

# The Soma Tantra



# The Soma Tantra

- A Cosmic Tragedy -

*Authored on Earth by ItzQuauhtli (Obsidian Eagle)*

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~ ≈ ~

For Tara

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## **I – Three Planes of Existence**

By most accounts of Hindu cosmology our universe is divided into three major planes, delineated here as follows:

***Bhuloka*** – The physical plane, which is where humans dwell.

***Antarloka*** – The subtle ‘astral’ plane where the lesser gods and demons war.

***Sivaloka*** – The unfathomable ‘causal’ plane where only the greater gods (*Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva* along with their female counterparts) abide.

This threefold configuration corresponds to other important trios such as the ***Gunas*** (*Rajas*, *Sattvas* & *Tamas*), which represent the active, balanced and inert qualities of all conditioned phenomena as well as the respective roles that the three main deities play, namely: creation, preservation and destruction. Past, present, future, etc.

Putting all that aside, suffice it to say that most of this epic tale takes places within Antarloka. The geography here corresponds only loosely to that of Bhuloka since its edifices and landscapes are upheld by tradition, will-power and a social consensus. It is an ideal plane in every sense of the word.

## II – Mythic Overview: The Denizens of Antarloka

Like Earth, the psycho-spiritual sphere of Antarloka is home to a variety of races. Most of these have their own monarchs and are distinguishable by virtue of appearance or special abilities. This is a brief description of their hierarchy:

***Devatas*** – The lesser gods (as opposed to ‘Devas’ like Shiva or Vishnu). Nonetheless, their pantheon constitutes the dominant caste of Antarloka and has ruled over the others with an admirable degree of prosperity, meeting resistance only occasionally. Mostly humanoid in aspect they are: *Indra* (king of gods), *Agni* (god of fire), *Varuna* (god of water), *Vayu* (god of wind), *Yama* (god of death), *Surya* (the sun god), *Soma Chandra* (the moon god), *Kama* (god of desire), *Karttikeya* (a young war god) and *Guru Brihaspati* (priest of the Devatas).

***Ashuras*** – Often referred to as ‘jealous demigods’. Legend tells that they were once rightful rulers on this plane. As such they comprise the most formidable opposition against the Devatas and are considered demonic. They’re also divided into three notable tribes: *Daiityas* (often having multiple heads or limbs), *Danavas* (towering giants) and *Rakshas* (vampiric ghouls). Yet although Ashuras are powerful warriors they tend to have trouble getting along with one another, which means that these three tribes are rarely on good terms.

***Ghandharvas & Apsaras*** – The Ghandharvas are heaven’s musicians. Like angels in Christianity except with avian heads to match their wings. They are usually accompanied by Apsaras who are their wives but also talented performers in their own right. The Apsaras dance and sing while the Ghandharvas play instruments wherever their presence is requested by the Devatas. Vayu, god of wind, is the chieftain appointed to them by King Indra.

***Yoginis*** – Personal attendants of the high goddess *Kali* (*Parvati*’s shadow side). As female combatants trained by the goddess of destruction herself, they are a force to be reckoned with.

***Maruts*** – The sons of Vayu. These air-elementals compose Indra’s personal guard and accompany him during any major confrontation. They are at odds with the Ghandharvas left in their father’s custody.

***Kinnaras*** – Essentially ‘reverse centaurs’ – Kinnaras are tall, lanky beings possessing humanoid bodies but with equine heads growing up from their shoulders. Once pages in the court of King Indra, they now reside in the netherworld domains serving as minions under Yama.

***Pisachas & Ganas*** – These shape-shifters are distant cousins of the Rakshas. Pisachas are soul-eating wraiths whereas Ganas are deformed and mischievous little dwarves. Ironically, they have sworn service to Shiva, which is why they inhabit the graveyards and charnels of Antarloka (his preferred meditation grounds away from Mount Kailash).

***Rudras*** – Close cousins of the Maruts, Rudras (howlers) are air-elementals too except that they are considered sons of *Bhairava* (Shiva's wrath personified). Because of this they are more ferocious and prefer to strike by cover of night. It's not so strange then that they also keep company with Ganas and Pisachas.

***Nagas*** – A secretive race of serpent people that has been relegated to a remote corner of *Patala* (the netherworld). There are those who believe that they harbor close ties to the numina of Sivaloka. While their physical forms can vary they remain quintessentially reptilian in character.



### **III – Prologue: The Nectar of Immortality**

*Many eons ago, before planets could take shape within the galaxies of Bhuloka, the transcendental plains of Antarloka were already overflowing with life. It was during those early halcyon days that a mendicant by the name of Durvasas undertook a long walk through the uncharted wilderness of this dimension most sublime.*

*Soon enough a heavenly muse separated herself from an overhanging cloud formation and presented Durvasas with a fragrant garland of field-flowers. She smirked enigmatically prior to evaporating completely.*

*At that moment the wandering pilgrim was struck by a profound sense of euphoria mixed with nostalgia for something ineffable and eternal. He became so ecstatic that he burst into song while kicking up his feet in a dance of devotion! He continued along the foothills praising the skies and spinning on his heels as he flung his arms about. It was not long before he crossed paths with Indra - King of the Devatas - riding upon an elephant. The storm god regarded this ragged sage with curiosity. Then without hesitation the strange little man quietly offered Lord Indra the lei that he wore around his neck. The king accepted this gift with a polite nod, placing it on the head of his mount.*

*However, to the surprise of both and the chagrin of Durvasas that hulking beast was affected by the scent of the flowers in such a negative way that it began stomping about, nearly crushing him beneath its rowdy stride. The pachyderm went on to grab the wreath using his trunk and slammed it into the dirt - flattening it under heel. Understandably incensed Durvasas proclaimed a potent curse against King Indra:*

*“Hark ye well king of the Devatas, I hereby condemn you and your kin to suffer defeat at the hands of your hated foes: the Ashuras! So long as the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshas exist, your sovereignty within Antarloka shall never be absolute. And though it may take eons to culminate, the Devatas will eventually grow so weak because of their own corruption that Dharmic law will demand nothing short of their obliteration . . .”*

*The wandering ascetic stalked off while uttering random profanities until he was no longer visible or within earshot.*

*Still stunned despite his elephant's renewed calmness, Indra mulled over the bitter words of the departed stranger for a few moments. Nevertheless he thought of them as little more than the crazed inanities of a derelict. He merely shrugged and sighed deeply before starting back for Mount Meru, the site of his royal palace.*

*No sooner had he arrived there than he was greeted with pressing news of another skirmish between one of his people's patrols and their enemies, the dreaded Ashuras. According to their reports, Shukra, a spiritual guru of the Daityas had recently completed a thousand years of austerity. He had hung upside-down above the reach of a fierce bonfire and withstood its effects for extended periods. Due to this Shiva himself had seen fit to grant Guru Shukra whatever boon he might desire. Therefore the wily Daitya requested an occult mantra from the Lord (one that could raise the dead whenever it was chanted). Indra's scouts claimed they had witnessed Shukra perform this miracle shortly after their own forces had slain several Danava giants among the enemy's ranks. Apparently these were successfully brought back to life and rejoined the struggle, leaving their small contingent of Maruts no choice but to flee.*

*Disconcerted by the details of this latest incident Indra wasted no time in convening his war council. Within a few days Antarloka's broad expanse became a raging battleground.*

*Unfortunately for the Devatas their scouts had not exaggerated with respect to the Ashura's newfound advantage. As their own numbers dwindled steadily, those of their rivals were reinforced constantly by the very casualties that Indra's troops inflicted. The situation worsened and the Devatas despaired.*

*Again King Indra consulted the other gods and they all agreed that there wasn't any recourse other than to seek out Lord Brahma: grandfather to all beings and an inexhaustible reservoir of obscure wisdom. Hence they entered into a meditative trance together even as a battering ram thumped against the castle gates.*

*Following what seemed a prolonged silence - Agni, Vayu, Varuna, Indra and Guru Brihaspati found themselves in a psychic clearing devoid of any discernable qualities. It was then that a gleaming presence made itself known. Their inner eyes beheld a*

*snow-bearded individual seated on a lotus-throne. His countenance and crown shimmered with golden light as if indicating an unmatched degree of insight. Recognizing his visitors that ancient one spoke:*

*“Dearest sons of sons, it doth mine heart good to see thee here before me. However I can feel great tension coming from ye. Tell me swiftly what circumstances weigh so heavily upon thine otherwise capable shoulders?”*

*“Oh thou eldest of gods,” Indra replied, “an unprecedented calamity hath befallen us. We now stand on the brink of annihilation and it is in this our darkest hour that we seek thy unfailing advice!”*

*The young king continued to explain everything that had transpired throughout his domain over the last while. Brahma listened attentively and smiled knowingly as Indra finished briefing him.*

*“Hast any among thee heard tell of Amrita?” Brahma questioned.*

*The Devatas looked around at one another but ended by collectively shaking their heads in bewilderment.*

*“Amrita,” Brahma proceeded, “is the nectar of immortality. In every universe it hath been responsible for sustaining the virtuous so that they may uphold blessed Dharma: the perennial law born here in Sivaloka. Only by obtaining Amrita canst ye hope to conquer these powerful Ashuras.”*

*“But where grandfather or how are we to find this legendary nectar?” Brihaspati ventured to ask.*

*“Abandon Antarloka temporarily and enter Bhuloka, the coarsest plane of reality. There from amongst infinitesimal galaxies thou art to choose one that is suitable to be churned as if 'twere an ocean of milk. Choose wisely for this deed can be carried out a single time and no more. I wouldst be happy to accompany thee since I am certain that churning said ocean shouldst yield amazing results as always.”*

*“An excellent idea no doubt,” commented Indra, “but let us not forget that our enemies close in as we speak. How, honored progenitor of Dharma dost thou suggest we handle the problem at hand?”*

*“Strike thee a truce with yon foes noble king. After all their assistance will be quite indispensable for the task that lies ahead. Go now and do as I have instructed. In the meantime I shalt speak to Lord Vishnu concerning this matter. Thou may summon us both when everyone else is prepared to depart for Bhuloka.”*

*That having been said, Brahma vanished and the Devatas found themselves back amid the chaos enveloping their celestial palace. Nonetheless, over the course of that next fight they were able to negotiate an armistice with the Ashuras (who were equally intrigued by the prospect of extracting Amrita from a fabled ocean of milk).*

*When the gods and their demonic counterparts gathered and burned oblations by dint of Agni’s incendiary hands, Brahma and Vishnu appeared as promised. The former was seated on an enormous swan whereas the latter stood astride his immense eagle Garuda (who some believe spawned the race of Ghandharvas).*

*After formalities were exchanged Brahma went on to produce a resounding: “A-U-M!”*

*They had the distinct impression that all three planes vibrated within and without their assembly. It was an overwhelming sensation to be sure – gripping at one’s core – although it took place in the blink of an eye. Suddenly the complete host of Antarloka was surrounded by a myriad of swirling galactic bodies. Some much larger or denser than others.*

*At first the various members of that celestial company drifted freely throughout the unlimited reaches of this vast physical field. Fortunately, selecting an exceptional candidate didn’t turn out to be as difficult as the creator had predicted. And so those tenuous allies congregated at an agglomeration of tightly-packed star clusters. The plasmic gas of nebulas flashed periodically, releasing pure energy into this promising maelstrom.*

*Brahma flew his swan up to its summit and by his alchemy its center was transmuted into a lofty mountain. Whilst Vishnu and Garuda soared within the void to trace out a widespread figure eight from which Vasuki (King of Nagas) materialized. The cosmic serpent flowed toward the Devatas and Ashuras like a violet river of light.*

*“Ussse me asss rope,” Vasuki hissed.*

*With that he coiled 'round the solid central mass of the young megacosm and stretched either half of himself across its entire breadth. The Devatas were quick to grab a hold of his tail-end, leaving that Naga's big head to their adversaries. Now Vishnu leapt off Garuda's back and transformed into a gargantuan tortoise, making his way to the mountain's bottom in order to stabilize it. Brahma floated above its peak and signaled for the tug-of-war to commence.*

*Under his direction the Ashuras went first, pulling with their combined strength, followed by a vigorous response from the gods. They continued like this for a fleeting period that was interrupted when Vasuki (agitated by such monumental strain) began coughing out a rancid miasma that engulfed the whole area. This noxious Halahala poison wouldn't stop spreading and the heavenly hosts scattered driven by fear. Even both supreme Devas were at a loss; the skin of Vishnu's human form turned onyx as it came into contact with venom.*

*During that crucial juncture a general clamor rang throughout space, crying for Lord Shiva's help. Ever gracious and merciful Mahadeva (greatest among gods) proved the truth of his namesake by arriving in Bhuloka. The universal destroyer had only to cup his hands and inhale, drawing murky vapor into his throat. Parvati, Shiva's faithful wife manifested then too. She clasped her hands around his neck to stem the Halahala poison from circulating. All those present sang their praises for this marvelous feat and nicknamed him Nilakantha (Lord Blue Neck).*

*Thus the churning was taken up anew and this time Vishnu lent both sides half of his phenomenal stamina. Soon the luminous surface of that galactic ocean was covered by seething froth. Incredible archetypes started emerging from its waves: a white horse followed by a white elephant, which were claimed by Bali (King of Ashuras) and Indra respectively. Next came Surabhi, the primeval cow. And then a paradisiacal tree accompanied by many Apsaras who would later become wives of Gandharvas. These Apsaras circled the tree while dancing elegantly and were led by Queen Varuni, goddess of wine.*

*To delight Ashura and Devata alike, two more gorgeous goddesses arose from the depths: Lakshmi and Alakshmi - benevolence and malevolence incarnate. It is told that this was when Brahma sprouted three more heads solely to view those comely females from every possible angle! The first was to be Vishnu's future bride and the second joined Bali's Daityas. It wasn't until after the*

*birth of Surya (the sun god) and Soma Chandra (the moon god) that Amrita finally issued forth, carried in an urn by a beaming male youth.*

*Ironically the Devas and Devatas were so engrossed in welcoming their new members that the Ashuras seized this opportunity to make off with the urn. Through Shukra's wizardry they returned to Antarloka, thinking to seal their victory. When the gods realized what had happened Vishnu put their minds at ease by morphing into Mohini, a voluptuous enchantress. She gave them all a suggestive wink before disappearing as well.*

*Mohini found the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshas arguing amongst one another about who should be allowed to drink the Amrita first. Although her swaying hips and ample breasts became the cynosure of all eyes in mere seconds. King Bali, a mighty Daitya and general of the Ashuras bowed down at her feet, asking how he might be of service. The girl smiled sweetly and said:*

*"Venerable lords, permit me to aid you in distributing this gift. For in accordance with Dharmic law it is only proper that you exhibit magnanimity toward your challengers by letting them drink before yourselves."*

*"Your sharp mind matches your lovely physique darling girl," Bali passingly mentioned as he took her hand and pressed his lips to it, "but I pray you render me your name oh admirable maiden."*

*"Sri Mohini," she answered with a curtsy. Her luscious eyes pierced his heart.*

*Unbeguiled by feminine wiles Guru Shukra attempted to intercede: "My king, I must advise against this dubious course of action -"*

*"Nonsense!" Bali exclaimed before Shukra could finish. "It shall be done as Mohini has proposed and any who oppose her will have to cross swords with me personally."*

*Once that was settled Mohini fetched the Devatas and had both groups organize themselves into two separate lines. As had been agreed, she herself carried the urn to the trailing line of Devatas and made sure that it was passed when each god had taken his fill.*

*Generosity notwithstanding the throng of Ashuras got upset rather fast and King Bali felt a sting of jealousy as he watched Sri Mohini caressing the cheeks of his opponents while sharing their laughter.*

*One of the Rakshas named Rahu (who could shape-shift) even disguised himself as a Devata and snuck into their line, sitting between Surya and Soma. Unfortunately for him those two gods of light could see right through that clever Raksha's façade. They discretely reported the infraction to Lord Brahma just as Rahu lifted the pot to his mouth. Being notified telepathically Mohini reverted to Vishnu and severed Rahu's head with the blazing edge of his discus weapon!*

*Seeing Rahu beheaded the Ashuras roared furiously and took up their arms again. A terrible battle ensued. However, the Devatas had regained the upper hand (because only an immortal can vanquish an immortal). Fueled by Amrita, Indra decimated the Danava ranks using lightning while Vayu and his Maruts rained arrows upon the Rakshas with their bows.*

*Clearly on the Devata's side, Vishnu unleashed a spiral of gamma rays from his Sudarshana Chakra. It whipped through the Daityas' front line, slicing torsos and limbs.*

*Comprehending that this confrontation would spell their untimely deaths the Ashuras retreated en masse and were spared (if only momentarily). The gods of Antarloka expressed their profuse gratitude to the eminent Devas of Sivaloka, who bestowed their blessings on Lord Indra's kingdom and then retired to their respective abodes.*

*Yet ever since those days that proverbial conflict between the forces of light and darkness has resurfaced during every epoch. Now at long last, its dramatic conclusion draws near . . .*

*Act One – Soma Chandra's Hubris*





## [ 1 ] A Gathering of Gods

Lady Tara glanced back at Guru Brihaspati as she walked in the direction of the palatial gardens. He was still blathering on about the Vedic scriptures with his cohorts, debating some doctrinal moot point. She and he had been married for little over a month but she was already sick of it. *What a cruel fate to be married off to a Brahmin* she thought to herself. Luckily, social functions tied in with his priestly duties (such as this regal ball in the court of Indra) provided Tara with much-needed respite.

She didn't have any particular aim in mind as she meandered among the opulent shrubbery of the gods. It was sufficient to be alone and at peace instead of undergoing constant introductions as if she were some kind of trophy. That's why her interest peaked when she heard the sound of music in the distance, away from the audience hall. Tara headed further into the gardens and noticed that the silvery moon usually high above Antarloka seemed to nearly touch the horizon ahead. Presently she encountered a large group of Ghandharvas crowded around a princely Devata, who sprawled comfortably on an ornate couch placed in front of an equally elaborate water-fountain.

Plainly these Ghandharvas were responsible for the captivating melody that had lured her there as they all played musical instruments – Sitar, tamburas and tabla drums to name but a few. She also caught sight then of many Apsara nymphs cavorting on the ground and in the air alike with streamers in tow. It was a mesmerizing scene but it came to a halt when she entered their circle. All heads turned in her direction and even the youthful god on the couch sat up to get a better look.

“Well, well. What have we here?” He asked, voicing unanimous astonishment. “A beauty to rival even **your** wife, wouldn't you agree Viswava?”

A Ghandharva standing off to his right and whose feathers were midnight-blue squawked at the query but said nothing. Tara did not fail to observe that he was the only one of his kind without an instrument. A pair of sheathed scimitars hung from his belt. Opposite to him a huge rainbow parrot stepped into view, bearing an archer on its back. Tara recognized him from her wedding as Kama, the god of romance itself.

“Mind your words Soma Chandra,” Kama chided. “This is Lady Tara – Brihaspati's new wife.”

“Forgive me for intruding,” Tara stammered. “I wasn't aware that there was to be a performance tonight.”

“There isn't,” Soma put in with a laugh, “this here is my personal retinue. I don't know about you honorable lady but I cannot endure another of Indra's boring parties.”

“He throws these parties as an extension of his administrative dealings but he hasn’t the faintest idea as to how to unwind. Whilst I on the other hand am a master in the fine art of hedonism. Which reminds me –”

Soma Chandra snapped his fingers loudly, signaling for the revelry to continue. And so it did. Smiling he turned back to his unexpected (though not unwelcome) guest.

“Please join us,” he invited.

“I’d love to but I better not. It wouldn’t be prudent of me to do so.”

“Prudence? Who needs it? Come, sit. Having one drink with me isn’t going to kill anyone.”

“Well alright, but just one.”

“Of course.”

Soma patted the empty space on the sofa next to him and Tara took it, subconsciously adjusting her silk sari. Unperturbed the lively Devata poured drinks into a pair of golden goblets and handed one to her.

“A toast, to your stunning green eyes!”

Lady Tara couldn’t help giggling but she conceded the point by lifting her chalice to meet his and taking a sip. The charming moon god did seem to have a certain mystique about him after all. His skin was so white that it might have been blinding were it not for the soft blue aura it emitted. His irises were like amethysts and his hair long and black with hints of silver.

“Mmmm . . . this is quite good,” she remarked.

“Why thank you for saying so. You see it is my own concoction. Don’t tell anyone but Amrita is its main ingredient. This is what King Indra imbibes whenever he has demons to slay.”

“Really? What is it called?”

“Soma.”

Again she laughed. The Devata responded by emptying his cup and smacking his lips with exaggerated satisfaction.

“Such a grandiose beverage is worthy of bearing my name,” he said grinning.

“I guess so,” replied Tara, eyebrows raised. Still, she sipped on her portion with increasing enjoyment.

“I’m sorry if it comes out wrong but how does a woman of your winsome character end up with a crotchety old priest like Brihaspati?” Soma daringly prodded.

Taken a little off guard by his gutsy question (and feeling the impact of his drink) the girl innocently voiced: “It was an arranged matrimony.”

“Ah, well that makes sense,” he quipped while picking up a pewter pitcher containing his liqueur. He was about to refill her cup when domestic sensibilities took hold anew. She gently pushed the vessel aside.

“My apologies Lord Chandra but I really should return to that crotchety old priest of mine,” Lady Tara rebutted, standing up from the couch. “I am grateful for your hospitality and the music,” she finished, joining her palms and bowing at hip while facing Viswava. The dark blue Ghandharva kept quiet but courteously returned her bow.

“Do come again!” Chandra shouted after her as she strolled away. Tara turned momentarily and waved. He maintained his gaze fixed on her until she was fully gone. At which point he crooked his finger and motioned for Kama to come closer. “I must have her,” he stated bluntly.

“You had better be joking,” Kama flatly retorted. “Besides, you’ve already got twenty-seven concubines residing in the lunar palace. What makes this one so special?”

“Not one of those silly wenches has green eyes like hers.”

“Drinking too much is making you lose your mind. Only a fool would wager his kingdom for a pair of green eyes.”

“Do not try to dissuade me cousin. It is obvious that Guru and this girl are thoroughly incompatible. If anything I’ll be doing them both a favor and the other Devatas would be wise to thank me!”

“Very well,” Kama sighed. “I will fulfill your ludicrous request but you ought to be conscientious of the devastating consequences of this act. Mark my words audacious cousin: you are on the verge of breaking the relative peace that Antarloka has been enjoying for the past few eons. And when this war does break out do not presume that I’ll be on your side. That is to be the price for this gambit.”

“Fine, I accept. Now quit plaguing me with useless warnings and get to work.”



Later that night, long after everyone had retired and arrived back at their homes, Kama stealthily steered his parrot over and touched down on the lawn outside Guru Brihaspati's ostentatious estate. He produced a scarlet flower bud from a satchel slung about his torso. Holding its stem between thumb and index on one hand, he caused it to bloom by gesturing with the other.

The flower exuded a winding mist of purple pollen that sailed on the breeze as it headed for the mansion. Kama then withdrew an enchanted arrow from his quiver and placed it across his bow. Keeping watch over the balconies and entranceways he knew it was just a matter of time before Lady Tara appeared.



Although a deep sleeper Guru Brihaspati was also a Brahmin trained in the fine points of meditation. This meant that he was able to detect nearby activity amid all three states of consciousness (waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep). That night he sensed a local disturbance rippling through psychic wavelengths. His body signaled his mind informing him that Tara had vacated their bed. He came to and scanned the room wearily; she was nowhere in sight. A zephyr blew into the bedchamber and Guru saw no alternative but to throw on his robe and investigate.

As he approached the closest balcony Tara's silhouette became visible cast against the full moon. He then heard a whistling noise as a sparkling green arrow struck her chest! A second green arrow (an obvious flare) zipped past, illuminating the sky. Brihaspati yelled out her name and she swung around but only to glare at him in disdain. Seconds later a jeweled chariot drawn by sapphire horses passed by and Soma Chandra reached out, sweeping her up on their ascent.

Guru Brihaspati ran to the railing and shouted after him,

“Soma! How dare you? I command you to bring her back!”

The moon god looked over his shoulder at him, making eye contact while holding onto the reigns. He didn't say anything. He didn't even smile. Soma Chandra turned around coolly, following a direct course to the moon.

## [ 2 ] Mutual Grievances

King Indra moseyed along beneath the high arches of a corridor accompanied by Agni and Varuna (fire and water, respectively). Apart from their preceptor Guru Brihaspati these three were the oldest Devatas. Today Guru had shown up urgently pressing for an audience a few hours before dawn. At which time he and Indra spoke in private and Guru related the outrage perpetrated by Soma Chandra. Their level-headed high priest had been reduced to tears as a result. Never underestimating the seriousness of such an issue the Devata king had rallied his two closest lieutenants. The purpose of this current parley was to assess what progress they had made on his behalf.

