

The Immortals of Meluha

Book 1 of the *Shiva Trilogy*



*This is the first chapter of the book **The Immortals of Meluha**. If you like what you read, please do pick up the complete copy of the book from a bookstore near you. The book will be available in leading bookstores from February, 2010.*

*Cheers,
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CHAPTER 1

He has come!

1900 BC, Mansarovar Lake (At the foot of Mount Kailash, Tibet)

Shiva gazed at the orange sky. The clouds hovering above Mansarovar had just parted to reveal the setting sun. The brilliant giver of life was calling it a day once again. Shiva had seen a few sunrises in his twenty-one years. But the sunset! He tried never to miss the sunset! On any other day, Shiva would have taken in the vista – the sun and the immense lake against the magnificent backdrop of the Himalayas stretching as far back as the eye could see. But not today.

He squatted and perched his lithe, muscular body on the narrow ledge extending over the lake. The numerous battle-scars on his skin gleamed in the shimmering reflected light of the waters. Shiva remembered well his carefree childhood days. He had perfected the art of throwing pebbles that bounced off the surface of the lake. He still held the record in his tribe for the highest number of bounces: seventeen.

On a normal day, Shiva would have smiled at the memory from a cheerful past that had been overwhelmed by the angst of the present. But today, he turned back towards his village without any hint of joy.

Bhadra was alert, guarding the main entrance. Shiva gestured with his eyes. Bhadra turned back to find his two back-up soldiers dozing against the fence. He cursed and kicked them hard.

Shiva turned back towards the lake.

God bless Bhadra! At least he takes some responsibility.

Shiva brought the chillum made of yak-bone to his lips and took in a deep drag. Any other day, the marijuana would have spread its munificence, dulling his troubled mind and letting him find some moments of solace. But not today.

He looked left, at the edge of the lake where the soldiers of the strange foreign visitor were kept under guard. With the lake behind them and twenty of Shiva's own soldiers guarding them, it was impossible for them to mount any surprise attack.

They let themselves be disarmed so easily. They aren't like the blood-thirsty idiots in our land who are looking for any excuse to fight.

The foreigner's words came flooding back to Shiva. 'Come to our land. It lies beyond the great mountains. Others call it Meluha. I call it Heaven. It is the richest and most powerful empire in India. Indeed the richest and most powerful in the whole world. Our government has an offer for immigrants. You will be given fertile land and resources for farming. Today, your tribe, the Gunas, fight for survival in this rough, arid land. Meluha offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams. We ask for nothing in return. Just live in peace, pay your taxes and follow the laws of the land.'

Shiva mused that he would certainly not have be a chief in this new land.

Would I really miss that so much?

His tribe would have to live by the laws of the foreigners. They would have to work every day for a living.

That's better than fighting every day just to stay alive!

Shiva took another puff from his chillum. As the smoke cleared, he turned to stare at the hut in the centre of his village, right next to his own, where the foreigner had been stationed. He had been told that he could sleep there in comfort. In fact, Shiva wanted to keep him hostage. Just in case.

We fight almost every month with the Pakratis just so that our village can exist next to the holy lake. They are getting stronger every year, forming new alliances with new tribes. We can beat the Pakratis, but not all the mountain tribes together! By moving to Meluha, we can escape this pointless violence and may be live a life of comfort. What could possibly be wrong with that? Why shouldn't we take this deal? It sounds so damn good!

Shiva took one last drag from the chillum before banging it on the rock, letting the ash slip out and rose quickly from his perch. Brushing a few specks of ash from his bare chest, he wiped his hands on his tiger skin skirt, rapidly striding to his village. Bhadra and his back-up stood to attention as Shiva passed the gate. Shiva frowned and gestured for Bhadra to ease up.

Why does he keep forgetting that he has been my closest friend since childhood? My becoming the chief hasn't really changed anything. He doesn't need to behave unnecessarily servile in front of others.

The huts in Shiva's village were luxurious compared to others in their land. A grown man could actually stand upright in them. The shelter could withstand the harsh mountain winds for nearly three years before surrendering to the elements. He flung the empty chillum into his hut as he strode to the hut where the visitor lay sleeping soundly.

Either he doesn't realise he is a hostage. Or he genuinely believes that good behaviour begets good behaviour.

