

PROLOGUE

Once again in a new disguise, he decided to take a stroll around. There were many houses in the settlement, some big, some small and then there was one towering house which seemed to be the chief's house. He skirted the chief's house and went ahead, towards a cluster of houses which he could see from far. When he was near, he could feel the heat emanating from inside another big one which was away from the smaller group of houses. A huge pillar-like thing was lying in the courtyard. He thought maybe this was the thing which was being dragged, of which he had a glimpse of. Still, he could not make out what it was and went inside, as there was nobody around. What he saw was incomprehensible, there was an unusually large pit with circular clay walls. They were actually cylindrical, going narrow at the top and wide at the bottom. There was a fire burning in it, but it was not the Yagna Mandap. He went closer and saw red coloured stones lying around. There were many such kinds of stones kept above the pit in heaps, then he saw some tools and weapons of the same, what was it? He picked a few small ones; one of them was a dagger.

There were voices coming out from the hut, so Gavi went behind the hut to see what would happen next. The men who seemed to be workers came with large chunks of rock

in about a dozen trailers and emptied them. One of them started igniting the fire with flintstones. It took a while to light the flintstones as it was morning and the air was crisp and cold. But soon flames were blazing out of the pit. The rocks were thrown in the now hungry fire. Towards one end of what Gavi had thought as the Yagna Mandap was a slope, which Gavi had noticed but had not understood its purpose. Now he could see what it was for. The hot rocks came out of the fire and went into another relatively smaller pit. The men kept the rocks in the flame for quite a long while and then pushed the rocks quickly with a long ladle which seemed to be of similar material. Gavi had seen enough, now it was time to go out. But he couldn't move out immediately, as the men were still working.

At night, when the moon was up in the horizon, when the last of the men had left about a *ghatika* back, Gavi sneaked out of his hiding and went towards the unusual Yagna Mandap. He put his hand inside the cold fireplace and tried to take out something, he soon was successful, just that his hand was completely black, He looked at his black hand and smiled, he smeared the black ashes all over his body and tied the egg big rock in his angavastra. He then crawled towards the backside. But to his dismay, there were two sentries. He smiled, he had forgotten that he was all black and they would not see him in such pitch darkness.

He stayed low on the ground and kept following a trail of bushes. Remaining on the other side of the bushes, he kept crawling at a snail's pace. Once he crossed the sentries, he took a breath of relief and then entered the dark forest. He knew a way out of it which was a short route towards Aushni.

The dark forest was extremely dangerous and had threats innuendo. The trees which were strangely standing close to each other made an extensive canopy all over. Gavi somehow

managed to return from the forest dodging several reptiles who were scared to see such a huge creature amongst them.

He stumbled out of the dark forest, almost finding the outside dark as good as dusk. So dark was the dark forest, a person would get poked in the eye and then only feel the pain, no way to see the poking finger.

Gavi straight went home; Bhavya, mausi and mother were very worried. Still, he did not talk to any of them. He knew his time had come to do some quick action.



Reva came out of the chimera created by the book. She was sitting on her haunches from last ten minutes and now her knees hurt, She stood up and realised, her college bag was still on her shoulder. The book was in the right hand and the fallen page of the old book was in her left which she had been reading, lost in time. Reva's eyes were shining bright; it had become unbearable for her to keep the book down. She rushed to her study table, and carefully sifted through the yellow pages, she found the page number which she wanted and placed the fallen page after it.

CHAPTER 1

THE OLD BOOK

Reva today has a distanced look about her, inscrutable, as if longing for something, lost in a world of her own. She finished her class of Ancient Indian History, delivered by her favourite professor, Prof. Mankani and came out in the corridor, thinking about her thesis. She is a student of the school of Historical Studies at the University. In today's lecture, Professor Mankani spoke about the Pre-Vedic era and briefly narrated a story about a group of stalwart Kings in a war to achieve control of iron mines in the complete *Aryavart*. He also mentioned that 'Kathayam Ayasam', is the story of a young, ambitious King Gavi or Gunadhish.

Reva recalled that during the lecture, the Professor had stopped for a bit. *She wondered was it her imagination or she had seen it actually?* The Professor had paused, gulped and then narrated how he had come across the story of Gunadhish in that little, remote village of Uttar Pradesh.

Reva also replayed in her mind how the Professor had tensed and stuttered when he sadly told the students that the book had been misplaced by him and that he still grieves the loss of the precious manuscript. Since it is a very rare Sanskrit manuscript, other copies of it were not available.

Reva being a post-graduate student of the University and that too in her fourth term had been anxious for quite a while now to choose a subject for her thesis and after fighting with oneself for the longest time got this amazing subject brought in front of her on a platter by her favourite Professor.

When she saw the Professor heading towards the parking lot, Reva hurried behind him, “Prof. Mankani, how about doing the thesis on the Iron Age developments in the Pre-Vedic era? Is the subject apt and not taken by anybody? Can I do it?”