“I talked to Kama,” mentioned Agni. “He was quick to confess his participation and has pledged cooperation to you my king. Though according to him the enchantment cannot be reversed from afar.”

“And what of Brahma?” Indra inquired not surprised by that last bit of news.

“I approached him together with Brihaspati and we presented the case to him. Grandfather has offered to mediate this dispute. He’s probably already at the lunar palace trying to talk some sense into Soma’s swollen head.”

“Then let us hope he succeeds,” Varuna interjected, “for there is more trouble afoot. My brother Vayu tells me that two thirds of the Ghandharvas have deserted his mandate and I’m afraid we three know where they’ve gone.”

Lord Indra nodded gravely. “We have to contain this situation or it could escalate into civil war and fratricide. Where does Surya stand on the matter?”

“His loyalty is not in question,” Agni assured him. “Remember that he was a dedicated pupil of mine in ages past. Besides which he and Chandra haven’t ever gotten along on more than a competitive level. I am not the warrior I once was but if it should come to blows then you can count on Surya to fill that spot.”

“What about your son?” Asked Varuna.

“Karttikeya likes to keep to himself,” the fire god divulged, “but I am confident that his skills can be enlisted if necessary. Although I sincerely doubt that it will be.”

“If Lord Brahma fails then perhaps we can have those lads try their hands at it,” Indra suggested. “Agni please see to it that they’re both standing by while we determine the severity of our problem.”

Agni acknowledged the order and departed with a perfunctory salute. The imperious monarch now focused his stare on Varuna. “Instruct Vayu to put the Maruts on high alert so that they’re ready to sortie with me during any unforeseeable instance.”

“Yes milord,” the aquatic deity agreed, taking leave.

Despite his best efforts Indra could not shake an insistent feeling in his gut. Tumbling somewhere within his psyche there was the vague recollection of a past malediction as well as a newer presentiment of chaos about to erupt.

Yet at the same time he couldn’t deny the unalloyed giddiness that comes from living to witness interesting times . . .



Lord Brahma could hardly believe his eight ears. Mainly because they left him no doubt that Soma had to be the most puerile and impertinent being in existence. Reason thus was not an effective tool for communication. The grandfather of gods resorted to a more brutish vocabulary with four mouths,

“What in nine hells is wrong with you? Do you really want to throw Antarloka into disarray this badly? Have some common decency for you own sake. This behavior is not befitting of your station!”

“Silence you old fool!” Soma Chandra shot back from aloft his cushioned throne. Lady Tara was sitting beside him and she appeared to be perfectly happy. “As long as there is no perceived threat then there is no need for me to worry. And right now all I see is a bunch of spent has-beens trying to tell me how to run my life. Are you not aware that I permeate every inch of this lunar sphere and that I can intercept anything or anyone who comes within ten leagues of its circumference? You’re only here because I’ve allowed it. The upper hand is already mine and I can’t see a single solitary reason to cede it to the likes of you.”

Hearing this Brahma’s four heads guffawed heartily. “Insolent brat – you are completely out of your depth. Indra isn’t known as a destroyer of worlds for no reason. And how many minions have you ever slain? None I’m sure. Furthermore nobody else is demented enough to form an alliance with you whereas our allies are numerous. You’d be wise to seize this chance to reconcile with Guru Brihaspati.”

“Why grandfather I’m so glad that we could have this meeting. Now kindly remove your presence from my premises,” the upstart said without missing a beat.

Brahma grumbled in frustration but relented. Though he added:

“This fort is going to crash down on your head whether you believe it or not. Better brace yourself for the harsh realities of defeat youngster.”

With those words Lord Brahma stormed away, brushing against the left wing of a tall blue Ghandharva entering Soma’s majestic chambers. This was Commander Viswava who progressed to the throne carrying a similar weight in his steps. The aquiline creature regarded Soma with an indignant expression.

“What is it Viswava? Are you having second thoughts concerning your allegiance?”

“Strangely I’m not. However you know as I do that my people aren’t warlike. There are some things and individuals we cannot protect you from. And I for one won’t endanger my brethren any more than need be.”

“My valued commander, you worry too much. Unbeknown to our enemies I have sent a proposal to the Ashura’s leaders who harbor a deep-seated enmity for the ruling Devatas. With them on our side we’ll have a much greater chance of prevailing.”

“The Ashuras? Why that is high treason indeed. Are you convinced that you want to follow this questionable path wherever it may lead?”

“I’m positive,” Soma confirmed. “If and when Indra stages an attack all I need your units to do is help me stall his advance whilst we hold out for reinforcements.”

“You make it sound easy,” Viswava cautioned. “Just don’t forget that a sizable fraction of the Ghandharvas have chosen to remain under Vayu’s command.”

“Bah! You’ll win them over yet. Vayu is a poor substitute for a pure descendant of Garuda such as yourself. And isn’t it time that the Ghandharvas claimed a sacred right to elect their own leaders?”

“On that I cannot disagree. But what makes you think that the Ashura tribes can unify likewise? They’ve been fragmented for longer than anybody can remember.”

“The Ashuras worship strength. And one has risen from the ranks of the Daityas who has proven his stalwartness on many occasions. Indra himself has heard some unsettling rumors lately regarding the heroic exploits of Shukra’s youngest son.”

“You refer to Upaya Panther-Mask?” Viswava uttered incredulously. “I had heard that he was a rogue soldier who quested through the obscure regions of Patala, which is supposedly where he gained Garuda’s feather from the Nagas.”

“Garuda’s feather?” Echoed the moon god inquisitively.

“It is a legendary sword said to be carved from one of the mighty eagle’s feathers. It was probably left in the netherworld when Naga serpents tried to ransom his mother for a draught of Amrita.”

“Interesting,” admitted Soma. “I’m genuinely beginning to like the sound of this Daitya prince. I’ve already sent him an official summons. With any luck his reply shall be a prompt one.”

“All the same, I’m going to continue organizing our defenses against what now seems inevitable.”

“Excelsior commander! My new queen and I laud your efforts.” Next to Soma Lady Tara smiled vacantly and nodded. Viswava stifled a plaintive screech as he saluted by pressing fist to shoulder before exiting.



Upaya Panther-Mask, Prince of The Daityas was so called due to the black, iron helmet he never failed to wear during times of war. Shaped like an angry feline’s head it was reputedly imbued with psionic enhancements that heightened its wearer’s senses; irrefutable workmanship of Shukra – Guru of Ashuras and Upaya’s father. Not to mention Guru Brihaspati’s undying old rival.

Few were foolish enough to openly state it but the truth was that none except Shukra had beheld Upaya’s visage since the bygone days of his boyhood. Most impressive of all was how speedily he’d achieved notoriety among his peers. His own volition drove him to hazard duels and take on missions that would make anyone else tremble from cowardice. Having proven himself hardy he was embraced by the three tribes as he bore those traditional hallmarks of a Dharma Heruka (a virtuous demon).

Still he couldn’t help feeling intrigued by the lascivious moon god’s invitation delivered to him the previous day by a crimson Ghandharva. Certainly he was no stranger to these sorts of tasks. He’d once coordinated a subterranean campaign against the Nagas. His detachments of Daitya tribesmen and their Danava cousins had served as unofficial auxiliaries in Yama’s army. Surely their violent contributions were what secured the god of death’s stake in that freshly-usurped terrain.

Upaya made his way toward his father’s tent in the hills. Shukra had caught wind of the looming political unrest and sent for him posthaste. As a Brahmin, Shukra’s counsel was always worth listening and adhering to. Awarded with unnatural longevity by Lord Shiva for his dedication, Shukra had witnessed the rise and demise of every Ashura king.



The prince removed his helmet after stepping into the tent (his father being the one person that he didn't conceal identity from). His swarthy baldness complemented a sinewy pair of tanned arms. One could have easily mistaken him for human were it not for the telltale claws protruding from the joints of his knuckles whenever he made a fist. At the far end of this spacious tent Shukra was enthroned on a thatch yoga mat elevated by a small dais. His four arms were raised and he held out each hand in symbolic *mudra* gestures. It was obvious from his lowered eyelids and serene demeanor that he was still immersed in meditative absorption. Comprehending full well Upaya settled cross-legged onto one of the guest mats and waited patiently.

After a few minutes the Ashura guru's attention returned to his immediate surroundings. He greeted his son with a warm smile and announced:

"A divine war brews within the collective Noosphere of Antarloka. I understand that Soma Chandra has abducted Brihaspati's nubile bride and is being pressured to remit by his kin. But evidently the lunar deity has been consuming copious amounts of Amrita and consequently turned on them. He currently plots to draft the indomitable Ashuras into his service to enact a misguided scheme of supplanting the status quo with a hedonist utopia." He paused to catch his breath and then asked: "Am I close to the mark?"

Upaya laughed loudly before responding, "Revered father it never ceases to amaze me how adept you've become at probing the ethereal Nous of our present."

"If only your heart were as easy to prod my dear boy. Given the gravity of these unfolding events I am almost afraid of learning how you plan to react to Soma's entreaty. The present may be easy to read but the future is beyond the grasp of my cognitive faculties. Yet withal, one crucial detail is sufficiently salient to deduce its trajectory and that happens to be **your** involvement amid this schism. In some mysterious way it appears as if your participation is preordained."

"Frankly I cannot disavow my interest concerning these radical affairs," confessed the prince. "Normally confronting the Devatas head-on would seem to me a brash notion. Though in light of what we're seeing it no longer strikes me as unfeasible. You yourself were always pointing out to me how our age-old antagonists have sowed dissension among us in order to diminish whatever threat we might pose. For that reason I believe it's fitting for us to exploit a comparable advantage now that the tables turn."

The Brahmin crossed one pair of arms over his chest and laid the palms of the other pair on his thighs. "Listen carefully my son," he admonished, "there might be nothing I can do or say to deter you from this path but that is precisely why you must be extra cautious when dealing with the Devatas. Especially this smooth-talking lunatic Soma Chandra. Not since we churned the ocean of milk together has there been an alliance between Ashuras and Devatas and the reason is because they will stop at nothing

to accomplish their petty self-centered goals. We paid an expensive price to learn this firsthand. Any extension of friendship from them is naught but veiled opportunism.”

“Of that much I am aware,” Upaya rejoined. “Which is why I solicit your sagely advice. How would you suggest I proceed now that I’ve resolved to reunite the three tribes and mobilize them in favor of Soma?”

“As you’ve grown we’ve often discussed the downfall of our most exalted kings,” Shukra reminded him. “Of them Mahabali is probably the best example. Do you recall that historical episode?”

“Indubitably,” his son affirmed. “After spending the golden age of Satya Yuga at war with the Devas, Mahabali managed to wrest sovereign control from Indra for the first part of the Treta Yuga. During this silver era the Daitya emperor’s influence extended to include Bhuloka. His reign was prosperous and he was recognized as a benevolent ruler by most sentient beings. Of course then the Devas became intoxicated with envy and petitioned Vishnu to intercede.”

“Exactly. That was when Guru Brihaspati interrupted us in the midst of a sacrificial ceremony. He came accompanied by the pigmy Brahmin *Vamana* who was actually Lord Vishnu exercising his unmatched powers of illusion as usual. The presumptuous dwarf demanded that the Devas be given a fair share of Mahabali’s realm. *Vamana* proposed for the king to grant them at least as much ground as he himself could cover within three strides.”

“And duped by his apparent stature Mahabali chose to neglect your exhortations by acquiescing with an act of charity, which ended up costing him more than his crown,” Upaya finished for his father.

“Yes. *Vamana* expanded far past the heavenly vault and traversed both the physical and astral planes within two immeasurable steps,” the elder guru went on. “Since he could find no place to take a third one, Mahabali had to kneel down and offer his own head as a footrest. Vishnu trampled him into the very depths of the underworld! The sum-total of that Daitya’s dynasty was thus deposed. He was imprisoned in Patala along with his children and grandchildren where they remain to this day. Lord Vishnu then reinstated Indra as governor of the heavens.”

“Right but what is the point that you are trying to illustrate?”

“Well it is primarily that Vishnu and Brahma have always been staunch supporters of our enemies. This particular chronicle also demonstrates that contrary to popular opinion we Ashuras are wholly capable of exhibiting righteousness. By stark contrast the covetous and deceitful Devas have somehow managed to curry favor in

Sivaloka. As a result I cannot overly stress the importance of paying homage to Shiva Mahadeva, who is our only steadfast benefactor.”

“But father, every renowned Ashura potentate has been defeated whether he worshipped Shiva or not,” objected the prince. “In fact the additional clout he provided them with is what typically led to their ruin.”

“You are correct,” Shukra consented. “However that is not a reflection of Lord Shiva’s munificence. Rather it denotes our own greatest failing: an inability to relinquish egotistic attachments. Those demon leaders who practiced asceticism customarily did so to aggrandize their personal authority. None of them was ever able to dissociate from tainted deeds and consequently reaped the negative fruits of Karma Yoga. That is where you must strive not to repeat their mistakes.”

“In other words the boons conferred upon them by Mahadeva backfired because of their inherent megalomania?” Posited Upaya.

“At last you start to wrap your head around it,” his father declared, beaming. “Therefore clever boy do your utmost to honor our patron in Sivaloka via virtuous comportment. I guarantee that it’ll pay off in the long run.”

“Wisest sire, your guidance does not fall on deaf ears. From this day forth I shall endeavor to curb my inner ambitions and will dedicate a bountiful sacrifice to Shiva prior to any armed engagement. At present though my presence is required in the Vale of Berunni without further delay. The three tribes convene there tonight and I intend to solidify our pact with the Danavas and Rakshas. Once that’s in hand I’ll send Vidyunmalin to escort you to us so that you can preside over our rituals.”

“Your older brother Vidyunmalin is not the brightest lad but he is strong and has a decent soul. You should take care of each other throughout these coming trials.”

“We will father,” Upaya pledged as he put his helm back on.

“Above all be wary of Guru Brihaspati and those nearest to him. Never underestimate the lengths they’ll go to cheat you out of what is rightfully yours.”

The prince nodded solemnly and bowed. He then strapped Garuda’s feather onto his upper-body armor before setting off with air of determination. Shukra sighed briefly but was soon reabsorbed in a profound state of *samadhi* trance. There was still so much that remained unclear.

## [ 3 ] Heaven's Orphans

Priya was the wife of Viswava, commander of the Ghandharvas. Her own mother was none other than Varuni, the wine goddess that had surfaced when the primordial ocean was churned. Strangely though Varuni had abdicated her queenship of the Apsaras early on to elope with an Ashura. She hadn't been heard of since apart from the occasion on which she'd entrusted Priya to her handmaidens to be raised in the Apsara's temple.

In spite of those unfavorable circumstances Priya had been treated with respect as she grew up and was formally trained alongside the other heavenly dancers. In time she blossomed into such a distinguished performer that her royal lineage had been acknowledged and ratified by everyone who attended King Indra's court. These days she spent less of her time entertaining and more of it coaching new recruits.

At the moment she directed herself to the massive paradise tree lying just beyond the limits of Amaravati, the immortal city. Mount Meru loomed in the distance behind her with the spires of Lord Indra's stronghold jutting into an increasingly cloudy sky. Priya was trudging uphill to meet with the goddess Kali who'd long ago established an exchange program between her aggressive Yoginis and the gentle Apsaras. As she neared the top of that incline the transdimensional tree (which is said to occupy all three planes) became visible.

Beneath the wide awning of its innumerable boughs, among the gnarled roots and with her back resting against its thick trunk sat Kali – Parvati's fell alter ego. She was blacker than soot, having eight arms and a necklace of shrunken skulls that hung above her bare breasts. Her only garment was a girdle of men's severed limbs around the waist. A dozen muscular females holding lances or axes and not wearing much either guarded her perimeter. One of them handed the goddess a hollowed-out gourd filled with blood, which she drained in a single quaff. Another two stepped aside permitting Priya to breach their circle. The young queen cleared her throat gingerly, drawing the distracted Kali's attention.

“Precious Priya, how nice of you to join us!”

“All adoration unto mother Kali, Shakti to Shiva,” the Apsara queen said as she began genuflecting.

“Now, now – no need for that,” Devi dismissed, waving four right hands. “I trust things are going well back at your temple?”

“They are indeed milady. Am I to understand that you have a new ward for us to instruct?”

“Oh yes as a matter of fact we do,” Kali asserted with transparent enthusiasm, “but this one is considerably different from the rest.”

“Really? How so?” Queen Priya queried.

“She is the sole survivor of the extinct human race,” revealed the dark goddess, allowing her words to sink in. “I handpicked her myself from the shambles of Bhuloka when she was only a child. My loyal Yoginis have taught her everything they possibly could since then. All that remains is for the Apsaras to round her skills out completely.”

“A human woman in Antarloka? How has she been able to survive in our ethereal Nous?”

“Believe it or not they can be a very adaptive species when necessity dictates. Moreover this girl is second to none in my entourage when it comes to combat. I do hope you’re up for the rigorous task of schooling her in your fine arts.”

“We **will** rise to the challenge,” the queen vowed. “Bring her forth at your leisure inexorable one.”

Kali beckoned to her closest subordinate, “Yaksha – where is Ishtar?”

“Highness she is doing drills by the waterfall,” the Yogini answered, falling to one knee.

“Please go now and get her.”

Yaksha bowed her head prior to standing and darting through the air toward an adjacent ridge . . .



Although she was around eighteen years old by Terran counts Ishtar vividly remembered her last days on Earth. Back then she’d been only five and everything had happened so suddenly. She recalled frenzied talk of polar icecaps melting from her parents; residents of Mumbai on India’s West coast. She couldn’t grasp it too well at that age until the fateful morning when she saw a stupendous tidal wave roiling onto the streets. She had stood there breathlessly immobile and would have perished were it not for Yaksha (Kali’s emissary) swooping down to her rescue.

Afterward her existence was drastically altered by forces she could hardly reckon. She’d been adopted by Kali, Goddess of Destruction no less, to be tutored by Yoginis in an array of lethal disciplines. To what end was unclear but Ishtar had developed a total rapport with her surrogate family. Especially with Yaksha who was like a big sister.

Zealous servants of the dark one, these Yoginis had matched weapons with every kind of foe at one time or another. Even with the Ashuras whose recent stirrings they were entirely aware of. Ishtar had accompanied her sisters in Patala at age sixteen – against Upaya Panther-Mask – the only opponent to ever best Yaksha in a duel.

Currently Ishtar’s toes hovered over a fast-flowing rivulet merely ten feet from where the waterfall cascaded onto mountainous rock. She stood poised, right leg straight and left one bent at its knee. Angled behind her head she hoisted a curved slender sword high up in the air with both hands. The girl inhaled audibly, filling her lungs to capacity prior to blaring Kali’s mantra: “*Om Kring Kaliyai Namah!*”

Down swished the blade, sending waves rushing back toward slope and slicing a cleft into the cataract. A fine mist of droplets sparkled around her as the torrent resumed momentarily. The human Yogini calmly held the weapon’s blunt end against her forehead as if recollecting her senses through it. At which point she was broken from her reverie by a familiar voice:

“You’re far better than I ever was,” Yaksha acclaimed, “and you probably surpass my present-day prowess too.”

“I owe it all to mother Kali and you dearest sister,” replied Ishtar as she turned to face her visitor; a woman with matching scratch scars on either shoulder blade.

“Sadly though the time has arrived for you to part from us. At our mother’s behest, Priya, Queen of Apsaras has come to conscript you. They wait for you now at the foot of the tree.”

“Then we shouldn’t keep them waiting any longer,” reasoned Ishtar. Affectionately they hooked inner elbows and glided back to the main group. Thereupon Ishtar and Priya were introduced to each other and matron Kali took that opportunity to honor her human daughter with a gift. In two black hands she held out her heavy war sickle, which the girl accepted as she prostrated herself.

“All of my confidantes should know that mine and Shiva’s will are one and the same,” the goddess expounded addressing those present. “In earnest Antarloka has entered a phase of decline and shall henceforth deteriorate further. Ergo, we have decreed it necessary for the Devatas to burn off the negative Karma that they have accrued throughout their tenure in this realm. My Yoginis are hereby charged to assist that process through indirect involvement at these early stages and more intimate participation later on.”

“*Om Kring Kaliyai Namah!*” Everyone (including Priya) assented out loud.

Yaksha stepped to Ishtar and presented a conch shell. The latter fastened the war sickle diagonally across her back and stowed said conch inside a plain travel bag.

“When the time comes blow on it and we will hasten to your side,” explained Yaksha.

Ishtar nodded in agreement and embraced her big sister as they both struggled to restrain tears. For soon she was on the road to Amaravati, in no mood of conversing with her new matriarch.



Seated atop a peacock Karttikeya, son of Agni strutted into a glade. At the far end of that clearing some hubbub preceded the abrupt exodus of many deer from the woods. They sprinted in his direction and shortly he found himself encircled by them. He couldn't help wondering why they were unafraid of him even though he bore a spear. They simply eyed him as if to display a hint of recognition within their glazed stares. This herd shifted uneasily as its pursuer caught up. Surya the sun god came mounted on his shining steed followed by some attendants.

“What is the meaning of all this commotion?” Karttikeya demanded.

Surya wheeled on his horse brandishing a fiery bow while he spoke,

“Karttikeya you know these stags are fair game. Ever since Bhuloka crumbled human souls transmigrated here and took form as these creatures. There is an overabundance of them. They should be hunted down in droves to atone for their sins. Your father Agni has been a teacher to us both and he would advocate my course.”

“This is my forest and I say what is and isn't fair game,” the younger but not less physically imposing Devata pronounced, spinning lance with utter confidence. Karttikeya had once delivered Antarloka from the demon King Taraka, who'd terrorized the Devas for centuries. He wasn't to be taken lightly in a fight and wasn't one to back down in disputes. “I hereby forbid hunting on these premises.”

“Bloody spoil sport,” complained the sun god. “I do hope you're more forthcoming on the dilemma caused by Soma Chandra. He has rebuked Brahma's counsel and is forcing Indra's hand. I'm afraid my cousin's aspirations have outgrown his means. He leaves us no choice but to humiliate him.”

“Or you could simply let it be.”

“For shame you should mention it! Brihaspati is preceptor of the gods and cannot tolerate such a slight. This anarchic move has serious political implications.”

“Social protocol notwithstanding, it’s a ridiculous reason to go to war.”

“As good a reason as any,” Surya mumbled. He gestured for his escorts to retract with a snap of his head and sped off without further utterance.

Inhaling a calming breath Karttikeya looked around at the sizable herd still milling about. It was then that the largest antlered buck came forward and fixed his sights on the perplexed Devata. The god peered into the bull’s iridescent eyes and chuckled when he realized what he was seeing there. For Karttikeya could perceive that in its previous lifetime this magnificent buck had been one of his Sri Lankan devotees.

*Merciful lord please follow me* he heard the deer say. Fascinated, the young god goaded his peacock to break away from the group along with this newfound guide. However it didn’t take long for Karttikeya to abandon his avian mount because the stag was leading them into progressively denser stretches of woodland. Indeed, hiking through the underbrush started to become such a nuisance that he began to reconsider his decision. Until of course they reached the yawning mouth of a cave.

*In there* the animal indicated with its antlers. Karttikeya hesitated for a moment thinking this all very strange. Nevertheless he overcame his misgivings and ventured inside. Beyond its entrance the cave became a winding corridor that the Devata had to stoop and crouch through. Visibility was minimal and the sound of dripping water complemented a dank odor that hung in the air. After continuing like that for a seeming infinity he was able to make out a faint glow up ahead where the tunnel opened into an expansive adjoining cavern. In the center of that hollow enclosure a spindly old man sat full-lotus on a tiger’s pelt. He appeared firmly lodged in *samadhi* and a soft silvery halo emanated from his head.

“Who are you?” Karttikeya interrogated, putting aside the usual considerations.

The hermit stirred and countered with a cryptic remark, “Boy, I could ask you the same question and I am sure that you would give me the wrong answer.”

“I am Karttikeya son of Agni!” He claimed with conviction.

At that the little old man roared with laughter, which resounded off stony walls. The Devata youth was tempted to impale him on his spear but something inexplicable occurred: the elder’s balding head started to crack like an egg and luminous fissures showed up on other parts of his frail body. Without warning he burst into fragments that flew outward in every direction. Karttikeya shielded his face with forearms on a reflex though it proved unnecessary. Subsequently he had to lean back so that his vision could encompass the vast and effulgent figure of Shiva Mahadeva, in whose immeasurable presence he now found himself suspended. Behind that cross-legged Deva his own light



cast a shadow onto the cavern's interior. Within it Karttikeya watched dumbfounded as Kalachakra Bhairava (Shiva's ogre-like double) devoured stars from Bhuloka by trillions. The browbeaten Devata knelt and exclaimed:

“Shiva – bearer of the trident and lord across all three planes – what would you have of me Guru of gurus, Godfather of Yoga?”