Shiva remembered what his uncle, also his Guru, used to say. 'People do what their society rewards them to do. If the society rewards trust, people will be trusting.'

Meluha must be a trusting society if it teaches even its soldiers to expect the best in strangers.

Shiva scratched his shaggy beard as he stared hard at the visitor.

He had said his name was Nandi.

The Meluhan's massive proportions appeared even more enormous as he sprawled on the floor in his stupor, his immense belly jiggling with every breath. Despite being obese, his skin was taut and toned. His child-like face looked even more innocent asleep, with his mouth half open.

Is this the man who will lead me to my destiny? Do I really have the destiny my uncle spoke of?

'Your destiny is much larger than these massive mountains. But to make it come true, you will have to cross these very same massive mountains.'

Do I deserve a good destiny? My people come first. Will they be happy in Meluha?

Shiva continued to stare at the sleeping Nandi. Then he heard the sound of a conch shell.

Pakratīs!

'POSITIONS!' screamed Shiva, as he drew his sword.

Nandi was up in an instant, sword ready. They sprinted to the village gates. Following standard protocol, the women started rushing to the village centre, carrying or tugging their children along. The men ran the other way, swords drawn.

'Bhadra! Our soldiers at the lake!' shouted Shiva as he reached the entrance.

Bhadra relayed the orders and the Guna soldiers obeyed instantly. Shiva was surprised to see the Meluhans draw weapons hidden in their cloaks and rush to the village. The Pakratis were upon them within moments.

It was a well-planned ambush by the Pakratis. Dusk was usually a time when the Guna soldiers took time to thank their gods for a day without battle. The women did their chores by the lakeside. If there was a time of weakness for the formidable Gunas, a time when they weren't a fearsome martial clan, but just another mountain tribe trying to survive in a tough, hostile land, this was it.

But fate was against the Pakratis yet again. Thanks to the foreign presence, Shiva had ordered the Gunas to remain alert. Thus they were forewarned and the Pakratis lost the element of surprise. The presence of the Meluhans was also decisive, turning the tide of the short, brutal battle in favour of the Gunas. The Pakratis had to retreat.

Bloodied and scarred, Shiva surveyed the damage at the end of the battle. Two Guna soldiers had succumbed to their injuries. They would be honoured as clan heroes. But even worse, the warning had come too late for at least ten Guna women and children. Their mutilated bodies were found next to the lake. The losses were high.

Bastards! They kill women and children when they can't beat us!

A livid Shiva called the entire tribe to the centre of the village. His mind was made.

'This land is fit for barbarians! We have fought pointless battles with no end in sight. You know my uncle tried to make peace, even offering access to the lake shore to the mountain tribes. But these scum mistook our desire for peace as weakness. We all know what followed!'

The Gunas, despite being used to the brutality of regular battle, were shell-shocked by the viciousness of the attack on the women and children.

'I keep nothing secret from you. All of you know the invitation of the foreigners,' continued Shiva, pointing to Nandi and the Meluhans. 'They fought shoulder-to-shoulder with us today. They have earned my trust. I want to go with them to Meluha. But this cannot be my decision alone.'

'You are our chief, Shiva,' said Bhadra. 'Your decision is our decision. That is the tradition.'

‘Not this time,’ said Shiva holding out his hand. ‘This will change our lives completely. I believe the change will be for the better. Anything will be better than the pointlessness of the violence we face daily. I have told you what I want to do. But the choice to go or not is yours. Let the Gunas speak. This time, I follow you.’

The Gunas were clear on their tradition. But the respect for Shiva was not just based on convention, but also on his character. He had led the Gunas to their greatest military victories through his genius and sheer personal bravery.

They spoke in one voice. ‘Your decision is our decision.’



It had been five days since Shiva had uprooted his tribe. The caravan had camped in a nook at the base of one of the great valleys dotting the route to Meluha. Shiva had organized the camp in three concentric circles. The yaks had been tied around the outermost circle, to act as an alarm in case of any intruders. The men were stationed in the intermediate ring to fight if there was a battle. And the women and children were in the innermost circle, just around the fire. Expendable first, defenders second and the most vulnerable at the inside.

Shiva was prepared for the worst. He believed that there would be an ambush. It was only a matter of time.

