed his preference for fruits and vegetables, she began to bring him more plantains, wild jackfruit, and tender coconuts.

Each morning, she arrived with a small bowl of green herbal paste, which she carefully applied to various parts of his body. Whether it was the forced rest or the efficacy of the herbs, Santosh couldn't tell — but his pain had begun to ease.

Occasionally, the stout, dark-skinned man would visit with Kaja. Every other day, another person came to check his body and apply hot oil to his limbs. After a couple of weeks, the clay-and-bark cast around his upper body was removed.

Santosh often wondered why these people were so concerned about his health. Kaja and her companion seemed genuinely interested in his recovery. If they meant to kill me, he thought uneasily, would they go to such lengths to care for me? Wouldn't they have done it the very first day?

But another thought chilled him. Perhaps I'm only being fattened — like cattle back home — before slaughter. The idea made him shudder. How can I trust them? How do I read their true intentions?

He realised he was entirely at their mercy. There was no point now thinking about an escape!

Escape? To where?

He had no idea which direction led to safety — one wrong move could prove fatal.

It might be wiser to bide his time, to learn about their world, to wait until the odds turned in his favour.

Sensei's words echoed in his mind: "My dear young ones, in any long battle, the early breaks do not define victory. Keep your eyes open, your ears to the ground, your spirit steady — till the final moment. A blink of laxness can ruin all. And remember, life is no different from a battle."

Santosh steadied his thoughts. I must watch these people closely, understand their ways and intentions. I must not let fear or despair cloud my mind. Even the plane lost balance in turbulence — I cannot afford to.

He drew in a deep breath.

Stay calm, Santosh, stay alert! Victory belongs to those who can endure.

Meanwhile, Sebu, the high priest, was equally restless. He often wondered what purpose the departed Elders had in sending the boy who had "fallen from the skies"!

Was this stranger truly destined to sustain the Chief's lineage? Indeed, the Elders, after all, were believed to see across time — past, present, and future. Better prepare the boy for his initiation as soon as his health permitted.

He met the healer on the way to Mahaba's hut. "How fares our boy from the skies?" Sebu asked.

“Is he well enough to stand? His initiation must be done soon. Only with the Elders’ blessing can he fulfil his purpose for the tribe.”

The healer nodded confidently. “His shoulder had a minor crack — it should have set by now. Still, best avoid strain for another fortnight. The other wounds are healed. He can move slowly. Let me check him once more to confirm.”

Together they reached the Chief’s hut. Mahaba was surprised to see both men arrive unannounced, but Sebu spoke before he could ask anything.

“Chief, we must prepare for the boy’s initiation — our gift from the skies. The sooner, the better. He must be presented before the spirits of the Elders at the earliest.”

“When do you plan to hold the ceremony?” Mahaba asked anxiously.

“Let the healer examine him. If he’s fit, we’ll decide the time.”

They entered the hut. Ipili was applying her herbal paste to Santosh’s bruises when they came in. Santosh immediately recognised Mahaba but was alarmed by the two unfamiliar faces. He tensed, but restrained himself.

The healer stepped forward, pressing gently along Santosh’s limbs. The pain had mostly gone; only a twinge remained near his shoulder. The healer pointed to it and said something to the others. Ipili nodded, went out, and returned with clay and herbs, which he mixed and applied. Wrapping bark strips around Santosh’s shoulder, he gestured for him not to move the arm.

Santosh felt oddly reassured. Their concern seemed genuine — yet a part of him still refused to trust them completely.

“The shoulder is almost healed,” the healer said. “A few more weeks of rest, and he’ll be fine. He can sit through the ceremony.”

Sebua’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He checked Santosh’s right wrist — yes, the black thread with the amulet was there, just as the divination had foretold. He thanked the Elders silently and declared,

“The ceremony shall be held tomorrow! Let the spirits be pleased and bless us — that their divine plan may unfold for the good of our tribe.”

Santosh, of course, understood none of this. He only sensed that his shoulder wasn’t fully healed and that something significant was about to happen.

The next morning, a group of excited tribes-people crowded into the hut. Startled, Santosh tensed. He recognised just the man with the staff among them — Sebua.

Without explanation, they began dressing him in leaves and vines, painting his face with coloured marks. His pulse quickened. He wanted to resist, but reason prevailed. They’ve done me no harm so far, he reminded himself. To resist now would be foolish.

Soon they had finished. Two men lifted him gently, careful not to hurt his shoulder, and carried him out. From his perch, he could see a large open space ahead — a tall mast at its centre, flanked by two carved wooden pillars. The pillars bore faces with wide, staring eyes looking in every direction. Before them

lay a massive stone slab, flat and cold — a sacrificial altar, perhaps.

Cold sweat trickled down his back. His mind raced. What are they going to do with me? What is this ceremony? But even as fear coiled within him, Santosh clenched his fists and forced himself to stay calm. Whatever happens, I must keep my head steady.

Santosh was carefully placed before the man with the staff, facing the assembly. He remembered having seen him before — an austere figure who occasionally visited the hut. From the man's bearing and the quiet authority with which he moved, Santosh sensed that he was someone highly revered in the tribe.

The man lifted his staff and gazed toward the top of the tall mast, then raised his eyes to the sky, invoking the blessings of the departed souls. Turning to the gathering, he began to speak. His voice rose and fell in impassioned cadences, his gestures animated and emphatic. He often pointed at Santosh, who sat frozen in terror, unable to decipher a word but certain that he was the subject of the fiery address. A chill crept up his spine as he wondered what fate awaited him.

Suddenly, the priest strode forward, seized Santosh's right arm, and raised it before the crowd, pointing to the black thread tied around his upper arm. A murmur of awe rippled through the assembly — gasps, exclamations, and wide-eyed stares. The priest then turned again to the sacred mast, bowed deeply, and the entire crowd followed suit.

He made Santosh stand, guiding him gently to bow toward the mast and the carved poles beside it. Then, turning him again to face the crowd, the priest struck his staff against the ground with a loud thud and spoke a few ringing words that drew a roaring response from the people.

A few of them stepped forward, lifting Santosh and placing him within two concentric circles — women in the inner ring, men in the outer. The chanting began softly, swelling into a rhythmic song accompanied by a vigorous dance. The tempo quickened, the stamping of feet and the drumming of voices rising until the priest threw his head back and cried out to the heavens. The assembly echoed his cry in a thunderous chorus.

Santosh felt as if he had fallen into a hornets' nest. Panic surged through him. What are they going to do with me?

Then someone brought a jungle fowl and handed it to the priest, now visibly possessed by ritual frenzy. Santosh's grandfather's stories flashed in his mind — of ancient temple sacrifices in Kerala — and dread tightened his throat.

The priest gripped the bird in his left hand. He drove his staff deep into the ground so it stood upright, freeing his right hand. With a sharp stone blade, he struck. The fowl's head fell, and its blood spilled into a leaf cupped beneath. The priest chanted feverishly as the crowd trembled with awe.

Santosh turned his face away, eyes squeezed shut, revolted by the sight. When he dared to look again, the priest was sprinkling the blood at the base of the mast and carved poles, muttering incantations. Then he lifted the bird's body and waved it thrice over Santosh's head, the rush of air and metallic scent of blood making him flinch.

The priest barked a command, and the crowd bowed in unison. The dead fowl was handed to Kaja, the woman who had once tended to Santosh.

The men lined up before the sacred mast, Kaja's companion at their head. Among the women, Kaja led the procession. From their prominence, Santosh realised they must be the foremost figures of the tribe. So that's it, he thought grimly. I'm in the care — or custody — of their leaders.

As the ceremony continued, he noticed many eyes on him — some curious, some reverent, but one pair burned with unmistakable hostility.

A woman, standing slightly apart, watched him with cold fury. Was that hatred real, he wondered, or just my fear twisting what I see? What have I done to earn her loathing?

His unease deepened when he caught sight of a boy — tall, broad-shouldered, perhaps a few years older than him — who stood apart from the other children. The same bitterness and scorn that flashed in the woman's eyes darkened his as well. Are they related? Why this animosity toward me?

He forced himself to think calmly. Clearly, not everyone here welcomes me. I must remember that. There may be foes among them — hidden threats beneath friendly faces.

Suddenly, dark clouds rolled in. A gust of wind tore through the clearing, followed by sheets of rain and a pelting hailstorm. The crowd scattered for cover.

Santosh was quickly carried back into the hut, the storm outside now mirrored by the turmoil within him.

As the wind howled, his mind spiralled back to the plane crash — to the last moments before impact, to his parents, to home. How must they have reacted to the news? Do they think I'm gone forever? The thought broke something inside him, and he fought to stifle his sobs.

No, he told himself fiercely, don't give in. Weakness is defeat.

He heard Sensei Mallesh's voice echo in his mind, "Never cower. Fight till the last moment. A frail mind is the first step to failure."

He steadied his breathing.

It's foolish to wait for rescue. No one will find me in this wilderness. My survival depends on me — and me alone. I must observe, plan, and act only when the time and terrain align.

The tribe's protection may be real, he reflected, but I can't take it for granted. Among them could be enemies waiting for a chance. I must stay alert — eyes open, mind calm. His resolve hardened.

Yet beneath that surface of determination, unease gnawed - small, persistent doubts leaking into the cracks of his courage.

Sleep came only in fragments that night, broken by vivid dreams of pursuit and escape. He saw himself running through the forest, chased by the tribesmen, only to stumble into his own home in Bangalore — just as they caught up.

He woke with a start, drenched in sweat. The dreams returned for several nights, each one ending the same way — at the threshold of freedom, with shadows closing in.

Chapter-14

Santosh was kept confined to the hut with strict orders against any movement outside. He could sense that the tribe was intent on keeping him safe and healthy — though for reasons still beyond his comprehension. But as the days passed, the confinement began to weigh on him; it was suffocating.

Now that the pain had subsided and his bruises were almost healed, a restlessness began to creep in. He yearned for a taste of freedom — to breathe the open air again, to explore the settlement, and to understand these people for himself. His very survival, he knew, might depend on it. But communication was a hurdle. How could he convey his desire to go out when even sign language was difficult? His left hand, after all, was still bound.

His only consolation after the ceremony was the occasional appearance of a few children. A handful would sometimes peek in, chatter in their queer tribal tongue with Kaja's daughters, then steal curious glances at him, giggle, and scamper away.

A few days later, the Healer came to examine his hand. After a brief inspection, the old man nodded approvingly and spoke to Ipili. She seemed pleased. Soon, the bark strips and mud wrapping that held his left arm fast were removed. His hand was finally free.

The Healer handed a small paste of crushed green leaves to Kaja, who carefully applied it over his hand. They spoke briefly before the Healer left. Then, Kaja called out loudly, and two girls — the ones who were often seen with her — entered the hut. From their interaction, Santosh had long suspected they were her daughters.

It was during this exchange that he clearly heard the girls call out “Kaja!” to their mother. Curious, he listened again — yes, there it was. The word, “Kaja.”

He reasoned. Children will not call mothers by name. So the word “Kaja” must mean “mother”! He whispered the word softly to himself, repeating it under his breath — “Kaja... Kaja...,” committing it to memory.

He didn’t realise he’d spoken it audibly until all three of them stopped talking and stared at him. Then, with a gasp of delight, Ipili rushed forward and wrapped him in a warm embrace, overcome with emotion.

Santosh did not resist her affection. In fact, a wave of relief washed over him. If she wanted him to call her mother, it meant he was under her protection — and with her husband being a person of authority in the tribe, that meant a fair degree of safety.

That day marked his first outing since his arrival in the hut. Akuva and Sensibu, Kaja’s daughters, had been given special instructions by their mother. They carefully helped him down the ladder and out into the open for a short stroll. Soon, other children gathered, excited to see the “miracle boy” up and walking again. The air buzzed with laughter and chatter.

Santosh relished the freshness of the breeze, the chatter of children, and the thrill of finally being outdoors. The settlement, hemmed in by dense jungle, filled him with awe.

Word spread quickly that the mysterious outsider was well again. Children began to approach him, eager to make friends. One boy, about Santosh’s age, stepped forward shyly with a handmade bow and arrow, offering it as a gift. Akuva picked it

up, handed it to Santosh, and gestured toward the boy to show who had presented it. Santosh smiled and folded his hands in gratitude.

He felt genuinely elated. The warmth and curiosity of these children lifted his spirits. Having friends among them, he thought, might not only ease his days but also prove useful later — for knowledge, and perhaps, for escape. Yet, the problem of language still loomed large.

As his strength returned, Santosh resumed his morning exercises with discipline. He knew he had to stay agile — both in body and mind — if he were ever to attempt a getaway. Within a couple of weeks, his limbs regained their flexibility and his movements became smooth again.

One morning, as he practiced near the hut, he noticed a small commotion among the children. They were talking animatedly to Kaja, pointing toward him. She listened, smiled, and nodded. Soon after, several of them came running to him, gesturing excitedly that he should join them. Some even tugged gently at his hand, urging him to come along.

Kaja watched with amusement before gently encouraging him to go with them. Before the group set off, however, the anxious Ipili called over the older children and spoke to them earnestly, pointing to Santosh again and again. They all nodded in agreement, replying in unison as though reassuring her.

Santosh understood. This was his opening — and a risk as well. Such outings could be dangerous, despite the supervision. Still, if he wanted to learn the layout of the area and discover possible escape routes, this was the way.

He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and followed the children — ready for whatever surprises the jungle might hold.

Santosh moved along with the nipper gang, keeping his inner turmoil firmly in check. He wore a deliberate look of enthusiasm, as though he had always been one among them. Yet, his eyes were sharp and alert, studying every turn of the jungle path they followed.

Many of the children carried small bows and arrows, while others held short harpoons. They moved with an ease that came from familiarity — confident, swift, and sure-footed. After nearly an hour and a half of trekking through the dense undergrowth, the group reached a sea mouth where a murky river met the sea in quiet confluence.

On their side lay a rugged stretch of rocks and boulders; on the opposite side, a long sandy bed fringed with brackish-water plants and a cluster of wild pineapple bushes. Santosh immediately recalled the wild pineapples that grew along rivers in Kerala, near his grandparents' home — but these were bushier, their fruits larger and tinged with a deeper red.

The gang seemed to know the place well. They walked with purpose, heading straight toward the rocky side, ignoring the long stretch of beach to the right. When Santosh saw the open sea for the first time since his capture, his heart gave a leap. Freedom lay somewhere beyond that endless horizon. Yet he knew that to attempt escape without preparation would be sheer folly.

He scanned the surroundings carefully, committing every feature to memory. Upstream, half-hidden among the wild pineapple plants, he noticed several small canoes pulled ashore. Each had an additional wooden beam fastened parallel to its side. Curious, Santosh studied them closely. Outriggers! He realised after a moment. They must provide balance and stability to the craft, he concluded with growing interest.

Touching the shoulder of the boy walking ahead, he pointed to the canoes and gestured a shrug to ask what they were. The boy followed his gaze, smiled, and pointed to the canoes, saying, “Hodi! Hodi!” while mimicking the action of paddling.

“Hodi,” Santosh repeated softly, the word rolling off his tongue. A flash of realisation struck him. In his mother tongue, Odi or Odam also meant canoe. “Hodi” could be their local variant! The resemblance was striking.

His eyes lingered on the boats. He had never paddled before, but instinct told him he could learn quickly. These hodis could be his only key to freedom. If he were ever to escape, mastering them was essential.

Meanwhile, some children waded into the shallow estuary with nets and spears, while others crossed to the opposite bank and clambered onto the hodis. They paddled toward the open sea in search of larger fish and sea turtles. The boy who had explained “hodi” to him tugged at Santosh’s arm, pointing toward an unused canoe on the other side. Together, they waded through the knee-deep water. The boy climbed in first and helped Santosh aboard, handing him a paddle and demonstrating the correct way to row.

The boy was a skilled paddler, and Santosh, a quick learner. In no time, they were gliding out through the sea mouth. A few other hodis bobbed nearby, their young occupants expertly wielding harpoons. Santosh was amazed by their agility — and by the steadiness of the outrigger canoes, which rode the waves far more smoothly than ordinary ones.

By the time they returned, they carried a modest haul of fish. Santosh felt triumphant — not for the catch, but for his first successful experience on a hodi.

Back on shore, several boys were prying mussels from the rocks with bare hands and dropping them into woven cane baskets. Mussels, he gathered, were a delicacy of the tribe. Some of the boys tried to teach him how to strip them off the rocks, but he struggled, his hands bruising against the sharp shells.

Soon, he turned his attention to another group fishing with harpoons at the river mouth. Seeing his curiosity, one boy handed over his lance, gesturing for Santosh to try. Santosh took it eagerly but missed his target several times. Disappointed, he tried to return the lance, but the boy refused and encouraged him to try again.

By now, several others had gathered to watch. Reluctantly, Santosh agreed. He stood still for a moment, poised and focused. When a fish rose slowly to the surface, he thrust the lance forward — and to his astonishment, the harpoon struck true. The fish twitched wildly on the tip!

A roar of delight broke out. The entire gang cheered as Santosh stared at his first catch, equally surprised and overjoyed. He came back and landed on the shore with his first catch.

By now, the sun had begun to slant landward, the day half spent. Santosh looked toward the shimmering expanse of sea. If the sun rises from the sea, he thought, it must be the eastern side of the island. Which means... that's the Andaman Sea out there.

As he gazed at the horizon, he spotted a large vessel far away, barely visible against the glare. Those aboard could never spot the small figures at this river mouth — yet he could not resist. He raised his arm and waved frantically.

Instantly, the nearby children grew agitated. They pulled his hand down, gesturing “No! No!” and shaking their heads vigorously. It seemed clear now — communication with outsiders was forbidden.

He was still processing this when a sharp blow landed on his back. Startled, he turned to see Kireeba — the burly boy who had always looked at him with hostility. Before Santosh could react, the boy who had taken him on the hodi rushed forward, yelling at Kireeba in furious protest. The argument quickly escalated, their voices rising, fingers pointing. Then, without warning, Kireeba punched the boy squarely in the face. The smaller boy fell back with a cry.

Santosh could bear it no longer. Without hesitation, he lunged forward and delivered a flying kick that sent Kireeba staggering backward.

Enraged, Kireeba scrambled up and charged. But Santosh was ready. Drawing on his karate training, he leapt forward and struck again — this time a firm kick to the chest, accompanied by a resounding “Kia!”

The blow landed hard. Kireeba flew backward and crashed to the ground. The gang stared in stunned silence — eyes wide, mouths agape. A frail-looking outsider had just floored their strongest boy!

For a moment, no one moved. Then, to everyone’s astonishment, the defeated Kireeba got up awkwardly from the ground, looked at Santosh with raging eyes. But he had lost his confidence. He turned away and trudged off silently.

The others erupted in cheers. The miracle boy had not only won the fight but their hearts. But Santosh knew — along with newfound fame came new enmity.

When the gang finally returned to the settlement, they could hardly wait to tell the tale. Even before unpacking their baskets of fish and mussels, every child was clamouring to recount how Santosh had vanquished the mighty Kireeba.

The elders praised the youngsters for their catch — proof that the next generation was growing strong and skilled.

But when they heard of the fight, their astonishment knew no bounds. The outlander boy was now a hero whose courage and strength had won their respect, and their faith.

Chapter-15

Soon after Shiv Ram and Aparna left for the hospital, Janaki Amma called her husband to convey the shattering news.

Hearing that the aircraft was missing, Raman Nayar froze. A chill ran down his spine at the thought of Santosh being lost somewhere, perhaps gone.

The long, haunting silence on the other end alarmed Janaki Amma.

“Can you hear me? Are you alright? Why don’t you say something? Can we do anything to find him?” she cried.

“I... I can’t think of anything,” he said faintly. “My head is spinning.”

“I’ll call you later,” she said softly. “Try to steady your mind. We’ll talk again.”

Raman Nayar set the phone down, numb. Sobs welled up again and again, unstoppable. How could the plane have crashed? Could a boy survive that? He refused to let the dark thoughts take root. What now? His mind was blank.

He wandered aimlessly until he found himself before the Puja room. Staring at the picture of Goddess Durga, their family deity, he cried out, “Oh Divine Mother, why have you forsaken us?”

Then, as if seized by a sudden thought, he picked up his phone and called Mahadev Iyer.

“Iyer, I have to rush to Bangalore immediately. I don’t know how long I’ll have to stay. A terrible tragedy has struck us. The aircraft carrying Santhu is missing. My mind is in a daze.”

“What! Oh God, oh God!” cried Mahadev Iyer. “When? Where? Do you mean there’s no trace at all?”

“The aircraft vanished over the Bay of Bengal. Only two were on board—Santosh and the pilot. No trace of either. I’m leaving for Bangalore right away. You’ll have to look after things here until I return. Please ask Babu to arrange a taxi to Coimbatore. I’ll take the first flight I can get. I must go... my mind is bleeding.”

“Don’t worry about a thing here,” Iyer said gently. “I’ll take care of the old-age home. Keep your faith steady. Our Goddess - the temple deity - will protect him. Go calmly. Everything will be all right.”

Those words brought a faint flicker of comfort to Raman Nayar. He began packing at once.

Even during the drive to the airport, his mind was boiling over with helpless thoughts. He called his wife to say he hoped to reach Bangalore on the earliest flight available.

By afternoon, he arrived at Apar Villa in Sadashivanagar. He dropped his bag and went straight to Shiv Ram, who sat motionless, hollow-eyed. With a heavy heart, Raman Nayar gently patted his son’s back and shoulders. Then, unable to restrain himself, he drew him close in a tight embrace. Words failed, but tears did not.

He didn't know how to comfort his son, who seemed crushed under the weight of an unbearable loss.

In a strained voice he asked, "Is there any way to find out where they are? Is there still some hope?"

Janaki Amma intervened softly, "Please, don't trouble him with questions now. Have your lunch first. We'll think of what to do later."

"I'm not hungry," he muttered.

"You can't afford to skip food at your age," she insisted. "At least have some porridge. Don't run on an empty stomach."

He nodded absently.

As he forced down a few spoonfuls, Janaki Amma briefed him about the continuing loss of contact with the aircraft and the authorities' inability to trace it.