“From here on in,” Shiva confuted, “I would have you know that in truth you are my firstborn son Skhanda – Lord of Armies!”

“What's this you say? But how is that possible?”

“I once made a pact with an Ashura named Taraka. To reward him for his devotion he was granted invincibility on the condition that only a son of mine could overcome his monstrous strength. Needless to say I had neither a son nor a mate then. Nevertheless, in due course Brahma and Vishnu approached me together with the cowering Devatas. They implored me to copulate with Parvati but didn't find disrupting my *samadhi* to be an easy task. Hence they employed Kama, whose charms did manage to ignite my latent passion for Parvati, daughter of Himalaya.”

“If that is true then why have I spent my whole life in Antarloka and not with you in Sivaloka like Ganesha or Nandi?”

“Oddly enough my seed did not impregnate your mother. We were engrossed in Tantric love-play for so long a span that Brahma deemed it necessary for Agni to interrupt us assuming the shape of a turtledove. The fool caught my semen in his beak when he cooed and it almost destroyed him! He passed it on to Vayu who delivered it on a gale to Ganga the river goddess. In turn, Ganga placed it among the reeds along her East bank where it took ten thousand years to ferment. Thence, six stellar maidens known as the Krittikas found you and became your nursemaids. That is why you are called Karttikeya (son of the Krittikas) and can sprout six heads as well as twelve arms. This also explains why your skin is blue like mine.”

“So in effect you're saying that Agni adopted me and concealed my identity up until now?”

“Is it too hard to believe? The Devatas fear you for being my son. Yet they are cunning and manipulative. I have chosen the most opportune moment to reveal these secrets in order that you might respond appropriately. Know then that Indra's supremacy is reaching its climax and that I would have you occupy his throne in short order. Accordingly you are not to partake in this quarrel between Lord Chandra and the others. It must be allowed to play out in full.”

“It is just as well,” Skhanda concurred, “seeing as I had no intention of joining them to begin with. But what am I to do during the interim, omnipotent sire?”

“Make for the Southern wastelands. Purify yourself by practicing Yoga amid those charnel grounds. When the hour is at hand you will be confronted by a righteous Ashura capable of trading blows evenly with you.”

“A righteous Ashura? Surely you jest for that is unheard of.”

“There is a first time for everything,” certified Shiva. “You should also take the buck who brought you here in that general direction. He has another appointment to fulfill with destiny.”

Skhanda got to his feet and nodded emphatically. “Today is a joyous day because the unruly suspicions of my heart have been dispelled by Nilakantha, Lord Blue Neck, who drains poison from our lives!”

That having been said Skhanda was transported back outside where he was met by the stag. They left together, heading south.



Flanked by his four-armed brother (Vidyunmalin) and the Raksha Priestess Kaitabh, Upaya sauntered through the horde of Daityas, crossing over into the Danava’s encampment. They were met there by Andhaka Eight-Arms, Dasyus and Trisiras; surviving comrades from their campaign into the nether sphere.

As they aged Danava giants tended to grow more arms. Andhaka’s cohorts had only one pair each but didn’t look any weaker than him. Standing sixty feet tall and wielding bludgeons befitting their scale they were undeniably intimidating for anyone. The opaque plates of their armor alone could be used as shields by their somewhat scrawnier cousins. Both triads exchanged formalities and Upaya spoke with Andhaka,

“When can I expect to converse with the elders of your clan?”

“Our patriarch Berunni will be arriving any minute now,” imparted Andhaka.

True to those words they then saw Berunni and six members of his family shoving their way through the mass of brutes. Berunni Twenty-Arms was oversized even by Danava standards. It was remarkable that his tusks didn’t pierce his long bearded face when he talked,

“Upaya Panther-Mask and Kaitabh of the Rakshas – I welcome you to my vale though I harbor qualms concerning your objectives.”

“Then let me assure you paramount one that my intentions hold the best interests of all Ashuras at their core and not my own personal gain,” Upaya professed. “I believe we’d be unwise to let the opportunity that now presents itself slip through our fingers.”

“You mean the opportunity to suffer terrible deaths caused by the Devatas,” riposted the ogre, “or have you forgotten that they’re immortal?”

“Perhaps Berunni has forgotten that Soma is the Devata entrusted with the distribution of Amrita,” Kaitabh dared to add, raising a clawed index. Her bat-like wings unfolded and her pupils dilated when she spoke, making it look as if those sanguine eyes were about to detach from that frilled skull. “If the legends don’t lie we may stand to gain more than we bargain for.”

“Humph!” Scorned the Danava chief. “Isn’t that what everyone says when misfortune befalls? You are undoubtedly naïve to think that Lord Chandra would share immortality’s nectar with the likes of us.”

Many giants in the periphery grunted their agreement. Upaya weighed his words carefully before stating:

“The moon god really has no say in that matter. If he does not supply at least some of us with Amrita then we shall withdraw and deprive him of our sorely needed military assistance. Furthermore I for one will not cower before the Devatas. If need be, I am determined to spearhead our assault against King Indra himself!”

Hearing this Upaya’s older brother raised his four brawny arms, holding different weapons in each hand. He called back to the onlooking Daityas: “Upaya knows no fear!”

The entire tribe chanted that phrase in a rousing exhibit of support for their valiant prince. Berunni traded frowns with his associates until the tumult receded then said:

“Worthy Daitya, while we do not question your commitment to our common cause there is only one way this can be settled and you know it.”

Catching his drift the prince straightened to reply: “Naturally. Custom demands that I prove my fitness to lead by dueling your champion. Select him then but be forewarned – he could lose limbs in this fight. Limbs that might be dearly missed during upcoming engagements.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Kaitabh interposed while wringing her hands. “It’s nothing my healing sorcery can’t handle.”

The prime Danavas ignored them as they huddled to decide on their champion. Afterward Berunni Twenty-Arms proceeded to introduce his nephew Virocana of

Twelve-Arms – who sported a titanic sledge hammer as well as two curling ram’s horns that grew from his head.

Andhaka Eight-Arms hunkered down near Upaya to whisper, “Are you positive you want to carry on with this? Even I would avoid a scuffle with that lummoX. He’s a thoughtless killing machine.”

“The higher the stakes the greater the rewards,” the plucky Daitya recited while grasping the hilt of his sword and taking a few practice swings in order to stretch out his eager muscles. He continued loosening his neck, upper body and legs as everybody else backed away from these paladins, creating a wide circle of spectators. Upaya adopted a stance in which he propped the length Garuda’s feather behind his ample shoulders, leaving one hand free to incite his opponent into striking first.

“Little panther talk brave but Danavas no afraid of anything!” Virocana jabbered as he lurched forward, bringing the sledge up over his head to smash down on the Daitya’s position . . .

Upaya leapt away just in time to skirt the big crater left behind by that wallop. But the ornery behemoth sustained his attack, deftly passing the hammer’s handle from one beefy hand to another. The agile prince was so hard pressed to dodge this barrage that he had to protect himself at one point with the broad side of his blade. One solid hit knocked Upaya back a long distance, sending him into somersaults. The throng of giants whooped and cheered.

Regaining his footing the Daitya growled as the Danava closed in again. *I must draw blood and end this quickly* he reflected. In that instant he caught glimpse of a cliff face not too far off behind him. He slung the blade in its holster and when Virocana renewed his frantic offensive Upaya performed a nimble succession of back-flips.

Daityas and Rakshas cleared a path as the combatants waded through. Wasting not a single second the cat-like Ashura scrambled up the side of the bluff, reaching its crest with amazing speed and dexterity. Giving his rival no chance to react he withdrew Garuda’s feather as he flew at the giant’s head, slicing diagonally to miss only his eyes.

Virocana reeled clutching at his face. He howled furiously and tried to retaliate by slamming his horns against that stony wall. However Upaya had landed gracefully and swerved in behind him to cut out the fleshy backsides of his knees. The ogre stumbled forward but managed to hold himself up with twelve hands. Still unsatisfied the ferocious Daitya planted his reddened sword into the ground before delivering a swift kick to the Danava’s posterior for good measure.

Now it was Upaya’s tribe and Kaitabh’s ghouls who celebrated with noisy abandon. Berunni Twenty-Arms and his crew ambled over to where Virocana lay in dirt.

Shaking his head with embarrassment the patriarch ordered consorts to remove his disgraced nephew from the scene. He then turned to address the victor, bowing slightly. “Well met son of Shukra! The might of my people is at your disposal.”

“Honorable chieftain, you have my gratitude and my oath that I shan’t betray your confidence in my leadership.”

Berunni shifted on his heels to observe the moon climbing into evening sky. “Regardless, I do not understand how you plan to get our combined armies onto Soma’s terrain. Unlike the Devatas most Ashuras are incapable of flight so our involvement appears precluded from the onset.”

Right then Kaitabh fluttered to their side and disclosed: “Leave that to us! We Rakshas have pooled our arcane abilities to devise a method of transporting you hulking Danavas and everyone else through the ether. My scouts have also mapped out the terrain we are to navigate. Believe me, any required preparations **have** been made.”

Although they were loath to admit it both Upaya and Berunni were a bit disturbed by the Raksha priestess, who exercised control among her faction through witchcraft. All the same they weren’t stupid enough to look a gift horse in the mouth – which was why they nodded appreciatively.

The next morning as per Upaya’s request the three tribes convened to render a sacrifice to Lord Shiva. Unbeknown even to Guru Shukra the perfect stag they offered was the same one that had helped Kartikeya become Skhanda. Everything was unfolding according to Karmic design.



Lord Chandra reread the parchment that announced Indra’s declaration of war as well as offering him terms for surrender. It had been brought that afternoon by a green-plumed Ghandharva, who’d also taken the opening to swear fealty to Commander Viswava.

The lunar deity crumpled up the message, tossing it aside. He knew things had progressed well beyond the point of no return. Even so he didn’t care. Truth be told Chandra just hadn’t been the same since planet Earth perished. Soma’s favorite pastime used to be spending endless hours peering in on the denizens of Bhuloka. He was enthralled by the mortal race of humans, who lived for such short spans that they rarely discovered all seven of their senses.

Unsurprisingly it wasn’t always a pleasurable distraction. Those tiny beings could be exceedingly cruel toward one another and hence the moon had witnessed more than its share of atrocities. Particularly during their hectic final days when Varuna and Surya worked in concert for the oceans to rise against them (albeit at Shiva’s prompting).

Kali herself had wracked the globe with a quake of unprecedented magnitude. Certainly the human species had warranted such punishment but there was little forgiveness in Lord Chandra's heart for his kinfolk.

That was why he'd been taken aback by the revelations of Kali's envoy, Yaksha. Evidently the mother goddess had salvaged a solitary human female. Thus she requisitioned a portion of Amrita on her Terran daughter's behalf. Soma had complied with this order on the assurance that neither Kali-Ma nor her Yoginis would interfere with his plans. Besides, as he took another look at his prize concubine he passingly wondered if the human woman might be any prettier.

## [ 4 ] Besieged

Borne on a litter of air-elementals, Airavata (Lord Indra's elephant) soared high above the moon of Antarloka. Upon him was nestled a palanquin from where the Devata king could oversee the proceedings below. Indra stroked a bleach-blond beard, which matched his azure eyes. An almost imperceptible field of static electricity clung to his diamond armor as he contemplated the scene.

*So it has come to this* he considered while Vayu, Varuna and the Maruts harnessed pockets of condensation and similarly used them to bear their foot troops aloft; the hapless Kinnaras. Mindless horse-headed knights, these Kinnaras had spent centuries with Yama in the underworld and were noticeably warped because of it. Conversely the sixty original Maruts had been born from Vayu's first breaths. Each of them had exhaled sixty sons of his own though that was where it ended. Neither of these races was immortal but they comprised the bulk of Indra's forces. A minority of Ghandharvas ostensibly in league with Vayu was there too.

Some of the nimbus formations produced by King Indra's clansmen also carried their siege engines. Indra realized that he would need them bearing in mind the small handful of Devatas in attendance. Agni and Brihaspati were sitting this one out citing age as a factor whereas Yama was too preoccupied in Patala to accompany his legions. Fortunately Surya was present, riding in his gilded battle-chariot pulled by white horses with flaming manes. Yet withal Karttikeya was definitely missed.

*No matter* he thought *this company should suffice*. The king was aware that despite Soma's allegations there was no way he could keep such a host at bay without expending insufferable amounts of his own vital energy. All Indra needed to do was provide a suitable chance for his troops to touch down by softening up the lunar defenses. With that aim he shuttered his eyes in order to conjure an electromagnetic storm unlike anything he'd ever brought forth. Vayu and Varuna assisted by summoning an impenetrable layer of cloud-cover.

Within moments their bombardment commenced. Lightning bolts saturated the surface along with hailing pyroclastic boulders hurled by Kinnaras. Those salvos intensified as their battalions neared the shell-shocked territory below. Electrical rays rebounded from the ground and twisted all around them before tapering off. Scorching pillars begat a sheet of fallout that wafted downward. As such it didn't take long before they attained their objective. Airavata was landed once substantial footholds had been established. The siege could now be conducted in earnest.



Perching on ramparts, Commander Viswava and his Ghandharvas surveyed the landscape outside Soma's palace. The front lines of Indra's soldiery were sighted promptly. Their initial hailstorm had been impressive to say the least but it was clear that its sole purpose was to shatter whatever focus the moon god had invested in preventing their intrusion. The lunar fortress remained otherwise unscathed. Now it was up to Viswava to lead his fellows in a counterstrike.

Luckily there wasn't anyone better suited for that job. Popular belief held that Viswava was a direct descendant of Lord Vishnu's eagle: Garuda. He was an awe-inspiring paragon of his race, whose only anthropoid features were two lightly feathered arms separate from his wings. A hooked beak and yellow eyes were offset by deep blue plumage that converged to form a crown on his head. He stood upright on a pair of vicious talons when the crimson Ghandharva named Silat sidled to his right.

"Our archers are fully prepped come what may," Silat put plainly.

"I wouldn't expect any less of them," half-kidded Viswava, placing a hand on his captain's shoulder. Feeling the need to review stratagem he turned to face his kindred and discoursed: "Those of you adept at close-quarter combat will sortie with me shortly. We shall assail the pompous Maruts head-on and prove ourselves to be much more than entertainers in slavery. Tonight they will learn that our skill with hostile implements mirrors our other talents!"

Drums sounded among them, emphasizing his speech and bestowing approval. Many relaxed their posture and seemed to stand taller for it. Some fidgeted anxiously with their armaments. Viswava went on: "Should we be obliged to fall back the half of you staying here with Captain Silat will cover our retreat at my signal. Just remember, we want to hit the Maruts as hard as possible. Disregard the Kinnaras and wayward members of our clan. Is that understood?"

Their stern nods were all the affirmation he sought. Still he threw in: "We might be the youngest race in Antarloka but nobody, not even the Devatas can brag about surpassing our style or velocity in flight."

That comment elicited lots of amused cackles among his confederates. Thence Viswava unsheathed his twin scimitars and spread out his elegant wings, scrutinizing the field anew. His skirmishers followed suit, seeing a swell of clouds rolling toward them awfully fast. The alpha Ghandharva gave a raptorial shriek prior to diving straight for it. Five hundred vassals flew in tight arrowhead formation along either side of him. They dragged a flourish of trumpets in their wake. Mere seconds later the aerial battle was joined as their wedge carved effectively into a brazen assembly of Maruts.



Maruts started dropping in large numbers unable to withstand the coordinated flap of two thousand Ghandharva wings. Viswava himself slashed through a dozen air-elementals within the first few minutes of that encounter. Then again their dominance was not to last if Vayu could impede it. For that was when he rose to meet them enshrouded in the turbulent column of a hurricane.

“Viswava – this affront to my divinity won’t stand. I am your rightfully appointed magistrate and you should accord me the deference owed!”

“What rubbish,” scolded the blue one, “by all accounts you’re our forefather’s arch-nemesis and that’s why you attempt to subjugate us. You’ve become scared that Garuda’s progeny might defeat you as he did.”

Vayu’s eyes flared with rage. Without another word he pushed forward using both hands, thereby projecting the whirling mass of wind outward against the rebellious Ghandharvas. Buffeted by this cyclone the bird-like warriors became totally scattered and the Maruts didn’t hesitate in giving chase, taking down scores of them.

Viswava cried out to his companions: “Regroup and retreat!” As he had led them into the fray he led them back to relative safety behind the battlements. “Archers on my mark,” he ordained, waiting for every able-bodied (and oft-bloodied) Ghandharva to return. The Maruts were hot on their trail, “Now!”

A bright slew of arrows shot past the wall and tore into the advancing thunderheads, felling hundreds more of their foes. Now it was Vayu who ordered his henchmen to regress, making it seem as if that storm might abate. Although it certainly wouldn’t since by then the Kinnaras were finalizing the setup of their trebuchets and ballistas. Surya took note of Vayu’s withdrawal and triggered the first wave of missiles by firing a burning dart from his bow. Fireballs and steel pikes cruised toward the castle.

The Ghandharvas braced themselves for the worst but at that critical moment a veil of crystalline radiance descended before them. Molten rocks exploded against it and the barbed poles ricocheted whence they came! *Formidable* Surya deemed *but let’s see how you handle this*. He raised both arms above his head and fashioned a ballooning orb of hot plasma.

“Surya don’t!” Indra yelled from the rear. In vain because the sun god had already wound up and cast his projectile. It blazed a slow but sure path to the walls where it looked like it would break through Soma’s barrier before imploding and blinding them all with its brilliance.

Atop the bulwarks Commander Viswava and his brethren couldn’t see anything either. At least not for a minute after which their eyes readjusted to the setting. Confusion ensued as to why the enemy’s artillery was taking so long to reload. Had they

given up on that method? It was then that they heard a different type of pandemonium afield. Viswava squinted through blurred vision and gasped involuntarily, struck by his recognition that the Ashuras had arrived . . .



A humongous metallic cylinder floated far above the site of the battle. It would have appeared as a bright star to those below except that their attention was drawn elsewhere. This state of distraction afforded Upaya Panther-Mask a bird's-eye view of the ongoing havoc. He stood at the brink of a hatch on the vessel's side, scanning that distant panorama through sensory augmentations ingrained in his helm. The fulmination that had dissipated a little earlier would have blinded him too were it not for said helm shading his eyes from any glare.

“What do you see?” Priestess Kaitabh inquired next to him.

“Berunni's Danavas have found their way from the shadows and engaged the Devata's infantry, which means that my Daityas shouldn't be far behind.”

“Excellent,” crooned the Raksha, “allocating our ground forces on the dark side of the moon was a superb idea wily prince.”

“Not quite as superb as these craft. Your mages are exceptionally gifted to extract such artifice from the collective unconscious of Bhuloka. I always assumed that there was nothing left worth retrieving in the spatial-temporal sphere.”

Kaitabh only grinned, wringing her hands as usual. They both directed a gaze at the nearby ships of their armada and beheld a bat-winged messenger flying toward them. They moved aside and the incoming Raksha knelt summarily at the feet of his superior.

“Exalted matriarch,” he articulated amid halting breaths, “our brigades await your commandment.”

She diverted her red eyes to Upaya, who gripped a railing and studied the surface intently again.

“I do remember saying that I would spearhead this assault,” Upaya reasserted. “Even now I have Lord Indra in my sight.” The Daitya prince freed Garuda's feather from its sling.

“No last-minute doubts?” She tested.

“None, if this grants me the momentum you're so sure of.”

“Count on it as you count on that sharp rudder.”

“Watch me then.”

He dashed back inside the hull and took a running start for the egress. Out he went, plummeting like a meteorite. Priestess Kaitabh handed a magic flute to her herald who used it to spur on their paratroopers as they plunged after Upaya.



Vayu could not accept what he was seeing. Yama’s Kinnaras were suffering horrendous casualties versus a multitude of colossal Danavas. The Ghandharvas among their ranks had dispersed, providing only nominal resistance. *Where in tarnation have these giants come from and could more Ashuras be en route?* His questions were answered when an uneasy sensation compelled him to face the firmament. Something – or more alarmingly someone was falling straight toward them at an incredible rate of acceleration! Apprehending their alignment with Indra, Vayu resolved to defend his king.

The diaphanous deity gathered numerous Maruts about himself. Together they inhaled to blow any intruder off course with an unyielding gust of wind. Unexpectedly their blast was rebuffed and weighed down on them from above. Vayu and his sons felt themselves being brushed aside like flies. In the wind god’s experience there was just one entity capable of this feat: Garuda.

“Impossible!” He bemoaned when flung past some neighboring sierras.

Ultimately that tempest razed the roof off Indra’s conveyance, who immediately spotted the intrepid Ashura. “Upaya Panther-Mask, Prince of The Daityas,” he muttered with ire. The Devata king lifted an arm and concentrated half of his own pneuma into the thunderbolt clenched by his fist. “I cannot be conquered by such a cipher as he!”

He took accurate aim of this skydiving contender before lobbing the incandescent shaft. A dazzling trail sizzled toward Upaya (for whom it snaked closer in slow motion). Had Indra known this he may have evaded the beam, which was adroitly deflected with a single swat of that Ashura’s wing-blade. Instead the rueful god was hit squarely in the chest by his own shot, whereupon he discovered himself crashing through protuberant bedrock.

Having seen everything Varuna rushed to his old friend, “Lord Indra! Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he vouched as he stood from the rubble. “My armor has saved me.”

In any case he was more hurt than he let on but too much hung in a balance to register pain. Amidst gridiron Daitya reserves were making their entrance in tandem with Upaya. They bolstered the pressure that their enormous cousins had exerted upon the Kinnaras, permitting those Danavas to demolish Indra's battery.

Meanwhile their feline mastermind drifted ever nearer to the arena, swinging broadsword to affect both the angle of and celerity of his descent. Several leftover units of air-elementals made an effort to obstruct his passage. However they were minced into vaporous shreds that faded like fog. By the time Upaya's feet contacted basalt, no less than thirty Maruts had died fighting against him in mid-flight.

Yet somehow that did little to deter others from attacking. After all even Upaya's endurance had to have limits. So it was that Surya joined in, practically bowling this Daitya head over heels as he streaked to the fore in his chariot.

"You're doing remarkably well son of Shukra," conceded the Devata when he brought his vehicle around. "I didn't expect to cross any worthwhile adversaries tonight but you have truly earned this," he tugged on his bowstring and let loose a cluster of searing arrows.

The pantherine Ashura sprung behind a ballista, narrowly escaping the conflagration that quickly reduced it to cinders. These flames lit up some Kinnaras close at hand as well as the Danavas they were fighting. Arms flailed in agonized despair. Upaya wished he could help them but tangling with Surya required his unwavering attention. Although as luck would have it that was precisely when the Rakshas came swarming downward as if from nowhere.

Alone those vampiric thralls weren't terribly robust but in such large numbers they were dreadful indeed. Using claws and fangs for weapons they mowed through the thinning lines of Maruts, homing in on Upaya's location. Surya moved to intercept them and noticed their arrangement: concentric circles dissected by straight lines. In the center was a prominent female whose eyes were shut. Apparently sensing his glower, her eyelids flitted open and she mouthed an indistinct syllable.

Throughout their array bars of lavender light intersected, forming a diabolical lattice. The pattern came to life oscillating and pulsing among its beacons. Within it one could espay macabre scenes from forgotten war zones.

"An evil *mandala*," murmured the sun god.

"Sickly pallor of doom!" Kaitabh corrected while raking her nails across the middle. A wispy luminosity spilled onto Surya. His horse's manes went out like candles and they shriveled up into skeletons. Even the Devata became gaunt and his splendor perceptively dimmed. Nevertheless it could not absolutely obliterate his vital spark.

Stubbornly he pointed the arc of his bow, drawing its string. This time though, Upaya vaulted shoulder-first into Surya and sent him skidding along the moon's crust!

Rapidly taking stock of their army's predicament Indra exhorted Varuna to sound a decisive retreat. They had gotten more than they'd bargained for upon this battlefield, making recoument imperative. Varuna did as he was told and assisted his nephews by repelling demons in pursuit of the Kinnara's dwindled phalanx. Many doubts ran through their minds but Devata opinion on the debacle was unanimous; *How despicable Soma's actions – compounded by this inexcusable betrayal!*



Later on the four leaders of each rebel clan stood at one end of an open courtyard: Commander Viswava, Berunni Twenty-Arms, Priestess Kaitabh and Prince Upaya. They were shoulder to shoulder and token detachments from their respective militias filled every corner of that square. All eyes regarded Lord Chandra, who officiated these proceedings on an altar in front of those about to be honored.