The Pakratis should have been delighted to have access to the prime lands, as well as free occupation of the lake front. But Shiva knew that Yakhya, the Pakrati chief, would not allow them to leave peacefully. Yakhya would like nothing better than to become a legend by claiming that he had defeated Shiva’s Gunas and won the land for the Pakratis. It was precisely this weird tribal logic that Shiva detested. In an atmosphere like this, there was never any hope for peace.

Shiva relished the call of battle, revelled in its art. But he also knew that ultimately, the battles in his land were an exercise in futility.

He turned to an alert Nandi sitting some distance away. The twenty-five Meluhan soldiers were seated in an arc around a second camp circle.

Why did he pick the Gunas to immigrate? Why not the Pakratis?

Shiva's thoughts were broken as he saw a shadow move in the distance. He stared hard, but everything was still. Sometimes the light played tricks in this part of the world. Shiva relaxed his stance.

And then he saw the shadow again.

'TO ARMS!' screamed Shiva.

The Gunas and Meluhans drew their weapons and took up battle positions as fifty Pakratris charged in. The stupidity of rushing in without thought hit them hard as they met with a wall of panicky animals. The yaks bucked and kicked uncontrollably, injuring many Pakratris before they could even begin their skirmish. A few slipped through. And weapons clashed.

A young Pakrati, obviously a novice, charged at Shiva, swinging wildly. Shiva stepped back, avoiding the strike. He brought his sword back up in a smooth arc, inflicting a superficial cut on the Pakrati's chest. The young warrior cursed and swung back, opening his flank. That was all Shiva needed. He pushed his sword in brutally, cutting through the gut of his enemy. Almost instantly, he pulled the blade out, twisting it as he did, and left the Pakrati to a slow, painful death. Shiva turned around to find a Pakrati ready to strike a Guna. He jumped high and swung from the elevation slicing neatly through the Pakrati's sword arm, severing it.

Meanwhile Bhadra, as adept at the art of battle as Shiva, was fighting two Pakratris simultaneously, with a sword in each hand. His hump did not seem to impede his movements as he transferred his weight easily, striking the Pakrati on his left on his throat. Leaving him to die slowly, he swung with his right hand, cutting across the face of the other soldier, gouging his eye out. As the soldier fell, Bhadra brought his left sword down brutally, ending the suffering quickly for this hapless enemy.

The battle at the Meluhan end of camp was very different. They were exceptionally well-trained soldiers. But they were not vicious. They were following rules, avoiding killing, as far as possible.

Outnumbered and led poorly, it was but a short while before the Pakratris were beaten. Almost half of them lay dead and the rest were on their knees, begging for mercy. One of them was Yakhya, his shoulder cut deep by Nandi, debilitating the movement of his sword arm.

Bhadra stood behind the Pakrati chief, his sword raised high, ready to strike. 'Shiva, quick and easy or slow and painful?'

'Sir!' intervened Nandi, before Shiva could speak.

Shiva turned towards the Meluhan.

‘This is wrong! They are begging for mercy! Killing them is against the rules of war.’

‘You don’t know the Pakratis!’ said Shiva. ‘They are brutal. They will keep attacking us even if there is nothing to gain. This has to end. Once and for all.’

‘It is already ending. You are not going to live here anymore. You will soon be in Meluha.’

Shiva stood silent.

Nandi continued, ‘How you want to end this is up to you. More of the same or different?’

Bhadra looked at Shiva. Waiting.

‘You can show the Pakratis that you are better,’ said Nandi.

Shiva turned towards the horizon, seeing the massive mountains.

Destiny? Chance of a better life?

He turned back to Bhadra. ‘Disarm them. Take all their provisions. Release them.’

Even if the Pakratis are mad enough to go back to their village, rearm and come back, we would be long gone.

A shocked Bhadra stared at Shiva. But immediately started implementing the order.

Nandi gazed at Shiva with hope. There was but one thought that reverberated through his mind. ‘*Shiva has the heart. He has the potential. Please, let it be him. I pray to you Lord Ram, let it be him.*’

Shiva walked back to the young soldier he had stabbed. He lay writhing on the ground, face contorted in pain, as blood oozed slowly out of his guts. For this first time in his life, Shiva felt pity for a Pakrati. He drew his sword and ended the young soldier’s suffering.