"The airline and the Air Traffic Control have both confirmed they still have no communication," she said wearily. "By chance, I remembered Sreejith—my father's sister Rema's grandson, whom we met at a wedding function. He's now a senior police officer in Calcutta. I called him last night and told him everything. He promised to contact the Port Blair authorities and push for immediate search and rescue."

Raman Nayar nodded silently.

Janaki Amma continued, her voice drained of life. "He called back. A search team went out, but a sudden hailstorm and lightning forced them to return. They believe the small plane

must have been caught in the turbulence—perhaps lightning and icing too. They think they’ve identified the approximate location, but it’s deep inside the jungle. Sreejith is following up, but he said we’ll have to keep faith and wait.”

Raman Nayar suddenly got up, leaving his meal half-eaten, and walked away like a man possessed. Alarmed, Janaki Amma followed. He stopped before the Puja room, eyes closed, tears streaming down his face.

With trembling hands folded, he prayed,

“Oh merciful Mother, why are you punishing us like this? We only prayed for the child’s long life. There’s no one we can turn to but You. What sin have we committed to deserve this cruel fate?”

Before he could finish, his phone began to ring. He almost ignored it, but curiosity made him glance at the screen. The caller ID read Janardhana Panicker.

The timing startled him—he had longed to speak to the astrologer since the tragedy struck.

With anguish flooding his voice, he said, “Panicker... the Mother has abandoned us. The aircraft Santosh was on crashed over the Andamans. No trace. No word of survivors. You had warned us, after studying his horoscope, that danger loomed over his life. We never imagined it would come to this. The family is shattered, Panicker. Shattered to the core. The Mother has deserted us. I’ve lost my faith... I’ve lost everything.”

Panicker’s calm voice came through the line. “Please, don’t lose hope so soon. The Mother never abandons her children. Her

plans are beyond our understanding. I remember Santosh's chart—there was danger, yes, but no sign of death. The amulet from the temple... he was wearing it, wasn't he? Then leave it to Her. She will take care. I'll make a special offering to the Goddess for Her merciful intervention. Trust Her wisdom, Raman Nayar. Have patience. Everything will be fine."

Raman Nayar struggled to contain his emotions as he spoke, his voice quivering, "Please go ahead with the propitiation of the Goddess and seek Her mercy. I'll meet you once I return and settle the dues. I don't know how many days I'll have to stay here. Everyone is shattered. Please, Panicker, do pray for us."

Shiv Ram was finding it impossible to face the grim reality staring at him. Raman Nayar and Janaki Amma, however, refused to accept that their grandchild was gone. For them, the words of the astrologer were final — and Santosh was alive somewhere. They believed the Janma-Kundali, the birth chart, was infallible, and that destiny moved precisely as written.

The astrologer had declared firmly that there was no sign of premature death in Santosh's horoscope. That assurance, along with their unwavering faith in the family deity — Goddess Durga of Thirumandhamkunnu Temple — kept their hope alive.

And yet, ripples of anxiety stirred in their minds: Where is he now? How will he survive alone? How can he ever be found? Will he be able to return?

They had no answers. But they clung to the belief that divine intervention would come — that the Mother would extend her

hand. After all, could destiny truly betray the promise written in the stars?

Meanwhile, Aparna couldn't understand why Lakshmi Amma choked up every time she came to attend to her. "What's wrong, Lachimma? Are you unwell? Has something happened to someone close to you? Why are you so downcast? I can't stand seeing you cry."

Lakshmi Amma forced a smile. "Just some dust allergy, dear one. It'll pass. Oh, my Goddess... please help!" she murmured under her breath.

"Is that so?" Aparna asked, then added gently, "Okay, Lachimma, let me tell you something. I feel awful that I can't look after Santhu properly because of this wretched bed rest. Amma's too old to manage everything, and I can't expect more from her. Please, you take care of Santhu for me. I don't even know if he's attending his karate classes regularly or reading his favourite books. Just keep an eye on him and tell me if I need to step in."

Lakshmi Amma turned away to hide her face. In a slow, deliberate voice, she said, "Baby, please don't worry about Santhu. We're all here to take care of him. You just rest — that's what the doctor has said. Don't burden your mind with anything till the delivery. Once it's over, you can take charge of everything again."

Aparna gave a faint smile and fell silent.

In the stillness that followed, the persistent ring of Shiv Ram's phone broke the hush. He picked it up reluctantly, his voice weary.

"Hello, Shiv Ram here. Who's speaking?"

A composed voice answered, "Good afternoon, sir. This is Biswajit Roy, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. I'm calling as requested by our counterparts in Calcutta. You had sought information about your son, who went missing after the recent plane crash over the Andamans. We wanted to update you on the findings of our joint search operation."

There was a long pause before he continued.

"We've located the crash site and found remains of the aircraft deep within the jungle. We also recovered body parts of the pilot from the wreckage. But, sir... we found no trace of the boy. There's no sign of his death either. It's possible he may have survived the crash. However, despite our best efforts, we've been unable to locate him. The terrain is harsh — dense forest, wild animals, and unfriendly tribal groups. We can't give you any assurances, but the search will continue for the next few days in adjoining areas as well. We share your grief, sir, and will inform you immediately if there's any positive news. I'm truly sorry."

The line went silent.

Shiv Ram stood frozen, crushed under the weight of what he had just heard. The words echoed endlessly in his head. The

truth was too heavy to bear — he wished he hadn't been told at all. A wave of helplessness engulfed him.

As his thoughts wandered, his greatest worry was Aparna. How would she react if she came to know?

He sighed in relief. In a cruel twist, her fragile mental state had turned into a blessing in disguise. She was blissfully unaware — and he wanted it to stay that way.

He longed to go to her, to hold her close and cry like a child. But he knew he mustn't. Composing himself, he walked slowly into her room.

Aparna was in a light slumber. He hesitated for a moment, then gently stroked her forehead and hands.

She stirred, opened her eyes, and smiled. She always cherished his touch. Taking his hands into hers, she looked deep into his eyes and sensed something was wrong.

"Shiv, what's the matter? Why do you look so sad?"

"Appu, you're worrying unnecessarily," he said softly. "I lost some sleep over urgent work last night. That's all. Maybe I just look tired. Don't mind it. You're feeling fine, aren't you? Happy?"

"Of course," she smiled faintly. "Why should I be unhappy? My only problem is this bed rest. Once the baby comes, I can move about freely again. Thank goodness Amma is here to look after Santhu."

Shiv Ram looked away at once. Pulling out his phone, he said, "Sorry, Appu. I'm expecting an urgent call. I'll be back soon."

Aparna nodded, closed her eyes gently, and drifted back into a soft dream — one filled with the image of the baby growing within her.

Chapter-15

That single incident of the marvel boy trouncing Kireeba wowed the entire clan. It instantly won Santosh their admiration. More than that, it reaffirmed the Chief's and the elders' belief in the flair and instinct of the little boy sent to them for a special purpose.

Indeed, the departed elders up in the skies were never wrong. This child will surely work wonders for the clan, they believed. He has the mind and the magic to carry out the mission. He was chosen for a reason.

The Chief called four of the smartest children and gave them special instructions, "Keep an eye on our outlander boy. One of you should always be by his side. He is special. He must be protected at all times and never exposed to any danger."

The youngsters were thrilled to receive the assignment. Wasn't it a great honour to be linked with the clan's new star — the marvel boy who had captured everyone's heart? The flock of younglings now brimmed with new energy and spirit.

But dark clouds were gathering in Santosh's mind. Kireeba would certainly be looking for revenge. He had to stay alert, careful not to fall into any trap. Kireeba would have his loyal followers, for sure. Santosh concluded that he too must have a close circle of his own — a few he could trust implicitly.

He also wanted to know more about the boy he had rescued. He hadn't even asked his name! Next time, he told himself, he must

not forget. He needed friends — a small, loyal band. It was, after all, a matter of survival.

Later in the day, as the boys gathered around him, he spotted the boy he had saved. Santosh waved to him, and the boy came running with a bright smile.

Santosh smiled back and patted his shoulder. Then he pointed to himself repeatedly and said, “Santhu... Santhu.” He touched the boy’s shoulder and spread his palm open, as if to ask, “And you?”

The boy looked confused.

A moment later, Santosh’s face lit up. He touched his chest again and said, “Meej... meej Santhu.” Then he pointed to the boy, repeating the same gesture.

The boy grinned. “Meej... Cherumu, Cherumu. Meej... Cherumu.”

Santosh echoed him cheerfully. “Cherumu, Cherumu, Cherumu.” Cherumu laughed aloud — he liked how Santosh called out his name.

Santosh harboured a quiet wish — to go back and see the crash site. Perhaps he could recover something of value. But how could he communicate that idea to the boys? He decided to try anyway.

He nudged Cherumu for attention, stretched out his right hand — middle three fingers together, little finger and thumb extended — and moved it over his head, making a buzzing airplane sound. Cherumu narrowed his eyes, trying to interpret. The boy beside him suddenly shouted, “Talahe! Talahe!”

Cherumu's eyes widened in understanding. He blew out air with a whooshing sound, mimicking the motion, and repeated, "Talahe, Talahe," looking to Santosh for confirmation.

Santosh didn't know what "Talahe" meant, but he could tell they were referring to a flying machine. He decided to press on. He repeated the flying motion, then twisted his hand sharply downward to show the crash, pointing towards the treetops and saying again, "Talahe, Talahe." Finally, he gestured with his hands to suggest, "Shall we go?"

The boys exchanged puzzled glances, talking rapidly among themselves. One came behind Santosh and grabbed him, mimicking the way the tribesmen had once caught him, then pointed towards the deep jungle as if to ask whether that's where he wanted to go.

Santosh's eyes lit up. He nodded vigorously, excitement all over his face. The joy spread to the others — a ripple of enthusiasm ran through the group.

What followed was a dash — a wild, joyous dash into the jungle. The boys ran through the wilderness, yelling and laughing, keeping Santosh safely in the middle.

Santosh expected to see the aircraft still tangled in the trees. But when they reached the site, his heart sank. Except for the propeller, still caught in the branches, most of the wreckage lay shattered and scattered on the ground. There was nothing left of the pilot, Mark. The sight chilled him.

The children, however, were fascinated. They rummaged through the wreck, examining everything. Some tried on life vests. Others found cans of unopened drinks. One boy came

running with a small backpack; Cherumu and another boy carried two cracked suitcases.

Santosh opened the drink cans, making sure everyone got a sip. The fizzy sweetness amazed them. They laughed and clapped, enchanted by their marvel boy's ingenuity.

Then Santosh turned to the salvaged items. His own drenched backpack was among them. His passport and documents were ruined beyond recognition; most biscuit packets were mouldy. But the medicines — still sealed — were safe. He set them aside carefully.

One of the damaged suitcases was his. He entered the number lock and opened it. A foul smell hit him. The clothes inside were discoloured, blackened with mildew. He tipped the case over — and a small flashlight with a lanyard dropped out. It was the solar pen torch his father had insisted he carry. On impulse, he pressed the switch — a sharp beam of light pierced through the shade.

“Wow!” he whispered. It still worked. He looped it around his neck proudly.

The boys gasped. Their marvel boy could summon light from his hands!

There was nothing else of use in his suitcase. He moved on to the next — likely the pilot's. It was already cracked. Using a dry branch, he pried it open with help from the others. Inside were Mark's clothes, papers, a leather bag, and some currency — all soaked and mouldy. Nothing they could use.

Just then, a few adult members of the clan appeared, alarmed to see the children so deep in the forest. Their voices rose, full of concern and scolding.

The boys grew restless and uneasy. Some began to slip away. Cherumu tugged at Santosh's hand, urging him to leave quickly.

Santosh gathered whatever he had kept aside — the medicines, the flashlight, a few biscuits — and followed the boys back, merging into their noisy, breathless run toward the settlement.

Chapter-16

Raman Nayar was getting increasingly distraught on seeing that Shiv Ram continued to withdraw into himself and shun attending office. He couldn't bear the sight of his son pining and grieving without any break. Nayar opened the door noiselessly and entered the study. Shiv Ram was sitting inside the dimly lit room with his forehead cupped in hands.

He approached Shiv Ram quietly and gently stroked his head and back. Shiv Ram looked up at his father, his eyes wet.

Nayar spoke in hushed tones: 'I understand your pain and grief. We are affected, too, though not as intensely as you. The worst tragedy for any person is the loss of one's own child right before their eyes. It's a massive blow; a catastrophe that is not easy to overcome. But think about it: Does life ever move according to our expectations, routines, or plans? We accept life's unexpected triumphs and joys without conditions, often taking them for granted. While no one wishes for disasters and adversities, can we truly imagine a life free of setbacks or reversals?'

Raman Nayar stopped a moment to confirm that Shiv was really following him. Then he resumed, "I do not deny that the disappearance of your only son has been a shattering blow. But you seem consumed by grief, as though there is no coming out of it. Tell me—how can we move forward in life if we begin to wither and crumble each time adversity strikes, however cruel it may be? You have always been one of steady mind and sober outlook. If even you surrender to this misfortune, what will become of the rest of the family? Have you not thought that

Aparna will fall apart without your strength beside her? Who will stand by the life growing within her, if not you?"

Nayar wiped tears dropping from his eyes, and said, "I'm not saying it's easy to recover from a blow like this. It's painful — it's terrifying. But life insists that we keep moving forward, even when the vilest storms strike us. Life is about pushing ahead despite the slips, the falls, and the crushing downturns. Anything less is surrender — the end of the line."

Raman Nayar took a deep breath and continued, "For someone like me, who believes in a Power above us, I take this as His will. You're free to think otherwise. I trust horoscopes too — and believe it or not, he *will* return. That's my conviction. His birth chart speaks of a long life. I know, it's a belief, not logic. You don't have to share it. But my heart says he's in peril, not lost — and that he'll come back unharmed. That's what I choose to believe. No, you need not accept my views. But when all is said and done, life isn't about yielding to the knocks and knots that confront us. Life isn't surrender — it's not accepting defeat without a fight. Life is like roots pushing through bone-dry rock, growing into a mighty tree. It's like roots burrowing deep into the desert, sustaining and blooming against all odds.

You don't have to agree with me, son. Just turn inward, look into your own life, and draw your own meaning. Let me end my monologue here. Steady yourself — and calm down." Raman Nayar tenderly stroked his son's back again and stepped out of the room.

For several minutes, Shiv Ram sat frozen, lost in silence. At last, he drew a deep breath and lifted his head. Though his face still carried the weight of sorrow, he pushed himself up from the chair and began to walk, gathering his thoughts with quiet resolve.

He opened the door and searched for his dad. Raman Nayar was reading a book with an engrossed mind. Feeling the presence of someone standing in front of him, he lowered the book. There it was! Shiv Ram was standing before him!

Shiv Ram conveyed in a muted voice, “Forgive me, Dad. I just can’t bear this loss. He was my nucleus — the very spark of my life. I don’t know how to cope with the tragedy that has struck me.”

Shiv Ram was choked for a moment. “I do understand all that you said, Acha. But this blow has shaken me to the core. I just need a little more time to find my way out of it.”

Raman Nayar folded the book he was reading. He looked intently at his son and said softly, “The untimely departure of anyone close brings anguish. But the deepest pain of all is losing one’s own child—it’s a shattering blow, beyond words. No one can remain stoic in the face of such a trial. My only effort, my dear one, is to caution you against drowning in that vast ocean of grief. Grief is like the sea—the lashing, thrashing waves will drag you under unless you fight for your life. You must keep moving your hands and feet, reaching for something to hold on to. Otherwise, you may never resurface. The deeper you sink, the harder it becomes to return to the light. I know your mind understands these truths, but right now it lies numb and unresponsive. All I’m trying to do is rouse it from its slumber.”

Janaki Amma was returning after doling out Aparna her regular measure of medicines. And she happened to listen to Raman Nayar speaking to Shiv Ram. She stayed back silently.

The instant Raman Nayar stopped, Janaki Amma butted in, “Shivu, I was listening closely to what Achan said, and he’s absolutely right. I just want to add a few words of my own. Yes, the plane tragedy and Santhu’s disappearance are unbearably cruel turns of fate — for you, and for all of us. There’s no denying that. But when such grief keeps gnawing at your mind without pause, it grows into a deeper crisis. Have you ever thought about that? About how far its shadow reaches? It doesn’t stay confined to one person — it spreads, touching everyone around. In your case, it goes even further — it touches the lives of more than two hundred families who depend on you and your company.”

She stopped for a moment and pressed on, “I consciously avoided telling you. Did you remember that today was the day you were to take Appu to the gynaecologist for the periodical check up? It’s true that you had to face a grave tragedy in your life. But should your resulting grief lead to other tragedies equally grave in life? It’s time you decided whether to get carried away by grief or to cope with grief and start building life back again! Do not cave in, Shivutty, do not. Remember, you have your responsibilities which you cannot ignore. You should come back to life and tend to Aparna, as also take care of your company which is now running sans its captain.

She reiterated, “Only if you have a mind with a never-say-die attitude can you expect to surmount tragedies and move forward in life. Do not ignore this plain truth, my dear one.” Janaki

Amma advanced towards Shiv Ram, hugged him, and kissed him on his forehead.

In the loving clasp of his mother, Shiv Ram became another youngling. He wiped off the tears welling up in his eyes and nodded his head.

The next day morning itself, Shiv Ram took Aparna for the gynaecological check by Dr. Pradeep.

After due examinations, the doctor expressed his concerns, “The growth parameters and weight of the 30-week-old foetus are below the expected range. The baby’s weight needs to improve. For that, medication alone won’t suffice — I’m recommending some changes in her diet and nutritional supplements. Her water intake must also increase. I trust she hasn’t been missing any of the medicines prescribed by Dr. Dorai Swamy. Do take her to him for a follow-up as well. From now on, for the well-being of both the mother and the baby, a weekly medical review will be essential.”

Dr Pradeep also cautioned, "If Aparna feels any severe pain or physical discomfort, please bring her immediately to the hospital. Aparna, I'm not supposed to reveal the sex of the child. But you may choose a pretty name for a girl child. Shiv Ram, incidentally, what's up? Any progress in the missing case? Anything positive?

Shiv Ram turned pale. He showed a sign with his eye that Aparna is sitting beside. The doctor instantly recognised his mistake. Requesting Shiv Ram to stay back for a moment, he asked his nurse to accompany Aparna to Dr. Dorai Swamy. After they left, the doctor apologised for his blunder.

Shiv Ram opened out, “I don’t know what to say. I am crestfallen. It’s a dead-end. The search is over. The broken parts

of aircraft are located. The pilot's dead and his body parts are identified. There is no trace of Santhosh. We don't know whether he's alive or dead. I didn't want to let these out in the presence of Aparna."

An embarrassed Dr Pradeep replied sloppily,

"I'm truly sorry once again, Shiv Ram. But don't lose hope. There's nothing yet to suggest that he isn't alive. There's still a chance — perhaps fate has spared him. Let me put it this way: hold on to your hope, but don't let it consume you. Take care."

"Thank you," Shiv Ram rose up coldly, and walked towards the psychiatrist's consultation room.

A piqued Aparna asked him, "Why Shiv, why didn't you come out with me? Was there something in the talk that I should not have heard?"

"He was indicating to me what symptoms and pointers should call for an emergency admission," said Shiv Ram, partly in response to her and partly as an explanation to Dr. Dorai Swamy.

And he turned to Dr. Dorai Swamy for his clinical observations.

"She is much better and improved. Yes, but it will take time, perhaps even beyond the delivery. It will take its own time to get used to the realities. Let her medicines and personal care continue," pronounced the doctor.

Aparna appeared flabbergasted. She asked Sivaram, "I don't understand. What's my problem? What are you talking off?"

"Some women experience psychological stress during pregnancy — that seems to be what's affecting you. You mustn't

neglect your prescribed medications or the relaxation exercises. Make sure to follow them regularly and at the right times.”

Aparna nodded as if she understood.

As they returning home in the car, their minds were equally agitated. But the surge and swell in each one's minds were a torrent of emotions, powerful yet diverse.

The moment they reached home, Shiv Ram gave a quick rundown of what was instructed by the doctors. He appraised his mother of changes in medicines and what symptoms and pointers to watch out for that may call for immediate hospitalisation.

He had kept his parents informed of his decision to immediately leave for his office, once he dropped Aparna home.

His driver was ready to take him to office without further loss of time. On his way to the office, Shiv Ram was busy talking to the key personnel of his office to catch up with the latest developments in the company amid his absence.

After alighting from the car at the office entrance, he briskly walked to his office chamber. Meanwhile, each staff member he met on the way to his chamber looked at him with a mournful face and expressed deep shock and sympathy on his misfortune.

The first thing that he did after sitting on his chair was to call a meeting of all department heads in his chamber. Immediately on entering, the chief executive officer, Hemant Valsaraj, gracefully kept a mounted photo of Santosh on Shiv Ram's table and gently placed a white rose flower right in front of it. He expressed his deep sorrow on the misfortune that befell on the family. The rest of the officers too followed suit in expressing sympathy.

Shiv Ram deliberately sent his eyes away from the photo and gestured them to sit down. He started, “The first thing I want to tell you is this. It’s human to show sympathy to others, and it’s natural to lend a hand to those struck by misfortune. But in my case, I seek your support in a different way. Please refrain from saying or doing anything that might remind me of the air mishap or my missing son, Santhosh. My heart refuses to accept that he is no longer alive. It may sound irrational or unconvincing to you, but I choose to hold on to the belief that he’s alive somewhere — and that he will return one day. I only ask for your kind understanding and mindfulness in this regard. Please take it as my earnest request.””

The response was a stunned silence.

Shiv Ram called for his aide immediately. Both the photo and white rose flowers were wrapped up in a cover and shifted to his car.

“Please convey this message to everyone in the office. The best way you can help me heal and move forward is by doing what we do best — getting back to work and striving for excellence together. Let’s channel our energy into rebuilding our strength and unity. Our shared focus now should be to take the company to greater heights. To start with, we’ll hold a review meeting to reflect on our past performance and assess our ongoing projects.”

“We respect your feelings, Sir. And we will honour your longings and aspirations!” That was Hemant, the CEO. He then gave a crisp report about the recent accomplishments of the Company and the fresh developments that took place during Shiv Ram’s stay away in Australia and later.

What thrilled everyone was the most recent development revealed by the CEO. In the background of the efficient handling of the QUANTAS project, a new enquiry had come from a different quarters in the same segment. An expression of interest from the Dublin-based Ryan Air!