Earlier when the battle was won Viswava had been sent to invite their allies into the palace. Thereafter the Ashura bosses had met the turncoat Devata and bluntly stated their terms of allegiance. Those negotiations were brief since Soma had foreseen as much and hence proffered to favor the three of them with Amrita. Nevertheless Chandra maintained that his supply was finite and so it could not be disseminated liberally amongst everyone. At any rate even the knavish moon god had standards pertaining to who should or shouldn't be awarded this coveted nectar. Thus the fiendish triumvirate approved that compromise as well as a stipulation entitling Viswava to his fair share.

Presently Lady Tara walked out from behind cashmere curtains near the altar. She was wheeling a ponderous brass urn on a trolley, which she obediently uncapped for her patron. There were whispers among the Ashuras relating to Soma's lovely assistant; *Isn't she the cause of all this?* They were silenced almost instantly by a low guttural rumble from Upaya. Soma Chandra ignored them while he scooped out a bit of the glowing yellow liquid with a ladle and dripped it onto a lotus blossom. He held it up for the crowd to behold before declaring:

“Last night we achieved a glorious victory by defying the immemorial tyranny under which my relatives have kept Antarloka. Obviously it could not have been possible without the unified efforts of every group represented here. Therefore as a sincere expression of my gratitude, I am pleased to furnish these gallant exemplars with the means by which they may stand toe-to-toe with immortal Devatas. This first lotus goes to Upaya Panther-Mask, Prince of the Daityas, who in spite of being a mortal managed to unseat King Indra from Airavata!”

The Ashuras clapped and whistled jointly as Upaya took center stage to receive his prize, “Won’t you remove your helmet?” Soma urged.

“That shan’t be necessary,” averred the prince, introducing said bloom into the maw of his mask and retracting solely its stem. It had a pleasant bittersweet flavor. Almost immediately he felt a dynamic surge of puissance coursing within himself and as the ceremony carried on he gradually became aware of lustrous contours highlighting everything around. In individuals nearby he could now see subtle fluctuations of energy. Moreover, his enchanted mask also responded to the Amrita. It seemed to meld fully with the Daitya, making him a truer feline by extending its tendrils into his extremities. Finally he understood the real source of the Devata’s long-standing supremacy.

When all four leaders had been given their due after joining Soma upon the altar they regarded each other with knowing gazes. As if on cue Upaya roared, Berunni bellowed, Kaitabh screeched and Viswava shrieked together in triumphant elation. There was another longer round of applause. Then the moon good admonished that raucous majority to follow in the footsteps of their newly immortal monarchs (hinting that they too might earn this endowment). For despite everyone’s good cheer, the war had only just begun.



Miles away from the lunar fortress, Indra, Varuna, Vayu and Surya hovered above the peak of a mountain staring out into the distance. Nobody said anything for some time though Surya was the first to crack: “We should never have abandoned such a struggle! It would have been difficult but we could have still won. Instead we lost both our dignity and the chance to prevent those pesky Ashuras from gaining Amrita courtesy of Soma.”

“Surya’s right,” mused Vayu. “If they were sufficiently powerful to rout us back there, think of how much more dangerous they’ll become when they imbibe our elixir. Up until today it’s been our cutting edge against those who oppose us and yet we’ve let it fall into the wrong hands!”

“Don’t you think we know that?” Varuna retaliated. “It’s no use grouching about what’s been lost. What we need to figure out is how to surmount these new obstacles. Previously Upaya and his cronies had the element of surprise on their side but that is no longer the case. Immortal or not, they won’t ever be our equals because of our prodigious experience. There is no reason why we shouldn’t be able to smite them.”

“All the same we ought not to underestimate the Daitya’s prince,” Vayu advised. “The rumors about Garuda’s feather weren’t false and he wields it as if it were an extension of himself.”

“Leave him to me,” proposed Surya. “Had the Rakshas not interfered he would already be dead by my hands. I do solemnly swear that Upaya Panther-Mask shall rue the day he crossed me.” Even so after a moment’s pause the solar deity deferred his oath to Lord Indra, “Unless of course your majesty decides otherwise.”

Since he was engaged in tactical speculations, Surya’s question caught the Devata king at unawares. “Uh, yes that’s fine. What’s important is that he dies no matter who does the actual killing. Anyway, can someone please tell me what state our troops are in, numerically speaking?”

“It’s not looking good,” Vayu related. “My sons have sustained irreplaceable losses though upwards of a thousand Maruts survived. The Kinnaras aren’t much better off but at least two thousand of them are still with us. As for our Ghandharvas, I’m sorry to say that every last one has defected and gone over to Viswava.”

“Then we shall require reinforcements,” Indra noted, sighing lengthily. “Varuna and I will return to Amaravati and garner additional support. You two are to stay here and establish a garrison. Do not, I repeat, do **not** launch any offensive operations in my absence. Trust me lads, this time I’ve got a plan.”

Vayu and Surya made eye contact prior to saluting in unison, “*Yes sir!*”

## - Interstice -

*Every once in a while when Guru Shukra was submerged in meditation and his astral body streamed through that primal ether dubbed the Parma Akasha, he would spontaneously relive past chapters of his prolonged lifespan. At present that was precisely what occurred:*

*Shukra was transported (both mentally **and** corporeally) to the era preceding the galactic churning. It was a time of persecution for his kind. Mahabali had been dethroned by Vamana (an Avatar of Vishnu) and the Devatas swept the realm in a crusade that nearly drove the Ashuras into extinction. Many flocked to Shukra then, seeking sanctuary in his Ashram. Because he was a devout Shaivite Brahmin the gods wouldn't dare to lay a hand on him, though that didn't stop them from massacring his pupils whenever possible.*

*It was specifically this brand of merciless conduct that compelled the Daitya guru to take up his thousand-year vow of mortification; hanging upside-down above a bonfire for days on end. Ever leery the Devatas conspired to divert him from that path when they learnt of his endeavor. Thus Lord Indra dispatched his own attractive daughter Lady Jayanti to seduce Shukra and alienate him from his followers.*

*At first their ruse didn't bear the desired fruit since that Brahmin was unshakably committed to his task. On the other hand, Jayanti's humble ministrations weren't overlooked by Shukra either. For a thousand years she prepared him daily meals, tended the pyre and ran all sorts of errands on his behalf. Eventually her perseverance paid off (albeit **after** Lord Shiva had imparted an esoteric mantra to his Ashura disciple). Feeling indebted to her servility the young guru accepted this strange girl's invitation to partake in Tantric love-play for no less than a century.*

*During that lapse the Devatas sent Guru Brihaspati to sabotage the Ashuras from within. Brihaspati took on the outer aspect of Shukra and postured as priest of the hated demons, using his disguise to persuade them into renouncing their faith in Shiva Mahadeva. He suggested that they convert to Vaishnavism instead by submitting to Lord Vishnu's conservative doctrine. According to Brihaspati's sermons, they would be better off if they embraced their lowly station as opposed to shunning the preserver's stratification of Antarloka.*



*This unconventional dogma had the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshas so thoroughly convinced that when their real guru came back – they eschewed his counsel and ousted him from their midst – unable to tell him apart from the impostor.*

*As a result Guru Shukra spent yet another century exiled from his people. He passed the greater part of those years doing penance in the wilderness, regretting his pleasurable days in Jayanti's arms. For it was plain that it had all been orchestrated by the unscrupulous Devatas and that Guru Brihaspati must be the one impersonating him. Sadly the penitent Brahmin was at a loss as to how he might reverse these ominous tides.*

*Then one day while Shukra was practicing Yoga atop a hill, a younger Daitya stumbled onto his camp. He turned out to be on the verge of starvation and so the priest fed him some rations. When questioned the youth recounted recent events to his savior,*

*“Kind prabhu, your charity has made me the most fortunate Ashura alive. You see, there is a guru among us whom you resemble and who preaches the complete renunciation of personal possessions. Because of his advice the performance of Vedic rites has ceased. Nowadays our once proud race wanders through Antarloka reduced to nomadic mendicants, begging food and alms from strangers. What's worse is that anyone who rejects this degrading lifestyle and tries to keep private property is invariably murdered by the Devatas.”*

*“Listen my son, it is no coincidence that this other priest and I look alike. Verily I say that he is Guru Brihaspati posing as me, the legitimate Guru Shukra.”*

*“Guru Brihaspati? But why would he do such a thing?”*

*“Isn't it obvious? What better way to steer our people toward imminent disaster than as you've described? Surely he acts on orders from King Indra.”*

*“You're right, that would explain why he spends whole months at Mount Meru supposedly bargaining with the gods. Woe unto us Guru, we need you now more than ever!”*

*“Then I shall return though surreptitiousness is strictly in order.”*

*Having made that decision Guru Shukra departed with his clansman, assuming a low profile on their way back to the Ashram. Knowing of secret passages inside it they infiltrated the temple and hid in a cubby behind the shrine. Hence, when the camouflaged Devata sat down to deliver his latest sermon Shukra cast a spell that disrupted Brihaspati's technique of mental control. The Ashuras bellowed wrathfully as they pieced together what was going on. The Shaivite Brahmin came forth and publicly denounced his Vaishnava rival,*

*"You have wronged me and mine in a manner heinous beyond description, Brihaspati, Preceptor of Devatas!"*

*His cover blown, the aforementioned priest fled for his life, chased for a stretch by devils weakened from their former subservience. However it wasn't long before the three tribes rallied under Shukra and the next war was declared.*

*Following that flashback the aged Daitya's superlative senses rejoined his body in the present, alerting him to a familiar presence. Guru Brihaspati strolled into the tent wearing a smirk of contempt.*

*"The sons of Shukra have raised their hands against us gods," Brihaspati accused. "At last you've overstepped all bounds through your failure to corral them. I have waited eons to see your head served on a platter."*

*"Since you have come this far to claim it I can reasonably presume that the expedition goes well for Upaya. Existential anxiety has forever driven you to paltry deeds as it does now. May my offspring succeed everywhere that I've faltered against your timeless depravity."*

*"I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you. We won't loosen our grip so easily and your sons will follow you into the abyss. Do not forget why we Devatas still dominate this sphere."*

*"Nothing is forgotten. Let's just get it over with shall we?"*

*"As you wish. I've brought a friend who yearns to meet you." Brihaspati pulled open the tent's flap and bowed as Yama, god of death, rode in upon his black water buffalo. That beast snorted angrily in Shukra's face. Elevated by its hump the frightful Devata held a bronze mace and a braided noose with each hand.*

*"It's not every day that I take such a trip to collect someone's soul," Yama commented, "but for yours ancient son of Diti - I've made an exception."*

*"Believe me when I say that I feel genuinely privileged oh aboriginal human, who was created by Surya at Lord Brahma's behest. But hear me, for I have also foreseen the nature of **your** demise. Yes, it is a lingering female of your own ilk that will supplant you. So shall the final human wipe out the first."*

*"What nonsense. That strain has been utterly effaced, like yours must be!"*

*Yama swung only once but from then on, Guru Shukra felt nothing more.*

*Act Two – To Hell and Back*



## [ 5 ] Avenues of Deceit

A vehement chorus of female voices protested the unannounced entry of Lords Indra and Varuna into the residential chambers of the Apsaras. Queen Priya herself confronted them without batting a lash as she fastened the waistband around her silken robe.

“To what do we owe this most irregular visit, Lord Indra, King of Devatas?”

“My apologies young majesty,” he offered in turn, “but we are officially under state of emergency and your assistance is urgently required.”

“Am I to understand that you’ve declared martial law, all over a marital dispute between members of your own godly house?” Queen Priya catechized, arms crossed and foot tapping impatiently.

“Be careful Lady Priya,” Varuna warned, “as wives of the insurgent Ghandharvas you Apsaras are hardly in a position to be passing judgments and can scarcely afford **not** to cooperate with us.”

“Point taken,” she capitulated through tightened jaw, “but how can we – a troupe of exotic dancers – possibly be of any use in an armed struggle?”

“Not to worry,” Indra reassured her whilst moving among the scantily-clad nymphs, “we need but one volunteer to act as little more than a messenger.” It was then that he espied a maiden quite unlike all the rest. She was more muscular and possessed smooth skin bronzed to sensuous perfection but there was something else mystifying about her, which he was unable pinpoint. “Girl, please step out from behind that flimsy screen panel, it is rather ineffectual against Devata eyes.”

The Apsara did as he ordered, shyly patting down the folds of her nightgown.

“Pray tell stunning damsel, what is thy name?”

“Milord, I am called Ishtar.”

“Oh? Do tell me that you’re not already betrothed.”

“I am not.”

“Very good then, how would you like to try your hand at seducing an Ashura?”

Indra's proposition drew gasps from every woman in the room and Queen Priya voiced their collective objections:

"Lord Indra, this proposal is grossly indecent and unbecoming of royalty. Furthermore, Ishtar is our newest recruit and cannot be considered qualified to carry out such an unmentionable task."

"Hold your tongue Priya. Queen though you are, do not presume to lecture me on regal etiquette. Desperate times call for desperate measures and I'll be the final authority on who is qualified to do what."

Increasing anger welled up in the Apsara's leader. Fortunately, Ishtar interrupted before she could say anything that might have worsened their bad situation,

"It's alright milady, I am of age and skilled enough to undertake this mission, despite its inherent risks." She made direct eye contact with the queen, confiding telepathically; *Fear not – surely this is part of Kali-Ma's plan.*

Priya visibly relaxed.

"Then the matter is settled," Indra concluded. "Ishtar, please present yourself at my keep by noon. Your escort will be waiting to explain the finer details as well as transporting you to the lunar palace forthwith."

"Certainly King Indra."

Their business done, the two Devatas exited quietly. Ishtar on the other hand began to rifle loudly through her things as she devised ways to conceal an edged weapon using her new wardrobe.



Kama's psychic exchange with Chandra when the former approached the latter's domain to deliver a passenger was characteristically jovial. *Congratulations dear cousin Kama transmitted turmoil wracks the realm and everyone has you to thank or curse for it. Even our king is worried to no end –*

*Indra is no longer my king! I renounced him when he took Guru Brihaspati's side over mine and declared war on the moon. All the same, I thank you for the compliments and grant safe passage to fulfill your dubious errand. Now what exactly do you bring?*

*It's nothing really, just another strumpet for your harem I'd say. Lord Indra seeks to placate the Daitya's prince by giving him a virgin Apsara.*

*Futile machinations. I'll permit it only because Upaya's reaction may amuse me. Make your way to the usual landing area, Captain Silat will usher you inside.*

*Very well, we shall see you shortly.*

Kama then turned his attention to Ishtar, asking out loud: "Have you memorized the mantra I taught you?"

"Yes," came the answer from behind him. The saddle on Kama's large parrot was broad enough to seat two with adequate comfort.

"Splendid. Remember though, it can be effective only if you're looking straight into each other's eyes. That means you'll have to achieve something considered impossible by many – you must find a way to coax Upaya into removing his helm."

"While I'm aware that it's no simple chore," she made clear, "let me stress that a girl has her ways."

"That's the proper spirit," lauded Kama as they neared the lunar sphere.



Upaya Panther-Mask entered Soma Chandra's private audience room (located atop the central citadel) to be met there by the moon god as well as a light greenish fellow accompanied by a pretty young woman.

"Welcome Upaya," Chandra signaled invitingly for him to take a seat across from their visitors. True to form, Soma himself was sitting in the middle on a higher platform in order to mediate between everyone else. "I'd like you to meet my cherished cousin, Kama, Lord of Desire and his entrusted ward."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Prince of the Daityas. I, acting as goodwill envoy on behalf of King Indra hereby introduce to you Lady Ishtar, who is a heavenly dancer that would pledge her life and love to you all in the interest of peace."

Ishtar nodded submissively, to which the prince growled almost inaudibly,

"Although I am not so uncouth to flatly refuse such a gesture, I distrust Devas, especially when they come bearing gifts."

"That is understandable," permitted Kama, "but know this: Lord Indra makes no demands in exchange for your acceptance of his token. Instead, he is letting you see that there is no reason why we should carry on like outright enemies. Perhaps once you have

learnt the true value of Ishtar's betrothal you will realize that a truce and negotiations are actually the best course of action."

"Perhaps," Upaya purred, "but I want to hear from Ishtar's own lips what she opines over this whole sordid affair."

"My lord," she acknowledged, "it is as Kama says. I am committed to serve you no matter what and do everything within my limited power to please your sensibilities."

"If that is truly the case then by all means feel free to stay," the Daitya warrior allowed. "Keep in mind however that I have much to attend to among my kinfolk and cannot be bothered with wedding plans or anything of the sort at present. I hope Lord Chandra has readied separate accommodations."

"A suite is being prepared adjacent to your own," the moon god informed.

"I suppose that'll have to do," accepted the prince.

"Thank you kind sir, your wise decision won't backfire," Ishtar promised him.

At that, Soma rang a tiny silver bell. One of four doors connected to adjoining walkways opened and Lady Tara stepped inside with a cursory bow. "Hello Tara love, please do us a favor and show Ishtar here to her quarters as we previously discussed."

Lady Tara kissed him on the lips in a passionate display of affection, after which she led the new girl out.

Kama cleared his throat and spake anew, "Perfect, my duty is served and I would hasten back to Amaravati. Prince Upaya, this has been a pleasant meeting and King Indra will hear of it from me. My cousin can call me back again whenever you are ready to bargain with us Devatas."

The Ashura would have shaken Kama's hand except that it appeared far too frail. He merely craned his head down to denote respect before also taking courteous leave.

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*That was the easy part* the clandestine Yogini deliberated, following Lady Tara. Ishtar didn't honestly estimate a high probability of success in convincing Upaya to unmask. Something about how he had scrutinized her back there was extremely unsettling. It had been as if his hidden gaze pierced right through her and yet he was letting events unfold naturally, utterly unafraid. Even so, he couldn't have much to go on apart from suspicions. To some degree she still had the advantage of secrecy on her side. Lamentably Kama's subservience mantra might be no help whatsoever.



Eventually both women arrived at another area and Tara took Ishtar into her designated quarters. These were spacious and elegant, lacking nothing. The posing Apsara started to make sense of why Tara was irreparably smitten by Soma Chandra. “Make yourself at home Lady Ishtar,” she recommended.

“You have my humble gratitude.”

“Don’t mention it, there is none more beneficent than my beloved Lord Chandra.”



Later in the evening Upaya contemplated the oddity of Lady Ishtar while sitting alone in his room, waiting for her to enter in response to his summons. There was definitely a peculiar aura around her – but at the same time – its quality felt vaguely familiar. Whatever the case, it would be foolish to lower his guard in her presence until he got to the bottom of things. This interview should ideally go a long way toward alleviating those concerns. He heard a knock at his door. “Come in please.”

The girl did as requested and stood before him bedecked in the ceremonial veil and garb of an Apsara performer. “Salutations my liege. I hope that my appearance pleases you. If nothing else, maybe a dance can allay the prince’s nerves?”

“As you will,” he agreed, getting to his feet. The dancer put a small shiny box on the floor and depressed its top lid; musical tones sounded throughout their dwelling. Soon her hips were gyrating and her belly undulated through an opening in the clothes. She raised a toned pair of arms, forming hands into *mudras* then spun her whole body while flailing limbs smoothly. Upaya stalked about her outer radius like a cat circling a mouse. She was truly a sight to behold, particularly with his heightened senses.

“Tell me Ishtar – and try being sincere – who you really are. Though you possess unquestionable talent and beauty, you don’t come across as an ordinary Apsara.”

“Have you known many Apsaras milord?” She fended off without wavering, continuing to move fluidly along with the atmospheric melody.

“Admittedly I haven’t but I **have** spoken with several Ghandharvas today and they expressed doubts similar to mine.”

“Did they? Well I **am** a neophyte inductee if that’s what you’re seeking to hear.”

“How very convenient. Obviously the Devatas are up to something more than meets the eye here and I must find out what that is. My best guess is that Kama gave you a charm of the same kind that Soma has used to maintain Lady Tara at his beck and call. Indra thinks me susceptible to carnal temptations. He shall be sorely disappointed.”

“The prince is astute as he is strong. Clever guesses notwithstanding, he cannot see the full picture.”

“Oh?”

“What if I were to reveal that I am in fact a free agent with my own agenda to look after?”

“Would that explain why there’s a burdensome object hidden within the layers of your extravagant disguise?”

For a moment Ishtar froze in place. She hadn’t foreseen such acuity of perception. Now her eyes narrowed and nostrils flared slightly. In a blink she grasped the heavy war sickle’s handle and tore it free from fashionable capes!

Shaped like a tongue of flame, its blade flashed purple when it struck hard against Garuda’s feather . . . both adversaries locked in defensive stance.

“Fascinating,” snarled Upaya, pushing forward a single step. “I knew that I recognized certain aspects of your appearance and behavior. Even your dance resembled *Mahamudra Tandava*. Yet I never thought that Kali-Ma’s Yoginis could stoop to the employ of King Indra.”

“I’ve already told you that I’m here of my own accord and it’s to settle a score from our days in Patala. Upaya Panther-Mask, Prince of The Daityas, you will pay in blood for defeating my sister Yaksha outside the Temple of Shesha-Naga!”

With those words she broke loose and lashed out once again.

“We’ll see about that little one. I’ve been itching for a fight since I received Amrita the other night. Don’t expect me to hold back on account of your youth.”

The Daitya parried each of her strokes with minimal effort but the Yogini was just warming up too. Her attacks became increasingly powerful, making it necessary for him to expend energy avoiding them instead of absorbing their impact. A few quick swings of the sickle reduced the surrounding walls to rubble. Inevitably, this bout was going beyond the confines of their private chamber for all to witness. In short order, gawkers started gathering at the periphery of that expanding conflict.

Blinding arcs of sparks were produced as the swords clashed in a deafening series of echoes. Upaya had begun a vigorous counterattack and his catlike speed compensated for Ishtar’s overwhelming fortitude. He batted wildly at his target, shredding through marble columns in the process. Ishtar for her part rose to the crystal ceiling above, aware

that Upaya was unable to fly. She lifted her weapon high up with both arms while exhaling,

“*Om Kring Kaliyai Namah!*”

Like a blazing comet she dropped and cleaved a chasm across the entire floor, which caved in immediately. Upaya barely managed to jump away and ride the shockwave but was able to grab onto a spiral staircase that provided him with useful altitude. Her laughter rebounded from the distant walls left standing.

“The wielder of Kali’s sickle is rendered virtually invincible by it,” she boasted, “for it is imbued with *Tamas* – the tendency of decay responsible for cosmic dissolution.”

Upaya chuckled unabashedly when he heard that. “Then our armaments are equally pitted and the outcome of this contest will be decided by skill alone. Garuda’s feather contains pure *Rajas* – the active tendency that propels atoms, bodies, planets, stars and galaxies. It’s impossible to break or bend. What’s more, it can generate wind anywhere. Watch!”

The Ashura wrapped his arms tightly around himself, gripping haft in one hand. He unwound as he kicked off from the top step, whirling toward her. An intense gale blasted Ishtar through the glass enclosure overhead and out of sight into the starry night.

Upaya went to the closest stable ledge and searched the sky intently. Minutes seemed to pass although they were actually breaths. *She has to be up there somewhere he judged or can she transpose?* The hair on his neck stood on end when he sensed her standing behind him. He turned in time to block an impending coup-de-grace but it sent him smashing through the fissure below.

Momentarily Soma arrived, floating above the epicenter of this disaster. He was flushed pale with anger. “Would someone care to explain why my estate is being rent asunder from within?”

There was an audible shift beneath the wreckage followed by a loud explosion of dust and debris. Upaya had pulverized what he was buried under using his clawed fists. Brushing detritus from shoulders he pointed at Ishtar, “Lord Chandra, thy brethren hath planted an assassin betwixt thine carefree auspices.”

“Girl is this true? Wait a minute – you – you’re a Yogini!”

“Guilty as charged, what of it?”

“Why the nerve. I was explicitly told by Kali’s emissary that this sort of interference would **not** occur!”

“Yaksha was here?”

“Yes, and she spoke of your coming without describing its circumstances. I have even put a helping of Amrita aside for you as per Devi Kali’s request. If it is Kali-Ma that you serve and not Indra then you must comply with her orders and put your weapon away this instant. That is the sole stipulation of our sacred pact!”

Ishtar hesitated briefly. She was seriously driven to avenge her sister but incapable of contravening Kali’s mandate. Besides she felt her point had been made and Amrita was a highly acceptable consolation prize. The war sickle went back into its sling and the Yogini bowed at the waist, hands folded. “This has been a most sporting match Prince Upaya.”

“Indeed cheeky girl. We shall have to do it again sometime.”