After marching continuously for four weeks the caravan of invited immigrants crested the final mountain to reach the outskirts of Srinagar, the capital of the valley of Kashmir. Nandi had talked excitedly about the glories of his perfect land. Shiva had prepared himself to see some incredible sights, which he could not have imagined in his simple homeland. But nothing could have primed him for the sheer spectacle of what certainly was paradise. *Meluba*. The *land of pure life!*

The mighty Jhelum river, a roaring tigress in the mountains, slowed down to the beat of a languorous cow as she entered the valley. She caressed the heavenly land of Kashmir, meandering her way into the immense Dal Lake. Further down, she broke away from the lake, continuing her journey to the sea.

The vast valley was covered by a lush green canvas of grass. On it was painted the masterpiece that was Kashmir. Rows upon rows of flowers arrayed all of God's colours, their brilliance broken only by the soaring Chinar trees, offering a majestic, yet warm Kashmiri welcome. The melodious singing of the birds calmed the exhausted ears of Shiva's tribe, accustomed only to the rude howling of icy mountain winds.

'If this is the border province, how perfect must the rest of the country be?' whispered Shiva in awe.

The Dal Lake was the site of an ancient army camp of the Meluhans. Upon the western banks of the lake, by the side of the Jhelum lay the frontier town that had grown beyond its simple encampments into the grand *Srinagar*. Literally, the '*respected city*'.

Srinagar had been raised upon a massive platform of almost a hundred hectares in size. The platform built of earth, towered almost five metres high. On top of the platform were the city walls, which were another twenty metres in height and four metres thick. The simplicity and brilliance of building an entire city on a platform astounded the Gunas. It was a strong protection against enemies who would have to fight up a fort wall which was essentially solid ground. The platform served another vital purpose: it raised the ground level of the city, an extremely effective strategy against the recurrent floods in this land. Inside the fort walls, the city was divided into blocks by roads laid out in a neat grid pattern. It had specially constructed market areas, temples, gardens, meeting halls and everything else that would be required for sophisticated urban living. All the houses looked like simple multiple-storeyed block structures from the outside. The only way to differentiate a rich man's house was that his block would be bigger.

In contrast to the extravagant natural landscape of Kashmir, the city of Srinagar itself was painted only in restrained greys, blues and whites. The entire city was a picture of cleanliness, order and sobriety. Nearly twenty thousand souls called

Srinagar their home. Now an additional two hundred had just arrived from Mount Kailash. And their leader felt a lightness of being he hadn't experienced since that terrible day, many years ago.

I have escaped. I can make a new beginning. I can forget.



The caravan travelled to the immigrant camp outside Srinagar. The camp had been built on a separate platform on the southern side of the city. Nandi led Shiva and his tribe to the Foreigners' Office, which was placed just outside the camp. Nandi requested Shiva to wait outside as he went into the office. He soon returned, accompanied by a young official. The official gave a practised smile and folded his hands in a formal *namaste*. 'Welcome to Meluha. I am Chitraangadh. I will be your Orientation Executive. Think of me as your single point of contact for all issues whilst you are here. I believe your leader's name is Shiva. Will he step up please?'

Shiva took a step forward. 'I am Shiva.'

'Excellent,' said Chitraangadh. 'Would you be so kind as to follow me to the registration desk please? You will be registered as the caretaker of your tribe. Any communication that concerns them will go through you. Since you are the designated leader, the implementation of all directives within your tribe would be your responsibility.'

Nandi cut into Chitraangadh's officious speech to tell Shiva, 'Sir, if you will just excuse me, I will go to the immigrant camp quarters and arrange the temporary living arrangements for your tribe.'

Shiva noticed that Chitraangadh's ever-beaming face had lost its smile for a fraction of a second as Nandi interrupted his flow. But he recovered quickly and the smile returned to his face once again. Shiva turned and looked at Nandi.

'Of course, you may. You don't need to take my permission, Nandi,' said Shiva. 'But in return, you have to promise me something, my friend.'

'Of course, Sir,' replied Nandi bowing slightly.

'Call me Shiva. Not Sir,' grinned Shiva. 'I am your friend. Not your Chief.'

A surprised Nandi looked up, bowed again and said, 'Yes Sir. I mean, yes, Shiva.'