It was just a preliminary stage enquiry. But it was accepted as a matter of overriding interest to the company. A swift decision was taken to respond instantly to it and chase the lead vigourously.

The cream team explored ways forthwith to prepare a sound action plan to follow through and clinch it soon enough. Shiv Ram's chamber once again turned a hive of activity.

For Shiv Ram, his makeover was neither smooth nor complete. But, he had started his battle!

Chapter-17

Ipili was overjoyed at first when she heard that Kireeba had received a good thrashing from the marvel boy. Word had it that the mighty Kireeba was no match for the puny newcomer, who had sent him fleeing in disgrace.

But her joy was short-lived. Fear soon crept into her heart. She knew Kireeba all too well — a vindictive soul who would quietly nurse his grudges, waiting for the right moment to strike back.

At length, she found what seemed a way out. She would take Santosh to Suru's hut and talk things through. She would plead that Santosh be treated as Kireeba's own younger brother — a gift from the departed elders, sent to bring good fortune to the clan. He must be protected, not harmed.

Let the past be buried, she resolved. Let me request Suru to forgive, forget, and begin anew...!

Yet deep down, Ipili's faith wavered. She did not trust Kireeba — not entirely. But she held on to a slender hope: that he might still heed his mother's words.

Santosh had no clues where Kaja was taking him, and why he was being led to where she was taking him. Even as they entered the hut of Suru, he was unable to immediately identify persons in the shady darkness inside.

Only as his eyes got used to the darkness around, he could see those faces better. And he could recall those faces. They hit him like a lightning!

The face that emitted the death stare! It took him to the date of the initiation ceremony. He assumed that the rest of them, girls standing behind her, must be her daughters.

In the presence of Ipili, her glare was a shade tempered. But he could still feel the hidden loath within.

Ipili was talking to that woman, pointing her fingers at him often. Her slow talk to the woman sounded to be very sweet and calming. The children kept their distance and only listened to the conversation silently. Suru mechanically nodded to whatever was being conveyed as if everything was fine and okay with her.

A boy suddenly burst into the room, calling out loud, “Kaja”. It took a moment for Santosh to recognise the person. Santosh froze first and turned restive the very next moment. It was Kireeba!

Only then did it strike him that he has been brought to the hut of Kireeba and that Suru is his mother.

Kireeba too was appalled on seeing the outlander boy in his own hut. His eyes were glowing with rage, but the words that his mother spoke to him cooled the fire just a tad.

However, Kireeba’s look continued to bite into Santosh.

All of them gave a calculated look as if they were listening to each word uttered by Ipili.

As they were about to leave, each one of them made a point to give a special hug to Santosh. Santosh harbored a strong suspicion that Kireeba’s hug was a shade suffocating: it felt like the treacherous Dhritarashtra’s embrace of Bheema!

Ipili motioned to Santosh for their return. He turned back and started following her. In his second step, he nearly jumped. Something pinched the bottom of his foot. It felt hard like a

pebble or pod. He knelt down to pick it up. Everyone was curious to see what he was up to. In the dim light, he searched with his hands and picked up two small pods with rough edges. As if returning all that he got from the floor, he handed just one of them to Ipili, cleverly retaining the second one, out of sheer curiosity. Ipili mechanically handed it over to Suru. Santosh skilfully masked the other one, holding it in his clenched fist.

Ipili bid goodbye and clambered down the ladder, with Santosh behind her. A couple of steps down, Santosh got an urge to turn back. He was not surprised. All faces were turned towards him, their gaze locked upon him, the eyes transforming into something akin to smouldering embers.

Back inside the shack, his mind was burning to examine what he had collected from Kireeba's hut. Santosh started examining the pod closely in the light of the lamp.

Ipili was wondering what Santosh had in his hand. Just one look, and she was startled! Santosh was holding the seed of the most poisonous tree in the jungle!

She snatched the pod from his hand instantly, ran to the door with it and threw it out of the door. She came back with the same speed to make further check whether he had any more seeds with him in his hands or elsewhere on the body. She showed him repeatedly a gesture of 'no chewing or munching' the seed she snatched and threw out, with deep agitation evident on her face.

She continued to blast him in her jungle language, which failed to convey anything to Santosh. But her panic, alarm and wild gesticulations clearly signified an intense apprehension about the seed he collected from Kireeba's hut.

He grasped it fully, approved and acknowledged it. But it set him thinking. Her apprehension meant that there was something unsafe about the pod. Was it toxic? Was it a poisonous pod? She might have been stressed out whether he would chew it or taste it!

Some more vexing thoughts entered his mind, just then. He did not step on just one odd count. He stepped on two and he felt there were more spread around. It just couldn't be by chance that these were there in the hut. There could be a heap from which a few might have just fallen down, his mind started speculating. What could be the reason for their storing such toxic pods, then? He was unsure, but the suspicion relentlessly lingered in his mind.

He looked intently at Ipili and nodded his head in a reassuring manner. She stroked his back and moved out in search of Mahaba.

Ipili conveyed Mahaba that she went to Suru along with the outlander boy. She also informed him that it was to soften the mind of Kireeba and request others to forget and forgive the boy in the interest of the whole community. They seemed to have understood.

The Chief's response did not sound upbeat at all, which was not surprising. Who could believe the brute one?

"I can understand. You are not willing to put all your faith on that thug. That's why I thought of involving Suru too. She is part of us and will understand, won't she? She may help. Yet we should also look at alternatives for adequate care of our marvel child," she agreed.

Mahaba was not yet out of the shock inflicted by the miscarriage. His mind was in a spin. He wanted to hear out the high priest. True, there was a revelation. And also, the early part

of the revelation has come to pass. But..., but, why does the curse of miscarriage follow then? Again, how can an outlander boy who does not even know the tribal language and customs help in sustaining the lineage? His mind was edgy and restless.

The newcomer boy is smart, no two words about it. He has routed Kireeba despite being undersized. But how the hell can the boy prevent the recurring miscarriages of Ipili? He was truly foxed.

Yes, a new anxiety had taken root in the Chief's mind—the realization that the boy's life might be in danger. Kireeba would never sit idle. He would look out for an opportunity of retribution. Mahaba decided, he should open up before the high priest, and seek his suggestions. He was curious to know whether it would be necessary to have a couple of boys to keep a watch over Kireeba. The high priest thinks invariably two steps ahead of others.

Mahaba reached the shack of the high priest, with anxiety writ large on his face. Sebua instinctively discerned the thoughts coursing through the Chief's mind.

But he patiently waited for the Chief to unwind, and countered him, "Can we the people here on earth ever determine the course of our life? The souls up in the sky decide what's bound to unfold. Their eyes can see everything. Their ears can hear everything. There's nothing that they do not know. It's better to leave it to them, isn't it, Chief?"

He looked intently at Mahaba and continued, "They alone can see all the three time zones at the same time. The past, the present and the future! We can only expect that they will take care of us. They sent us a lad as they indicated to us, didn't they? They must have a scheme devised for us. They must definitely have."

The high priest was lost in thoughts for a few moments. Then he resumed,

“Yes, it’s our duty to protect the lad sent to us. I will engage two boys to keep an eye on Kireeba. I will also entrust two reliable lads to take care of our marvel kid. Let’s keep the information veiled.”

Mahaba heaved a sigh of relief. Good to know that the high priest is equally concerned. Four eyes can surely see more than two.

The Chief had another mission too. He had to seek another favour from the high priest. The customary practice within the clan was that boys above the age of 12 are moved out of their family and stayed together in a separate thatch. But the chief wanted exemption for the outlander boy in this code of the clan. The boy neither knows their lingo, nor the conventions. The clan would not feel miffed if the deviation is done with the explicit approval of the high priest.

“Don't you worry! Let him continue to stay with you. I will convey to the community that it’s my decision,” Sebuva reassured him.

It was with this consolation that the Chief returned to his dwelling.

Chapter-18

Aparna went to the gynaecologist that day as part of her routine check-up.

Her medical parameters appeared irregular, prompting concern from the doctor.

“There are some worrying trends in her health reports,” the gynaecologist cautioned. “They’re not favourable — either for the life inside or the one outside. It would be safer to go for a caesarean delivery at the earliest.”

Shiv Ram didn’t think twice. He decided to stay back at the hospital and informed his parents that Aparna would be undergoing surgery.

“Do what the doctor advises, Shiv,” said Janaki Amma reassuringly. “If a surgery is needed, go ahead. We must trust the doctor’s judgement. If you want us there, let us know. Convey our regards to Aparna and give her strength. Stay positive, Shivu — everything will turn out well.”

The surgery went smoothly. It was a baby girl — born preterm at 36 weeks. The infant was immediately moved to the neonatal intensive care unit for observation.

The tension finally lifted. Though premature, the baby was fairly healthy, Dr. Pradeep assured with a smile. Shiv Ram exhaled in relief.

But the joy didn’t last long.

His thoughts drifted to Santosh. Santosh would have been so happy to welcome his little sister. Shiv Ram felt a sharp pang, fighting back a sob.

Then he realised he hadn't informed his parents about the birth. He called his mother and shared the good news — that both mother and child were fine.

Raman Nayar and Janaki Amma were overjoyed. They offered their gratitude to the divine for the merciful outcome. Soon after, Raman Nayar rang up the family astrologer, Janardhana Panicker, and asked him to prepare the newborn's horoscope, promising to pay the honorarium and collect it, once he returned home.

Meanwhile, Aparna was regaining consciousness. Shiv Ram, brimming with relief, leaned closer.

"The baby's fine, Appu. She's just being kept under observation in the neonatal care unit. You'll be discharged in about a week. Thank God, everything went well — though a bit earlier than expected. Rest now. Mom and dad are eager to see you both; they may come by later today."

Aparna smiled faintly, but her next words startled him.

"But... what about Santhu? Why isn't he here? I can't wait to see him!"

"Appu, we're still in the hospital," he said gently. "Let's first get home with our baby girl. We'll figure out the rest later."

He caressed her head, brushing his fingers softly through her hair.

A nurse entered just then. “The doctor’s on his morning rounds,” she said politely. “Please step out for a few minutes.”

When the check-up was over, Dr. Pradeep met Shiv Ram in the corridor.

“Her post-surgery parameters are stable,” the doctor said. “The incision looks fine, bleeding is under control. The only concern is the lingering post-traumatic stress. It’ll take time — medication and calm surroundings will help. The baby has mild jaundice, but that should clear up in a few days. Overall, things look good.”

Shiv Ram exhaled in relief.

His phone, however, kept buzzing with calls and congratulatory messages. He cut most of them short with brief replies, promising to call back later.

Then came a call he couldn’t ignore — from Hemant, the CEO.

“Good morning, sir,” Hemant said. “I wanted to share something exciting! The Dublin project has moved ahead — they’ve invited us for final discussions next week. Should I book your travel and hotel?”

Shiv Ram didn’t hesitate.

“Hemant, I’m assigning you full responsibility for the final negotiations. Don’t wait for me — I won’t be able to leave right now. I trust you completely to handle it.”

A short pause, then Hemant’s grateful voice came through:

“Thank you, sir, for the confidence. I’ll take it forward. Congratulations once again to you and madam — and best wishes to the new little guest!”

“Thanks, Hemant. All the best for the meeting. Keep me updated.” His tone softened. “But my heart still burns, Hemant... the uncertainty about Santosh — it’s tearing me apart.”

Hemant replied gently, “Allow me to quote your own words, sir — Hold on to that streak of hope. Let’s pray the darkness clears soon.”

Shiv Ram ended the call, silently echoing that hope.

Five days later, Aparna and the newborn were discharged. The doctors were particular about her follow-up reviews, especially concerning PTSD. Medication and mental routines were to continue until she regained balance.

At Apar Villa, both grandparents were waiting eagerly. The homecoming was marked by tradition — a lit oil lamp at the entrance.

Janaki Amma received the tiny one into her arms, took her to the puja room, and whispered a prayer before the family deities:

“Oh Lord, bless this child with health, happiness, and long life.”

Aparna was then led to her bedroom. Suddenly, she turned hysterical.

“Santhu! My dear boy — where are you? Call him! I want to see him! Come down, my child!”

Janaki Amma froze in distress and looked helplessly at Shiv Ram. He took the baby from his mother's arms and placed her gently before Aparna.

"Appu, look — this is your child. She needs you now. Santhu isn't here, not yet. You must focus on her. She depends entirely on you. Don't forget, Santhu used to talk about her even before she was born."

Aparna's tense face slowly relaxed. Her eyes softened. She clutched Shiv Ram's hands and pressed them to her chest, then closed her eyes.

Janaki Amma quietly kept a watch over the baby laid beside Aparna. Aparna released Shiv Ram's hands and pulled the infant close. As she held her, milk began to flow — a natural bond restoring itself.

Outside, anxiety weighed on both grandparents.

"When will her mood swings settle, Shiv?" Janaki Amma asked softly.

Raman Nayar's concern was practical. "Can we trust her to care for the baby? Will the child be safe in her hands?"

Shiv Ram sighed. "Appu's mind is clouded. Santosh's disappearance has shattered her. We must give her time — and patience. The doctor's medicines can calm her, but healing must come from within. She needs our support more than anything."

He paused, then continued quietly, "It'll be hard for all of us, but we must see this through. Only then will we get our Aparna back."

"No, Shiv," Janaki Amma said quickly, taking his hand. "We're not complaining. We just want to help. We'll stay here until she's fine — no matter how long it takes."

She hugged her son tightly. Raman Nayar joined, patting Shiv Ram's back as silent tears escaped him.

And then, shattering the quiet emotion, erupted the newborn's wail — loud, demanding, insistent — a proclamation that seemed to say:

"Your worries are many, but I belong here now. You cannot overlook my presence."

Chapter-19

It was a daily routine. Fetching water from the nearby streams and ponds was a task assigned to the lot of women. A few of them were accompanied by their girl children too. Each one carried as many bamboo pitchers and gourd-casks as were possible of them.

As was the custom, Ipili too had gone that day along with a group of women. On their way back to the settlement after collecting water, Ipili felt an uneasiness consuming her. The bamboo pitchers suddenly fell off her hand, and she blacked out with no warning signs at all. As luck would have it, Ipili did not suffer any serious injury to her body.

Akua and Sensibu, who were following her came running, sprinkled water on her face, and shook their mother awake. As soon as Kaja's fatigue subsided, they all continued their journey back as if nothing had happened.

It was her own children who had accompanied the group that shared the news of Ipili falling down unconscious while on return. Suru received the news with deep concern. Does it mean beginning of a new sprout? Oh, God, doesn't she have anything other than breeding and bearing? It's like she's bent on messing up her calculations!

The jolt caused by the upsetting divination of the Priest and the ready arrival of the miracle boy as made out in the prediction had not even abated.

She was resolved. "I have to find out if this is true, and whether it's part of the early indications of conception. If so, it must be crushed, and the birth of a male child prevented. Else, my dreams will be shattered."

She went straight to the Chief's hut.

As she entered, two cats tried to join her in. Suru loves cats. The cats are aware of it! She always carries something for the cats. Fish bones, pieces of meat, or some such thing!

But today she was in a hurry, so she didn't have anything on her hands for the cats. Shooing the cats away, she entered the hut hurriedly, asking, "What's the matter? My children told me that you fainted on the way back. What's it? Anything up? Anything exciting?"

In those words, she deliberately packed a lot of care and concern into those words.

Ipili was swept away by Suru's sugary words. She said, "I don't know. I frankly do not know. I usually feel nauseous when I am caught. I don't have that feeling now. I guess it's just the fatigue. Of course, the rest I am leaving to the grace and blessings of the departed Elders."

"Blessings, you have a lot of it, chechimma, a lot. There always will be. I think it's a boy this time, not a girl. The symptoms are different, sis. You have very little nausea, when it's a boy. Nausea and vomiting are likely more when the life budding inside is a girl."

Ipili's face bloomed. "Let those words turn true," she drew Suru nearer and gave her a warm hug. "I cannot be sure. Let's see as it comes."

Suru said, "Anyway, let me keep my hopes high. I am going to prepare the herbal mixes anticipating that it indeed is a sign. It's always better to be prepared, isn't it? My herbal brew is sure to promote the health of both the mother and baby during the term."

Ipili nodded her head in agreement. She had no reason to disbelieve Suru.

Suru left confirming that she was sending the health mix as soon as it was ready.

“I will send it in the hands of Matomi tomorrow.”

Meanwhile, Santosh, who too was inside, looked out for an excuse to escape the disquieting presence and hidden hostility of Suru. Collecting a few pieces of dried fish, he quietly stepped out of the hut.

The dried fish was meant for cats that he saw moving occasionally, down on the ground. He was not a cat-lover. But he liked pets.

In fact, he fancied dogs much better. He was not allowed to breed a dog at home in Bangalore, despite his intense plea. Aparna was mortified of dogs. Dogs were in the forbidden list of Apar villa.

His solace was, his friends, and that too many of them, had dogs at home. So he would make frequent visits to such homes. To fondle them and play with them. Evading Aparna’s attention!

He was amused. He couldn’t see or hear any dogs during his stay within the forest. There were occasional bunches of cats around, especially in and around the settlement.

What he had learnt was different. He had read about wild dogs and also about the tribals taking their dogs for hunting. But here it was queer but different! No dogs around!

He loved watching nature or animals. It is engaging and revealing too.

No doubt, a cat is interestingly different from a dog! Observing them quietly and feeding them teaches a lot about their nature, temperament and responses to various stimuli.

It was a favourite pastime of his in his jungle days!

Chapter-20

That day, Suru was up early enough. She had her task set.

Suru was to blend and prepare the deadly potion like a shot. The mix must reach Ipili in a flash. Ipili's gestation should not succeed.

Carefully, she took the extremely poisonous lantern-shaped seeds she had collected from Chemana, added certain other leaves and roots of herbs like Adathoda Vasica, Black Musli and so on in a well-thought-out manner. The mix was ground well and water added in a measured way.

The potent combination ought to have an instant effect. Her eyes lit up thinking about the sharp effect of the toxin to eliminate the life ticking in Ipili's womb.

Suru was clear. She always brewed a good enough quantum of the potion required for a minimum number of days. She was keen to ensure that the next batch was delivered well ahead of schedule. Any break in supply should not foil her plan. The object was to be achieved. At any cost.

Her elixir must reach Ipili the soonest. The earlier she started, the quicker the result was. The effect was more acute in the initial days.

She called up Matomi and handed over the concoction poured into a bamboo pitcher, "This is the brew meant for your stepmother. Hand it to her and her only. Convey that I advised her to start on this mixture early enough."

She nodded and held it hanging in her hands.

"Be careful that you do not spill it out," Suru cautioned her.

She looked back at her mother with a confident smile and stepped out of the hut.

It was afternoon time. Santosh, sitting within the hut, suddenly got curious about a raspy meow from down on the ground, around that time. Usually, cats were seen resting during this time of the day!

Was it plain hunger or something else? Was it a signal? His mind was uneasy. He wanted to find out. He took some pieces of dried fish and quickly moved down.

Matomi, climbing up the ladder, didn't anticipate someone coming down in a swish. Her instinctual reaction was to scream and clasp the outer bar on the side with her hands, as she barely managed to avoid getting hit and falling down. In the process, she lost hold of the bamboo pitcher containing the potion meant for Ipili. It fell down splashing the potion around.

A confused Santosh too dropped all pieces of dried fish he had carried in the melee. Everything fell down and got strewn on the ground mixed with the thick solution.

Hearing an unusual sound, Ipili came and peeped out. She was surprised to see Santosh with a completely taken aback look, and Matomi hanging onto the sidebar of the ladder, just a step below him.

She helped the dangling Matomi get back onto the ladder, gently led her inside the hut and consoled her, after getting to know what happened on her way up.

Ipili assuaged her.

"I'm relieved to see that you were saved from a possible fall and injury. That boy would not do it intentionally. Just ignore it, Matomi."

She continued, "Ask Suru not to get upset about this incident and the loss of medical brew she sent to me. I do realise how sincerely she loves me. It's sad to see that her pain and toil to make the medical potion for me has gone waste. But tell her not to worry. Do ignore it, Matomi and return home with no fret and fury."

Matomi just nodded her head and ran back home, indeed fretting and furious.

Meanwhile Santosh had slipped away ashamed and rueful of the untoward crash with Matomi. He wanted to bide some time till everything cooled down. He wanted to spend his time away and out of the hut to divert his mind out of the unnerving episode.

The cats that had provoked him to venture out were all there on the ground. He just kept observing them impassively.

But it struck him just then, like a flash! The cat that was making distressful calls had a belly larger than usual. Was the cat carrying? Could that be the reason for the painful calls that came out from her?

The expectant cat could be hungry, perhaps. He looked around for the pieces of fish that fell down from his hand. He could see a few of the pieces lying just below the entry-ladder. He knelt to salvage what he could, but they were all drenched in the potion that spilled out from the bamboo pitcher. In some of them, the sludge of the mixture stayed. But he didn't want to waste the food, especially when the cat needed extra nourishment.

"At least the cat would get some relief," he reasoned. He tossed the fish to it, and the cat devoured it in a gulp, seemingly unconcerned of the mixed smell.

He then made his way unobtrusively up to the hut.

Matomi had, by this time, reached her hut back. Suru was surprised to see her returning with a glum face.

Matomi was certain that her mom will deeply be upset and was hesitant to convey the upsetting news. Yet, Suru too could guess that something was amiss.

Upon hearing the unforeseen debacle, Suru instantaneously turned furious. Her lingering doubt was that it was possibly contributed by a mis-step of her own daughter, but her initial rage cooled off, seeing the intense disappointment and grief conspicuous on Matomi's face.

Suru's simmering mind was now a cauldron of resentment. It quickly shifted its attention to him, the miracle boy, her new-found target. Soon she felt a boundless resentment towards the miracle boy—the unwitting architect of her plan's initial failure.

She knew. Her new target wasn't just a menace, but the key to everything.

Despite being deeply disappointed that her plan had temporarily failed, Suru was not one to accept defeat so easily. She immediately decided to prepare another batch of the brew that was lost. She wasted no time and took on the task with both her children.

She was not one would give up easily.

Is there any point in getting disappointed if, sheerly by chance, a delay occurred in executing a plan? A smarter recourse, Suru reckoned, was to prepare equal measure of lost mixture quickly and hand it over to chechimma as briskly as possible.