Afterwards Ishtar took the opportunity to publicly disclose that the Apsaras were being held hostage by Indra and his subordinates. This of course caused much commotion among the Ghandharvas, who were insistent on taking action. Various arguments ensued between members of the alliance until Priestess Kaitabh of the Rakshas came forward and introduced her sister Namuchi. That lamia proceeded to transfigure before their eyes, becoming indistinguishable from Ishtar in every respect. Kaitabh claimed that she had numerous subalterns at her command with this same ability, suggesting that they could switch places with heaven’s dancers in order to act as decoys and lay an ambush. Thus was hatched a plan to lure their rivals into palaver with the pretense that Upaya had been snared via Kama’s love-mantra.

Soma had felt it necessary to underline their scheme with an indispensable caveat, “Be wary ye Rakshas, this illusion will not work on all Devatas. I for one can see through it clearly as can my cousin Surya.”

The errant Yogini then put forth that she could further empower Namuchi with Kama’s charm, in case her detachment did cross the sun god. It wasn’t long thereafter that those shape-shifters were surreptitiously dispatched to the woods bordering Amaravati. Presently, Namuchi herself was in the Apsara’s temple, still assuming Ishtar’s role. She had already conveyed the workings of their plot to Queen Priya, who she sat next to while they both waited for King Indra’s arrival.

The embattled monarch now entered and regarded them blankly. “Back so soon Lady Ishtar? What news from the moon?”

“Esteemed lord, the mission has been a dashing success. Prince Upaya is currently in my thrall and I come to deliver a message on behalf of Commander Viswava. Having learnt of the situation here the Ghandharvas wish to conciliate.” She handed Indra a scroll, which bore the unmistakable seal of Viswava.

The king unfurled said scroll and took his time mulling over its import. According to what he read Viswava and his renegade knights would betray Soma’s forces during the upcoming struggle on one condition: that they be summarily reunited with their wives. Indra was pleased with these results but debated whether or not to temporarily relocate these Apsaras. It would be a lot easier to use them for leverage and prevent their abscondence if they were kept in his lunar outpost. Such a move would also ensure the continued support of their husbands since they would have to fight that much harder to forestall harm from befalling their mates. Having considered those angles he turned back to the women, “You say that Upaya is under your control Ishtar?”

“Verily highest king. He is as docile toward me as Lady Tara is to Lord Chandra. I would have brought him to you if it didn’t rouse suspicion.”

“You did the right thing and I am duly impressed by your expedience in this trial,” Indra commended. “Queen Priya, prepare the full complement of Apsaras to depart by morning. We are all going to the moon together.”

“Straightaway my liege.”



That same night by the shadowed moon, a swarm of Rakshas snuck into the city. Yet not only did they go undetected – they opened a portal back to the forest – enabling the real Apsaras to escape. Namuchi let Priya know that a vessel lay not far off from where they were being sent and that a guide awaited as they spoke. In the morning Varuna escorted the impostors to a specially designed transport vehicle. Even then the Devatas were none the wiser that something calamitous was happening.



From a watchtower at one corner of their provisional fortifications Surya observed as Vayu aided Varuna in landing Lord Indra’s long overdue reinforcements. It looked like Yama had come too along with fresh Kinnara shock-troops. To be sure, the god of death brought with him as many equine henchmen as he had originally lent them. Surya’s curiosity was piqued when he saw a long rhombus-shaped structure being set down painstakingly by the Maruts. The sun god descended for a closer inspection and was met by both Yama and Indra. “What have we here?” Surya pried while motioning to the apparent ark.

“A little insurance to safeguard us against the Ghandharvas,” the king told him.

“Apsaras then?”

“Correct. No more questions though. Chandra has probably detected us and we must ready ourselves for the imminent confrontation. Help Yama organize our ranks.”

Few outside this circle knew that Yama had not been born a Devata. Factually speaking he was humanity’s prototype and had been granted Amrita by Lord Brahma for being the first person to ever reach Patala – the underworld. From then on he had existed as a custodian of the nether sphere, the bleakest social station anywhere. At the moment he stared dispassionately at Surya (who was incidentally his creator). The solar deity found it hard not to turn up his nose at Yama’s sweaty facial hair and the lumbering ox he rode in on, which defecated loudly then as if to thoroughly vex him. Surya restrained an impulse to undo his creation before finally saying: “I’ll fetch my horse.”



Indra was right in supposing that Soma might sense their accession. Indeed, the traitor had been keeping a close eye on his kin the whole time. He knew that they were located in the craterous badlands where they’d established a crude bivouac using jagged rocks. Earlier on the lunar god had experienced a compulsion to expel them from his principality by causing moonquakes but he was confident that his allies would spare him such trouble. Now that Queen Priya and her vassals were hidden safely inside a guesthouse, their husbands’ reprisal should prove a grand spectacle.

Outside Chandra’s palace Upaya’s vast army was beginning to mobilize. Viswava had taken his contingent ahead to play the part of scouts and for the second time in as many nights Soma shrouded the Devata’s hemisphere with uttermost darkness.



“This is nothing compared to the despairing murk of Patala,” Yama ridiculed, spitting on the ground. His buffalo kicked up dust when its ears caught wind from flapping wings.

Vayu flew up to intercept those responsible. “Halt and identify yourselves in the name of Indra, destroyer of worlds, Maharajah of the Devatas!”

“Lord Vayu, it is I, Commander Viswava of the Ghandharvas.”

“Ah yes, the duplicitous brood of Garuda. State thy business.”

“We come to give thy Rajah word of the Ashura’s advance and to resume our allegiance to thine clan.”

Having heard the exchange King Indra levitated to their level and made public, “Thou art welcome back into mine fold provided ye kneel and kiss Vayu’s ring.”

An awkward pause preceded the Ghandharva commander’s response, “Where are our women?”

The storm gods casually pointed out the ark, illumined by its proximity to Surya.

“Fair enough, I shall do what you have asked of me.”

Captain Silat held out his lance lengthwise so that Viswava could perch there. The fledged immortal stooped below Vayu, bringing his rostrum near the Devata’s ring. He looked up at the wind god and took in his smug expression. Split-seconds later a pair of scimitars glimmered through the darkness. Vayu’s severed head hung in the air briefly before vanishing like his body.

“What have you done?” Indra clamored!

“Annihilate the Maruts!” Viswava commanded his comrades. Therewith commenced a massacre as the sons of Vayu, caught largely at unawares, received the vindictive strikes of Ghandharva arms. Varuna tried to intervene but was met midst the fray by a Yogini.

“You put your proud ancestor to shame Viswava,” Lord Indra berated, hovering opposite to him, “and you force me to douse my hands in the blood of Apsaras.”

“You’ll **never** get that chance!” The raptor reproached. No sooner than he uttered those words, cacophonous rumblings were heard emanating from a distance. These rumblings came from the drums of devastation played by the Daityas in Upaya’s front line. The planetoid’s surface shook beneath the weighty steps of Danava titans who blared morbid notes through bone trumpets.

Coming to terms with dire straits Indra called on Yama, “Fire the artillery **now!**”

Great balls of fire pierced the surrounding shadows. Fortunately, shield-bearers among the giants mitigated the carnage inflicted by bombs and spiked missiles, although they could not stave off injury for all. After the initial cannonade unharmed demons charged the barracks. Berunni’s people made a concerted effort to slam clubs, hammers and mauls simultaneously against the barricade. Their combined pounding caused seismic ripples that even Soma could feel back at headquarters. Breaking through the makeshift gates Upaya’s infantry collided head on with seven thousand Kinnaras.

Concurrently the Rakshas locked inside the box colluded to attract Surya's attention. He was unable to ignore an insistent torrent of whispers in his mind that drew him to the ark and cajoled him to unlatch its door. *What compels me?* He wondered, not wholly given to their trickery. Nevertheless, Surya wanted to find out what was amiss for himself. He threw open the ark and out burst the ghouls, screeching aggressively as they clawed past their unsuspecting liberator.

"Damnation!" The solar Devata wailed, bursting defensively with deadly flames that scathed at least a score of Rakshas. "I'll incinerate you lot!"

Namuchi's division then received the support of Kaitabh's airborne sorceresses who started casting projectile spells that laid waste to ordnance. Priestess Kaitabh taunted Surya openly, "Again we spoil your sport shining one. Understand that you need to get past me to hurt my spawn."

"Foul witch, thou art drunk on Amrita. I shall show thee its pure essence!"

Surya drew his bow and let fly an arrow, which created an incommensurable thermonuclear explosion across the firmament, making ashes of countless Rakshas.

The priestess shrieked irately, grew four more wings and covered her body in sharp quills while diving straight for the sun god with outstretched arms. She twirled her body like a drill and sped toward him, emitting a sinister radiance.

Surya tossed his bow aside and brought his burning palms together to cast an ardent spout of empyrean fire, which would instantly kill anyone who hadn't drunk Amrita. Though slowed by it this Raksha continued working through to her target. The spin of her attack accompanied by black magic dispersed the heat enough for her to come within range to graze the Devata's chest. Feeling that pinprick the indignant deity augmented his blast and Kaitabh went reeling into a safety net set up by her acolytes.

Surya now became lightheaded and stumbled involuntarily, confused. There was a sharp stinging sensation throughout his being. Suppressing this pain he picked up his bow and whistled with his fingers. A stellar stallion rushed to its master, who scattered a spread of blooming flares overhead as they broke for the foothills.

"Let him go," ordered the head priestess, heavily singed. "Namuchi, make sure our conjurers finish what was begun." With that Kaitabh retired from the field to have her wounds tended.

Elsewhere Ishtar tussled energetically with Varuna, Lord of Water. Around them a pitched aerial clash between bird-warriors and air-elementals continued although it was clear that the Maruts didn't stand a chance of surviving it.



“So Devi Kali sees fit to side with this rabble instead of us?” The aquatic god criticized. “And you girl, you’re neither Apsara nor Yogini, you’re something far worse: an Earth woman! I don’t know why it didn’t dawn on me before but that oversight can be fixed.”

“That they are blind to their own faults is truly the Devata’s most glaring fault,” countered Ishtar. “Remember, it was you who drowned the human race with tsunamis.”

“You dare begrudge my Dharmic duty?”

“If that was your duty then exacting retribution for the species is mine!”

“You’ll never manage it,” scoffed the Devata. “I’ll wipe you out like the rest of your failed kind.” Deriding her thus, he summoned water hidden deep inside craters. Tall polar geysers birthed heavy clouds, which precipitated rainfall on their hemisphere. Indra, god of lightning, wasted no time directing potent surges from overhanging swells to the Danavas. Stroboscopic forks of light crackled toward their aimed trajectories in the wake of a resounding thunderclap!

Hundreds of giants were stopped dead in their tracks, some convulsing as they toppled noisily onto the turf. Berunni Twenty-Arms though, was unfazed. He strode in silent obscurity as he made for the Devata king.

“Very impressive,” Ishtar complimented Varuna backhandedly. “Maybe next you can get flowers to grow upon this barren wasteland?”

“Arrogant child, you more than most should know better than to underestimate the lethal nature of water.” Having said this Varuna formed hard-hitting jet streams that Ishtar had to parry with her sickle. Any that missed carved through stone ridges like a gust of wind parting ocean waves. The marine lord raised the frequency of those volleys in an effort to throw his opponent off balance.

No slouch, the Yogini gained ground while swatting away his watery barrage. She closed the distance separating them and took a swipe at that incredulous Devata. But to her chagrin, Varuna’s body liquefied and reconstituted itself outside of her reach again. Before she could catch her breath Ishtar was sideswiped by a moving wall of water, which knocked her to the floor.

“You almost had me,” Varuna shrugged off. “If the fountains of sorrow are not enough to inter you, I mustn’t hold back any longer.” The oceanic god gathered all available water about himself, giving rise to a towering cascade that he held in place. “This would be more than enough to inundate any Terran city. Perish by it scion of Bhuloka!”

A veritable tide tumbled forth, sweeping Kinnaras and Daityas aside indiscriminately while rolling rapidly toward Ishtar. The girl stood perfectly still and focused on its approach. From one moment to the next the human Yogini invoked Kali's mantra and swung her cutlass, rebuffing that torrent. Varuna gasped in horrified disbelief as his own element crashed back upon him, dissipating cohesion and bringing his life to its end.

Indra could not help noticing that another of his closest kith had met with demise. Viswava flew away earlier leaving him to deal with the Ashuras and now this girl bested his right-hand lieutenant. For honor's sake he confronted the culprit. "Well done Ishtar, daughter of man, but don't think for a second that I'll let you pass unchallenged."

"You've got bigger problems to worry about," she pointed out coyly. Amid dark and din the king had failed to discern that Berunni Twenty-Arms was standing behind and below him. A monstrous hand clasped around the unsuspecting Devata's waist, pulling him down to where the Danava could scowl at him from above.

"All too many of my kin have died at your hand King of The Devatas. Hence shall I enforce our justice."

Berunni hurled Indra through a stretch of palisade and consecutively thrust a massive polearm after him. The halberd grinded basalt, scraping at its sorry victim. Indra staggered a few steps prior to regaining composure. Flustered but enraged this Devata fought back by weaving a web of lightning that paralyzed the offending Danava with electrocution.

"None, not even you who've drunk Amrita can escape my bejeweled net. Ashura filth you too will die by these hands!"

A stone's throw away astride the shoulders of Andhaka Eight-Arms, Upaya oversaw the ongoing slaughter of Yama's foot soldiers. Unknown to all Yama himself had already fled the scene since he possessed free access to Patala from anywhere. Now aided by his mystic helmet the Daitya watched a wrangle between Indra and Berunni.

"It appears your chieftain is being overpowered by the Devata's king," Upaya reported into Andhaka's ear. "That's my cue to cut into their dance, take me to them."

Without hesitation this armored behemoth obeyed the Ashura prince and sprinted in the specified direction, covering much distance with his gait. Quick on the uptake Indra spread his web, zapping Andhaka as well.

"Bring on the entire host of Danavas. I have plenty left to go around!"

Just then the Devata glimpsed someone leaping from atop that second giant. Upaya generated a draft using his wing-blade, dispelling Indra's electric field.

Recovering, Berunni swiveled incredibly fast dealing a sound blow to the vulnerable god. Winded, Indra bounced against the moon's surface several times before his body rolled to a stop. Shortly the king picked himself up though stiffened by aches. Demons encroached and he had no tricks left. Yet as the feline Daitya floated downward he spotted something bright coming closer from afar. The prince shielded himself instinctually with Garuda's feather. This incoming shot was an incendiary that blew a new caldera into the valley as its mushroom-shaped effulgence ascended!

The Maharajah heard Surya's voice inside his head; *King Indra – this foray is a failure and we must cut our losses. Flee with me before it's too late.*

Not requiring further convincing Indra teleported to his elephant and stormed off.

It was mostly luck that could be held accountable for the survival of Upaya and those close to him. By such virtue they lived to revel in another monumental victory.

## [ 6 ] Curious Occurrences

Seated on four sides of the most intricate dice board ever designed, Shiva Mahadeva, Nandi the bull, Ganesha and their honored guest Bhrngin (Peer of the *Bhuta-Ganas*) were barged in on by the goddess Parvati. Having trudged up Mount Kailash Devi was rather more upset than usual. She threw up her arms and began scolding her husband,

“Why Shiva, I inside the house cooking and cleaning while you sit out here on the snowy summit smoking *bhang* and corrupting my son Ganesha with these louts!”

“But precious the boy is playing your turns. Besides, I thought relocating the game here would give you respite from our loud bantering.”

“If that’s true then be careful oh remover of obstacles. Your father is both a liar and a cheat. He still owes me for our last wager.”

The elephant-headed god lifted his trunk and giggled uncontrollably.

“Forgive me my darling Parvati but I had previously promised to settle that debt. Is there something else pending? We happen to be right in the middle of a pivotal toss.”

“As a matter of fact your royal hind ass, there is something else! Lord Brahma and the Devatas have arrived seeking an audience with their derelict overseer.”

“Goddamn it! That’s all I need. I’ve got a good mind to banish Brahma to Antarloka. Of course they won’t take no for an answer so you may as well bring them.”

“They followed me, which means they’ll be here shortly. Now put out your pipe, I don’t need the whole universe knowing that I’m married to an addict.”

Mahadeva complied. He patted down a tiger-skin pelt and leant on his trident while all present awaited the newcomers. It was not a long until Brahma and his grandsons showed up short on breath. The ultimate destroyer engaged them at once,

“Greetings King Indra, what brings thee and thy brethren to Sivaloka?”

“Pardon this disruption my lord. As you no doubt already know we have been waging war against our clansman Soma Chandra for kidnapping Guru Brihaspati’s wife. I am quite sorry to say that the campaign has not been working out favorably. On the contrary, we have lost Vayu, Varuna and every last Marut to a terrifying host of Ashuras serving Soma. The moon god has distributed Amrita among them, closing the gap between our strength and theirs. Merciful Nilakantha please deliver us from doom!”

“Is that all?” Shiva phoned while sighing. “I suppose that your miserable faces do warrant my intervention. Therefore three nights hence shall I shatter the moon and defeat your enemies in a single stroke. Be ready to seize whomever you wish to live.”

“Oh mightiest Deva we are eternally indebted to your kindness.”

After Indra vocalized that praise he and the other Devatas prostrated themselves before Shiva, whose pet cobra necklace hissed when its tamer insisted:

“Lord Brahma, march these Ants back down the hill and take care never to disturb my game again.”

“Certainly Mahadeva.”

Parvati departed along with them but left behind a threat, “You had better not be late for dinner. I don’t want you playing out here all night. Be assured that I **will** interfere with your beloved game if tested. And don’t even think of inviting that skeletal scamp Bhrngin to our family’s table.”

“Yes dear.” The husband accorded. When he believed her to be out of earshot, he addressed three-legged Bhrngin, “So where were we?”

“We were on the verge of discovering if my faction can recognize their master prior to meeting with extinction. I say there’s no question yet you choose to differ.”

“Impious dwarf, allow me to illuminate your obscured mind.”

Shiva blew on a pair of ivory dice and rolled them onto the board . . .



Because Upaya and Ishtar occupied rooms within the same vicinity it was inevitable for them to bump into each other at some point. During the interval in which the last battle took place Soma had restored the wing of his palace damaged when Ashura and Yogini crossed swords earlier. Now they both made awkward attempts to sidestep one another and conversation naturally ensued,

“You fought with exceptional skill and grace the other night Lady Ishtar. I commend you for smiting Devata Varuna. Amrita has made you an unimaginably formidable adversary. I do hope that we can put our differences aside and move forward as allies if not friends from here on in.”

“Thank you sweet prince. I too would like that very much and should add that I am equally impressed by your leadership and valor. Berunni Twenty-Arms might not be

alive if you hadn't stepped in to save him from King Indra's clutches. The three tribes are truly one under Upaya Panther-Mask."

The Daitya cocked his head forward respectfully. He then proceeded to probe, "Where is you're going at this late hour?"

"To be honest, I haven't the faintest idea. I simply get so restless being cooped up around here with nothing to do. A good walk may relax me."

"Have you been to Lord Chandra's personal observation deck yet?"

"No – is it worth the visit?"

"Yes – but very few have access. If it pleases you I will gladly squire you there."

"Sounds like a charming pastime. Lead the way milord."

The observation deck housed a magnificent rotating mirror on which either the local terrain or that of Antarloka's various provinces could be visually scanned. Upaya instructed Ishtar on the usage of four levers, which adjusted their view in different ways. There was no shortage of things to see and the two spent many hours spying on events elsewhere through the looking glass. At length they unwittingly aligned the controls in a manner that placed a ravaged planet on display. Veins of molten magma glowed feebly against its black cloud-covered orb.

Ishtar's jaw dropped before she was able to articulate, "That's my home world – it's Earth!"

"Bhuloka," Upaya consonated. "My one secret fear is that a similar fate may await Antarloka."

For a minute they stared in silence together until the girl started sobbing softly. The prince put a hand on her shoulder and wiped her tears away delicately with another.

"I wonder if all the women of Earth were as beautiful as you are."

She smiled faintly, "You're only saying that to console me."

"Untrue, it's well-known that Daitya females aren't particularly comely."

That elicited her laughter, "Is this also true of Daitya men?"

"You be the judge," he decreed while ceremoniously removing his helmet.

Ishtar couldn't help gasping, "But milord, what if I recited Kama's mantra?"

"I can think of worse ways to pass eternity than enthralled by a gorgeous woman like you. Go ahead and do your worst."

Upaya stood before Ishtar, unmasked, and she beheld his handsome countenance for the first time. She ran a hand along its smooth features and he pulled her in closer to himself. No more words transpired as their lips met within a moonlit embrace.



Though officially Antarloka's capital, Amaravati (the immortal city), took up but one small corner of that dimension's broad expanse. Being an ideal plane its geography corresponded to a wide gamut of possible mental and emotional states. So whereas Amaravati was analogous to concentration, knowledge and bliss – the outlying southern area known as Naraka – matched torment, hallucinations and fear. It had originally been Yama's main jurisdiction until Upaya and his Ashuras helped Yama gain the upper hand against the Nagas further south inside Patala's seven dungeons.

At this moment in Naraka, Skhanda (Shiva's newly acknowledged son), sat meditating amid a field of burning bodies. In actuality those corpses were *pretas* – hungry ghosts who had wandered there by accident – and who moaned in pain as their astral bodies were consumed by etheric fires. Skhanda's own divine flesh seared with that same heat, which enveloped him too. Nonetheless he withstood it while mentally reciting compassionate mantras for all the *pretas*' wayward souls. After long repetition he chanted the sacred syllable aloud and altogether extinguished these pyres. Still he sat in unwavering awareness before being beset by verbal critics,

"Who is this upstart that dares quell the flames of Naraka and treads our charnels as if he were their proprietor?"

The Devata stretched his legs assuming a dignified stance and lifting his spear. "Pisachas and Ganas – you're naught but lesser fiends – hardly qualifiable as demons."

"Whoever you are we shall have your head on a pike before this night is through. Nobody has ever defeated the Bhuta-Gana's brigade on their own territory."

All around that fledgling war god sinister wraiths took on the most menacing physical forms and a legion of grotesque goblins arose from Naraka's blood-red soil. Pisachas rattled their appendages while Ganas battered shields with cudgels and maces.

"I see you do as you please here where Dharma runs thin. But since Dharma and Karma are closely related I have to teach you Bhuta-Ganas some respect."

“Mere malarkey,” they disdained openly as one. “We may only be tamed by Shiva Mahadeva himself!”

Thus those hellions assailed Skhanda en masse, seeking to overcome strength by sheer numbers. The youth subdued line after oncoming line of them, inflicting fatal gashes with his inflexible metallic pole. Its length shimmered like a shooting star across midnight sky but even so the Ganas and Pisachas somehow regenerated themselves and renewed their onslaught. This affray carried on for what seemed an eternity yet neither side gave any sign of a waning commitment to winning. Finally the young Devata slapped his staff onto the field, unsettling their foundation with a most shocking tremor. He followed that up by intoning his father’s mantra thrice:

“*Om Namah Sivayah!*”

Skhanda’s third eye opened and emitted a radiant beam that melted down everything and everyone in its path. Their majority liquidated the Bhuta-Ganas had no choice but to withdraw. At last the godling slumped, allowing himself well-earned rest. When he was convinced that they wouldn’t bother him any longer he slept awhile. However, during his slumber he heard whispers at the very periphery of percipience,

“Remarkable. This lad has single-handedly vanquished most of the Bhuta-Gana’s brigade. He is undoubtedly a peerless Devata. What should we do?”

“Hold back. He is extremely dangerous and perilous to underestimate. Bhrngin ought be present to provide us advice.”

“The night remains young. We shall mix caution with courage for we are Rudras formed from the exhale of Bhairava.”

Skhanda was roused by a tumultuous racket as the bloodied dirt of that waste pelted his blue skin with its pebbles. Posturing defensively in a trice, he barely riposted the headlong charge of multiple attackers. Repelled they regrouped among shade, which afforded their jet outlines an excellent camouflage. Curved daggers gleamed held by countless invisible hands. Again they advanced on him with such rapid stealth that some of those dirks did sink in his flanks.

The boyish warlord exploded with rage, releasing another *Ajna Chakra* discharge! Although on this occasion the Rudras impossibly wrapped themselves around the edges of his luminous stream like a tunnel. When its brilliance subsided they surrounded their quarry with mocking howls. A peal of thunder broke in pitch blackness and the knives came rushing forward once more. Then as these Rudras lunged nearest to Skhanda, that Devata sprung five more heads with equal pairs of arms. Taken by surprise many of those specters found themselves grappled and fell victims to the rod.



“How can this be?” They despaired. “It appears he is strong as Bhairava!”

On each of his foreheads the god’s tertiary eyes shone forebodingly. Twelve upper limbs could spin a lance better than any two ever would. Rejecting whirlwind he reprimanded:

“Only fools would provoke me to fire in all six directions. If you value life surrender and pledge loyalty to me – Skhanda – Lord of Armies and Shiva’s direct heir!”