The Professor stopped at Reva’s words. He turned slowly, he was an old man of about 60 years but looked 75. He had acquired a hunch, which he called an occupational hazard. It was actually due to burning the midnight oil, reading old manuscripts. Sometimes the sun rose at the horizon to witness the professor still bent over some time-honoured, yellowish bundle of papers. He looked at his favourite student. Reva was a keen learner and an avid fan of History, that too of the Vedic and Pre-Vedic age. The Professor sometimes took her help to write his findings. The old head seldom spoke with anybody but liked Reva’s simple, sweet, non-interfering presence.

His wife had been the same, patient and always helpful. He had lost her in a train accident and had never married again. The couple, when young, had had a bohemian lifestyle and had never thought of starting a family. They immensely enjoyed visiting old forts and tribal towns. Temples of the medieval era were their favourite haunts, not because they were religious. They simply loved to study the scriptures engraved on the temples’ walls, comparing them with the knowledge they had about a certain King or his era. Now that his partner was not there, the only surviving partner was History, to which he had completely dedicated his life.

Prof. Mankani's house resembled a storehouse of History books. Asha, his soul mate, as he called her, had lovingly designed the house and had creatively arranged the books, with huge spaces left for long wooden cupboards, shelves and racks for his innumerable books with a rocking chair here, a bhartiya baithak there, so that he can pick up a book and start reading comfortably. But now, the Professor had long surpassed those spaces and the books lay almost everywhere in his whole bungalow.

The Professor looked at Reva slowly with a sweet smile, "Reva, the subject is not taken up by anybody. It is very much there, not on some journey but the real thing is if you have the will you will be able to do it, the capacity is there, so you may."

Reva smiled sheepishly and murmured a thank you to the Professor and then hurried to the library to get some books back to her room. The Library at the University was a colosseum of books of such varied genre that it resembled a city with a huge population of various religions, castes, creeds, occupations and conversations. Reva weaved her way amongst the tables and chairs, towards the tall, intimidating shelves filled to the brim with ancient books looking like brooding, wise old men.

She looked for a few books which she had wanted for a long while and surprisingly found them quickly. She murmured, "Oh! It's a good day today." She was about to get down from the ladder when she saw a short fat book, with a dark blue cover, her favourite colour, lying unattended. From where she was standing, she could not see the title, but it was written in scarlet, she could see fleetingly. Reva stretched herself to pick that book, but couldn't reach it. So she got down and dragged the heavy ladder to the spot. She climbed up and picked the heavy book with one hand. She had to

balance it well. It was stone heavy. Still standing on the ladder, she blew the dust from it, to reveal its name. It took her some time to decipher the title, as time had played its part and the letters on the book had become crooked. When Reva finally understood it, she couldn't digest her own luck and with that excitement, she almost fell off the ladder and was saved by the book which worked like a hook, as she had one arm with the book wrapped around the ladder. She slowly got down and took the book to the librarian. The plump librarian, Amita, started checking the numbers of the books, but when this book was kept in front of her, she looked confused. She started adjusting her specs on the bridge of her nose again and again to have a better view of her screen but couldn't find the number labelled on the book nor could she find its name in the library database.

Giving a long sigh, she declared, "Reva you will have to leave this book here. I can't issue it to you, as there is no information about this book in our database."

Reva was disappointed and hurriedly picked up the book, "You could give some temporary number to it and write down the name of the book so that you can start off with formalities," rallied Reva to keep the book.

Amita had been working in the library from the past 17 years and did not like students telling her what to do with the books which were in her custody. She looked at Reva from underneath her glasses who made a sweet imploring face and murmured, "Please, please..."

The librarian was not at all satisfied with the state of affairs, but reluctantly let Reva keep the book. Reva picked the books quickly and went out of the library with the speed of light, lest Amita calls her back.

Reva's roommate, Meghna, was getting ready to go out for the weekend; she came out of the bathroom, to blow dry

her hair. She was surprised to see Reva. Reva was setting the page which had fallen from the book. She asked Reva casually, “Not coming out tonight, someone coming here?” Reva gave a naughty smile, “I and my solitude, what else would a beautiful girl ask for?” Meghna looked at Reva quizzically and then left the room.

Reva was fond of creating the right ambience. She thought the environment must be correct for everything. For shopping, the sun should not be too bright or else it takes lots of energy for miles and miles of wandering. For cooking, there should be a good kitchen with nice utensils and all the correct ingredients. Similarly, for reading she required correct shade and amount of light, a cosy room and quietude.

The pages were yellow and little torn and at certain places stuck to each other. Reva checked the date on the book but couldn't see any. She opened the first page to find it was written in Devnagri script and the language was archaic Sanskrit. As a student of historical studies, Reva required Sanskrit a lot and was fluent in it, though this was a tougher kind. Nevertheless, she opened her MacBook for the Sanskrit dictionary and a long night full of mystery, swordsmanship, inventions, kings, queens, witches horses and wizards and most of all ayas- iron.

Reva's eyes scanned the first shloka; it was a prayer to the God, “Oh my Creator, my caretaker, my well-wisher, the one who is present all around us, all-encompassing. Give me the facilities of mind and body to work at its optimum to tell the story of King Gunadhish *tasmat* Gavi.”