It would probably take a day more to get everything ready. No issues!

Isn't it better that I call on chechimma to express my concern about the inadvertent loss of herbal mix and request her to

handle things with care till the fresh supply is done? It could also serve as a pointer to show that I have boundless love and care for my co-sister, she reasoned.

She walked towards Ipili's hut with measured steps.

"Oh, sis, is something wrong with our darling boy? Did our little one fall down? I can get him some medicine, if he has any injuries. Did he suffer any injuries?"

Ipili's reply was instant.

"No. He didn't. I was in fact more worried about Matomi. She is free of sprains or stress injury, isn't she? She narrowly saved herself from a fall, clutching on to a ladder crossbar."

"Relax, sis. Tomorrow, just as the sun is about to rise, I will myself be in front of you, my dear one, with the elixir. Identical measure. It's a commitment," Suru said it softly yet firmly, and left.

As she was leaving, Suru's eyes locked briefly with that of Santhosh. He could feel the heat radiating from those burning eyes even in the faint light indoors.

Santhosh was not surprised. He knew. His carelessness was behind the medical brew getting spilled out. He froze for a moment. Yes, it was sheer fluke that Matomi narrowly escaped from a tumble.

He couldn't help but feel humiliated and ashamed. It would give some peace of mind if one could move out and wander about aimlessly for a while. It could offer a distraction to the mind!

But before he could step out, he could feel there was some commotion behind. He turned back only to see Kaja lying on the floor, with her daughters trying to awaken her by splashing water on her face and repeated tapping.

By the time he approached his Kaja, she had opened her eyes and was trying to rise up. The children, however, did not allow Ipili to get up, thinking that she should continue to rest for a while more. She had fainted two days ago as they were fetching water, they recalled.

Sensibu, the younger of the two daughters, was uncertain if Suru's prediction of Ipili being pregnant was true or not.

Ipili used to have her nauseous and dizzy days occasionally. Was this, just another bout of her dizzy spell, only an upset stomach or some other issue? Sensibu's mind was abuzz!

She ran off to the mid-wife Granny.

The Granny reached and asked Ipili about her complaints, and examined her, taking some time.

She asked Akuva to get her a betel leaf. A betel leaf is waved over the head to stave off harm.

She confirmed, "Thank the elders. Ipili is carrying. Throw this leaf out."

As the Granny left, she comforted both children, "Do call me whenever you need any help."

An awesome news was waiting to be broken before the Chief who just returned from a regular hunting trip that afternoon. His face lit up, and he exclaimed, "Thanks to the good will of the departed souls and elders."

He looked up in supplication, and called out with a pang in his words, "Oh, divine powers, lend us your protective care. Preserve the new life for our sake!"

The Chief suddenly recollected that this glad outcome ought to be communicated to the High Priest right away. He moved out in a haste.

A short while later, a tired Ipili who was lying down felt way better and got up unhurriedly. Slowly, she became active and turned busy with her chores. Both her children were happy to lend a hand to their mother.

Chapter-21

The next day morning, just as promised, Suru came up with a bamboo pitcher full of the herbal potion.

The moment he heard the call “Elder Sis”, Santosh could guess it was Suru with the potion. He instantly rose up and made his exit. Instead of sitting there and inviting glowing gazes, he knew it was better strolling around till Suru left.

Suru carefully handed over the bamboo pitcher to Ipili.

“Sis, you should take this after food every night. One mouthful is enough. Just gulp it in. Remember that it is for the combined health of both the mother and the life ticking inside. Have it on a regular basis. And do tell me at least a day before you run out of the stuff. I need time to prepare it,” Suru rounded it off quickly and returned.

Meanwhile, Santosh, a little away from the hut, was into his pastime of watching the cats he was now familiar with. Initially, he thought they were resting near the back of the hut. Maybe both are taking a nap, he thought.

But as he cautiously approached them and watched closely, they appeared, in fact, weak and weary. Although it looked like they were dozing off, he noticed something strange.

There were blood stains on the queen cat’s private parts! It was sort of weird! His curiosity was aroused.

Another puzzling fact was the sight of food stuff strewn around. Many of them were undigested bits and pieces of fish that he had offered as feed the previous day. Doubts started raging in his mind.

After considering many possibilities, he reached a singular conclusion. Never have the cats thrown up fish given by him any time before. Since these pieces were tainted with the spilled brew, the only possibility was that the brew itself was the villain.

What else could explain this sort of an abnormal reaction? To bring about such a serious upshot, it must indeed be a potent drink!

Suru must have delivered a highly toxic potion passing it off as medical brew. Santosh was positive. His intuition kept asserting that there was something wrong with the mixture in the bamboo cask.

And, he had to caution Kaja about it. But how was he to do it? He was in a fix. He didn't know their language. He had to express his concerns powerfully before her.

How could he convey it? Santosh mulled over it for a long time. A solution gradually emerged in his mind.

He entered the hut with a visibly relieved face. He conceived a viable plan to expose the truth: the 'restorative' medical brew Suru distributed was, in reality, a venomous potion.

Once inside the hut, Santosh made a mental note of the spot where the bamboo pitcher containing the medical brew was stored. He kept a constant eye on the pitcher.

True, he didn't have any clue as to who the target person was and what the actual purpose was! He had only an inkling that Kaja was the target.

After their supper, at the bidding of Ipili, Akua carried the pitcher and poured out a small portion into a baby container. Akua extended the tiny container towards Ipili, just as Santosh jumped in and wrenched the small cup out of their hands.

All the three were startled, and looked at him with a shocked face. They couldn't understand why he acted in this wacky way.

He pointed his finger at both the pitcher and container and gesticulated a wild 'NO'. All the three looked at him in awe and alarm.

He kept repeating his gesticulations to forbid drinking the stuff, and asked them by signs to follow him.

The three of them were still in shock, but they got up. Meanwhile he picked up a few pieces of dry fish and meat and started walking out with the pitcher and the small pot in hand. He looked back again, pointing his finger towards a small lamp, which Akua carried in her hands. He stepped out of the ladder and waited on ground for them to come down and join him.

Bewildered and thoroughly confused yet, they followed him. He took them to the cats lying pooped and drained. He showed some of the pieces the cats had puked out the day before, which were teeming with ants and insects, and tried to act out to suggest they were of the previous day.

He tried his best to explain by signs that the cats had eaten the pieces fallen onto the splashed potion the day prior, taking them again and again to the place below ladder where the pitcher fell and again to the cats acting out that they had lapped up pieces dipped in the potion the earlier day.

He then went near the queen cat and pointed to its private parts where the blood dribbles were still clear. All his gesticulations like 'NO to the potion in the pitcher', 'DO NOT DRINK the potion from the pitcher', and repeated pointers to the cats as if they were victims of the potion did have a scary and jarring effect on them. They had a feeling there was something wrong with the medical brew, though they were not truly convinced.

Raising his hand and showing them the fish and meat pieces, he had carried, he dipped them in the potion he carried and gently placed them before the weary cats.

The cats were rather drained and drowsy. They were delighted to get something to eat, and gulped down the pieces dripping with the brew.

Abruptly, an incident of recent past raced to Ipili's mind. She recalled that the miracle boy had handed over a couple of poisonous lantern shaped seeds right after their visit to Suru's hut! Could there be some connection between the two in what he wanted to say?

She had just kept the incident to herself so far. She disclosed the account for the first time with her children, and acknowledged that she too was unsettled thinking why Suru took the trouble of collecting such poisonous substances.

Yet her mind was unwilling to fancy that Suru would have designs to harm her. Agreed, she might perhaps have lantern shaped poisonous seeds or anything similar in her collection. But yet, it was really difficult to buy the argument that she would have any reason to use it in this concoction and harm her.

Suru's love and concern looked so genuine to create such doubts in the mind of Ipili. Were her love and care an elaborate deceit?

Ipili was truly feeling fazed. How do you distinguish between what is true and what, fake? How do you know who is a genuine friend and who, your foe? Both the mother and children went to sleep, unable to distinguish clearly truth from untruth.

The night was able to cover every thing like truth and untruth, friend and foe under its dark and shady blanket.

But the never-ending whines and whimpers of the cats made holes in the blanket, and kept on disturbing their sleep. The uninterrupted wails of the the cats amplified the anxiety in the minds of Ipili and her daughters. Early in the morning itself, they went out to check what was behind heightened wails.

The cats were nearly in a knocked out stage. The queen cat had dropped four undeveloped dead foetuses. Blood lines oozed out of its private parts!

The appalling sight shook all the three of them.

Questions after questions raged in Ipili's mind. "Were all my earlier miscarriages induced by Suru's herbal potion? Was it her definitive plan to clear out life spawning in my womb? What was her ultimate object in this plot?"

Ipili was shell-shocked, but she took a stand. No one should know about this episode. Except me and my children. Let even the Chief remain in the dark. It must only be conveyed at an appropriate time.

She made it clear to both her daughters, "Mind you, we should keep this to ourselves. And we would not react. Remember, we must play it cool. Suru should never know, at any cost. We will act as if the potion is being used up. We would ask for regular refills to make her feel that I am taking the brew routinely. Our counter should be as artful and veiled as her cunning scheme."

Akuva and Sensibu agreed with her wholly. And all the three returned to the hut quiet and withdrawn.

The first thing that Ipili did after getting inside the hut was to look around for the miracle boy.

She approached Santosh in an instant and clasped him tight. Tears started running from her eyes as she kissed him again and again, calling him, "AMI IKELE, AMI IKELE (My kiddo, my lad)!"

Chapter-22

Days and months passed, but there was no end to Aparna's erratic behaviour. The only solace was that the interval between one episode and another had widened. However, the situation remained unpredictable, as there was no knowing when Aparna's outbursts about Santhosh would begin or end.

The shock of Santhosh's disappearance and the persistent mental volatility of Aparna had enveloped the family like a fog. Against that backdrop, there was nothing unusual about the naming ceremony for the newborn becoming a subdued affair.

'Samantha' was the name. Shiv Ram and Aparna had chosen the name of their girl child early enough. The name had received the approval of their pet one, Santosh too.

Tradition demanded that the grand father of the child lead the ceremony of naming a baby. Raman Nayar lay the child on his lap, covered the baby's left ear with a betel leaf and gently whispered into her right ear, "Samantha, Samantha, Samantha."

Even before the ceremony was over, Aparna became agitated, jumped up, and ran upstairs, screaming "Santhosh, Santosh."

She came down just as quickly and shook Shiv Ram, demanding, "Where is my boy, Santhosh? He's not in his room. Where's he? I want to see him now. I want to see him right now."

Shiv Ram's mother intervened, "Look, Appu, calm down. Isn't it your own younger one's naming ceremony today? Is it right to disrupt this by talking about something that can't happen right now? Just because Santhu is not with us, is it fair to neglect the matters of the next child, dear?"

"No, I don't want to hear it, mother. Where did he go? I can't live without him, Shivu, I can't. I don't care where he is, just bring him back. I want him."

Raman Nayar, sitting crosslegged on the floor with the adorned and prettied up baby on his lap, was disconcerted and alarmed, seeing Aparna's sudden emotional outburst. He exchanged glances with Janaki Amma, grossly shaken by Aparna's reactions.

Shiv Ram intervened, "Appu, do you think you're the only one who feels this grief and sense of loss, because Santhu isn't here? Even if the pain's not as intense as yours, I do feel it too, don't I? Even if you can't see it, am I not enduring it? Look, didn't Lachimma endure it and move on after losing her husband, who was all she had? Let's say we lost Santhu, even if I don't buy that! But we have a daughter now. Yes, one isn't a replacement for the other. Still, we have another child now. We can't completely ignore that truth."

Before he completed it, Aparna's pupils rolled upwards, and she collapsed. Lakshmi Amma rushed in picking up a water bottle, sprinkled water on her face, and gently tapped her. Like someone who had just returned from a dream world, she asked about her baby.

"Here she is. We have laid her before the deity, adorning her with all ornaments and a Bindi, and just called her by her name for the first time. Isn't Samantha the name you chose? Come and see your little darling." Janaki Amma called out to her.

She immediately added, "If you are feeling tired, don't bother. You continue to rest on that sofa. We will bring the baby to you. Give her some milk. She must be starving."

Aparna's tense muscles and face relaxed. A weak smile spread across her lips, and she extended her hands for the baby. Janaki Amma got up with the baby.

Chanting the prayer in Sanskrit, "Niramaya, aayushmati tatha sarvada saubhagyavati bhava" (Free from disease, full of life, and always blessed), Janaki Amma handed the child to Aparna.

Aparna kept staring at the baby without blinking a moment, as if seeing her daughter for the first time.

What surprised her the most was Samantha's facial resemblance. In a flash, she could make out that the child looked like her own mother, more than anyone else!

Out of nowhere, the memory of her parents flooded her thoughts. Her mother would have been elated to see the newborn baby girl. If only, if only, she could pass on the information about her delivery, her mother would crave to make it to her.

But then, would her mother be able to make that visit, even if she were able to reach out to her? No chance!

Her mother could never go against the wishes and desires of her father. How could a woman disregard the dispositions and demands of her husband?

Aparna knew that her father had not forgiven her, and would never ever pardon her. She had caused so much emotional pang and hurt to him. She went against his wishes, disregarded his directions and ran away from home to tie the knot with Shiv Ram.

Before she knew it, the events and memories from the past made a surging entry into her mind.

Though she believed that what she had done was right for her life, were there some mistakes hidden within? Tears rolled down her eyes.

Lakshmi Amma, who had been sitting nearby constantly observing Aparna's movements and mental confusions, saw the dark clouds gathering in her eyes.

She put it across to her softly, "Why are you sad, my dear? Many things in life do not happen the way we want them to, do they? Can we truly be called human beings if life always unfolds exactly as expected?"

Shiv Ram came out of the office room, listening intently to those words.

"Yes, Appu, you need to understand. There are two types of misfortunes in life: one is like the predictable thundershower or a storm, which develops over time, slowly. The other is like an earthquake that unleashes suddenly! Suddenly, very suddenly. Thoroughly unexpectedly. The first one, say, a rainstorm, we can anticipate and be prepared to an extent. We can carry a raincoat. Wear gum boots. We can move away from low-lying areas. But the second one, we can't do anything, Appu, we can't. We have to endure it. Just put up with it. There is no other way."

Patting Aparna, Shiv Ram said pleadingly, "We have to endure it and move on, Appu."

He turned to his father, "I wanted to tell you something else. I have a special client conference scheduled in the afternoon. It is unavoidable. Since today is a special day, and I did not wish to skip the naming ceremony and the family feast, I had informed the meeting organisers that I would attend it only after lunch time. I would finish it off quickly to return home the earliest in the evening."

"Why did you schedule such an important event today itself? Couldn't you slot it some other day, sonny?" Raman Nayar expressed his disappointment.

"No, dad, this is an inaugural ceremony to launch our new software into the market. The inauguration of this software, which targets the hospitals and doctors, was announced a few weeks ago to all interested doctors and institutions. Wouldn't it be inappropriate and cheeky of me, to stay out of such a crucial event?"

No one including Raman Nayar could find any flaw in it.

The star attraction, Samantha, was enjoying her siesta. The rest of the family quietly enjoyed the festivities and feast.

Chapter-23

Inaugurating the meeting, attended by about 100 hospital representatives and 25 doctors, Shiv Ram said, "I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the distinguished individuals representing the hospitals and eminent doctors who have come accepting our invitation. To put it in a nutshell, this new software is meant to be as much useful a tool for hospitals as it is for doctors. It is designed and developed to integrate two essential components of hospital tasks and obligations. The software has an element that surveys and tracks proper billing within the system, while it compiles the method, course and effectiveness of every therapy offered for analysing and evaluating the effectiveness. It assays apparent effectiveness and shortcomings of a particular treatment or a particular medicine in a group of patients. Moreover, if doctors want to have their own patient data bank, they can carry it with them separately, using a plug-in and an API. There is a provision to add this personalised feature to the main software with mutual consent. I would like to place this software before you and check out its uniqueness and efficacy. I would appeal to all of you to please start on a trial basis and switch to its premier version, once you are assured of its value. I am indebted to all my colleagues who played key roles in making this software a reality. It is our privilege to offer a product that can assist the medical community in enhancing their quality of service and patient outcomes. I invite Mr. Hemant and his colleagues to provide more clarity on the software.

After the remaining speeches and the question and answer session, Shiv Ram met Dr. Pradeep and Dr. Dorai Swami during the informal high-tea session.

Dr. Pradeep expressed his opinion,

“Hi Shiv Ram, This sounds like a promising project. I wish you all the best. Consider us as a confirmed buyer of your software. We will try out Apar Infotech’s software in our Hospital. By the way, how do they fare, Aparna and the baby? Both of them are fine, aren’t they?”

“Thank you, Doc. Yes, Doc, I would say that both of them are doing well physically. But Aparna is yet not much improved. Her emotional volatility has not eased off.”

It was Doctor Dorai Swamy who replied, “I told you it would take time, Shiv. Don’t expect an instant solution to this aberration. The harsh facts are disturbing. You must walk through the facts at a speed comfortable to her. And it must be done in a gentle and compassionate manner. That’s the way. That’s the only way. Do take her out every now and then. Going on a long trip or living away from home will help make a difference. When you have a change from the sights you see regularly, it will be easier for her mind to come back. Think about a trip, a family outing, maybe for ten to fifteen days, at least, which might help!”

Only as he finished speaking, Dr. Dorai Swamy noticed a person standing right next to him. It was Dr. Parthasarathy, another physician from the same colony where he lived.

Dorai Swamy acknowledged him, “Hello, good evening doctor. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you. How are you?”

He turned to Shiv Ram and tried to introduce his neighbour.

“Doctor, let me introduce Mr. Shiv Ram, Managing Director of Apar Infotech. This is Senior Doctor Parthasarathy. He is the Chief of Durga Hospital, Shiv. He is a General Physician.”

Shiv Ram addressed Dr. Parthasarathy with a trace of embarrassment, “Good evening, uncle. How are you?”

Dr. Dorai Swamy was surprised. “Do you know each other?”

It was Doctor Parthasarathy who answered. “Not only do we know each other, we are closely related. Shiv Ram is my daughter’s husband. Aparna is my only daughter. But we don’t see each other. They got married without our consent.”

“Gosh, I didn’t know that. I’m sorry” Doctor Dorai Swamy felt a little embarrassed as he said that.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m the one who should be saying sorry! I was the one who kept it a closely guarded secret until now. I take full responsibility for the distance between us. I was the one who pulled away, and I am deeply sorry for breaking our bond. Let me seek the opportunity to earn my place back within your life. I’m making a fresh start, right here, right now. But, Shiv, what were you talking about Aparna? I heard what Dr. Dorai said. Is she not feeling well? What’s wrong?”

Seeing the distress on Shiv Ram's face, Dr. Dorai Swamy explained, "Their son Santosh went missing in a plane crash. It was a light aircraft with just the pilot and the child. Over the Andamans. Only the body of the pilot was found. The child was missing. It's been about six to seven months. After hearing the news, Aparna went into mental shock and PTSD. Aparna hasn't come out of it yet. In the meantime, she gave birth to a pre-term baby, a girl. A month ago! Shiv Ram is distressed by Santosh's disappearance and Aparna's PTSD."

Dr. Parthasarathy hugged Shiv Ram and consoled him, "Let's give a pleasant surprise to Aparna! I am coming to visit you today itself, Shiv Ram. With Aparna's mom. Let me get off right now. I'll go home and pick up Chitra."

Parthasarathy left.

Not long after, Shiv Ram too departed for his residence, citing certain urgent matters at home.

Raman Nayar was waiting for his son. "How was your inauguration, Shivu? How did it go?"

"It was well attended. Representatives of a hundred hospitals, and about twenty-five doctors. The whole thing went well. And, as you often put it, 'the proof of the pudding is in its eating' isn't it? Let's see."

He looked around to ensure no-one was around, lowered his voice and said to his father, "A wonder is going to happen today. Aparna's parents are coming down to visit us."

Raman Nayar's eyes widened. "Really? That's a miracle, indeed. How did this happen? Weren't you guys branded as enemies for life by them? What led to their change in outlook now?" His surprise knew no bounds.

"I don't know, dad. I didn't quite notice that Aparna's father was among the doctors at the ceremony. I bumped into him sheerly by chance. Our Psychiatrist, Dr. Dorai Swamy is his neighbour. In the course of Dr. Dorai's talk with me, Aparna's father captured the specifics of Aparna's PTSD and Santosh missing. He announced his intent of making amends and reconnecting with us. He said he is to pick up Aparna's mom from home and

to drive down here. Aparna need not know! Their abrupt arrival must give her immense joy. Don't you feel so?"

"Positively. No doubt about that."

Just as they were about to close their conversation, a car pulled up inside the compound. A man and a woman got out of it and rang the calling bell and waited.

From the words of Raman Nayar, "Come on in. Sit down," floating in, Janaki Amma could guess that some guests had arrived. Although she was curious to know who the visitors were, she continued the baby sitting inside with bated breath.

She impatiently waited for the call from Raman Nayar or Shiv Ram asking her to join them in the drawing room.

Raman Nayar soon made his appearance and asked Janaki Amma to join and welcome the guests. But he had a mischievous smile on his face.

"Do join us. But you should guess who the guests are! They are our close connections!"

"How can I tell without seeing them?" Janaki Amma expressed her doubt.

Raman Nayar presented Janaki Amma and introduced her to the guests,

"This is Janaki Amma, Shiv Ram's mother."

He turned to Janaki Amma and added, "I am not introducing them to you! Your challenge is to tell me who they are!" he said it with a playful smile.

"Aparna's father and mother?!" Janaki Amma aired it with a hint of doubt.

The four of them stood still.

"How did you guess?" Raman Nayar's curiosity was evident.

"Samantha is a spitting image of this lady. Am I true or not?"

All four of them agreed that it was. There was no need to ask for names. Janaki Amma knew them well.

Shiv Ram took them straight to Aparna's bedroom. They silently entered the room dimly lit for the baby to sleep in.