When the truth of that youth’s identity was revealed the Rudras realized their transgression and knelt before Skhanda, begging absolution,

“Forgive our sinful conduct and spare our worthless lives ye master of mysteries! We are forever at thy service son of Shiva Mahadeva.”

“So be it. Then abide with me whilst I await the advent of a Dharma Heruka.”

Thus were the surviving Pisachas, Ganas and dark howlers brought to heel by Skhanda; to carry out his bidding unquestioningly as members of that twilight battalion.



Farther south than Naraka, comprising the very bowels of Antarloka lay the cavernous dungeons of Patala. Until recently in heavenly history all its seven regions had been the principal abode of King Vasuki and his serpentine subordinates the Nagas.

Though theirs was possibly the eldest race inhabiting this plane it was simultaneously the least understood. If the dinosaurs of Earth had continued to evolve they would probably have looked like these Nagas. Some were oversized snakes while others ran on either two or four legs with reptilian agility. King Ananta, successor of the late King Vasuki, was (unlike his slithering sire) an upright biped.

Ananta’s own elite squadron had long resisted Yama’s unlawful annexation of their hallowed domain. Unluckily with increased support from Indra and later from Ashuras, Yama gradually confined Patala’s rightful rulers to the innermost dungeon. Ananta vividly recalled the battle during which Upaya Panther-Mask beheaded his father. If it hadn’t been foretold by Shesha-Naga, Ananta might not have been so at ease about it. Amongst his people there was no questioning the sooth spoken by their pythonic oracle. After all Shesha spent a greater part of his existence in Vaikuntha with Lord Vishnu (that Deva’s secluded paradise).

“Whence thy father is slain thou shalt have to take shelter within this deepest underground, to dwell here in pacific quietude until these caverns tremble as if the

heavens couldst collapse upon thine head. Cometh to me thence and I wilt guide thee further.”

So had Shesha counseled Ananta many cycles ago and today stalactites rained from the lofty ceilings above. Rivers of lava overflowed, spilling into the Naga’s last remaining refuge. Casualties were nominal but none harbored doubts that something significant must be happening over and outside Patala itself. Bearing those omens in mind the reigning serpent king saw fit to reenter the Temple of Shesha-Naga.

He was met at its entranceway by eight female votaries who ushered him below. They halted at an adorned balustrade, which looked out into a bottomless crevasse. The deified Naga’s disciples sang incantations that echoed from afar as their droning rebounded off an unseen canopy. Within the abyss there arose a timorous bubbling sound as water filled it. Subsequently the thousand heads of Shesha began emerging, spreading their majestic hoods inside that grotto. Each individual head wore a fragment of Bhuloka upon its crown: asteroids, comets, stars, pulsars, quasars, nebulas, white holes, black holes, naked singularities and things undiscovered or unimagined by Terrans. They were a bedazzling galaxy that appeared buoyant as the Naga bobbed its heads in wavelike motion. Ananta and his retinue were hypnotized via stare of two thousand emerald eyes. Forked tongues spewed draconic vapor when through them he dictated:

“Time is short, cyclical and inexistent Ananta-Naga. Heed my words then inside this fleeting perpetual instant. Tomorrow Yama returns with a prisoner in tow. A Prince of The Daityas who be also thy foe. Efface thine former grudges and set Ashuras free – ye shalt both obey the war god unto eternity.”

Regaining his wits the king questioned, “But honorable ancestor, what of our kingdom? I submit that we reclaim territories lost.”

“There isn’t any reason for what’s amiss to stay astray. Upaya’s far nobler than many care to say.”

“These are welcome tidings illustrious one. You have my thanks and obedience to count on in this course.”

“Superb. To Mahavishnu thy virtues wilt I wantonly endorse.”

Shesha-Naga retracted all his coils and King Ananta headed back to plan a coup on such brief notice.

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Lady Tara hummed contentedly to herself while she pruned flowers in Lord Chandra's hidden garden. Azaleas, hyacinths, lilies, magnolias, orchids, plumerias and an endless variety of similar blossoms flourished there in many vibrant hues. These too were vestigial specimens from Bhuloka, collected by Soma's own hands. He had recently shown her this greenhouse because he knew that she'd be thrilled tending it in his stead. Ironically, Tara would probably have behaved much the same way whether or not she fell under Kama's spell. But her attention was suddenly diverted when she noticed a nearby cloud formation dissolving to reveal a reflective surface as if fog were lifting from a placid lake. The view of Antarloka also faded and Tara could see the full moon represented ahead. Once this optical illusion culminated, the sky seemed to ripple like a pond 'neath rain.

Little did she realize that these were the effects of Shiva himself blurring the line between Sivaloka and this middling realm. Before long the steep outline of an inestimable mountain's summit replaced that apparition. Its apex became Mahadeva's dreadlocked head and Tara's eyes could scarcely make out his muscled neck and shoulders. The kidnapped bride screamed when he raised his hand overhead, for with it he bore *Trishula* (the trident scepter). She might have curled up and succumbed to fear had it not been for a known voice beckoning her,

“Lady Tara come hither this very instant!”

She looked back and saw that Kama was there upon rainbow parrot as always. Wasting no time the girl ran to him. He offered her a hand and they sped off together. Shiva inhaled sonorously then asserted:

“As 'twas found mid infinitude so it is and ever shall be.”

The destroyer brought *Trishula* down to bear and in the blink of an eye the lunar sphere was cracked in less than half – two thirds of it wrecked by that invincible weapon. Soma Chandra's fortress folded in on itself and a hollowed-out crescent shell of the moon descended made holocaust to barrens below. A larger part of the three Ashura tribes were thereby met with execution.



Upaya was rudely awoken by a kick to his side. He couldn't recall what had happened and wasn't given a chance to assess the surrounding desolation. His wrists were shackled and Surya propped him onto both feet only to punch his solar plexus. The sun god censured,

“You are lucky that Lord Indra wants you brought to him alive. Though perhaps not so lucky as I assume. There are definitely worse fates than death for those who defy us Devatas. Now follow me lowly beast lest I lose my even temper.”

Reluctantly obeying the Daitya surveyed those charring remnants of Soma's proud chateau. *May she have gotten away safely* he hoped. After covering a small distance they encountered King Indra, Agni, Guru Brihaspati and Yama. Behind them trailed a veritable slave-train composed of Danavas, Rakshas and Daityas. Upaya spotted his brother Vidyunmalin and his friend Andhaka Eight-Arms among these, as well as Berunni Twenty-Arms, Priestess Kaitabh, Commander Viswava and some Ghandharvas. Surya forced the prince to kneel before that company of Devatas and Guru Brihaspati came forth with a prismatic box, which contained the top half of Guru Shukra's head. Recognizing his sire's eyes the Daitya yawped in agonized fury,

“You'll never get away with this – mark my words – I'll kill you all!”

“Strong words Prince Upaya,” came Indra's retort, “but you are in no position to be uttering threats. Surya, take off his mask and let us finally see our enemy's face.”

That Ashura roared in pain as the solar Devata attempted to pry panther-helm from his head without success. Agni tried to help by holding the prince steady while Surya grilled his exposed neck, again to no avail. Both he and Agni faced Indra wearing befuddled expressions.

“It appears to be bound by one of Shukra's spells,” Brihaspati chimed in. “This helm needs to be shed voluntarily.”

“Useless priest I could have told **you** that,” the king belittled. “A skilled Brahmin would reverse the spell!”

Upaya Panther-Mask cachinnated openly, inciting Lord Indra to loose a bolt that propelled the upstart through ruins standing close by. The lightning god zipped to his side and continued to antagonize,

“I've not yet had the cruel pleasure of torturing another immortal. I'll separate you from that helmet even if I have to sever your head from its corpse. However we Devatas must first repair to Lord Chandra's tribunal. You shall be dealt with by me in due course. Yama, take these Ashuras to Patala and see to it that they become a lot more agreeable. Surya, bring the Ghandharvas along with us.”

Yama lassoed Upaya from atop his oxen mount. The death god then motioned forward with his club and the Kinnaras present whipped captives into a grueling march. They would soon join an amalgam of fallen demigods kept alive simply to undergo interminable spans of harrowing mutilation. All the same the sons of Shukra kept faith that Shiva would not forsake them to such a fate. The Daitya prince might find a way out and when he did, there would truly be hell to pay.

## [ 7 ] Rescued by Old Enemies

Assumed dead, Ishtar had managed to escape just in time since Kali-Ma blessed her with keen precognitive instincts. She had witnessed the moon's cataclysmic downfall firsthand and went on to stalk the caravan of survivors from far off altitudes. The Yogini understood that they were being herded to Patala where it could prove difficult to free them. Later when they'd entered the primary dungeon Ishtar started to wonder if she should use the conch shell to call upon her sisters. Yet while abandoning Upaya was unthinkable, proper timing was indispensable. Prematurely triggering Yama's alertness would be costly for just a dozen amazons. At least the terrain was not unfamiliar to her. Thus she kept up with Yama's procession as it trekked through inhospitable tracts of craggy rocks, some razor sharp.

Hanging high above them she held the best vantage for viewing the clinching of a double-pronged pincer made of lithe lizard figures. Seizing the chance Ishtar sounded her conch and a circle of Yoginis appeared around that human woman.

"Yaksha, there's little time to explain but we have to intervene below. Upaya is in mortal danger and he has exhibited virtue to me of late. Currently the Nagas struggle to liberate him and who more virtuous than they?"

"It is quizzical considering that they're former adversaries," surmised Yaksha. "But fret not. Mother has primed us to assist you as her equal. Our weapons and lives are at your disposal."

"I am honored dearest sister and you can all trust that my blade shall slay Yama – follow me fore!"



For his part Yama was effectively fending off Ananta's ambush by using the archetypal strength of his bronze mace. The Kinnaras started neighing ensemble and more squads rallied to this call; far-flung ones breaking through with archaic mortars and drills. Together in such a sprawling mass they were deadlocked with a sizable regiment of intimidating Nagas. Yama was not about to give Indra's hard-won prize over so easily. Ananta himself couldn't come within ten paces of that Devata because he was too busy hacking horse-men apart.

Gawking behind his mask Upaya saw Ishtar and her sisters descend to their level in formation. Not oblivious to their approach Yama struck at and displaced the subterranean air, stopping those Yoginis mid-flight. The death god vituperated them,

“Stand down daughters of Kali. I’ll not think twice about burying every last one of you to preserve Vedic order.”

“Yama, it is you who should surrender,” declaimed Ishtar, raising her weapon. “By Kali’s dictum Devata rule is abolished!”

Hearing this the first human struck out at that final one and felled a pair of serrated strata, which showered shrapnel upon Yoginis, Kinnaras and Nagas alike. Undaunted Ishtar launched herself into action, trumping Yama’s mace with her sickle. Disarmed, that god was powerless to prevent this girl from running him through. Entrails spilled onto the cave floor as Yama’s top half slid off his bottom half.

“Yaksha please free Upaya and the others – the rest of you follow me – we are going to help King Ananta’s forces!”

The serpent lord greeted her with praise,

“Well met young Yogini but we must hasten to defeat these Kinnaras forthwith. Since they do not belong here in Patala they quickly succumb to blind bloodlust. Let us wipe them out thoroughly.”

So commenced the extermination of an entire race. Shortly the surviving Ashuras fought alongside these Yoginis and Nagas against their common enemy. When this genocide concluded the victors stood knee-deep in bubbling blood. Upaya Panther-Mask had regained his freedom and a new alliance was reached by those old foes. Shiva’s dice were still in play.

## [ 8 ] Predestined Warpaths

The most infamous region of Patala was its fourth – Talatala – where Daitya, Danava and Raksha monarchs from past eras had been forever imprisoned. Inside this network of deep intercrossing tunnels were jail cells containing innumerable Ashuras. Central to everything was a circular courtyard, which lodged a platform on an incline. Upaya ascended steps up that slope because its peak afforded one top-down vistas of the dungeon’s extensive layout. A curling nautilus shell delivered the prince’s spoken words to inmates in this necropolis,

“Hear me ye who have been sentenced to eternal damnation by Vishnu and Indra. I am Upaya Panther-Mask, Prince of The Daityas and I come to proclaim thy salvation!”

At that a bedlam broke loose among those prisoners as they rattled their cages in tandem tantrum. Upaya waited for this racket to subside before continuing,

“Many of you remember me as a self-serving double-crosser but know that Amrita pumps through my veins and that Guru Shukra – my sire – has been murdered by our mutual nemesis: the Devatas.”

There was a grumbling now more subdued than before. He had piqued their interest and they awaited his follow-up, which went:

“Brothers and sisters let us put bygone differences behind and move forward together. Serve me faithfully and I shalt lead thee unto triumph. For King Indra himself wilt suffer cruel death at mine hands. If I canst count on thee then hail my name aloud!”

*“Oopaayaa, Oopaayaa, Oopaayaa!!!”*

Thus did the prince raise a second army, thrice as large as his first.



Later on the Daitya chief was led by Priestess Kaitabh down to one of the grittiest sections in Talatala. She pointed out a tar pit that seemed unremarkable after which she pulled on a rusty bar underfoot. The pool became drained of dark fluid thereby revealing another Raksha’s oversized head, spit through eyes and mouth with thick chisels. Nonetheless its ears twitched and tongue pulsated.

“He was found by Namuchi’s scouts,” Kaitabh told Upaya. “Rahu has probably been in this place longer than the others. He is the only other Ashura besides us to have tasted Amrita on his palette.”

“Interesting. What kind of condition is he really in?”

“If set free his eyeballs will surely regenerate. However he is predisposed to uncontrollable rabidity and should be kept under strict surveillance. What would you have us do noble prince?”

“Find something to contain him in and then release him from these shafts. I would have you transport that container along with us when we exit Patala.”

“Consider it done.”

Upaya knew that Rahu might come in handy during upcoming encounters; especially against Surya.



Agni – herald of Lord Indra’s court – accompanied a tall Yogini into the Maharajah’s throne room where Surya, Guru Brihaspati and Kama were also gathered. The ancient fire god introduced her,

“My lords I present Yaksha, captain of Kali-Ma’s honor guard.”

“Welcome daughter of Devi,” Indra saluted. “How may we assist you?”

“King Indra I bring dire tidings from Patala. Yama has been overthrown by Ananta-Naga and the Ashuras have regrouped under Upaya. Indeed he has sent me here to declare war on his behalf.”

The Devatas gasped in unison. Lord Indra rose from his throne and pressed on,

“And what of the Yoginis? Does Kali not intend to aid our cause?”

“No,” she verbalized and then vanished to thin air.

Those gods became astir with concern. Surya was vociferous above all,

“I told you to let me kill him! Now I’m through taking orders from this council and shall henceforth take matters into my own hands.”



“Surya you are the youngest and strongest left among us,” asseverated Agni. “For these same reasons we need you to stand at our side more than ever.”

“The only way to end this quickly is by challenging Upaya in person,” Surya argued. “Furthermore I possess something that belongs to him.”

“Do tell,” Indra solicited.

Instead the sun god showed them what he meant when he reached into himself and produced Garuda’s feather from within. This begat nods of admiration about him. Such was his determination to square accounts that Surya departed for Patala, alone.

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Locked inside a large holding cell framed by an immovable iron grate, Soma, Commander Viswava and his Ghandharvas awaited trial. Being official members of Amaravati’s royal court they were duly accorded a formal hearing before public jurors. Never in heaven’s extended history had any Devata been put to death by his peers. Chandra ran the risk of becoming an exceptional case in that regard and his aides were no better off than he. A morbid silence pervaded their atmosphere until they beheld Kama coming toward them on fleet feet. Desire personified brought them up to speed on current affairs,

“Rejoice ye reprobates thy trial hast been postponed. Upaya and his cohorts have been freed from wretched Patala by King Ananta and the Nagas!”

All heads perked inquisitively at this revelation. During their successive uproar the voice of Viswava carried more than anyone else’s,

“Lord Kama please tell us what has become of our wives the Apsaras?”

“Let your mind rest at ease commander. They survived as most of you have and are being held in custody at another facility.”

Following several related questions from other bird-men, Soma Chandra (who had remained silent up till then) snapped his fingers in annoyance. The Ghandharvas acquiesced and heard him speak thusly,

“You see all is not lost and Dharma abides by us yet. Now tell me cousin Kama, how difficult do you think it will be to release us once Upaya attacks? As our alliance with those Ashuras persists we must stand close together with them for better or worse.”

“Leave it to me,” Kama inspirited, leaving their midst with a wink. The hour of reckoning was nearly at hand and everybody could tangibly feel it.

## - Interstice -

*Beyond the farthest edges of Prakriti (creation) lay Lord Vishnu's abode: Vaikuntha. Gossamer swans and other exotic fowl swam or flew there. The boughs of trees in full blossom wafted petals onto the immaculate lawn of this veritable Eden. Here Brahma's consort Sarasvati - goddess of music and artistry, was putting on an outdoor recital at which Parvati and Lakshmi (Shiva and Vishnu's wives, respectively) sat front row center. But apart from Brahma their husbands were nowhere in sight. Knowing that their female counterparts would be enraptured by Sarasvati's performance Mahadeva and Mahavishnu strayed into Vaikuntha's abstract weald. They arrived at a circle of stones whence Vishnu cleared the underbrush to reveal an exact replica of Shiva's dice board.*

*"You see, all our pieces have entered the stage of fruition." Mahadeva explained. "Would you care to place a wager?"*

*"At this critical phase it is only prudent that I do."*

*"Certainly though I am curious to find out how you will approach the dilemmas presented by these particular circumstances. Things aren't quite the same in this Kalpa."*

*Mahavishnu rapidly analyzed every nuance of that game's progress before announcing:*

*"Despite grim appearances I shall stake reputation on my nephews the Devatas. They are bound to win even if it means that I myself must enter Antarloka."*

*"So you think to contend with a scion of my loins? Preposterous!"*

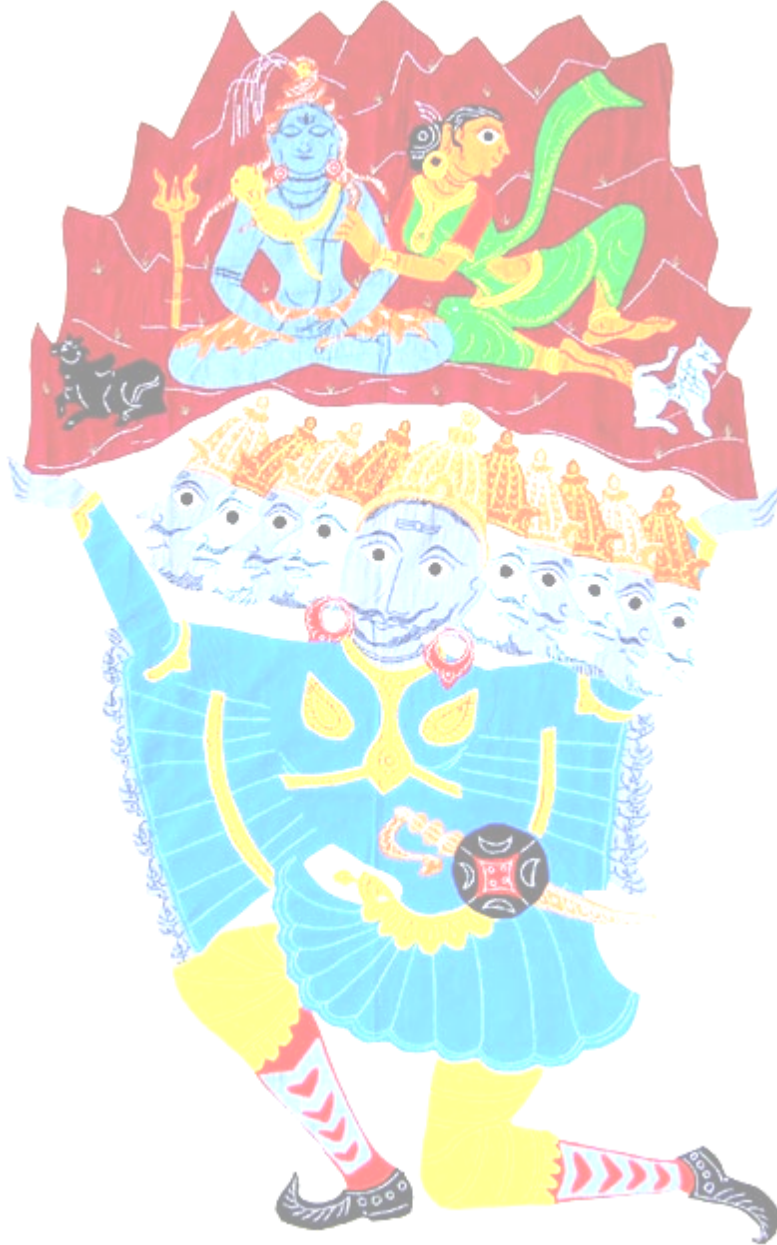
*"Says one brimming with overconfidence to a second who is unaffected by the three Gunas and wholly capable of manipulating Maya's veil."*

*"Very well then I accept your wager even if it reinforces belief in our difference when we are in fact nothing short of identical."*

*“Games within games. Mirrors unto infinite regress. The heedless aren’t deserving of self-evident truths. Yet you and I must also transcend each other’s subjectivity.”*

*With that, Lord Vishnu picked up a pair of ebony dice and tossed them onto the board.*

## *Act Three – Tremendous Upheavals*



## [ 9 ] Surya Sets

A Rudra scout named Eshana genuflected in Skhanda's presence and delivered his report,

“My lord, an inscrutable source of brightness draws nigh. We Rudras have attempted to becloud it without any success.”

Skhanda studied the horizon and nodded pensively. He instructed Eshana,

“Tell your kindred to withdraw and let whatever may come forth. I believe myself acquainted to this light's fount.”

The scout carried out that warlord's request and within a few minutes Surya could be seen riding his steed up steep hillside. Before long he came across his kinsman whereupon they locked stares and discoursed:

“Karttikeya! Us Devatas decimated by demons under Chandra's employ and yet you repose here while consorting with Pisachas, Ganas and Rudras.”

“Steady yourself cousin. Karttikeya is no longer my name since I am Skhanda – son of Shiva Mahadeva and head over all the hosts of Antarloka.”

“So you've finally learnt about your real heritage? But if what you say is true accompany me to Patala and command your legion against the Ashuras, newly allied with King Ananta's Nagas.”

“I won't lift a finger to aid those who have concealed my actual identity from me. Besides, I specifically told you early on that you were flirting with disaster. Even now you go on a fool's errand. For the sun has no place in the land of shadow.”

“Irrelevant. Fear is not in my makeup and your negligence leaves one duty-bound without recourse. The underworld shall tremble beneath me and I'll personally see to it that we Devatas remain in power like always.”

“Surya you are brave to a fault. I have it from the highest authority that the Ashuras will prevail no matter what. Why embark on a misadventure in which you may well lose your life due to a misplaced sense of obligation?”

“Why? Because of pride and principle! Do you plan to bar my way?”

“On the contrary, I wish you luck in your endeavor. Take care brilliant cousin.”

Blessed by Skhanda Surya circumvented the Bhuta-Gana's brigade and descended into the depths of Patala. True to his previous words, the subterrane shook when he entered, as if 'twere objecting the ingress of such resplendence.



Vitala, the second dungeon was an abysmal glacier where jarring blizzards blew perpetually through the mountains. At present Upaya found himself on its highest plateau accompanied by his Daitya troops as well as Ishtar and her Yogic sorority. The Nagas and Danavas were already descending the mountainside ahead of them while Kaitabh and her Rakshas comprised their rearguard, still ascending from behind.

Because he donned a reptilian leather cape that buffered him from wind and frost Upaya couldn't help noticing a drastic increase in temperature. Snowdrifts melted as hail evaporated on the heat blur of a decreasingly faint and scintillating glow. Without further warning an ice shelf broke off loudly at that company's fore when the tundra below was rocked by multiple impacts coinciding with compelling coruscations.

Vidyunmalin pushed his way through the crowd to update his younger brother,

“Upaya, Surya comes forth wielding unmatched power like usual. Many giants and serpents lie interred in his wake.”

*A lot sooner than I expected* the prince thought to himself. Keeping his wits he urged those about him,

“Listen, wait for me to grab his attention and then continue moving onward. I am the one that he wants.”

Almost on cue the sun god galloped to their level and confronted that Daitya,

“There you are – Upaya – I congratulate you on your expedient escape. Nevertheless I have come to settle our old score face to face. Prepare to perish!”

Surya fired out a fusillade of exploding arrows, causing everyone to scatter and the prince himself to recoil. Upaya raced down the opposite incline, backtracking away from his assailant. Infuriated by this flagrant display of cowardice the sun gave chase while haranguing,

“Let it be known that dispossessed of his precious sword Upaya Panther-Mask is nothing but a knave. Hence shall I – Surya – dispatch him to the grave!”