Aparna slowly opened her eyes hearing some subdued footsteps entering. At first, she couldn't see them clear. There was another pair other than Shiv's parents. Two faces looking at her. And, was it true, they looked exactly like her father and mother. Thinking it was a dream, she closed her eyes again and opened them to receive a loving touch on her cheek! "Surprise," a voice whispered, the voice as familiar as her own heartbeat.

She jumped up with tears of joy in her eyes and said in a trembling voice, "Amma, Appa!"

Her mother clasped her tight and said, "Yes dear. Appa and Amma wanted to give you a surprise!"

She sobbed uncontrollably. "I am sorry Appa, Amma. I can't even face you. I betrayed your trust. I know you can never forgive me."

Parthasarathy kissed her on the forehead. "Don't be daft, baby. You are our child. It was not a fault on your part. The error was on our side, dear. It was my failing. Leave it dear. We love you so much, dear," He patted her cheeks and asked, "Where's your baby?"

Samantha was not in her mind. She did not even look at the baby in the cradle, and her burst out was charged with emotion, "Appa, I lost my boy. He went on a journey, never to return. No trace of him, Appa. No one knows where he is and whether he's alive or not. I'm burning, Appa, I am burning!."

“We do know. It’s indeed a trauma and intensely painful. But can we afford to ignore everything else in our life just because of one shocker? No, we will not leave it there. We will make all attempts to trace him. Let’s pray for his safety, his return, my dear. But can you disregard our little one? What’s her role in the misfortune? What’s her wrongdoing in this? How can you justify neglecting the basic needs of your tot?”

Wiping her eyes, she took Samantha out of the cradle, caressed her. She gently handed the tiny one to her mother.

Parthasarathy said, “Chitra, did you notice? She is a ‘copy-paste’ of you!”

Chitra’s face beamed with happiness. She looked at the baby’s face intently and kept showering her granddaughter with kisses.

Aparna’s parents spent considerable time with Aparna and their granddaughter. They bid goodbye only after consoling Aparna that they would drop by every now and then.

For the first time after a prolonged period of torment, Aparna’s mind was filled with relief and peace.

Shiv Ram watched with joy as Aparna’s new relationship with her parents triggered minute but positive changes in her. Although she would occasionally fall into a depressive state, that the frequency and duration of her mood swings were decreasing gave him quite a relief.

Raman Nayar was even happier. He shared his thoughts with Janaki Amma, “It was only a benevolent act of our family deity that Aparna’s parents had the urge to meet her. Thank God, it has helped her feel better. I feel indebted to the grace of the Goddess, the Thirumandhamkunnu Devi! I should call my

associate, Mahadev Iyer and ask him to make arrangements for offerings to the Goddess.”

Over the days, Janaki Amma too was gratified to notice that Aparna was turning a corner.

But another thought was eating Janaki Amma. She was getting disturbed about their long stay away from own home in Mannarghat. Such long absence from home would upset the periodical maintenance work within home as also the management of farms they owned. Janaki Amma came to Bangalore in the third month of Aparna’s pregnancy and the newborn baby just turned three months old now.

She subtly raised the matter with Raman Nayar, “How long do we continue here? We have our house and farms to manage. Let’s not forget that. How long can the management of our destitute home be delegated? The anniversary function of the destitute home is around the corner. And then, we also have a lot of work to do in terms of agriculture. It will be hard to manage all of them remotely from here. What are your thoughts on these matters?”

She continued, “Thank God, Aparna is making steady improvement. And as luck would have it, Aparna’s parents have reconnected with Aparna. They are sure to make frequent visits hereinafter. Shouldn’t we take a little break now? Let’s return home now and consider coming again to Bangalore, if a need so arises. Think about it and decide after a discussion with Shivu.”

Raman Nayar was completely unaware that the Vanaprastha anniversary was fast approaching. He possessed a notoriously bad memory for dates and events; only Janaki Amma, by

diligently documenting every occasion, ensured they were never forgotten.

Raman Nayar felt his wife was justified in her thoughts and suggestions.

He called his son in the office instantly .

It was the secretary who answered the phone, "Sir, Shiv Ram sir is in an office meeting. It's a crucial review meet and he has left the phone in my hand. If you can tell me what the matter is, I will let you know, after talking to him. Please inform who is calling and how I can contact you back."

"This call is from Shiv Ram's home. I am Shiv Ram's father. Please tell him his father wants him to arrange tickets for the return journey. And ask him to call back, when he is free."

The secretary wrote down the details. "Okay, Sir. I will convey your message to him, Sir. Bye, Sir."

Raman Nayar disconnected the phone.

It was an office meeting, just prior to the year-end and was as much charged.

Shiv Ram concluded his speech by emphasising the need to effectively wrap up many tasks that had to be wound up before the close of the year. After inviting suggestions on actualising the intended goals and targets of the company, he formalised last-ditch adaptations in a few action plans for optimal growth and outcomes.

It was in the summing up speech, that Hemant came out with an update that took everyone by surprise.

"I want to share a splendid news that I have just received," he paused for a moment and looked carefully at the faces of the

people gathered there. Each one turned eager and curious. All of them waited with bated breath.

The CEO continued, "I am going to talk about a contract that will significantly boost our income not only for this year but also for the years to come. We can say without a doubt that we have almost bagged the 'Ryan Air project' that we have been chasing all these months. I am very happy to inform you all that the work contract with the airline is expected to be in our hands by the end of next month."

A non-stop applause thundered through the hall for several minutes.

Immediately after, Neethu stood up to say the vote of thanks.

"While we all hope that this will be a brilliant year for Apar Infotech, we must continue to work hard to make our performance as good or even better in the remaining months. The next phase will be handled responsibly by every member of our team. We must also honour the dedication of our department heads, whose energy has been vital to our success so far. If we achieve the expected results in this financial year as planned, then surely we can all turn it into a celebration with our families, right sir?" She looked at Hemant with a question.

"I guess I support the thought wholeheartedly. We should have a celebration, once we surpass our goals. Everyone should come together and work hard to achieve the set targets. And a great family tour in celebration of our achievement, right, Sir?" Hemant looked at Shiv Ram seeking his approval.

Shiv Ram's response was instant, but contrary to expectations, "Sorry, my thoughts are different! I appreciate the thought behind offering a bonus. However, I truly believe our team is already motivated by something far more significant than a 'carrot.' Our team's drive comes from a shared commitment to

our goals, and I am certain we will succeed based on that dedication alone.”

Shiv Ram paused briefly, looked at the disappointed faces, and smiled, "Without making it look like a carrot, I promise you a trip with our family as soon as this year is over.”

A deafening applause filled the conference room.

Out came a comment, from behind. It was from the Technical Head, Piyush Rawal. "Sir, let me make a suggestion. My brother-in-law told me about an amazing trip he and his family did last week. It sounded like an exciting trip. I wish we could consider that very location as our destination! They went to the Andaman Islands! What do you say about a trip to the Andaman's, Sir? Please do consider my suggestion!”

Hearing the name Andaman's, Shiv Ram's face turned pale. The sparkle in his eyes faded. The excitement cooled.

Hemant understood the reason and immediately intervened. "We have not decided our location yet, Piyush. We are indeed making a family trip, and there's enough time to decide. We will definitely seek suggestions from all and choose the most ideal destination, Piyush. There is no need to rush now.”

There was a chilling silence in the hall for a split second. Many of them knew that Shiv Ram's son's plane crash had taken place in the Andaman's. There was an embarrassing feeling among them all that this bidding was better avoided.

But by then, Shiv Ram had regained his composure. "Hemant, no. There's nothing wrong with our making this trip to the Andaman's. On the contrary, that's the right thing to do! It's been nearly nine months since I lost Santosh. I kept believing, on the strength of a mere assumption, that he would come back. Even against all odds, I somehow dangled onto that hope. Maybe, I may have to accept the challenge that I am, perhaps,

facing the end of the road, no matter how painful it is! How long can I run away from truth staring at me? Yes, let me embark on this tour and face it fair and square. Indeed, my dear colleagues, we will set our tour destination as Andaman's."

All the team members participating in the meeting stood up and gave a long round of applause, expressing their love and respect for Shiv Ram.

Chapter-24

Suru was indeed relieved that she could respond without much delay. She did not lose time in preparing a replacement for the lost medical concoction, demonstrating her grit and determination. An early start gives better results, she knew. But she had an odd feeling that everything was not well.

Her resentment towards Santhosh, who was behind the pitcher containing the brew to fall, was growing. Could he have known what the brew was? Was it a deliberate act of his? Suru was confused.

In any case, it wouldn't be favourable to have his continued presence within the pack! He was a threat to her plans. If the High priest is true, he has the mandate and backing of the Elders in the skies. The ideal thing would be to wipe him out swiftly!"

But how to get rid of him was an issue. Especially as Kireeba's freedoms are curtailed. She was determined. She would patiently wait for the right opportunity.

What really upset her mind yet was she couldn't figure out why her brew was not acting. Oddly enough, Ipili's health stayed undisturbed and her under-belly continued to grow.

Even after days, the poisonous brew was not delivering expected results. Where was she was going wrong? What was happening?

Suru carried the refill herself this time. She was eager to make enquiries and quietly scrutinise Ipili's health status.

She told Ipili in a compassionate tone, "Don't ignore sticking to the schedules and dosage, Sis. Your health during this time is

crucial a matter. May your health continue to be fine. The Elders are surely with you.”

Underneath the syrupy words, the sound of Suru gnashing her teeth was barely audible.

Ipili gave an apparently innocent reply to Suru! “My health is fine, thanks to your brew. And of course, Elder’s eyes are on me.” She looked at Akua and Sensibu and continued, “My children too would vouch that.”

As Suru returned to her own hut, a string of questions nagged her mind, “It’s been more than three weeks. Why is the chechimma’s belly growing in size, despite consuming the brew every day? Why is the miscarriage not happening? Could it be because my mix was below par? What was the failing on my part?”

Suru was agitated and forced to weigh various options. “Yes, if the measure of ingredients is raised, it can perhaps have lethal consequences. The primary target is to end her gestation. If it's not happening despite giving the normal brew, the only option is to increase its potency which might harm the mother-to-be too. But I cannot come a cropper. I have to win this game, whatever be the cost.”

She finally came to a conclusion. “It is possible this may have unintended consequences, but there is no other recourse. I must increase the measure of the ingredients to achieve a sudden and potent result.”

She reached a decision mentally and waited for Kireeba to return home. “I will thrash it out with him.”

Seeing the torment and agitation on her mother's face, Kireeba knew instantly that something was bothering her.

"What is nagging you? Your brows look furrowed, Kaja?" His question was direct.

She let out a long sigh and said, "You know your co-mother is carrying. Usually, when I start giving her my brew, her stomach empties in a few weeks. This time, despite giving her the potion faultlessly following schedules, contrary to the past, her belly is fine and healthy. My mind is completely flustered. I wonder if that new smart guy is behind this! He's turning out to be a nuisance to us. We should carefully get rid of him. It may not be that easy, but we have to do it."

She stopped for a moment, looked him straight in his face, and said it painstakingly, "We'll have to be careful. We'll have to be very careful. Everyone has an eye on him. Even the kids are after him! They all admire him since the very day he whacked you!"

Hearing that, his eyes were inflamed. He seethed and fumed under his breath, "Wipe him out, I will. Yes, I will wipe him out without a trace."

"I'm worried about you making a hasty decision. Promise me you won't do anything nitwitted. Be heedful. Do not move forward without letting me know your plan. Let's talk about it before you do anything brash," she warned him.

The two of them sat there for a while, clueless and lost in thoughts. It was Kireeba who jumped up with an idea. He said, "Listen! Isn't there a ceremony coming up this weekend? The annual ritual involving twelve-year-old children, the 'First Hunt', in which the younglings are expected to prove their skills in a hunting expedition. On that day, aren't all boys expected to go to the forest together? Let's somehow get our nipper boy also to join the group. While he is out in the jungle, single him out sneakily and I can manage my way. Either shoot him in the sly

with a poisoned arrow, or sneakily push him off a cliff, or clobber him till he breathes his last. Isn't that enough?"

"If you ask me, is it so simple? First of all, he is not of the tribe and need not join the conventional ritual. He must somehow be compelled to join the group. And then, you've to get him alone. Will it work?" Doubts surged in Suru's mind.

"Lomo is my bosom friend. But not many know it. I'll ask him to raise a charged and feverish demand that our boy too joins the group. I will have an undercover talk with Lomo about our plan. I will discuss it with him when we go to the thickets to relieve ourselves. If we discuss it there, no one can overhear. I will caution him to be on guard too."

Suru felt fairly okay with it. "We need to handle things very carefully," she reminded her son again.

Kireeba was cocky, "The weekend's just around. Not many days left. Let me plan it out. I must ensure that he doesn't outlive the evening of the First Hunt."

The First Hunt! It's a coming-of-age tribal tradition meant for the boys turning adults! To assert and prove themselves.

Twelve-year-old boys must prove their capability by successfully hunting and retrieving prey. The quarry can be any animal of fair size and edible quality. Upon the boy's return with the game, he is formally accepted and granted the status of an adult.

The day had arrived. The children, agog and full of energy, huddled, ready for the ritual. As a group, they would go into the forest for the hunt and had to return home before darkness fell.

To hunt, one needed to develop the skills to use the weapons appropriate for the game. Santhosh didn't possess any special

tribal skills like other kids on the block. It took months, even years, to master those skills.

Furthermore, he remained oblivious to the bustle. He was entirely unaware of the boys' destination, purpose, or the objective of their journey. As no one had urged him to participate, he simply watched the spectacle unfold, his curiosity piqued.

It was natural that he was unaware of the importance or meaning of this ritual. The elders and leaders of the group hadn't any plans to send him out along with the boys.

They were willing to wait. Let him first learn the local language and customs. The customs could wait. So, none of the elders had thought about including him in the event.

Suddenly, a boy, who had all along been standing a little apart, came running along, grabbed Santhosh's hand and pulled him along, as if to say, "*You come too.*" Santhosh felt that the boy was also telling the others, "*Let him come with us.*"

It felt a bit strange to Santhosh — this sudden friendliness from someone who had never shown any closeness to him before.

But then again, wasn't that how the other children too had first begun to befriend him? Santhosh tried to make sense of the show. From the way the other children addressed him, Santhosh gathered that the boy's name was Lomo.

Lomo gently pulled him to face the elders and presented that even if Santhosh didn't know how to hunt, he could at least come along and watch others. That way, he would learn, the elders agreed. They found the argument valid and reasonable.

Finally, the team set off for the hunt, with Santhosh too, following them. Each one of them carried a spear in hand, while some had a bow and arrows too. All except Santhosh! He had no weapon in his hand.

For Santosh, this was not a ritual or custom. It was just an opportunity to explore a new territory in the company of the lads of his age.

Lelevu was not comfortable about Santosh leaving vulnerable. Santosh shouldn't go unarmed, he insisted, and handed over a small spear to Santhosh.

With the spear in hand, Santhosh walked along like one among the group. With him, never leaving his side, was Lomo!

After crossing a stretch of dense forest, they reached the slope of a small hill. Beyond that, as far as the eye could see, there was only a forest glade, with clumps of tall grass rising up to knee height here and there.

Suddenly, a few wild boars dashed across in front of them. "Howe... Howe! (Boar... Boar!)," some of the children shouted and ran after them.

Santhosh was hardly interested in the hunting. He looked around. There was a hill ahead of him, with a rocky terrain and trees with hanging vines above. *The view from the top, up there, must be different*, he thought to himself.

He glanced around, but couldn't see Lomo, the boy, who took so much trouble to make him a part of the group. Signalling to the rest, Santhosh gestured that he was going to walk up the slope for a look.

Cherumu was not too far away, and Santosh gave a special sign to him indicating that he was heading up the hill. *Cherumu*

responded with a gesture as if: *“Go ahead, finish your task; I’ll finish mine.”*

Then Cherumu turned his attention back to the hunt he was engaged in.

Santhosh began to walk carefully. Alone. It was then that he realised the true worth of the spear in his hand. Without it, crossing small obstacles or warding off animals would have been difficult. In his heart, he silently thanked Lelevu mentally for the personal consideration.

Moving through the tall grass, he slowly made his way toward the top of the hill.

At one point, he sensed a faint movement behind him and turned, but saw nothing. He pressed on, but a faint suspicion lingered in his alert mind. His sharp eyes scanned the surroundings as he continued to walk cautiously.

As Santhosh reached the top of the hill, he stood in astonishment. The side he had climbed wasn’t very steep, but the other side was deep rocky cliff. It dropped sharply into a sandy stretch. And beyond it lay the sea!

At the edge of the rocky side of the hill stood a row of trees. On the side of the slope where he stood, the roots were invisible, buried deep in the soil. But on the cliff side, they clung tightly to the rocks, the thick and gnarled roots stretching downward like grasping fingers.

He was amazed. Through the cracks in the rocks, the roots — both big and small — had pushed their way, seeking strength, survival, and nourishment. These trees seemed to be fighting fiercely for life, determined to survive against every adversity.

He nodded to himself. It wasn't the wind moving the branches; the trees were speaking to him, their voices a deep, resonant whisper: "Fight. Persist. Do not surrender."

His eyes hardened. A quiet, rock-like determination settled onto his face.

He looked far into the distance. The sea was a vast, shimmering expanse, rolling endlessly toward the horizon. The roar of the waves wasn't a warning; it was an invitation. "There is my freedom," he thought, "my only way out. I have to trust it."

Suddenly, two giant wood rats, bigger than any he had ever seen scurried past his feet, squealing. Startled, Santhosh jumped sideways, as they darted up the nearby tree-trunk. At the same instant, an arrow hissed past his shoulder from behind and struck deep into the tree trunk!

The sudden attack shook him to the core. The terrifying realisation that he had escaped death by a hair's breadth gripped him completely. He quickly turned around to look behind. For a fleeting moment, he thought he saw two figures in the distance — but before he could be sure whether they were real or just his imagination, they disappeared.

His mind began to work swiftly. Whoever had shot the arrow, undeniably, the target was him. Without knowing where the assailants were, moving in any direction would only increase his risk. The safest place for him now would be somewhere below, hidden among the rocks. If he could climb down holding onto the tree roots, it would be difficult for anyone to shoot at him. Whoever tried to follow would have to come down one by one — and he would be able to see them, even defend himself if needed.

He didn't waste time thinking further. Placing the spear among the bushes, he gripped a sturdy root and carefully began to climb down toward the rocky side. After descending about five feet, he found a small crevice in the rock — just enough space to hide.

A wave of relief washed over him as he settled inside the small space, a temporary haven from the danger outside!

Parched, his throat raw from the climb, he'd found no water on the sun-baked hilltop. Now, deep within a narrow crevice, a sound: the faint, steady tick, tick of water. He turned, hope surging, to see cool drops trickling down the rock face within arm's reach. Cupping his palms, he collected the precious liquid and drank. The water, icy cold, slipped down his throat, and a shiver of profound, life-giving relief, both physical and mental, washed over him.

Even in that brief comfort, he stayed alert — eyes sharp, ears tuned. Was there any sound? Any movement? Any shadow anywhere? Only a focused mind would help him sense danger in time!

Meanwhile, on the slope of the hill, two men lifted their heads silently from the grass. Right after shooting the arrow, both had ducked down into the tall grass to stay hidden.

If the arrow missed, and if the prey couldn't guess where it came from, it should provoke panic and make it run recklessly. Often, that made things easier for the pursuers.

One of them held a bow and arrow; the other gripped a spear. They peered carefully through the grass. Seeing nothing, they leaned forward, craning their necks for a better look. The hilltop was empty. No one in sight. No movement, no moan, no sound of a wounded target.

“If the arrow missed him, wouldn’t he have tried to run back the way he came?” Both of them thought in similar lines. “But he didn’t! Could he have slipped in his panic and fallen off the cliff side?”

They looked at each other, gathered courage, and stepped out of their hiding place. Eyes darting in all directions, they scrambled to the top of the hill and swept the area for clues. There was no sign of movement, no trace of anyone. The arrow they had shot was up there, stuck deep in the trunk of a tree.

“Where could he have gone?” They wondered. *“Did the arrow scrape or lacerate his body before striking the tree?”* If so, the poison on the arrow must surely have entered his system! Could he have fallen somewhere down below after being wounded?”

Their minds were a mix of hope and doubt, filled with countless possibilities.

Rummaging through the bushes, Kireeba stepped on something hard. He bent down, picked it up, and instantly realized what it was: a hunting spear.

He showed it to Lomo. “Wasn’t this the spear he was carrying?”

Lomo came closer, examined it carefully, and nodded. “Yeah, it looks like the one handed to him.”

“Then he... he didn’t run anywhere. There’s no path of escape here. He must have fallen down below. That’s the only possibility!”

Even before he could finish speaking, they began to hear voices from the slope of the hill. The two exchanged glances, signalled

to each other with their eyes, “*let’s go!*”, and quickly slipped away by another route before anyone could spot them.

“Santhu... kooi! Santhu... kooi, koo... oo... oooooi!”

Amid the calls and shouts of the children, *Cherumu’s* voice rang out loudly. But there was no reply. Everyone began to worry. *They shouldn’t have left him alone.* If some danger or misfortune had befallen him, who could even imagine what might have happened? *What if something terrible had occurred?*

“What will we say when we return to the village now?” they thought, hearts heavy with fear and regret.

When the group of children reached the top of the hill, they began calling out loudly:

“Kooi... koo... oo... oooooi! Santho... kooi! Santho... kooi! Koo... oo... oooooi!”

Did they just hear a faint reply from across the steep rocky side of the slope? Or was it merely an echo?

To clear their doubt, they moved closer toward the rocky cliffs and called out again:

“Kooi... koo... oo... oooooi! Santho... kooi! Santho... kooi! Koo... oo... oooooi!”

From somewhere deep within the rocks, there came a weak, echoing response —

“Ko... oo... oo... oooooi!”

The children were astonished.

“Huh...? Where is that coming from? What is he doing down the cliff? How did he get there? Why on earth did he climb down?”

None of them could make sense of it.

Would he need help to climb back up? Should someone go down to get him?

Just as one or two of them were about to climb down using the tree roots, they suddenly saw Santhosh making his way up ploddingly, each movement of his deliberate and heavy. A wave of relief spread across everyone's faces.

Cherumu reached out his hand and helped Santhosh climb up. Seeing his exhausted face, he gestured with his hands and eyes, asking what had happened and why he had gone down there.