So that solar Devata went after his furtive quarry, hellbent on obtaining victory in this decisive showdown. He still held Garuda's feather inside himself.



Priestess Kaitabh and those around her balked when they saw and heard a series of volcanic salvos pelting a glacial mass further up along the mountainous slope. Inevitably, this led to an avalanche, which rumbled threateningly as it came toward them. Every Raksha instinctually lifted off the ground to avoid said threat. Namuchi's unit also bore aloft a steel crate, mounted on sturdy poles. Kaitabh then told them,

“It appears to be Upaya on whom Surya is gaining. They aren't very far now. Ready yourselves to unlatch the cage on my mark.”

Deft like any cat the Ashura prince skimmed that snowslide and wrapped his cape under himself, stomping through it onto advancing crest. Invigorated by Amrita he bounced over Surya who was more incensed than ever. That angry god unleashed a flurry of fiery *astras* – fabled weapons that scorched Vitala's inner dome. Unable to dodge such concentrated combustions Upaya plummeted into moguls, which thankfully put out the flames eating at his garb. He reached out through the Nous to Kaitabh; *Release Rahu immediately!*

Accordingly the Raksha's high priestess signaled Namuchi's team who complied with prior orders by throwing Rahu's portable prison wide open. Though lacking a body that crazed demon's head had become swollen because sacred nectar flowed through it. His mutilated face was ghastly to behold and Surya knew fear for the first time in his life. Rahu flew straight at his ancient condemner, pouncing on the sun with gaping fangs. Surya heroically resisted, preventing this monster's maw from clamping down on him. As these two wrestled to the snowy surface Upaya's immortal eyes perceived an unmistakable shape inside Surya. Taking heart the Daitya bounded forward and buried his clawed fists into that Devata's midsection.

Surya griped stoically, “Upaya – you coward!”

Upaya snickered cruelly, “Surya – you fool!”

Having said that the conquering Ashura cleft his enemy in halves from within when he extracted Garuda's feather, disregarding recalcitrant solar rays. All others shielded their vision as a refulgent emanation waxed throughout Vitala. Momentarily everyone could see the figure of Upaya Panther-Mask reunited with his fated blade, which continued shining like a sliver of sunlight. Next to him Rahu licked his lips with satisfaction, recognizing a friend in this Daitya.

## [ 10 ] A Duel Between Renegades

Short on breath Bhrngin the dwarf approached Skhanda and his Bhuta-Ganas. That Devata sat meditating in single-headed guise but shot up a glance at Bhrngin who tattled:

“Hear me Lord of Hosts, for thine Rudras have engaged a clutch of Yoginis that appear to be an advance party broken off from a main group, which I also espied yonder. It is nothing less than an endless sea of malignant spirits pouring out of Patala’s mouth and they are led by none other than Upaya Panther-Mask.”

“A prince of the Daityas, how appropriate. Today comes the foul dawn I foresaw. My every atom pulses with knowledge of this Avatar’s purpose as I was engendered to maintain stability even when our universe enfolds and an inverted pantheon runs amuck. Go Bhrngin – sound thy horn and take these troops afield but let **me** deal with Upaya.”

Those orders were carried out while that boy warrior calmly got onto his feet and uprooted his lance from the earth into which it was planted.



On Naraka’s rolling plains the confrontation between Ishtar’s corps and howling Rudras had escalated considerably. Despite their mastery of aerial combat those women were ill-prepared to handle perplexing mirages woven by expert specters. Ishtar lashed at Eshana in hotheaded frustration unable to tell him apart from his shadow or if he possessed one to begin with. She missed three consecutive strikes whereas Eshana’s butterfly blades grazed her arms and legs twice. Smarting from that she reciprocated with a shove through the flat face of her heavy war sickle. This provided enough space for her to intone Kali’s mantra and sweep said sickle sideward, producing a surge that tore a rift in the ground as it traveled to the offending Rudra. Reacting instinctually Eshana became an inky smoke cloud, which the aggressive energy scattered harmlessly. He recollected himself and chastised her,

“All the potency of Amrita won’t avail the unwise against we sons of Bhairava. Daughter of Kali you should lay down your arms and pay homage to Skhanda.”

“Patronizing brigand, this battle has just commenced. If you choose to stay blind to the righteousness of our cause then your life is forfeit via such lack of virtue!”

As if they had heard her words the Bhuta-Ganas and Upaya’s joint forces arrived synchronously and charged at each other across those prairies after running down opposing declinations. That valley rang with a chaotic din unheard of anywhere else.





Betwixt the strident ring of countless armaments clashing Skhanda moved forward equally deliberate and dauntless. He seemed taller with each step he took and his voice carried above the noise calling Upaya out to fight,

“Upaya Panther-Mask hark my appeal: come hither and meet me amid strife! Know that I am Skhanda, son of Shiva and General over ALL Antarloka’s militants.”

A dozen stalwart Daityas responded hostilely to that entreaty, thinking to defend their sovereign’s honor. Yet they were put down summarily when they tried this youth. Cruising along on Rahu’s flying head Upaya encountered that scene and dismounted.

“Skhanda, if you are truly Shiva’s son then I gladly accept your bold challenge. Here stands a slayer of Devatas eager to test your claim. Let us stay our armies then.”

Agreeing, the war god raised an open palm indicating for his subordinates to desist their violent actions. Matching this non-verbal bid the pantherine Ashura yowled frenetically until his allies and underlings froze in place. Everyone’s eyes transfixed on this transpiring contest. Those contenders circled one another for several moments before Upaya lost patience and thrust his sword against Skhanda’s unbreakable spear in a succession of fluid swipes. Standing his ground firmly the Devata twirled to wind up a single blow, which pitched Upaya into an overcast sky. But instead of drifting like usual that Ashura used his blade to impel himself downward rather quickly. Amazed, Skhanda didn’t have an opportunity to guard himself when Upaya’s helm rammed his face!

Staggering back three whole steps the boy’s tongue lapped at blood dripping from his forehead. His eyes then reddened into rubies, contrasting dramatically with blue skin. Ten more arms and five more heads grew out of his body. Skhanda’s scream was A-U-M – resonating at its highest possible octave – the hallowed *Spanda*. Flakes of slate lifted off when the ground split into discrete tectonic plates. Rising from a crouching position the feral prince braced his entire being to take on that god’s imminent counteraction. Blinking would have been fatal because when the transformed Devata came at him Upaya could swear to be fighting **six** Skhandas. That Daitya skirted death continually as the spearhead inched past his extremities from various different angles second by second.

Embodying the epitome of a sprightly cat Upaya’s acrobatic evasions were wondrous to witness. Throughout the three realms his reflexes were truly unrivaled. Graceful dekes notwithstanding it was only a matter of time before Skhanda landed a hit. A direct jab to his sternum through breastplate armor found flesh and gouged the prince. Ever hardy, he grabbed that sharpened point and held it steady with one hand even while Skhanda’s twelve arms fought to pull it away. Distracted momentarily the Devata failed to preempt a slice of that Ashura’s wing-blade, which lopped off his sixth head.

Releasing Skhanda's javelin Upaya unclipped his metal vest and threw it aside. Miraculously his chest had healed over probably prior to the cranium dropping.

Now Mahadeva's progeny drank from his own hemorrhaging neck with five mouths, scooping up the severed head and seamlessly replacing it. A few droplets fell there too giving rise to some new Rudras. Upon half a dozen brows Skhanda's third eyes lit like stars and glared offensively at their target. However as those *Ajna Chakras* homed in Upaya used Garuda's feather to billow out a solar ejection of equal intensity. Both currents contacted in the middle, neither overcoming its contrary. From their luminescent fusion arose something else: a spiraling column of primal fire that changed hues and seemed to reach up infinitely high through cyclonic brume and far down beyond Patala. It was as if they had accidentally uncovered a rupture in reality's fabric. Everyone (including both duelers) shrank away, awestruck. Slowly but surely that flaming *Lingam* looked to be expanding and boring a bigger hole into Naraka's landscape. Concerned, Skhanda regained his composure and decided to negotiate,

“Ennobled Prince of The Daityas – we must have a truce for Antarloka's sake. Frankly my father predicted your coming and this has all been a mere test. I am also aware that you seek to dethrone Lord Indra and eradicate those around him but I never participated in their campaign to subvert Soma. If thou art desirous of kingship then I shalt appoint thee King of Ashuras when ye exact revenge and treat thee like a brother.”

“Skhanda – pardon my doubts. Your divine genealogy is clearly evident to me. Being a faithful servant of Shiva I will defer to his ultimate authority and also serve you whether or not I am crowned. Such ambitions are trivial when compared to *Moksha*, which only sage Shankara can grant to those of us contaminated by savage Karma. Nevertheless I shan't extend mercy to any Devata who hast previously wronged me.”

So those foes formed an armistice and vacated the site of that conflagrant *Lingam* since it continued wearing away at Antarloka in spite of their optimistic hopes.

## [ 11 ] Fall of the Devatas

Upon palace terrace above Mount Meru, Indra, Agni and Brihaspati stood side by side. These three elder Devatas looked out over Amaravati's rooftops, which glittered like a mosaic of gemstones wherever their immortal eyes went to rest. From afar they could hear the sound of an encroaching demonic horde whose numbers were unprecedented. Eons had passed without the immortal city's gilded streets and her citizens coming under such duress. Conscious of the stakes King Indra lectured his ministers,

“Lo, our worst fears have materialized and we must ward them off or die trying. Agni, impart my decree to Amaravati's people: they should evacuate through the hidden labyrinth. Anyone who stays ought to know that they need to fight alongside with us. Brihaspati will remain here and operate the magical defense grid while I go head to head with these impetuous Ashuras. Agni meet me halfway and we shall expunge them mid this sacred place once and for all.”

Both nodded but before they could act a new sound arose outside the city walls. That distinctive conch-blown note was recognized by Guru Brihaspati who piped up,

“Panchajanya sounds! Behold ye gods – it is Lord Kalkin – whose Avatar has been prophesied by various Puranas. He comes forth brandishing a saber and riding aback his white horse Devadatta with a band of mystical heroes close behind him. Panchajanya's tenor signifies an end to the iron age of Kali Yuga. We cannot be beaten if Kalkin joins us. Thus we can proceed in confidence that the day is truly ours.”

Proving that Brahmin's words Lord Kalkin rode out from Vrindavan forest followed closely by Balarama, Parashurama, Visvaksena, both Ashvins, all five Pandavas, Manu and his ten Kshatriya sons: Vena, Dhrishnu, Narishyan, Nabhaga, Ikshvaku, Karusha, Saryati, Prishadhru and Nabhagarishta. Several distinguished males of Lord Brahma's line came along too: Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaka, Kratu, Vasishtha, Daksha, Bhrigu and Nārada. They made their way to city limits where demons were already bashing at its pearl gates and engaged them. Neither asking for nor giving quarter to the unwary fiends, those mighty men slaughtered many Danavas and Daityas. Encouraged by these signs Indra restated,

“This does bode well. Still, do as I have said and adhere to our original plan. Upaya has slain Surya and surmounted the depths of hell to come here. We mustn't underestimate him again. I will go now and put an end to his spree myself.”

Hence the thunder god departed, mounting Airavata while powering *Vajra* bolts.



The supreme personality of Godhead enshrined in Lord Kalkin proved absolutely unassailable to those enlisted under Upaya's banner. Skhanda had said that he would observe from the sidelines and get involved only if his participation became essential. Ergo, when the prince saw his kith effectively routed by Kalkin's cavalry he knew no alternative but taking matters into his own hands. Otherwise he might soon be left with no armies to command. As he thought about fighting these latest rivals Ishtar arrived at his side and propped,

“My dear prince, your best troops are no match for this Deva's incarnation. However we Yoginis can at least keep his knights at bay while you joust with him.”

“Beloved Ishtar, I do gladly accept your offer. Let us tempt destiny then and attempt to accomplish something altogether impossible: killing the undying!”

Upaya hopped onto Rahu and had this Raksha elevate him over those contenders. Without second-guessing that Daitya bailed from his mount, sending out a photonic blast as he glided toward Kalkin. It leveled the moors below and incinerated Brahma's sons. Unconcerned, Vishnu's Avatar blocked Upaya's lunge with adroitness though the prince pushed on defiantly atop Devadatta's saddle. Showing sheer mastery their rapid movements gave a false impression of them dancing in standstill. During this altercation the Yoginis caught up and affronted Kalkin's cortege. Seeing the bind that Upaya was in Ishtar tried to help by unhorsing Lord Kalkin but it turned out to be a lot more difficult than she expected. Intuiting their design the warring Deva continuously turned aside either blade using his jewel-encrusted saber. When they closed in together he knocked them both back with one incomparable swat!

“It's futile,” groused Upaya. “Vishnu is considered *Nirguna*, which renders our weapons totally useless against him. Whosoever could taint Bhagavan's perfection?”

“Don't give up my love. There is another way open to us but it depends on proper execution of a Tantric technique passed down to me from Devi herself.”

Kalkin regarded them apathetically but wondered what free will would lead lowly creatures to do. Meanwhile Ishtar communicated mind-to-mind with Upaya, sharing a secret *sadhana*. To everyone else's collective astonishment – those two concentrated attention and energy into their own blades then struck at each other. Although instead of being cut down like one might expect they had somehow used weapons as bridges and crossed into enigmatic terrain. Kalkin was confronted anew by a single opponent who is easily described as Ishtar Panther-Mask. That fused Daitya-Yogini was sexless and bore Garuda's feather as well as Kali's sickle. With two of four arms it raised its armaments and pronounced three mantras in a strange concordant voice:

*Om Shri Ganeshaya Namah*

*Om Kring Kaliyai Namah*

*Om Namah Sivayah*

Upaya-cum-Ishtar surged forward with numinous strength that not even Vishnu incarnate could guard against without experiencing stress. In a superb display of swordplay Ishtar's arms clinched Kalkin's saber between improvised scissors after which Upaya's clawed fists swung out to decapitate this Deva **and** his horse!

Before anyone could reassess the situation it appeared that Kalkin had traded heads with Devadatta. Indeed, the horse carried his master's head upon its neck and it smiled at the equine face resting aloft Kalkin's shoulders. That kingly Kinnara lifted an index finger, *Sudarshana Chakra* spinning on it. Vishnu's celestial *astra* shot a fine filament, which slipped through the culprit, dividing Ishtar and Upaya into separate beings once more. Oddly a third entity came along with them then; a female child whose features shone pleasantly.

Unsure what to make of this the horse-headed Avatar decided to be rid of them, aiming *Sudarshana* again. Both parents crossed blades to protect their newfound daughter. Yet at the last moment Skhanda's lance skewered Kalkin's godly skull, bringing bane to the quadruped abomination. The war god arrived and retrieved his trusty projectile. On the other half Devadatta's head whinnied in agony as its humanoid limbs contorted. Lion jaws protruded from its back and chewed the horse's face away. Lion paws shredded his hands. Soon a young Devata found himself faced by an ageless Deva who had taken on those leonine traits of Narasimha. That upright manicomore grew to astounding heights until he stood tall over Antarloka's masses. His loud roar stirred up a maelstrom within the primordial ether. Many fled while he monologued,

“Kali's brood are more devious than I gave them credit for. Irrespectively, these trespasses cannot be forgiven. This demon-slaying form shall stop you as it has done with similar nonentities throughout infinite universes. Your winning streak ends here!”

Impressed but not cowed Shiva's son ululated, summoning all Rudras. Numerous frightful specimens flocked to him including Adityatmaka, Bhavodbhava, Bheema, Devadeva, Eshana, Mahakala, Maharudra, Neelalohita, Vidyaraja and Virabhadra. Everyone watched while shadowy figures were assimilated into Skhanda's body, making him bigger and darker. It got to where he seemed to dematerialize thus confounding observers. Blacker than Vishnu, Skhanda's skin was the sky itself. Even King Indra halted in his tracks when zigzagging strobes of light split Antarloka's vault into kaleidoscopes. A deep brooding howl came from that hurly-burly and paralyzed every witness present. It cautioned Lord Kalkin's permutation in the following manner:

“Do not overstep your bounds defender of Dharma. For I – Kalachakra Bhairava – inhabit the interval between universes along with their cyclical evolution and involution. Everything occupying the ten directions and occurring within the three states of time takes place inside this illimitable empty space. Skhanda dwells in the unborn *Atman* where Shiva himself resides. Since they are favored in Sivaloka these Ashuras are under Mahadeva’s protection. From here by my sire’s leave you will be returned to that everlasting bliss devoid of differentiation!”

Filled with livid disbelief Narasimha rekindled *Sudarshana* in a vain attempt to injure Skhanda’s indelible embodiment. That lucent discus radiated the light of a billion galaxies into the void without hitting its mark. Laughter broke in loud peals overhead as a translucent beam fell toward Narasimha. Again Skhanda’s missile pierced this Avatar’s third eye. Bemoaning the manicomore exploded into an immense golden nebula. Aurous rain showered down, blanketing that bloodbath beneath hot stardust. All gathered now sang their praises to a whole new demiurge who reassumed his role as Skhanda. Rudras rallied around him after they were expelled through his mouth and everyone knelt while reverently bowing their heads. With two of twelve arms the blue god elevated Upaya and Ishtar before conferring,

“This battle is hardly concluded. Indra and his captains still draw hither. I cleared the path before you. Go and expiate them at your leisure.”

“You have my eternal gratitude son of Shiva Mahadeva. Ishtar please stay here with the little girl. As previously sworn I will attend to Lord Indra myself.”

“Godspeed brave prince and may your sword strike true,” Ishtar prayed then turned to the child now robed in saffron. “Young lady do you possess a name?”

“Mother – I am *Lila* incarnate – born to synthesize the normally irreconcilable differences existing between any bipolar opposition.”

Hearing Lila express herself so eloquently Ishtar proceeded by introducing her to the other Yoginis. Of course it was naught but a pretext to ignore the ongoing discord.



Inside those same cylindrical vessels utilized during the lunar siege Priestess Kaitabh and her closest subordinates were held rapt by developments far below. Turbulence generated when gods grew into transcendent monstrosities had nearly blown their ships off course. Undoubtedly they had been cloaked and were shielded via arcane sleight. Loyal Ashuras, these Rakshas awaited a signal from the Daitya tribal chief. It came in telepathic form; *Kaitabh I am entering the city to oust Indra from his own premises. Release your drones but be mindful of Amaravati’s defenses.*

Comprehending, that matriarch called on her younger sister in this wise:

“Namuchi take your scouts and alert our battalions, it’s time to bomb the city.”

Not needing to verbalize a reply Namuchi did as she was asked. Within minutes their airborne squadrons descended on Antarloka’s capital, dropping caustic payloads. Violet irradiance coincided with these impacts and lit up that dreary day. Regardless such an assault could not go unanswered. Those Rakshas had the tables turn on them when a plethora of colorful wheels spun into action atop city spires. Some reacted passively, snaring hapless prey like flytraps whereas others discharged nettles. Either way their advance units took heavy casualties. The high priestess saw no choice but to root out whoever was operating those magic machines from behind the scenes. Shrouding herself in vermillion furor she dove headfirst into the melee and rent through various structures as she sought this symphony’s conductor. After running a rampage she finally sighted the dais where Guru Brihaspati was situated. Impelling herself with six demonic wings Kaitabh reached him chiding draconically,

“I should have known that it was you little priest. Allow me to demonstrate the supernal *siddhi* bestowed on us by Tantric *sadhanas*.”

Priestess Kaitabh cast a hex against Brihaspati who had only just noticed her. Quick witted the Devata guru activated a ring of sky flowers surrounding his alcove to exorcize the succubus. That elder Raksha balled up and absorbed their harmful energies. She then bested her competitor with a frenzy of malefic spines. One such spine impaled Brihaspati’s left leg and it went limp beneath him. Entrenched the priest fell back on tradition, invoking Vedic hymns and gesturing *mudras*. Their effect was very limited because Kaitabh’s backup arrived and together they composed a spiritual mirror. All of Guru’s tricks couldn’t avail his efforts to extirpate this crone. Demoness apprentices arranged themselves into a geometric *mandala* clearly meant for an offensive launch. As it became lucific Kaitabh railed on that Devata,

“Your time has come preceptor of the gods. Suspire a last breath and recite a penitential vow. The wailing winds of Karma do beckon at you now!”

Guru Brihaspati gaped open-mouthed as an undeniable constellation projected from the esoteric circle crashed down onto his pulpit. Up rose an eerie fulgor joined by echoing temblors. In that moment this eruption was the cynosure of attention. Unbeknownst to most the Devata’s priest lay buried under its dross. Having neutralized their main hindrance Kaitabh’s ghouls continued with the dismantlement of Amaravati’s defensive apparatus. They carried out that task frivolously, knocking about those gigantic lotus wheels as their surroundings were consumed by an inferno. Interestingly this smolder was but a poor prelude of what loomed close at hand. Along lambent lanes, a palpable smelting process seemed to be underway, evinced in the rising heat. Agni was no breeze and he would surely try avenging Guru.



Being an independent curmudgeon Berunni Twenty-Arms had forged ahead alone like on previous occasions, fully decked in regalia and armed to the tusks. He still felt dissatisfaction regarding the results of earlier skirmishes. His old bones longed for glory. So when he happened to cross paths with Agni, Lord of Fire, Berunni blessed his stars. Devata and Danava circumambulated each other estimating respective strengths and possible weaknesses as they paced. Eschewing calid outbursts the giant instigated aggressions but conjointly disparaged,

“Thou hast gone dim and gaunt from imbibing Shiva’s seed, two-faced Agni. Conversely I have grown exponentially due to Amrita and canst kill thee in a swoop.”

Backing those words Berunni swung his poleaxe using all twenty upper limbs. A score of lifelike statues was reduced to mere smithereens but Agni held his ground. Setting their arena ablaze that Devata tried to set the record straight as well,

“Thou speakest ill foolhardy Danava. Though the *Hiranyareta* consumed every superficial part of my being it also taught me untamed ardor!”

Agni held out his open palms, forming a fireball that was at least as large as Berunni himself. He pushed said fireball toward the towering troll whereupon it concussed against Berunni’s plate mail. The Danava plowed through, stabbing forth with pike in hands. However the sweltering deity evaded him without any fuss and kept castigating his body with igneous orbs. Not overly concerned that Ashura persisted in chasing after this elusive Devata. Berunni Twenty-Arms brought down many an edifice as he pursued Agni and the latter charred his share of buildings while deploring,

“Look about us heretic – there is nowhere to retreat from these cleansing flames. Offer thyself willingly as a sacrifice for me.”

“Degenerate divinity – we sons of Danu are the most fastidious Shiva *bhaktas* and I have endured austerities far exceeding thine pitiful calefaction.”

Again lending credence to what he said Berunni shed his outfit and stood nude in front of Agni. Outraged, the Devata meant to call the Danava’s bluff by tackling this giant and digesting him within primeval embers. Anticipating Agni’s onrush Berunni spread his arms out wide and welcomed harmful hatred into his very soul. During an exasperating pause it appeared as if he were being immolated via sacred incandescence. His cry was a resonant angered groan. Berunni gritted tusks and spurned physical burn. Even when Agni intensified thermal abrasion there was little alteration in that Danava’s outer composure. Both god and demigod vied for ascendancy within the same space but it started to become clear who actually held the advantage.



Plumbing his soul's depths Berunni concentrated awareness at the pit of his stomach and thus gave issue to devotional *tapas* (inner warmth). Following a period in which it was beyond discernment to know who would prevail, Agni's existence dwindled before he himself could accept being superseded by this glowing exemplar. Berunni Twenty-Arms now extinguished nearby conflagrations with just one sweep from his lustrous limbs!



Having stopped partway on his approach Lord Indra watched (rather catatonically) as Amaravati – Antarloka's immortal capital – was destroyed both inside and out. He had been rendered dumbstruck and immobile since Skhanda put Kalkin in line a bit earlier. At that later moment the Devata king underwent a crisis, second-guessing every move. Somewhere deep inside he knew that theirs was a lost cause. No matter how much of a fight they put up these Ashuras seemed destined to overcome them. What could a lone dissenter do in order to turn back such an intransigent tide? Pondering this, Indra deduced a fairly simple answer: win, lose or draw – Dharma demanded his participation here in the respectable capacity of a combatant. Goading Airavata from the palanquin straddling that alabaster elephant the king carried on. Once more many among those Danavas and Daityas present felt the cruel sting of electrifying thunderstrokes hailing into their midst . . .