Santhosh pointed toward the arrow stuck deep in the tree trunk. The group of children froze when they saw it. In shock and fear, they pointed upward and exclaimed,

“Paado!, Paado! (Arrow!, Arrow!)”

As questions and guesses flew back and forth among them, one boy climbed the tree and carefully pulled out the arrow.

Anyone who saw it could tell. It was a poisoned arrow. There was no doubt about that. And though everyone had a clear idea who might be behind it, no one dared to say the name aloud.

Cherumu scrutinized Santhosh's body, looking for any sign of a wound or scratch. Once satisfied he was unharmed, he handed him some water and wild fruits to help him revive his flagging strength.

The sun was about to set, and the sky had turned a deep, bruised grey. A gnawing dread, cold as the twilight air, started raising

its head within the minds of the seniors. Where were the boys? So far, none had returned from the expedition.

Time stretched, each second a lead weight. Just then, a faint, familiar sound—shouts, faint at first, then growing louder—pierced the gloomy silence. The exhausted faces of the nipper gang finally emerged from the trees. A collective sigh escaped the seniors, and the profound relief was visible on every worn face.

Before anyone could even ask about the delay, the boys burst out with the story: how someone had shot a poisoned arrow at the boy who went off alone, forcing him to hide among the rocks for safety.

The elders listened in stunned silence. They chastised the children for recklessly leaving the boy alone. Yet, more powerful than the scolding, the incident solidified everyone's faith in the words of Sebu, the village priest-elder.

Though no one said aloud who was behind it, the elders all knew very well who had done it.

That day's formalities, acknowledging who among the pack were successful and granting them adult status were all completed much delayed than usual.

Four angry, frustrated eyes glared from the shadows, watching everything in silence.

A blinding rage burned in the eyes of everyone huddled in Suru's hut. The sheer intensity of their fury was so palpable a thing that even sleep shied away from entering.

Chapter-25

Ipili's happiness—and her belly—swelled day by day. In equal measure, Suru's jealousy and hatred festered within her.

The marvel-boy's escape from deadly danger only fortified Ipili's faith in him multifold. Mahaba, too, found his trust in the young man profoundly reaffirmed, alongside a newfound admiration.

The truth in the chief-priest's words utterly amazed him. "This boy," he thought, "truly possesses extraordinary powers and abilities!"

It was against the backdrop of Santhu's miraculous escape that Suru finally confessed to Mahaba. It was the marvel-boy who had helped her in discovering the real purpose behind the "medicine" given to her during her pregnancy.

Mahaba's lips trembled with rage. His eyes narrowed.

Ipili intervened gently, trying to calm him. "Relax, chief. Calm yourself. For the time being. True wisdom and cunning lie in knowing everything, yet acting as if we know nothing. Let that wretched woman's mind burn with unease! Hasn't she harmed us enough? Hasn't she duped us, made suckers of us, and deprived us of our legacy? We will get even with her. But let my childbirth be over first. Until then... be patient, chief, be patient."

The more Mahaba thought about it, the clearer matters became.

The chief's mind could now decipher everything. Answers to many questions that had hitherto remained unclear were finally emerging.

So, that was it. Suru and Kireeba had gone into the woods near Chemana waterfall just to fetch the poisonous lantern-shaped seeds from the Fire forest. It was probably on one such trip that she plunged into the river to save herself from the wolf attack.

So smartly did she manage to learn of each conception of Ipili, and so cannily did she plan to terminate each pregnancy with that medical potion!

"What punishment for this witch?" With an inflamed face, Mahaba rose to his feet. He proceeded at once to see both the high priest and war-chief.

They, too, must be informed. They, too, should know. Only after due consultation with them could he make an apt decision.

"Kireeba must be taken care of. He is sure to persist in his efforts to get rid of our marvel-boy."

It's nothing but the grace of the ancestral souls, he thought. It's just the will of the departed elders. How else were we to get an outsider boy to expose the plan and cunning of the demoness amongst us?

But the question that evades a straight answer is how to merge this outsider boy into our clan? Custom does not approve of an outsider. That's the tradition. That's the rule.

"How, then, are we to fit him into the group? That's a huge question! But the departed souls would naturally find some way. Surely!"

All those anxieties reflected in the chief's furrowed brows.

Mahaba apprised both the chief-priest and war-chief of Suru's devious acts in detail. The poison nuts she hoarded, her regular treks to the Chemana area to collect them, the lethal brews disguised as health tonics to terminate Ipili's pregnancies—all these unforgivable wrongs were laid bare. Together, they made a critical decision: Once Ipili gave birth safely, the council would be called to decide what punishment Suru should face.

Oblivious of the revelations and goings on, Suru went to Ipili's hut carrying another refill of herbal tonic she had prepared for Ipili's pregnancy, along with Ipili's favorite dish—roasted crab meat.

"My dear chechimma must stay healthy," she said, a sickly sweet smile pasted on her face. "Your heart should be full of joy! May it stay that way always. May you give birth to a strong baby boy. There isn't much time left now, is there? I've brought your favorite roasted crab, Chechimma. Let me serve it to you with my own hands. I will be delighted to see you eating and enjoying it.

Ipili said softly, "My stomach is kind of upset today. I'll skip eating for now." She gestured toward the earthen pot. "That's alright, though. The Chief loves crab meat—and you cook it so well. Just leave it there. I'll give it to him."

"Oh no, it'll turn insipid," Suru said quickly, perhaps too quickly. Her eyes darted to the pot. "I'll take it back with me. My little ones can have it."

“What’s that about taking it back, Suru?” Mahaba’s voice, calm and deep, cut through the quiet hut as he returned. He had overheard the exchange.

Ipili turned to him, her own voice sharp with subtext. “Suru brought me roasted crab along with the tonic she made. I told her my stomach wasn’t well, so I asked her to leave it for you, since you like crab meat. But she refused, and said her children could eat it instead.”

She turned to Suru, “ Why, Suru? Would it be so wrong if the Chief ate what was meant for me?”

Suru’s face drained of all color. Her eyes went wide with a silent panic. “Alright then, let it stay here!” she agreed unwillingly.

Without another word, she lifted the pot. She stepped forward to hand it over with a shaky hand—

“Aiyyo!”

She shrieked.

As if her foot landed on a slick spot, she slipped and lost her balance. The pot flew from her hands. It crashed to the floor, shattering instantly. Roasted crab and dark, viscous liquid scattered everywhere. A heavy silence fell over the hut.

“Oh dear, what a pity! I slipped, Chechimma, I slipped!” Suru cried, her voice laced with feigned distress. “Everything is ruined. Never mind, though. I’ll make a fresh batch for the Chief right away. I can bring it again in no time.”

The Chief’s voice was firm, cold. “Your foot doesn’t usually slip that easily, does it? Leave it. No need to trouble yourself for that

now. What's gone is gone.” He let the final words hang in the air, a silent accusation.

With a tight, painted-on expression of sorrow, Suru scurried out of the hut. She didn't dare look back.

Chapter-26

The departure of Raman Nayar and Janaki Amma saddened Aparna, but their absence wasn't felt too keenly, thanks to the frequent visits of her own parents.

Samantha spent most of her time in Lakshmi Amma's care. To Shiv Ram's relief, Aparna had recently started paying more attention to her newborn daughter.

Changes, though slow, were setting in. Yet the sudden, unexpected emotional surges persisted. No one could ever precisely predict them.

The full intensity of the fluctuations in Aparna's mental state revealed itself to her parents during one of their evening visits.

"Why hasn't Santhosh—who was said to have gone on a trip—come back yet? Why is everyone silent about him being missing?" Aparna shrieked, her voice raw with anguish.

She grabbed whatever she could, hurling objects in a fit of frustration. The moment she saw her parents, she collapsed, clinging tightly to Chitra, sobbing uncontrollably as Chitra gently patted her back.

"Now, now, my child, do not cry, do not!" Chitra soothed, her voice soft. "We're only human. Do any of us have all our wishes granted? Is it fair to expect every dream to come true? Every wish to realise?"

Wiping Aparna's tears and caressing her cheek, Chitra sighed heavily. "The hope that Santhosh will return seems faint, my dear. Life often unfolds in ways that defy logic and fairness; not every event has a purpose, and not all outcomes are just."

While Chitra was comforting her daughter, Aparna's father stepped aside to call Shiv Ram.

"Sorry, Uncle, I'm running a bit late today," Shiv Ram said, sounding slightly rushed. "I'm on my way back from the office—will be home in five minutes. Have you both been there long?"

"No problem. We'll talk once you're here. We've been here for about fifteen minutes now," said Parthasarathy.

He put his phone away and glanced at the door, waiting.

Siva Ram finally arrived, shoulders tense as he stepped in. "I try to be home on time," he said, a touch embarrassed. "Didn't expect you today, and the month of March is chaotic at work. Some evenings, no matter how hard I try, I just... can't leave office on time."

Before he could go farther, Parthasarathy guided him to the living room and motioned for him to sit. "Let's talk here. There's something serious I need to discuss."

He paused, meeting Shiv Ram's eyes. "I'm worried about Aparna. Honestly, I don't think she's making real progress. If it carries on like this, I fear it could become permanent."

Siva Ram shifted uncomfortably, but Parthasarathy continued, gentler now. "Consider stepping away for a while—take Aparna somewhere new, away from all these reminders. It doesn't have to be far; you're welcome to stay with us if you like. Sometimes

a change of scene softens what hurts inside. I believe Dr. Dorai Swamy may have suggested something similar?"

Siva Ram nodded. "Yes, uncle, he did. We're heading out for a tour next month—right after the financial-year rush." He offered a weary smile. "It's a twelve-day family trip organised by my office. Once we return, Aparna and I can stay with you awhile... until she finds her footing again. Would you be okay with that?"

Parthasarathy leaned closer. "Where will you go?"

"The team chose the Andaman Islands. Ten days there, plus a cruise for two days," Siva Ram replied.

Parthasarathy's brows rose in surprise. "What? Back there? Are you sure that's wise?"

Siva Ram's eyes glistened, shimmering with unshed tears. His voice was quiet but full of longing. "It's not a choice, uncle — it's something I have to do. For Aparna, the islands are like a new world: forests, winds, the open sea. But for me... I still carry the ache."

"Maybe," he said, the words barely audible, "If I can just look at that strip of land, that tract of forest where we lost him, if I can say goodbye one last time, I may finally find some peace." A tremor ran through his words as his composure nearly shattered. "Does anyone," he pleaded, the raw edges of his pain exposed, "does anyone really know how deep this pain is for me?" The question hung in the air, a testament to a grief that words could never fully bridge.

Moved, Parthasarathy reached out, embracing him tenderly, offering silent comfort. “Alright,” he said, voice gentle. “Go, then. Just tell me—will there be a doctor traveling with you?”

“Fortunately, yes. Dr. Gajanan, our company’s referral doctor and a general physician, is part of the group,” Siva Ram replied.

“Excellent. After your trip, you both are welcome to stay with us for as long as Aparna needs to feel better,” Parthasarathy said, gently guiding Shiv Ram toward Aparna’s room.

“Well then, dear, we’ll visit again later. Alright, Lakshmi Amma... Shiv, good night. And remember, don’t hesitate to call if you need anything,” he said warmly.

Shiv Ram gave a reassuring wave as he replied, “Thank you. Good night.”

Chapter-27

As days passed, the midwife's visits to Ipili had become an urgent, daily necessity, her manner reflecting a deepening concern for the mother's health and the progress of the pregnancy.

That day, the instant her eyes landed on Ipili, the face of the childbirth helper transformed, brightening with profound recognition.

The belly wasn't merely full; it had distinctly "dropped." The timing was critical now; the birth could commence at any moment.

Despite the significant heaviness and mounting physical discomfort that had plagued her, Ipili's heart was now overflowing with an exquisite joy.

After years of waiting and hoping, this long-awaited pregnancy was finally approaching its moment of truth. Alongside that joy, a tender, heartfelt prayer rose from the deepest well of her being: "Oh spirits and ancestors, have mercy. Let this child be a son, exactly as in the dream. Protect the continuity of our lineage."

There was a deep, desperate intensity embedded within that plea—a raw vulnerability she rarely showed.

Unbeknownst to her, in another part of the village, the chief and the other elders had gathered for an urgent council meeting. The chief, unusually tense, was pressing them to reach a decision quickly.

The Chief spoke with searing intensity, recounting the wicked deeds of Suru and her brood in meticulous, damning detail to the War-Chief and the High Priest. He laid the case before the council of elders with a forceful urgency, demanding swift and decisive action.

The revelations sent a shockwave through the gathered group. A palpable commotion rippled across the council circle. They were equally astonished to hear of the miraculous powers of the boy who had, seemingly, dropped from the very skies. Remembering the ancestral spirits who had orchestrated these events, a silent, profound current of gratitude passed through them all.

The War-Chief was the first to break the charged silence. His suggestion was harsh, uncompromising steel. "Not a single one should be spared. Mother and children, all of them are dripping with malice. Eliminate them completely! Wipe them out."

But the Chief had his doubts, a flicker of mercy in the harsh light of judgment. "Yes, the mother and the eldest are devilish, no doubt. But do the rest of the children deserve the same treatment? Unless we know they are equally involved, is it fair of us to indict them? Should we treat them all the same way? Should we?" He looked around the circle, his gaze demanding an answer. "What true wrong have the other children done? Out of fear of their mother, they must have simply obeyed her. They can't act on their own. They do not deserve the same treatment."

His tone hardened as he spoke of the two main culprits. "But Kireeba—he's different. Born wicked, cruel by nature, he never hesitates to do evil. Let the mother and son be meted out the stiffest punishment: banishment. The rest may stay and live among us if they wish to."

As the arguments intensified, a chasm opened in the council; the members' opinions were sharply divided, forming two distinct, opposing factions.

The Priest's voice cut through the heated debate. "For now, let's not act in haste. Keep your eyes and ears open, and make sure nothing else happens. Whatever needs to be done can only be done after Ipili's childbirth."

Then, turning to Mahaba, he continued, his tone reasoned but firm. "I too believe they should not be killed. But sending them away to the island across the waters is no different from killing them. Chief, I cannot agree to leaving a few of the children here while banishing the mother and son to that desolate island. That's not the right thing to do."

His voice took on a prophetic quality. "Even if you cut down a poisonous tree, and a new shoot grows, won't it still belong to the same wicked species? That must not happen. Whatever we decide, we'll think it through once more after Ipili's delivery. That is what truly matters now. May the blessings of the ancestral spirits ensure everything goes well. And everyone—keep a close watch on the devilish mother and her children."

Even before the words left his mouth, a commotion erupted outside the council hut. Women were running about in a frenzy of excitement. When the Chief stepped out, he saw a group of women gathered near his own hut, letting out the traditional, high-pitched cries of joy—the ululations reserved for childbirth.

Could it be? Had the birth begun? He wondered, a wave of hope washing over him. The other elders, their own arguments forgotten, quickly rushed out to join him.

As they watched, the midwife appeared, her hands holding something they could not yet see. A second group of women cried out in unison and carefully took the precious bundle from her, placing it inside a small earthen pot.

According to their sacred custom, the umbilical cord is cut with an arrowhead, and the afterbirth is preserved. After three days, following specific rituals, the pot is buried, and only then is the newborn brought out for the first tribal ritual.

An excited midwife came running down from the hut, her face beaming as she looked at the Chief and the others gathered.

“The birth is over!” she announced triumphantly. “It’s a boy! Both mother and child are doing well. By the grace of the ancestors—by their blessing, all is well!”

Overwhelmed with sheer happiness, the Chief jumped and clapped like a child, running to the Chief-Priest and pulling him into a powerful embrace.

The Chief then scanned the gathering until his eyes landed on the boy. With a powerful, protective motion, he strode over, scooped him up, and carried him to the centre of the celebratory throng. There, both the Chief and the Priest lifted their hero together—the marvel-boy who had descended among them on a bird from the heavens—raising him high above their heads in a shared gesture of profound admiration and triumph.

They then placed him in their centre, and began to dance around him, chanting in a joyous, rhythmic chorus:

“Thaave, Thaave, Thaave...”

Santosh, watching their frenzied reactions, quickly realised what had happened—Kaja had given birth! But he did not yet know that “Thaave” meant “boy” in their tongue.

The previously quiet and peaceful settlement now vibrated with joy and excitement. Drumbeats filled the air with a celebratory rhythm, and the ancient forest surrounding watched in awe and wonder as the community prepared to embrace days of festivity.

Chapter-28

The leaders of Apar Infotech were riding a triumphant wave. As they embarked on their journey, a deep-seated pride was etched on their faces, a testament to the monumental successes the company had recently achieved. Above all, the securing of a new international business account was a crowning glory, a milestone that had infused the entire team with an exhilarating sense of accomplishment.

The family members accompanying them were swept up in the same thrill. Everyone had long anticipated such a grand group trip, and a palpable sense of camaraderie and shared excitement filled the air.

Out of the total twenty-four people, three could be considered outliers, with no direct affiliation to the company: Dr. Gajanan Naik, his wife, and Lakshmi Amma. Dr. Gajanan, a general physician on the company's panel, had been granted special permission to bring his wife along.

Lakshmi Amma, however, was there at Shiv Ram's personal request. She was more than just a helping hand for Aparna; she was a beloved figure to Santosh, and her presence was a quiet acknowledgement of Aparna's delicate psychological state, which a few within the company were discreetly aware of.

Lakshmi Amma's thoughts, however, were not soaring with the plane. They were fixed on Santosh, her pet boy she had lost months ago.

Lakshmi Amma's thoughts wandered to Santosh. She sorely missed the little one. Though this was her very first flight—

something she had never expected—her mind wouldn't allow her to fully enjoy the experience.

As the plane dipped through the clouds over Port Blair, Shiv Ram sat by the window, his eyes fixed on the endless green that stretched below — the dense, untamed forests of the Andamans.

A shimmer gathered in his eyes. From the quiet ache within his chest, memories rose and rushed through him like a long, mournful train — each thought a carriage of loss and longing.

Where could that light aircraft have fallen, he wondered. Was it the crash that quickly ended his life? Or, did my poor boy fall into the jaws of some wild animal? If not, was his life pitilessly cut short by one of those savage tribesman in the jungle?

“Forgive me, my boy,” he whispered under his breath. “Forgive this dumb father who left you to face your fate alone. Forgive me, my dear boy..., my dearest Santhu.”

He pressed his trembling hand to the window, as though he could reach through the glass to the forest beyond.

“My boy,” he murmured, “I kept hoping you would return — defying all sense, defying reason itself. Even when hope turned faint and distant, my heart refused to let it die. Look, my son — I am here now. Your mother is here, and so is your beloved Lachimma. And yes... your little sister, Samantha — the one you longed to see, to hold, to play with.”

“My child, I have come to breathe in the very air that holds your last breath — to catch it as it drifts from these forests into my own chest. Your mother has come to seek one final glimpse of your spirit — the spirit that lingers unseen among the trees, brushing past vines and whispering through leaves.”

“And your little sister — she is here too, so that I may point to this sea of green and tell her, ‘Somewhere here, your brother sleeps.’”

“And Lachimma — your dearest Lachimma — she’s here as well. Do you remember the flavour of her stew, my boy? Perhaps if you caught its scent again, you might just follow it back to us...!”

Shiv Ram’s face was etched with brooding thoughts.

“Shiv Ram sir — what are you lost in thought about? We’ve reached Port Blair. Time to get down. Why aren’t you getting up? What’s wrong, sir? Your face looks a little clouded!”

Shiv Ram, feigning ignorance, dabbed his face with a towel.

“Oh... nothing,” he said after a pause. “Just felt like I might’ve drifted off for a moment.”

They all climbed into a waiting bus and headed straight to the hotel. The plan for the day was simple — check in, have lunch, visit the historic Cellular Jail, and later spend the evening at Corbyn’s Cove Beach.

As the sun dipped low, the beach came alive with laughter, games, and the sound of waves splashing against the shore. The group waded into the clear blue water, their joy unrestrained. Though Aparna and Lakshmi Amma stayed back from the sea, the laughter and easy cheer of the others filled even their hearts with quiet delight.

The next day promised something special — a full-day cruise on a luxury yacht.

When morning came, excitement rippled through the group as they boarded the gleaming vessel. The yacht had been hired exclusively for the Apar Infotech team — a day of unbroken leisure and freedom. From morning till night, they would sail across the scattered emerald isles of the Andamans, watch the golden sunset melt into the sea, and return after a night of music, dance, and dinner beneath the stars.

The ship was divided into three decks.

On the lower deck, passengers could sit back in comfort and take in the endless play of sea and sky. The glass enclosure and cool air-conditioning wrapped them in ease, untouched by the island heat or sudden rain.

Above it lay the middle deck — the dining level. Here, neatly arranged tables awaited travellers, where they could enjoy the meals they had ordered, served with quiet efficiency. A small counter stood nearby, offering beer and wine for those who wished to sip as the waves went by.

The uppermost deck was open to the sky — the heart of the vessel and the pride of the cruise. From here, the view was unmatched. Rows of chairs lined both sides, and the wide central space was left free, meant for gatherings, music, or the occasional burst of dance beneath the blue expanse above.

Before the voyage began, the captain appeared — a tall man in crisp white uniform, his voice carrying easily over the hum of the engines.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began with a smile, “welcome aboard. My name is Bimal Roy, and I have the honour of captaining this ship.”

“I’m certain you’ll enjoy every moment of this special cruise — from sunrise to nightfall. The sights awaiting you are a feast for

the eyes. You'll witness beauty in forms and colors few ever see — the shifting moods of the sea, its changing shades, the spellbinding hues of its depths. From afar, you'll glimpse the wild, untamed forests standing in silent grandeur, and you'll behold that timeless moment when the sea and the shore meet — as if in a tender, eternal embrace.”

“One more important point,” the captain continued, his voice calm yet commanding. “At certain designated locations along our route, arrangements have been made for you to disembark and visit the beaches or safely explore other scenic spots.”

“However,” he went on, “there are specific maritime rules that limit how close our vessel may approach the shore. While we will take you as near as possible and allow you to step off at the planned points, it may not be feasible at every location. I trust you will understand and cooperate.”

He paused briefly, letting his words settle over the group.

“Likewise,” he added, “passengers are not permitted to disembark wherever the ship halts. In some areas, doing so — or even attempting to — could invite danger or accidents. Those on the upper deck must also move indoors promptly whenever instructed. And remember, certain islands are inhabited by indigenous tribes who prefer to remain undisturbed. Approaching or trying to make contact with them is strictly prohibited by government order. I request your complete adherence to these directives.”

With that, the captain offered a courteous nod and stepped back. The engines rumbled softly, and the ship began to glide forward — the voyage was underway.

Turning to his colleagues and their families, Hemant spoke with an easy smile.

“Friends, this marks the beginning of the second day of our journey. May today’s experiences be even more delightful than yesterday’s!” he said. “Before we set off, let me introduce our cruise guide — Mr. Devendran. He hails from Kanyakumari district and speaks Tamil, Hindi, English, and Malayalam fluently. Please keep in mind everything the captain has just mentioned. So — all the best, everyone! Over to you, Devendran.”

“Good morning, and *namaskaram!*”

Devendran began with his hands folded, his face bright with warmth. “We’ve now left Port Blair and are on our way to North Bay Island — our first stop. North Bay is famous for its adventure activities. You’ll find everything there — scuba diving, snorkelling, jet skiing, speedboat rides, even trips on a semi-submarine. We’ll probably spend three to four hours exploring the island.”

He paused, letting the group’s growing excitement ripple through the deck before continuing.

“After that, we’ll cruise around Kid Island and Peatman Island, and then sail into the narrow creeks of Baratang. There, we’ll glide inland for a while to experience the mangrove forests — the wild, untouched world on both sides of the water. If time and tide permit, we’ll make a short stop to venture deeper into the inner mangroves. Later, we’ll move farther out to sea to visit

Guitar Island — named so for its shape. Once we've explored the area, we'll head back to Port Blair by evening for dinner. That's the plan for the day. Along the way, I'll share everything you need to know — and a few stories too. So, relax and enjoy the cruise!"

The announcement drew delighted murmurs. Faces lit up; eyes gleamed with expectation. In their minds, scenes of coral reefs, sparkling waves, and green islands began to unfurl like bright postcards from a dream. It was certain to be a day brimming with colour, laughter, and wonder.

But not for Shiv Ram.

His thoughts were nothing like the calm blue spread before his eyes. Within him, the sea was restless — windswept, surging, heavy with storm. The laughter and excitement around him drifted past like distant echoes he could no longer touch.

Noticing him standing apart, lost in thought, Piyush and Neethu exchanged a glance and quietly walked over.

"Sir," Piyush said gently, "it feels sad to see you standing here alone. Come with us — we're about to start a fun filled competition. You must join in!"

Shiv Ram turned toward them, his eyes distant but kind. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'm not in the right frame of mind. I'm waiting... for the breeze that carries my son's scent."

His voice faltered. "Please don't count on my company during this trip. Let me be. I just need some time — to make peace with my loss."

For a moment, none of them spoke. The sea wind brushed past, whispering through the railings.

With a touch of sadness in their hearts, Piyush and Neethu nodded quietly and walked back to join the others — leaving Shiv Ram alone, staring out at the infinite, murmuring blue.

It was only when Devendran's voice rose again over the speakers — announcing that they had reached their next destination — that the group, caught up in the laughter and friendly contests of their onboard competition, realised where they were. North Bay Island shimmered ahead, a turquoise jewel resting on the vast blue chest of the sea.

As soon as they set foot on the shore, a delightful confusion took over. Everyone was busy deciding who would try which adventure — calculating, planning, teasing one another, swept up in the fever of excitement. The beach rang with voices and the sound of surf; even the wind seemed to hum with anticipation.

Aparna, meanwhile, had chosen a quieter corner beneath a shade of palms, sitting with Lakshmi Amma and little Samantha. Since Aparna couldn't venture into the water with the child, she had decided to skip the rides altogether. Yet Dr. Gajanan and his wife, with their kind insistence and easy warmth, soon persuaded her to join them on the semi-submarine tour — a safe window, they promised, into the magic of the deep.

Shiv Ram, however, declined. He stood apart, unmoved by the excitement, his gaze wandering toward the horizon — as though searching for something lost long ago.

For most of the travellers, this was a day of firsts — their maiden chance to relish the wild joy of sea adventure.

Devendran moved among them with practiced ease, his voice steady, his manner reassuring, offering instructions, fitting life jackets, calming nervous hands.

“No adventure,” he told them with a knowing smile, “is entirely free of risk. We do everything we can to keep you safe — but it’s that very thread of danger that gives adventure its pulse. To feel the thrill, you must first accept the risk.”

It was true — courage, after all, is measured not by how one avoids danger, but by how much one dares to face it. Not everyone stepped forward; a few hesitated, weighed their fears, and chose to watch instead.

But for those who did — those who flung themselves into the sea’s embrace — the world transformed. Some soared through the air like birds, the wind roaring past as they parasailed above the glittering water. Others plunged into the deep, swimming among coral gardens and darting fish, their breath steady through long tubes as the ocean revealed its jewelled secrets. A few even walked upon the sea floor itself, suspended in a dreamlike calm — the strange stillness of another world.

Each moment left them breathless, their hearts lit with wonder — as though, for a brief while, they had stepped out of ordinary life and into something vast, fearless, and free.

The air on board was still thick with excitement as the ship pulled away from North Bay and began its slow glide toward Baratang. Everyone was talking at once — voices overlapping, laughter spilling into the wind — each person animatedly recounting their adventure, their eyes alight with the afterglow of thrill. The sea outside shimmered in soft blues and silvers, while the aroma of lunch lingered in the air.

Then, without warning, a sudden jolt ran through the vessel — a brief but unmistakable tremor, as though an unseen hand had gripped it. A hush fell for a heartbeat. Plates rattled faintly. A few startled faces turned to one another.

“Did you feel that?” someone whispered.

“Probably just a big wave,” another murmured. “These things happen.”

The chatter soon resumed, though an uneasy curiosity remained. Moments later, Devendran appeared once more, gathering everyone on the upper deck. His tone was calm, measured — the voice of a man who had spoken across countless seas.

“We are now approaching Baratang,” he announced. “From here, we move from the open sea into the inland waterways. This is a region that demands great caution. Deep within these forests live certain indigenous tribes — people who do not take kindly to visitors, especially those who stray too close to their land. For that reason, our ship will not cross the permitted boundary inside this channel. Please also note: no one is allowed to remain on the open upper deck without permission from me or another officer.”

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the group to ensure their attention was fixed on him.

“Listen carefully,” he continued. “We may disembark at a few pre-approved points, but only after confirming that conditions are safe. Stepping out without authorisation is dangerous and strictly forbidden — I say this only for your safety. And if at any time you receive instructions from the captain, please respond immediately and act responsibly.”

His words hung in the air for a moment, sinking in. The laughter had quieted now; a subtle unease crept through the group like a cool breeze.

A few voices rose in murmured concern.

“Then why bring us here at all if it’s dangerous?” one person asked.

“Maybe we should tell the captain to skip this part,” said another.

Sensing the tension, Hemant stepped forward, his tone steady, almost reassuring.

“Come on,” he said lightly. “If we start panicking over every caution, where will it end? These warnings are routine — a matter of responsibility, not alarm. It doesn’t mean danger is waiting around the corner. Remember North Bay? Even there, they made us sign disclaimers and explained the risks. It’s normal. Fear is natural — yes — but it’s not meant to control us. So take a deep breath, my friends. Let’s stay calm, curious... and unafraid.”

The group fell silent for a moment, his words washing over them like the rhythm of the sea itself. Then slowly, conversation returned — quieter now, shaded with thought, as the ship slipped deeper into the green silence of Baratang’s waterways.

Hemant’s reassuring talk was barely over. Without any warning, the ship gave a violent lurch with a terrifying sound. Hemant was flung off balance. Everyone froze for a moment, then started firing questions in every direction: *What was that? What happened? Why did the ship stop?*

Shiv Ram, shaken from his reverie, moved close to Hemant and said in a low voice, "I think something's wrong. Shall we go and see?"

Murmurs ran through the decks. Some passengers, peering from the lower saloon, said they could hear hurried footfalls beneath the hull and shouted orders rising from below. Others swore they'd caught the sound of something mechanical grinding, then a flurry of voices from the engine-room direction.

Devendran arrived on the scene, his face sharpened by concern. "Did you hear that terrible noise?" he asked. "Something's happened. Let us check with the captain. For now — no one should go out onto the open deck. Please remain seated."

Neethu nodded, pale; On everyone's face a shadow of uncertainty hovered.

Hemant, Shiv Ram and Devendran climbed toward the pilot house to find the captain. Except for the deck officer, no one was there. Devendran asked, "Where is the captain? What was that sound we heard?"

"I don't know," the deck officer replied. "I'm on observation. I heard a noise from the engine or the shaft below. The captain went down that way. If you want to find him, you'll have to head toward the engine room."

They were about to descend when the captain emerged from below, his uniform smudged, face grave but controlled. "Come up here," he called. "We've got a minor problem. One of the propeller blades appears to have bent — or perhaps broken — something is jammed. We cannot proceed at the moment. If we

continue to apply power the crankshaft could snap; we'll be stranded."

"So we're stuck?" Hemant's voice betrayed disbelief. "We can't go forward — or back?"

"That's correct," the captain answered.

Shiv Ram aired his concern, "Since there's a fault, it might require a repair, and it might take time too. Will we have to spend the night here? It's already past four o'clock."

"We have two options," the captain responded. "The best option is either to bring another ship and transfer there, or attempt an urgent repair and then return. We've already called someone. They've started out on a speed boat. After a minor underwater repair we can resume travel. Until then we'll have to remain here."

Shiv Ram's worry hardened. "But you said staying here is dangerous, captain? Won't things get worse in the night?"

The captain met him steadily. "All external doors are locked. We are secure inside, Mr. Shiv Ram. No one can approach unseen. We have duty officers on watch, and the deck officer is posted outside. If necessary, we are prepared to defend the vessel."

The terse assurance did little to still the uneasy silence that followed. Outside, the water lay dark and indifferent; the ship rocked gently as if reluctant to confess its injury, and the passengers — clustered in small knots of whispered speculation

— felt the slow creep of an unplanned night closing around them.

The captain met their anxious faces with calm authority.

“There’s nothing to fear,” he said. “You’re safe in our hands — I can assure you of that.”

Then, in a steadier, more deliberate tone, he added, “Let me repeat — don’t worry. We’ll inspect the propeller, assess the damage, and carry out the necessary repairs. As soon as it’s resolved, we’ll be on our way again.”

With those words of reassurance, the three men turned back, descending the narrow stairway in silence. When they rejoined the others, they conveyed the captain’s message as gently as they could.

Outwardly, everyone tried to appear composed — talking in measured voices, forcing smiles. But beneath the surface, each mind was alight with quiet tension, a small, unspoken fire of unease flickering within.

Chapter-29

That night, sleep eluded Santosh. His dreams were torn between fear and longing.

Memories of home returned to him in waves — his mother's gentle face, her swelling belly with the new life growing within, the tender laughter of his father, the smell of Lachimma's stew simmering in love.

He had waited so eagerly for his baby sister's arrival. Now the thought struck him like a knife — by this time, his mother must have given birth, just as Kaja had done here. Was it a little brother? Or a sister, like he had hoped?

The questions tore through his chest. Would he ever see them? Would he ever again press his face to his mother's arms, feel his father's hand upon his head, taste the warmth of home? Or did that cherished life now lie lost to him, somewhere across the vast, indifferent sea?

The ache in his heart deepened into helplessness. He knew that running into the forest would be foolish — there was nowhere to go, and danger lurked in every shadow.

He wouldn't even know which way he was heading, or where the wilderness might swallow him.

Perhaps, if he could find a boat, a ship — anything that floated — he might stand a chance. But the waterways lay silent, empty.

Even if by some miracle he spotted a vessel far out at sea, how could he make them notice? A small figure waving desperately from the shore — who would understand that it was a cry for help?

He pressed his face into his hands. He was sweating.

The thought of Kireeba — his watchful eyes, his simmering hostility — haunted him. He knew Kireeba would not rest until he exacted his revenge.

Exploring alone or indiscreet attempts might expose him. To act in haste would invite danger or even death.

It was a cruel predicament — trapped between the dangers of within and the impossibility of escape.

His thoughts spun like a whirlpool, pulling him into despair. A dull pain began to throb in his temples, spreading slowly, until his whole body trembled under the weight of that dreadful night.

The throbbing in Santosh's head grew unbearable, like a storm trapped within his skull.

Then, suddenly, a faint memory flashed through the haze — the day, months ago, when he had scavenged through the wreckage of the crashed plane, picking up whatever he could. Among the few salvaged items had been a small strip of tablets. Paracetamol, one of them read.

His father's voice echoed in his mind — calm, practical, and full of care. "Whenever you travel, my boy, always keep a few essential medicines with you. You never know when you'll need them."

That memory felt like a whisper of home.

Moving carefully so as not to wake the others, Santosh reached for the small pouch he kept hidden near his mat. His fingers brushed against the cold metal of something else — a torch. He froze, a flicker of surprise lighting his face. He had completely forgotten about it. It was there all this time, buried among other things.

For a moment, he simply held it in his hand, the weight of the object awakening new thoughts. A torch meant light — but perhaps, also, a signal. An idea took shape. He could use it to send an SOS — Save Our Souls — just as Premjit Sir had briefed them in the course of legwork for the quiz competition. A pulse of cautious hope stirred in him.

He decided at once. Keep it close — around the neck, where it can be used in a moment of need.

Switching on the beam briefly, he found the strip, pressed out a tablet, and swallowed it with a gulp of water. The faint chemical taste lingered on his tongue. Then he lay back down, the torch resting by his side.

“What now?” his mind whispered, circling endlessly between plans and fears. Slowly, as the ache in his head eased, a heavy drowsiness settled over him, drawing him into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When he opened his eyes the next morning, the air was thick with the hum of excitement. It was a day prior to the much awaited 3rd day celebration — though he did not yet know what it meant.

By the tribe’s custom, the third day after a birth was sacred. Only then could the newborn be brought out before the elders, introduced to the world, and presented to the spirits of the ancestors.

The ritual was to begin with a gentle cleansing of the baby's body. A thin thread to be tied around its tiny waist, and a black dot painted upon one cheek to ward off the evil eye. Then, amid songs and rhythmic drumming, the child was to be laid beside the ancient sacrificial stone — a symbol of communion between the living and the dead.

The elders would invoke the departed, calling upon their unseen presence to bless the infant with health and long life. The air would fill with chants and the deep, resonant thud of feet in dance, the entire settlement would come alive in celebration.

And when the songs ended, and the flames burned low, the feast would begin. This was a ritual as old as the forest itself.

The feast that marked the third day after a birth was always a grand affair — an offering to both the living and the departed. Wild boar meat and pork fat formed the heart of the celebration. Hunting those boars, however, was no ordinary task. It was the duty — and the pride — of the village's senior men.

So, at dawn on the second day, the elders gathered with their bows and spears, their faces streaked with ash and oil, preparing to venture deep into the forest. They would not return until their hunt was successful, for it was their kill that would feed the village and honour the newborn.

At the same hour, the women and older girls set out with clay pots balanced on their hips to fetch water from the distant stream. Their chatter echoed softly through the trees as they disappeared along the winding forest path.

Back in the settlement, the younger children, the grandmothers, and the older boys stayed behind to prepare for the day's work — gathering fruits and tubers for the coming feast. According to custom, the boys were not allowed to step outside until the

women returned with water. Only when the vessels were set down by the huts, glistening in the morning light, were the boys permitted to run into the woods.

The foraging groups knew their order well — first, collect from the forest: the forest mangoes, wild guava fruits, and rose apples. Then, descend toward the creek to gather mussels and crabs. The rule was simple: complete the forest work first, and only then move toward the water. In this way, everything stayed in balance, and the elders could trace the group if trouble arose.

When the call came, the children set off, their laughter piercing the quiet air. The women, already waiting near the reeds with filled pots, watched as the noisy group spilled down the slope, excitement in every step.

Santosh, as always, was among the first to join. He never missed these moments — who could say when a chance to escape might not turn up? Out there, beyond the watchful elders' eyes, it was easier to scout and explore, and a potential escape route might unfold.

Who knows?

By the time the sun reached its height, they had made their way deep into the woods, filling baskets with fruit and roots. They worked until hunger drove them to take a break. Sharing a few of the fruits they had gathered, the children sat in the dappled light, laughing between bites.

When their bellies were full, they rose again. For the day's work was not yet done. Ahead lay the creek, where the air smelled of salt and earth, and where, if luck held, the day's true rewards awaited.

Walking along the shore of the waterway, one group searched for mussels among the rocks by the bank, while others looked

for crabs along the edges. Both were tasks Santosh neither enjoyed nor had much interest in. His eyes, whenever he came near the lake, would always drift toward the places where the 'hodis' (boats) were moored — near the clusters of screw pines.

There were no screw-pine clusters anywhere in sight. Perhaps, he thought, if he walked a little farther, he might find them — the place he had seen before must be somewhere close by. With that impression, he quickened his pace.

Then it suddenly struck him — it wasn't right to leave without telling anyone. Turning back, he spotted Cherumu among the group at a distance. Raising his hand, he gestured toward the direction he was heading, signaling that he was following the waterway toward the sea. Cherumu caught his sign and nodded faintly. Assured, Santosh turned again and continued on his way.

Cherumu, realizing what Santosh meant, turned to the others and said, "The elders warned us not to leave the little one alone like last time. I'll have to go with him. I can't leave him alone.

I'll go and come back with him."

The others agreed.

Lomo, who was also in the group, watched this quietly. As Cherumu started to run toward Santosh, Lomo stopped him and said,

"You go back. I'll keep an eye on him."

"That won't do," Cherumu said sharply. "This task was entrusted to me by the elders."

Lomo's eyes narrowed, a flicker of resentment passing through them. He wasn't one to be left behind — not when something important was at hand. He forced a grin, though his tone carried an edge.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll come along. Two are better than one, don't you think?"

But there was no room for debate. Santosh was already some distance ahead, moving quickly along the narrow path toward the waterway.

"No," Cherumu snapped, cutting him off. "No one else is needed. This duty is mine alone — a command of the seniors."

Lomo stood rooted for a moment, unable to question him. Before he could speak again, Cherumu broke into a run, vanishing into the narrow path Santosh had taken.

As his figure disappeared into the dense green, Lomo turned to the others.

"Cherumu's gone ahead," he said, feigning composure. "He told me to follow — in case he needs help."

But even as he spoke, his gaze swept the surroundings, sharp and restless. There was no sign of Cherumu anywhere. The air felt heavy, the forest unusually still. His jaw tightened. He wasn't going to be left behind. Without another word, Lomo set off at a run, following the faint footprints pressed into the damp earth.

Meanwhile, Santosh had gone farther than he'd planned. The faint line of screw pine clusters now loomed in the distance — dark shapes rising against the light. No boats were moored near

the shore as they had been the last time. Perhaps the men had already taken them out to fish. Still, if he went closer, he might see something.

He slowed, scanning the quiet stretch of water.

Then, suddenly, his breath caught. Beyond the rustling reeds, where the stream opened up, a shape bobbed in the current—the unmistakable silhouette of a small ship, its form dark against the pale sky

He froze, watching intently.

From where he stood, it was hard to tell if it was coming closer or drifting away. But he knew one thing: if its shape grew larger, it was heading toward him — and if smaller, toward the open sea.

His heart began to hammer. The air around him seemed to thicken with silence.

Even after watching the vessel on the water for a while, its size remained unchanged — neither growing nor shrinking. Santosh's mind knotted in confusion; his heart pounded in his chest.

So... was that small ship anchored right there? If only — if only, he could somehow reach it! But he needed a canoe.

He took a deep breath, then bolted toward the screw-pine clusters — those were the spots where boats were typically moored. If there was any chance at all, a canoe would be there.

A sudden sound from behind made him whirl around. Through the tall reeds came Cherumu, panting and calling out. Relief flooded Santosh — there was now someone who could help him hunt down a hodi (canoe).

He waited for Cherumu to catch up, then asked breathlessly, “Hodi... hodi! Oithe? Oithe?” (“Canoe... canoe! Where? Where?”)

Cherumu understood Santosh’s obsession with the hodi — how, whenever they came this way, Santosh would plead for a chance to paddle, while the younger children watched, puzzled at his eagerness to drift about in a small boat.

Cherumu got it. Santhu’s eyes were sweeping the cluster of screw pines, searching for a hodi.

Catching Santhu’s attention, Cherumu pointed to the other side — and there, half-veiled by reeds, a small boat rested quietly on the rippling water, rocking in the breeze.

Relief flashed across Santosh’s eyes.

They were just about to step forward when a sudden movement caught their attention. Another boy darted out from behind the palm trunks, quickly untying the rope that held the boat.

He paddled a little distance away, then turned and called out cheerfully,

“Santhu! Elema, elema! Hodige ene!” (“Santhu, come, come! Sit in the boat!”)

Cherumu froze. His stomach tightened. He hadn’t expected this — not at all. Lomo!

How on earth had he reached here? He had told him clearly — don’t follow, don’t come with me!

Yet here he was, already in the canoe, calling out to Santhu.

Something wasn't right. Lomo had not only ignored his words, but had also taken over the very canoe Cherumu and Santhu had been searching for.

Why was he insisting that Santhu join him now? For what purpose?

Cherumu's instincts screamed that something was off. He could not allow this. The elders had entrusted him with a sacred responsibility — to guard the “marvel boy” and ensure no harm befell him.

If anything went wrong, the blame would fall squarely on him. The elders' wrath was not something he could bear.

He stepped forward, waving his arms urgently.

“Na! Na, beh nadem! Beh nadem!” (“No! Don't go! Don't go!”). His voice cracked through the air, filled with warning and fear.

Cherumu's face hardened. He shouted gravely in his lingo. Santosh couldn't understand a word of what he said. Yet, Santosh could guess what he wanted to convey. It was, “Santhu, going with him is dangerous. He's calling you with an evil plan in mind. Don't you remember? The last time you went with him, trouble followed. He was part of it. Stay away, Santhu. We can wait for the fishermen to return and borrow one of their hodis. Don't board this one — not today. He can't be trusted.”