Albeit Upaya Panther-Mask came dashing anon, flaunting Garuda's feather. With the first chop his blade let loose a splendorous solar arc, which devoured anything encountered along its path. No pushover, Indra erected a force-field around Airavata that arrested Upaya's emission. Taking up bolts reserved for this Daitya prince the Maharajah threw these choice *Vajras* and put his fearless foe on guard. Though a bit surprised Upaya skipped gracefully through the blitzkrieg, cinching the distance between himself and that Devata. It did him no good though because Indra's pachyderm was virtually insurmountable. In fact getting so close only made him an easier mark. One of those deadly flickers caught Upaya at point-blank range, flooring him in a blink. Few others would have been able to stand after such a knockdown but the prince sure did.

“Magnificent rebuttal worthy Indra,” he flattered, dusting off his bare shoulders. “It is an honor to duel unto death inside Amaravati's gates. I shall fulfill my oath and end your life in this place. Have at you King of The Devatas!”

Preempting the Ashura, Indra released some rarely seen ball lightning, which Upaya was barely able to deflect because of its speed and proximity. Nevertheless the Daitya kept pace by doing flips in midair. Yet when these rondures faded from sight they left behind small implosions that scathed the masked warrior's exposed torso. Relishing in pain Upaya stabbed upward and managed to nick Indra's left ear. However this maneuver proved costly for him since it provided Airavata an opening to slap the prince away with his trunk.

“Alas, although we are being hunted into extinction neither terror nor remorse inhabits my heart. It is a shame that your father could not be here today son of Shukra. He would have been an apt bystander for these final moments wherein I seal your fate!”

Upaya braced for another round as Indra released a coiling fluorescent chord. Batting away that whorl in the direction of some stately manors the Daitya began focusing on his sword. Garuda’s feather responded with a phosphorescent burst. Refusing to relent the Devata spread out his jeweled net over the Ashura and trapped him. Lord Indra upraised,

“What folly to lower your defenses Prince of The Daityas. It behooves me to revoke that immortality granted to you by Amrita!”

Caterwauling, the feline fighter was heard by Rahu who descended then to pounce upon Indra’s elephant. Airavata blustered in agony while that bodiless Raksha gorged on tender innards. Clambering out from his toppled conveyance the Devata king took to the air where he created a high-voltage vortex. Indra commenced amalgamating all leftover electromagnetism from the phenomenal universe into this nucleus. Bhuloka’s stars and planets yielded baleful amplitudes, which fattened that globe. Buzzing erratically it oscillated in place while everything around was displaced. Nonetheless Upaya had not quit heating his blade either. Hence when the lightning lord deployed his finishing blow it met halfway on its trajectory with a torrid photosphere. These ignitions collided violently and revolved around each other until mutual resistance gave way to a breach in Antarloka’s mesh. A ravenous vacuum pulled at everyone from within this black whirlpool. Above the ensuing confusion Upaya denounced:

“We are both fools for stubbornly pursuing such a disastrous course. Even so it is far too late to turn back. I will drag you along with me destroyer of worlds!”

Having uttered that threat he jumped off Rahu’s crown onto Indra’s person and together they started gravitating toward the anomaly. An adamantine god continued grappling against a tenacious daemon through the turbid sky. As those immortal nemeses got closer to the hole’s rim Ananta-Naga’s scaly tail came from beneath and snagged around Upaya’s ankle. Appreciating this unexpected safety-tether the prince jettisoned Garuda’s feather before digging clawed knuckles into Indra’s jugular. Immediately after Upaya disentangled himself and punched the Devata’s forehead with his second fist. Unconscious (or possibly dead) Lord Indra was swallowed by that aperture, which sealed behind him as if its hunger had been sated. When Upaya plunged down Ishtar whisked him below where everybody else went to bow at feet of Antarloka’s newest magnates. The Daitya thanked Ananta for saving him and Skhanda also came to congratulate them. Under his meddling auspices these Ashuras, Nagas and Yoginis had usurped dominance.

## [ 12 ] Deus Ex Machina

Shortly following those momentous events and when the ashes had settled Soma Chandra resurfaced along with his entourage. The last battle had been so intense that Kama delayed to uncage them but they were actually grateful for it. Now the moon god flanked by Kama and Commander Viswava greeted Upaya, Ishtar, Priestess Kaitabh, Berunni Twenty-Arms, Ananta-Naga and Skhanda mid a square at the center of Amaravati's remains. Sudden regime change called for democratic diplomacy and every major faction was represented there. Right away Soma got the ball rolling,

“Hail ye heroes of this greatest celestial feud! Please permit me to apologize wholeheartedly to anyone who has suffered loss as either direct or indirect consequence of my own well-known actions. Yet I think most of us can agree that we have each gained an infallible freedom to expand within our newly unified cosmos. Gladly do I intend to share Antarloka's rulership with you all once my satellite is restored.”

There was a silent moment of unease but the tension relaxed when Captain Silat arrived accompanied by Lady Tara, Queen Priya and her Apsaras. The latter went straight for their husbands whereas Tara gazed on Chandra as if they had just met. Momentarily her beautiful lips smiled at him in recognition and she draped both arms over his neck. Soma's sixth sense felt the presence of another being between them too. He placed a palm below Tara's stomach and then his complexion registered wonderment. She nodded a reply to his unspoken question before Lord Chandra publicized:

“A daughter is to be born to Lady Tara and I! She will be called Buddhi and to her I bequeath my hidden estates on planet Mercury. For none shall outspeed her mind.”

No sooner did those words leave his mouth than Lila fluxed to their fore like liquid quicksilver. Upaya and Ishtar's supramundane neonate shrilled,

“True though that may be nobody is faster than me! In contrast to Buddhi's quickness at cogitation – none can overtake *Lila* when it's a question of action.”

All were nonplussed by this but they didn't have time to muse on it because another development was already calling their attention. Upon Mount Meru's peak rubicund smog ascended from inside King Indra's castle and whatever its source was lighted the enclosing nightfall. Within seconds that stronghold's walls crumbled due to strain and gave view of an allotropic obelisk rising through the foundation. Thick haze became increasingly nitid while everyone looked fixedly at this pulsating monolith. Breaking the pregnant silence Lila jubilantly apprised them:

“There grows the *Lingam* known as Visvatman. Alembic of master and mistress.”

Eliciting a collective exclamation an anthropic figure began to coalesce within those clouds. Before long everyone could make out that otherwise inconceivable aspect of Shiva fused with Shakti: Ardhanariswara. Even the bravest and strongest beings present there quivered when faced by this pervasive androgyne who had one female breast. Its right hand held *Trishula* (with *Damaru* drum attached) and its left pinched the stem of a pink lotus between thumb and index. Nandi the bull and tigress Dawon flanked Ardhanariswara. All except Lila felt obligated to bow down low when this epicene started talking in an exigent tone,

“Woe unto thee inhabitants of Antarloka. Thine momentary triumph is no cause for celebration. Verily the worse has yet to transpire. That is why we are here to edify and instill proper Dharma within your hearts. Know then that during the coming eon you and these children will be directly responsible for this universe’s undoing. Indeed the splendid *Lingam* ye founded at Naraka has begun to rend through thy Noosphere. But fear not. We shall now mete out austerities to our chosen ambassadors in order to absolve them of negative Karma beforehand. Soma Chandra, you are guilty of sedition and moral incontinence. Your lunar fortress cannot be rebuilt unless by some miracle you can overthrow your own self-righteous gall. Undertake a pilgrimage to Bhuloka and attend the Ashram at Somanatha as you have in other *Kalpas*. One’s exterior can only be exalted once interior grandeur has been addressed. Therefore the fruit of Karma Yoga belongs to Upaya Panther-Mask, King among Ashuras. Amid this and in future universes he will manifest himself as our sanctioned delegate – the Dharma Heruka. However, that title also requires his performance of an unparalleled *tapasya*.”

Apprehending their meaning the Daitya further prostrated himself while lauding,

“Blessed are we to behold your unbounded form ineffable *Omkaara!* What you have asked me for will be my pleasure to effectuate. I shall cremate the sin of decide assiduously throughout these concluding millennia, contemplating your preeminent face.”

When Upaya finished Skhanda found courage to speak as well,

“Ardhanarishwara, both father and mother, *Prakriti* and *Purusha* combined – kindly expound reality’s ultimate truths to those gathered here tonight. Please tell us what our communal purpose and individual modes of action should be in your absence.”

“An exquisite request my superlative son. Listen then to this utmost Tantra, which we prescribe for your benefit as much as everyone else’s. Whether they reside in the physical, astral or causal plane all extant beings are as transitory as temporal space. Nonetheless a subtle undercurrent runs beneath any superficial appearance. That tremor is called *Spanda* – the reverberation of A-U-M – and it is always audible to the attuned. Make no mistake though, since it lies beyond words said *Spanda* is more than either sound or image. How could our universal wellspring be reduced to mere sensory signals? Such an ambiguous and amorphous source does not lend itself to conceptualization.

Consequently it is understood imperfectly by finite minds and represented in myriad conflicting ways. That is why it is also called *Mahamudra*; the primary archetype.”

At this point transparent bubbles started issuing from the gaseous pillar. Inside each one, pictures, letters, symbols, depictions of deities cast in stone and other tangible trappings became visible. Some displayed elaborate *mandalas*, maps or complicated diagrams. One globule went before Ardhanarishwara’s chest where it graphically charted a course through the galaxies of Bhuloka until planet Earth filled its circumference. Scenes of past human events cycled therein exposing mankind’s rise and inevitable downfall. Calmly the intersexual Deva-Devi continued what it was saying,

“Ishtar – whom I now designate Chief Yogini – is the sole remnant of these bygone people. There is no destructive force in existence greater than basic ignorance. Simply put, the human race fell victim to its own nearsightedness as a young species. Like Ishtar they possessed the potential to transmute their animalistic instincts but they were neither disciplined enough nor wholly cognizant of a common binding essence. Incapable of perceiving or even acknowledging the fount of all icons, ideas and dreams, these lowly creatures devised sciences that could only account for physical phenomena and which thus discounted ethereal noumena altogether. Because of that most humans could not distinguish the fine difference between ‘thought’ and ‘consciousness’. While it is rather empirical to those who live here in Antarloka, these underdeveloped primates mistook one for the other. Obviously though thought occurs linearly and verbally on one’s mental foreground whereas consciousness is the very background of awareness. Being a product of microcosmic brains, thought is evanescent but consciousness is *Brahman’s* macrocosmic breath; the eternal *Atman*.

Vibrating at occult frequencies this mysterious animating impulse is immanent on every level of energy and matter as well as subjective experience. Though inferior organisms may appropriate it via ego-mentation, consciousness is never truly theirs in an absolute sense. Misapprehending the quiddity of our omnipresent omniscience human beings fancied themselves to be exclusive subjects within an objective reality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. *Spanda* drove material evolution prior to the development of sentient hominids and it was *Mahamudra* that conferred intellectual or imaginative faculties upon them. Further, despite outward veneer, which leads relativists into perceiving a world of solid, static and independent objects – they actually lived alongside the composite, kinetic and interdependent processes of divine recreation. We repeat: the difference between conceptual thought and purified consciousness is that which distinguishes a mammal’s limited intelligence from a sage’s profound wisdom. Hence atheists, materialists, positivists, rationalists, skeptics and their ideological ilk are ill-equipped to grasp us.

Nevertheless there were some humans who managed to catch glimpses of *Brahman’s* atemporal non-local nature. By examining their insights you too can gain a better understanding regarding this transmudane ‘suchness’. Firstly comprehend that

*Atman* has three steady hallmarks: being, consciousness and bliss. These qualities are but slightly varying aspects of the same thing – in fact – they are reflected on lower levels of creation in multifarious manners. Generally though, our subjects make predominantly dualistic judgments within their psyches. For example good versus evil, soul over body, self against other. But alas even material manifestation is triadic at its core.”

Breathtakingly Ardhanariswara’s features morphed while two more heads sprang from its shoulders. Now heaven’s congregation shed tears of unspeakable joy when their eyes took in the sight of Sadasiva. This *Trimurti* (triple form) smiled upon its children equally with Brahma’s face on the right, Vishnu’s in between and Shiva’s to his left. Yet their morphing did not end there. Their faces and bodies fluctuated between masculine and feminine traits so that at times Antarloka’s people could see Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Parvati instead. Abruptly Sadasiva sprouted a thousand arms too, on which other famous gods and goddesses then appeared and disappeared like magical tattoos! *Trimurti* of constant motion, those spectacular deities went on to pontificate in a percussive voice that inspired both anxiety and thorough reverence,

“Within these lower planes the three *Gunas* condition everything. *Rajas* activates, *Sattvas* maintains and *Tamas* renders inert. Together said *Gunas* comprise the fabric of Maya’s shroud, which misleads the profane away from our sacred actuality. Thus complex configurations arise, abide and are annulled amid three temporal modes bearing those aforementioned qualities in flexible combinations as well as concentrations. It has often been preached that living individuals should strive to overcome their internal makeup in order to obtain deathless illumination or to escape rebirth. Know then that such goals do not befit all beings. Nay! Many are born who would contravene Dharma by operating too far outside the leanings of their inherent self-nature. Our secret Tantra contains a revolutionary edict: act according to your strongest inner tendencies. Follow your heart wherever it leads for it is the compass of one’s soul. We may each be likened to players upon a stage and everyone has a specific role to play, which is partially written onto Karmic imprints. Do not worry overly much about purity or righteousness. Peace is an ocean toward which every river must flow through a process of perpetual perfection.

Some might disagree though due to faulty logic and dogmatic misinterpretation. If properly distilled personal desire can easily serve as a springboard into liberation. Haughty priests focus excessively on ceremony and elitist tradition thereby precluding the dynamism of earnest religious congress. That is why I tell thee that those who worship devoutly inside their own system are almost always better off. Nobody can look to anybody else for enlightenment. Besides, the majority of devotees open themselves excessively to external influences and therefore fail to contact us. Mired mid biased opinions, lesser aspirants hail a single name, Avatar or mantra and try to promulgate it above every other. A sad state considering that imposition of beliefs denotes their insecurities in faith. So remember this always: words are arbitrary sounds that carry no weight apart from that imputed on them via socio-cultural programming. After all, speech is just an extension of thought. Still ignorant folk mistake signifiers for what is

being signified. As a result they worship little more than empty syllables rather than their origin. Like a monkey trying to scoop the moon's reflection from lake water.

Clearly ye can see that even our *Trimurti* is provisional and that we lack an extraordinary self-seriousness normally associated with God. Although since those who represent us are typically firebrands they bring demerit to themselves and their religion through outright stupidity. Harken then my Terran names and behold my diverse figures across forgotten ages of Bhuloka's history.”

Another cluster of globes gravitated near Sadasiva's upraised arms. Inside those drops were seen the emblems of Earth's monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Therewith the manifest trinity commenced enumerating in drone,

“Abba, Abhir, Abraxas, Adonai, El Elyon, El Shaddai, El-Berith, El-Gibhor, Elohim, El-Olam, Gaol, Immanuel, Jehova, Kadosh, Melekh, Messiah, Palet, Shaphat, Soter, Tsaddiq, Yahweh, Yeshua, Zur, Christos, Despotes, Deus, Hieros, Hosannah, Hupsistos, Kurios, Logos, Pantokrator, Sophia, Theos, Theotes, Allah, Ad-Darr, Al-‘Adl, Al-‘Ali, Al-‘Alim, Al-‘Azim, Al-‘Aziz, Al-Afu, Al-Ahad, Al-Akhir, Al-Awwal, Al-Ba’ith, Al-Badi, Al-Baqi, Al-Bari’, Al-Barr, Al-Basir, Al-Basit, Al-Batin, Al-Fattah, Al-Ghaffar, Al-Ghafur, Al-Ghani, Al-h Haqq, Al-Hadi, Al-Hafiz, Al-Hakam, Al-Hakim, Al-Halim, Al-Hamid, Al-Hasib, Al-Hayy, Al-Jabbar, Al-Jalil, Al-Jami, Al-Kabir, Al-Karim, Al-Khabir, Al-Khafid, Al-Khaliq, Al-Latif, Al-Majid, Al-Majid, Al-Malik, Al-Mani’, Al-Matin, Al-Mu’akhhir, Al-Mu’id, Al-Mu’izz, Al-Mu’min, Al-Mubdi, Al-Mudhill, Al-Mughni, Al-Muhaymin, Al-Muhsi, Al-Muhyi, Al-Mujib, Al-Mumit, Al-Muntaqim, Al-Muqaddim, Al-Muqit, Al-Muqsit, Al-Muqtadir, Al-Musawwir, Al-Muta’ali, Al-Mutakabbir, Al-Qabid, Al-Qadir, Al-Qahhar, Al-Qawi, Al-Qayyum, Al-Quddus, Al-Wadud, Al-Wahhab, Al-Wahid, Al-Wajid, Al-Wakil, Al-Wali, Al-Wali, Al-Warith, Al-Wasi’, An-Nafi, An-Nur, Ar-Ra’uf, Ar-Rafi’, Ar-Rahim, Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raqib, Ar-Rashid, Ar-Razzaq, Ash-Shahid, Ash-Shakur, As-Sabur, As-Salam, As-Samad, As-Sami, At-Tawwib, Az-Zahir, Dhul-Jalali Wal-Ikram, Malik al-Mulk, I Am That I Am, Alpha and Omega, Existence itself”

Having listened intently, Ishtar folded her hands and humbly submitted:

“Oh Para-Brahman and Maha-Maya conjoined – graciously elucidate for us – how can these appellatives refer to a single Godhead when those who coined them warred amongst each other to assert the primacy of their preferred epithets?”

“Incisive as always my invaluable daughter but the answer is straightforward. Since they dwelled in several countries and continents, sublunar peoples did not ever share a common tongue. Resultantly, members of those isolated nations became attached to their particular dialects or expressions, thinking them to be the only rightful rubrics. They could not agree on an apical truism that knowledge of God is both manifold and ecumenical. In turn such sectarianism fostered mutual exclusivity.

Yet clerical institutions that promote exclusion err because divisive doctrines will unavoidably lead to quibbling and violence. What good prophet has not preached love and benevolence? Life should be treasured forasmuch a healthy body is a prerequisite on the road toward enlightenment. Anyone who kills in the name of compassionate God commits the worse atrocity possible and shall die at birth many times. Our own words notwithstanding, allow us to contradict them by divulging a sacrosanct paradox. From the final perspective neither death nor inanimate matter can be said to occur at all. Just as ‘no-thing’ is a misnomer and a fallacy, which imperfect language cannot encapsulate. Everything that isn’t has merely been inferred from what actually **is**. Again though, mortal cerebration reifies that which lies outside its experiential field.”

“Quit believing in absurd impossibilities!” Sadasiva advocated. “Dispelling these relative notions the wise attain salvation through an unending presence in no way different or separate from ours. Wherefore meditate on this Tantra hereafter because it subsumes the substratum of the Vedas, Agamas, Upanishads, Puranas, Itihāsas and previous Tantric literature. Those who doubt its authenticity condemn themselves to countless incarnations spent as base animals that are either devouring or being devoured. For any act of consumption is not simply a survival tactic. It is also the modus operandi adopted by imbeciles who unknowingly seek inexhaustible plenitude (*Sat-Chit-Ananda*) in vain efforts to fill the void of their spiritual impoverishment. Lastly I enjoin Skhanda, my faultless son: you are free to enter Sivaloka when you please. Albeit your final test, seeing as it is far easier said than done. Fare thee well – middling Ants – strive to find your proper place during this decadent era.”

With those words the smoke cleared and Shiva-Shakti’s reluctant eidolon faded like a beautiful daydream, leaving their world in comparative darkness and ruin. Renovating that realm would prove a tall order for its inheritors. Of course happiness was prevalent then without a trace of anguish. Whosoever could consider their lot execrable after being graced by such an august vision? Rather, Antarloka rejoiced as one and Lila was gaily tossing elysian flowers about while the confluence exulted,

*Om Namah Sivayah*

*Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*

*Om Shantihi Om*

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## Appendix: Glossary of Sanskrit Terms

**Agamas, Itihāsas, Puranas, Upanishads, Vedas** – Various classes of Hindu scriptures (previously listed in approximate chronological order).

**Ajna Chakra** – Better known as our ‘third eye’. The word *chakra* literally means ‘wheel’ and seven such centers are counted within humans in ascending order: *Muladhara* (root), *Svadhithana* (regenerative organs), *Manipura* (solar plexus), *Anahata* (heart), *Vishuda* (throat), *Ajna* (third eye) and *Sahasrara* (crown).

**Ashram** – A hermitage set aside for meditation and Yogic instruction; holy place, shrine, or temple.

**Astra(s)** – Also called *Divyastras* (enchanted weapons), *astra* denotes any projectile.

**Atman & Brahman** – No simple explanation of these words could do. Indeed, volumes are filled with ambiguous descriptions of both. They are sometimes regarded in the West as equivalents for Soul & God but that is inaccurate since they are rather interchangeable. Grasping their actual import would be tantamount to awakening.

**Avatar** – A holy incarnation; an emanation of a formless deity into form.

**Bhagavan** – One of Vishnu’s soubriquets, implying illustrious fortune and sanctity.

**Bhakta(s)** – Worshiper, devotees (from *bhakti*).

**Bhang** – Cannabis, either smoked or concocted into a drink.

**Brahmin** – Member of learned caste. From the fourfold *Varna* system: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriyas (warrior kings), Vaisyas (farmers / traders) and Shudras (artisans).

**Gunas & Nirguna (Rajas, Sattvas, Tamas)** – As heretofore explained the three *Gunas* govern material and immaterial manifestation. Even physical atoms are known to contain positively charged protons, neutrons and negatively charged electrons in their nuclei. *Nirguna* therefore means ‘without qualities or tendencies’.

**Hiranyareta** – ‘Golden seed’, a euphemism for Shiva’s superheated sexual emission.

**Kalpa(s)** – These are cosmic ages but conversely, parallel universes.

**Karma Yoga** – Karma is ‘volition’ whereas Yoga translates into ‘union’. Hence, practitioners of Karma Yoga unify their intentions with action and thereby attain to

supreme Dharma. Other types of Yoga include Rajah Yoga (union through psychosomatic governance), Jnana Yoga (union through gnosis) and Bhakti Yoga (union through worship).

**Lila** – ‘Play’, the ludic imperative permeating sentient life.

**Lingam** – Phallus or Phallic shrine with Yonic base.

**Mahamudra** – ‘Great seal’, this term refers to the purity of consciousness that underlies ordinary experience. Additionally it encompasses practices aimed at balancing one’s body-mind continuum (i.e. *Mahamudra Tandava*: Dance of The Great Seal).

**Maharajah / Rajah** – A vaunted potentate.

**Mandalas** – Geometric wheels used as visual representations of rarefied reality.

**Mantra** – Ceremonial chants believed to carry a cumulative resonance of recitations from all universes via the *Parma Akasha*.

**Moksha** – Liberation from the rounds of suffering. Known as Nirvana by Buddhists.

**Mudra(s)** – ‘Seal’, ‘sign’, ‘symbol’, or ‘gesture’. Often refers to ritual hand-poses.

**Om kara** – ‘Om syllable’, see **Spanda**.

**Parma Akasha** – Primordial Ether; that subtle medium within which all else takes shape.

**Prabhu** – An honorific used for male lords and masters.

**Prakriti & Purusha** – In *Samkhya* cosmology the former is likened to ‘mother nature’ (phenomena) whereas the latter is more along the lines of a ‘spiritual father’ (noumena).

**Pretas** – Hungry ghosts. Their souls are damned to feed on bile, excrement, etc.

**Sadhana(s)** – Regimented spiritual techniques employed for numerous purposes.

**Samadhi** – A state of ‘non-dualistic’ trance in which subject and object are as one. There are progressive degrees ascribed to consciousness thus altered through meditation, these are (briefly): *Laya*, *Savikalpa*, *Nirvikalpa* and *Sahaja*.

**Sat-Chit-Ananda** – Being-Consciousness-Bliss.

**Shakti** – The feminine ‘energizing’ principle. It is said that Shiva is inert without Shakti.

**Siddhi** – Supernatural abilities reputedly brought about by Tantric adepts.

**Spanda** – ‘Sacred tremor’, evinced in the contractions and expansions of cosmic forces. This impulse is closely related to *Pranava* (the sacred hum of *Om*).

**Sudarshana Chakra** – Vishnu’s discus weapon.

**Tapas & Tapasya** – ‘Inner heat’ and ‘fervent devotion’. Traditionally anyone who performs a daunting *tapasya* is awarded some boon by Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva.

**Vajra(s)** – Lightning / lightning bolts.

**Yuga** – A universal age. Four such ages are posited within Hinduism in the following order: Satya Yuga (gold), Treta Yuga (silver), Dvarapa Yuga (bronze), Kali Yuga (iron). We are presently mid Kali Yuga, a coarse and unenlightened era, farthest from our gods.