Santosh hesitated. He did sense the danger. Every instinct told him Cherumu might be right. But inside him, a stronger voice began to stir — a voice filled with determination and desperate hope.

A ship sighting like this doesn't come twice, he thought. If I lose this chance, who knows when another is to come?

His pulse quickened. The thought of rescue — of home — of his mother's face, his father's voice — burned in his chest.

"Yes, there's danger," he told himself. "But letting this slip away is a greater mistake. Even if risk lies ahead, is not freedom worth the fight?"

Before Cherumu could speak again, Santosh made his choice. He sprinted forward, his feet splashing through the shallow water, and leapt into the waiting hodi.

"Santhu! Na (No)!" Cherumu shouted, running after him.

But Lomo was ready. Reading Cherumu's move, he shoved the boat away from the bank with a powerful push. The canoe rocked, caught the current, and began to drift from shore.

Cherumu stopped, helpless, water lapping around his ankles. From the bank he shouted again and again, his voice echoing over the rippling water:

"Santhu, don't go! It's dangerous!"

The hodi was already gliding toward the open water — and Santosh, heart hammering in his chest, couldn't look back.

Realising there was no point in lingering, Cherumu turned and sprinted back through the reeds, heart pounding, to alert the nipper gang — even as the hodi drifted farther into the middle of the waterway.

Santosh's eyes never left the distant ship. It loomed against the fading light, silent and still, as though holding its breath.

Why isn't it moving? he wondered. How long will it stay there?
What if it sails off before I reach it?

The dusk was already deepening — a violet haze creeping over the rippling water. If he failed now, returning to the village would be impossible, even perilous.

A quiet unease, nonetheless, began to coil in his chest. Lomo's manner, the strange urgency in his movements — none of it felt right. Something's off, his mind whispered. Keep your wits about you. Stay sharp. Stay alive.

He drew a long breath, steadying himself, and felt as though his inner vision — his "third eye" — flickered open.

Lomo dipped his oar into the water, then extended it toward Santosh.

"Ko... bak... Ko... bak (Grab the oar. Grab the oar)," he urged.

Santosh reached for it — but in that same instant, he saw Lomo snatching up a slender spear from the floor of the boat.

A chill ran through his spine. Every nerve stiffened; his body bristled like a startled porcupine.

Lomo, oblivious to the storm brewing inside the boy, flashed a grin. He lifted the spear slightly and made a flicking motion, as if aiming at a darting fish.

"Mi uji yo Jeepaley (I'll catch fish)," he said.

Santosh forced a shallow smile, his heart still thundering. His grip on the oar tightened.

He nodded, feigning calm — but inside, every sense stood taut as a bowstring.

Santosh gripped the oar firmly at its mid-point, his fingers locked with quiet resolve. He rowed in slow, deliberate strokes, just enough to keep the boat gliding — but not enough to draw suspicion. If things turned bad, he could always snatch the oar from the water and wield it as a weapon.

He moved as if half-distracted, dipping the oar lazily, his gaze fixed ahead toward the dark stretch of waters where the ship still hovered in the distance. Lomo, meanwhile, was busy stabbing at the water with his spear, pretending to fish. Santosh doubted he was really hunting. His aim was sloppy, his movements rushed — as though his mind were somewhere else.

“He’s not even looking at the water properly,” Santosh thought.

“He’s pretending.”

Even as he feigned clumsy strokes, Santosh’s heartbeat quickened. The ship — the one he’d spotted earlier — seemed just a little closer now. Or was it an illusion born of hope? He couldn’t tell.

Then, out of nowhere, a shrill whistle sliced through the silence — a sharp, echoing sound from across the waters.

Santosh froze mid-stroke.

Almost at once came a second sound.

A reply! From Lomo.

The realization struck him cold. That was no random whistle — it was a signal!

His eyes darted toward the direction of the first sound. Through the dimness of the creek, he thought he saw movement — the

faint silhouette of another canoe sliding toward them. His chest tightened. Someone's coming.

Without hesitation, Santosh dipped his oar again and began rowing harder, faster, toward the open water — toward the ship that might mean rescue, or at least safety.

Lomo noticed at once. The boy's sudden urgency, the direction he'd taken — it all made sense now. Santosh had grown suspicious.

Panic flickered in Lomo's eyes. The distant vessel, with its ghostly glow and humming lights, was no ordinary thing to him; it was the monster of the outsiders — dangerous, powerful, a thing that could ruin everything. If Santosh reached it, their secret, their plan, their world could collapse.

He tightened his grip on the spear. The fear that had been a shadow in his mind now surged like fire:

“This lad must not reach the ship.”

Lomo narrowed his eyes, peering across the dark water to where Kireeba's canoe was slicing through the creek. Still distant.

A flicker of calculation crossed his face. If he keeps this pace, this boy will hurtle to the ship before Kireeba even gets close.

There was only one choice left.

He shifted his weight silently, lifted the spear in his hand, and poised himself to strike.

Santosh, rowing with all his might, kept one eye trained on Lomo. He saw the faint gleam of the spear's tip catch the last of the fading light — and understood instantly. His heartbeat hammered in his ears.

Lomo thought he was unaware, but Santosh was watching every move, every subtle shift of muscle and stance, reading danger in the silence between strokes.

When the moment came, it happened fast. Lomo lunged forward, thrusting the spear with all his force.

Santosh reacted in a blur — twisting his torso and jerking his head back just in time. The spear sliced through the air, missing him by inches. In the same breath, Santosh swung his oar upward with all the strength of his panic and rage, driving the blade of wood hard behind Lomo's knee.

The impact cracked through the night.

Lomo gasped, his leg collapsing beneath him — and with a splash, he tumbled headlong into the dark water.

Santosh didn't wait to see if he surfaced. He grabbed the oar, steadied the canoe, and began rowing with desperate speed.

A quick glance over his shoulder — the other boat was still far away, just a ghostly outline in the dim light. Good. Still far enough.

Ahead, the ship's lights shimmered faintly across the waves, like a promise. But promises could vanish any moment. He knew that.

"Just a little more," he muttered through gritted teeth.

Every stroke tore through the water like a heartbeat, each one echoing the same thought — Reach it... before it's too late.

Chapter-30

Night was beginning to descend, spreading its quiet unease over the stranded vessel. The sea, once shimmering with afternoon light, now lay dark and uncertain beneath the dim glow of the ship's lamps. One by one, the passengers drifted from chatter into silence, their excitement giving way to anxiety.

Whispers passed through the decks like ripples on water.

"Will we really reach Port Blair tonight?" someone murmured.

"What if the ship can't move again?" asked another, her voice trembling despite the captain's earlier assurances.

The laughter and music that had once filled the air were gone. In their place settled a restless murmur — the sound of doubt. Faces once flushed with joy now bore traces of fatigue and fear. What had begun as a day of wonder had slowly turned into a long, heavy evening of waiting.

By seven o'clock, the vessel still hadn't stirred. The sea outside remained eerily calm, but inside, tension tightened like a knot. Unable to contain their worry, Shiv Ram and Hemant went up to the bridge to find the captain.

Captain Bimal Roy met them with his usual calm. "The repair team is on their way," he said. "They should be here any moment now."

Even as he spoke, a glimmer appeared in the distance — a sharp beam of light cutting through the darkness. A speedboat was approaching fast, its engine's hum breaking the uneasy stillness.

The passengers rushed to the railings, craning their necks to see. Relief flickered faintly across their faces.

The captain turned to Shiv Ram and Hemant. "Please go back and tell everyone to stay calm," he said. "I'll meet the team and get a full update myself."

Minutes later, the speedboat drew alongside the ship, its crew climbing aboard with coils of rope and heavy toolkits. A small sense of reassurance passed among the passengers. At least help had arrived.

Half an hour later, Captain Roy returned to the deck, his face tired but steady.

"The team has inspected the problem," he announced. "It's not a mechanical fault. Fishing nets have wound themselves tightly around the propeller blades. They'll have to dive again to cut them free. It's a tough job and will take about an hour, but once done, we'll be on our way."

A murmur spread through the crowd — not quite relief, not quite fear. For the first time in hours, hope felt possible again.

The captain smiled faintly. "There's nothing else wrong," he said. "Just a matter of time."

As he walked away, the hum of the sea returned to fill the silence, and the passengers, though still uneasy, began to breathe a little easier — clinging to that fragile promise of movement through the long, waiting night.

The captain's words spread quickly through the ship, washing over the anxious crowd like a calming tide. Relief rippled

through the decks. Shoulders relaxed, conversations resumed, and a few even managed a faint laugh. For the first time in hours, a sense of peace — fragile but real — settled among them.

For some, it felt as though the journey's lost joy had begun to blossom again. The fear that had been gripping their hearts slowly loosened its hold.

Then, without warning, the ship's emergency siren tore through the night — a long, piercing wail that shattered the calm. Startled faces turned upward, hearts thudding. The loudspeaker crackled, and the captain's firm voice echoed over the decks.

"This is the captain speaking. I repeat my earlier instruction — no one is to go up to or stand on the open upper deck. We've spotted two small canoes circling near our ship, each with a single rower. They appear to be from a local tribal group on one of the nearby islands. There may be others following behind.

We're monitoring their movements. If they don't turn back soon, we'll have to fire warning shots into the air — purely to ensure the safety of our repair divers working below. Please don't panic if you hear gunfire. It's only a precaution."

The announcement had barely ended when the still night was split by the sharp crack of gunfire. The sound echoed across the dark forested shores, bouncing off the water like thunder. Gasps swept through the passengers; some clutched one another instinctively.

On the bridge, the captain and the deck officer stood alert, scanning the shadows beyond the railing. The warning shots

had done their job — far off, the faint outline of a canoe turned and drifted back into the darkness. Kireeba had retreated.

Hidden behind the lifeboats on the lower deck, Santosh had seen it all. He stayed low, motionless, waiting until he was certain Kireeba had gone. Then, silently, he crept forward to the bow of the ship. Taking his small torch, he aimed it toward the distance and began to flash it rhythmically — three quick bursts of light, three long ones, three quick again. A pause, and then the pattern repeated.

On the bridge, the deck officer frowned.

“Captain,” he said, pointing through the window. “Do you see that? Over there — that flickering light. Isn’t that an SOS signal?”

Captain Bimal Roy leaned forward, eyes narrowing as he followed the direction of the beam. His face hardened in disbelief.

“Good heavens,” he muttered. “Turn the searchlight that way — now. Focus it on him!”

“A wild islander boy!” the deck officer exclaimed, leaning over the railing, eyes fixed on the flickering beam far below.

“True,” the captain murmured beside him, his voice thoughtful but uneasy.

“But what puzzles me is this — even if the boy somehow got hold of a torch, how could he possibly know the SOS signal pattern? That’s not something a local tribesman would ever learn. And another thing — why would he be fleeing from his own people? Did you see? He keeps glancing back over his shoulder.”

The officer's brow tightened. "Could it be a trap, sir?"

The captain hesitated, watching the canoe cut across the black water, each flash of the torch, a silent cry. For a moment, the only sounds were the whisper of the sea and the hum of the ship's generators.

"Maybe," he said finally. "But how can we ignore someone sending a distress signal? It's our duty to help — whoever it is."

The officer said nothing. His eyes followed the boy, who had begun rowing harder now, his small frame bent over the paddle. Then, from the corner of their vision, movement — the second canoe, the one that had fled when the warning shots were fired earlier, was now speeding back toward the boy. The chase was unmistakable.

The captain's jaw tightened. "So he *is* running from them," he said quietly. "And they don't intend to let him go."

The deck officer turned to him sharply. "Orders, sir?"

"There are only two canoes in sight — no sign of any larger group," the captain decided quickly. "We'll fire one more warning shot. If I'm right, the pursuer will back off again. That'll give us a chance to pull the boy aboard."

He straightened, his voice firm now. "The embarkation ladder's already hanging near the repair crew's boat. Lower it to the waterline and flood that section with the searchlight. If he's truly seeking help, he'll come toward the light. Once he's aboard,

bring him straight to my cabin and let me know. I'll be in the engine room, checking on the divers' progress."

The officer saluted briskly, though unease lingered in his eyes.

Then, out of the darkness, the crack of a gunshot split the night again — sharper, louder than before. The echo rolled across the bay, sending a shiver through the passengers crowded below decks.

But for Santosh, it was the sound of deliverance.

The shot flared above the water like a command from heaven — and Kireeba, startled and afraid, turned his canoe sharply away. The warning had done its work. The hunter retreated, swallowed by the black stillness of the night.

Breathing hard, Santosh gripped his paddle tighter and turned toward the beam of white light now cutting across the waves. For the first time in a long while, hope felt close enough to touch.

From the darkness below the ship's hull, a beam of light pulsed again and again — steady, deliberate, alive.

Santosh's heart leapt. *They saw me.*

He gripped the paddle, guiding the canoe closer, each stroke slow and cautious. The massive shadow of the ship loomed larger above him, its floodlights glimmering against the restless water. He turned once — one final glance behind — to make sure Kireeba had truly vanished into the dark. Only the silence of the forested shore remained.

Drawing a deep breath, Santosh stood in the canoe and lifted both hands high over his head, fingers spread wide — the

universal sign of surrender. The torchlight shimmered off his wet skin, his expression a mix of exhaustion and wary relief.

That single gesture spoke louder than any words.

On deck, the sailors who had been bracing for an attack hesitated. This was no wild threat — only a boy, drenched and trembling, his eyes darting toward the sea as though expecting it to rise up against him. The tension that had gripped the crew began to ease.

“Lower the ladder — careful now!” the deck officer called out.

The steel rungs clattered softly as they met the side of the repair boat below. Two sailors leaned over, their hands reaching down. Santosh gripped the ladder with numb fingers, his muscles aching, and began the slow climb upward. Each step felt heavier than the last, but the sight of the ship’s railing gleaming under the lights urged him on.

When he finally reached the deck, a wave of relief swept through him — warm, dizzying, almost unreal. He had made it. He was safe.

The crew surrounded him, their earlier suspicion fading into curiosity. One of them, a tall man with a weathered face, handed him a towel and motioned toward the corridor.

“Come,” he said gently. “The captain’s waiting.”

Still catching his breath, Santosh followed without a word — barefoot, dripping, and silent — through the humming metal passageways toward the captain’s cabin.

Chapter-31

By the time the last coil of fishing net was cleared from the propeller and the engineers confirmed that the engine was running smoothly, the long night's tension had begun to ease. Captain Bimal Roy thanked the divers, dismissed the repair team, and only then allowed himself to return to his cabin.

Over the walkie-talkie, the crew had already reported: "The rescued boy is safe, sir. He's waiting for you in your cabin."

Inside, Santosh sat quietly, wrapped in a coarse towel, his eyes lowered. To anyone watching, he appeared to be a frightened island boy rescued from peril — but beneath that calm exterior, his thoughts churned like a stormy sea. The panic of his escape had begun to subside, yet the clouds had not cleared. In his mind, flashes of fear and resolve flickered like distant lightning. He had crossed only the first threshold of danger. There were still many waves ahead before he could reach the shore of safety he sought.

Before entering the cabin, the captain's voice echoed across the ship's speakers:

"Attention, passengers. The repairs are complete. We'll soon resume our journey back to Port Blair. Please remain calm and stay in your cabins until further notice."

Then, with a sigh, he stepped into his quarters — weary but curious about the mysterious boy who had signalled SOS from the middle of nowhere.

Santosh stood as the captain entered. For a moment, Bimal Roy simply observed him — from his wet, tattered shirt to his mud-streaked feet. The boy's hair was unkempt, yes, but not curly like the island tribes'. His features were sharp, his eyes alert. Something didn't add up.

Not a native, the captain thought. Then who is he? And how on earth did he end up there?

He decided to test the waters.

"Boy," he asked gently but firmly, "what language do you know? Tamil? Hindi? Bengali? English?"

Santosh looked up, meeting his gaze.

"I can speak English," he said. Then, almost as an afterthought, "And Hindi, Kannada, and Malayalam."

The captain's brows lifted. That single line broke the barrier.

"Good," he said, pulling out a chair. "Now, tell me what happened."

What followed left the seasoned sailor speechless. Santosh's voice trembled at first, but as he spoke — recounting the wreck, the chase, and his desperate flight through the dark waters — his words carried a quiet conviction that silenced all doubt. The captain listened, wide-eyed, barely believing what he heard. In all his years at sea, he had never encountered such a tale of courage and survival.

When the story ended, Bimal Roy leaned back in his chair and exhaled slowly.

“You must be hungry,” he said at last, his tone softening. “We’ll get you some food. In the meantime, go take a warm bath and change. I’ll have one of the stewards find you some clean clothes — perhaps from the boys your age onboard.”

He rose and turned toward the door.

“You’ve been through enough for one night. Rest awhile. We’ll talk again in the morning.”

Santosh nodded quietly. For the first time since the storm began — not just the storm of the sea, but the one inside him — he felt a fragile sense of safety. Yet deep within, he knew this was not the end. It’s merely a brief intermission in the arduous journey yet to come.

While Santosh ate, the warmth of the food brought a strange comfort — the first real meal he’d tasted since his ordeal began. The quiet hum of the ship, the soft clatter of utensils, and the faint vibration of the engines made him feel, for the first time in days, that he was somewhere safe.

A short while later, the cabin door opened. Captain Bimal Roy stepped in, carrying a neatly folded set of clothes and a small notepad with a pen tucked into it. He set them down on the table beside Santosh and smiled.

“These are for you,” he said. “Change into them once you’re done eating. And now — I’ll need a few details from you. Regulations require me to record everything in the ship’s logbook. Let’s begin.”

He clicked open his pen and asked,

“Your full name?”

“Santosh. Santosh Shiv Ram.”

The captain wrote it down neatly, then continued,

“Your father’s and mother’s names?”

“Shiv Ram and Aparna.”

Something about the name made the captain pause for a second. He frowned slightly but went on.

“Place of residence?”

“Bangalore..., Apar Villa, 26/262, Third Main Road, Sadashiva Nagar, Bangalore — 5600025.”

Now the captain looked up, truly intrigued. The pen hung in midair for a moment.

“And your father’s occupation?”

Santosh hesitated only a second before replying,

“My father is the Managing Director of Apar Infotech...”

The words had barely left his mouth when the captain froze. His eyes widened. He rose abruptly from his chair, the pen rolling off the table unnoticed.

“Wait—what did you say? Say that again.”

“My father is Shiv Ram, Managing Director of Apar Infotech Services.”

The captain stared at him, almost in disbelief. Then, with a stunned laugh, he exclaimed,

“Good heavens... this can’t be real! What an incredible twist of fate — something straight out of an Arabian tale!”

Santosh looked up, puzzled. His spoon hung halfway to his mouth.

“I—I don’t understand...”

The captain leaned forward, eyes alight with amazement.

“Boy, you are the luckiest soul alive! Your parents — your own parents — are right here on this ship! Apar Infotech is the company that chartered this cruise for the day. Everyone on board the ship today belong to that very firm!”

For a moment, time seemed to stop. Santosh’s hand trembled. He tried to smile, but his lips faltered. A rush of emotion surged up, breaking through the dam of exhaustion and fear. His face crumpled, and tears slipped silently down his cheeks — tears of disbelief, relief, and the overwhelming realisation that after everything, fate had brought him home.

The captain placed a gentle hand on Santosh’s head, his voice warm with affection.

“Santosh, my boy — you are blessed beyond measure. Go take a good bath, put on these clothes — even if they’re a bit loose. Hurry now. We’re going to make this a night no one will ever forget.”

Santosh nodded silently, still trembling with disbelief. As he stepped out toward the washroom clutching the clothes, a sense of wonder and relief washed over him — the nightmare had finally turned into a miracle.

By evening, the ship that had once been heavy with tension now pulsed with joy. Laughter returned; music played softly in the dining hall; and for the first time since the troubling episode, smiles graced every face.

During dinner, a sudden chime rang through the ship's intercom. The captain's steady, cheerful voice followed: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I invite all of you to join me on the open upper deck after dinner. Before today's voyage ends, I have a surprise gift to you — something truly extraordinary. A gift that, I promise, will stay in your hearts forever."

Curiosity rippled through the crowd. Plates were finished in haste, conversations grew louder with excitement, and soon the entire company gathered under the starlit sky on the open deck. The sea breeze carried a hint of salt and anticipation.

The captain stood before them, his cap in hand, his eyes gleaming, "Thank you all for coming up," he said. "Without keeping you in suspense any longer, let me introduce to you a living miracle — a boy whose courage, intelligence, and sheer will to survive will inspire you all. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Santosh... Santosh Shiv Ram."

A heartbeat of silence held the deck before whispers exploded like wildfire.

"Wait — Santosh? Mr. Shiv Ram's son?"

"No... it can't be!"

Santosh stepped forward, his face lit by the golden glow of the deck lamps. The crowd gasped.

"Yes," the captain continued, his voice resonant with emotion.

"This is Santosh indeed — the son of Mrs. and Mr. Shiv Ram.

A boy who survived an air crash, lived among a remote forest tribe for nearly a year, and escaped from them in the most astonishing way imaginable. It is my great honour to reunite this brave child with his parents — right here, tonight.”

For a few stunned seconds, Shiv Ram and Aparna stood frozen. Then, as if released from a spell, they ran forward — all words forgotten, all restraint gone — and fell to their knees beside their son. They clutched him tightly, tears streaming freely, laughter breaking through sobs.

From a little distance, Lakshmi Amma too wept silently, her hands folded in gratitude. The captain stepped back, allowing the moment to belong entirely to them. As he briefly recounted how Santosh had signalled the SOS, escaped pursuit, and reached the ship just in time, the deck erupted in applause. The sound of clapping, cheering, and heartfelt cries of joy filled the air, mingling with the soft hum of the ocean.

Later that night, when the voyage ended and the passengers returned to their hotel, Santosh lay nestled between his mother and little sister and father. He held Aparna’s hand close to his chest, smiling faintly as sleep began to claim him.

But as his eyelids grew heavy, another face rose softly from the depths of memory — Kaja, his forest mother. Her warm, dark eyes, her gentle smile. The ache of farewell returned, tender and quiet.

And far away, deep within the whispering forests of the Andamans, Kaja sobbed, gazing at the stars.

Around her, the clan members sang low, soulful songs—dirges for their marvel boy whose arrival and departure were equally shrouded in mystery.

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