Shiva turned back to Chitraangadh, whose smile for some reason appeared more genuine now. He said, 'Well Shiva, if you will follow me to the registration desk, we will complete the formalities quickly.'



The newly registered tribe reached the residential quarters in the immigration camp, to see Nandi waiting outside the main gates; he led them in. The roads of the camp were just like those of Srinagar. They were laid out in a neat north-south and east-west grid. The carefully paved footpaths contrasted sharply with the dirt tracks in Shiva's own land. He noticed something strange about the road though.

'Nandi, what are those differently coloured stones running through the centre of the road?' asked Shiva.

'They cover the underground drains, Shiva. The drains take all the waste water of the camp out. It ensures that the camp remains clean and hygienic.'

Shiva marvelled at the almost obsessively meticulous planning of the Meluhans.

The Gunas reached the large building that had been assigned to them. For the umpteenth time, they thanked the wisdom of their leader in deciding to come to Meluha. The three storeyed building had comfortable, separate living quarters for each family. Each room had luxurious furniture including a highly polished copper plate on the wall on which they could see their reflection. The rooms had clean linen bed sheets, towels and even some clothes. Feeling the cloth, a bewildered Shiva asked, 'What is this material?'

Chitraangadh replied enthusiastically, 'It's cotton, Shiva. The plant is grown in our lands and fashioned into the cloth that you hold.'

There was a broad picture window on each wall to allow the light and the warmth of the sun. Notches on each wall supported a metal rod with a controlled flame on top for lighting. Each room had an attached bathroom with a sloping floor that enabled the water to flow naturally to a hole which drained it out. At the right end of each bathroom was a paved basin on the ground which culminated in a large hole. The purpose of this contraption was a mystery to the tribe. The side walls had some kind of device, which when turned, allowed water to flow through.

'Magic!' whispered Bhadra's mother.

Beside the main door of the building was an attached house. A doctor and her nurses walked out of the house to greet Shiva. The doctor, a petite, wheat-skinned

woman was dressed in a simple white cloth tied around her waist and legs in a style the Meluhans called *dhoti*. A smaller white cloth was tied as a blouse around her chest while another cloth called an *angvastram* was draped over her shoulders. The centre of her forehead bore a white dot. Her head had been shaved clean except for a knotted tuft of hair at the back, called a *choti*. A loose string called a *janau* was tied down from her left shoulder across her torso to the right side.

Nandi was genuinely startled at seeing her. With a reverential namaste, he said, 'Lady Ayurvati! I didn't expect a doctor of your stature here.'

Ayurvati looked at Nandi with a smile and a polite namaste. 'I strongly believe in the field-work experience programme, Captain. My team follows it strictly. However, I am terribly sorry but I didn't recognise you. Have we met before?'

'My name is Captain Nandi, my lady,' answered Nandi. 'We haven't met but who doesn't know you, the greatest doctor in the land?'

'Thank you, Captain Nandi,' said a visibly embarrassed Ayurvati. 'But I think you exaggerate. There are many far superior to me.' Turning quickly towards Shiva, Ayurvati continued, 'Welcome to Meluha. I am Ayurvati, your designated doctor. My nurses and I will be at your assistance for the time that you are in these quarters.'

Hearing no reaction from Shiva, Chitraangadh said in his most earnest voice, 'These are just temporary quarters, Shiva. The actual houses that will be allocated to your tribe will be much more comfortable. You have to stay here only for the period of the quarantine which will not last more than seven days.'

'Oh no, my friend! The quarters are more than comfortable. They are beyond anything that we could have imagined. What say *Mausi*?' grinned Shiva at Bhadra's mother, before turning back to Chitraangadh with a frown. 'But why the quarantine?'

Nandi cut in. 'Shiva, the quarantine is just a precaution. We don't have too many diseases in Meluha. Sometimes, immigrants may come in with new diseases. During this seven day period, the doctors will observe and cure you of any such ailments.'

'And one of the guidelines that you have to follow to control diseases is to maintain strict hygiene standards,' said Ayurvati.

Shiva grimaced at Nandi and whispered, 'Hygiene standards?'

Nandi's forehead crinkled into an apologetic frown while his hands gently advised acquiescence. He mumbled, 'Please go along with it, Shiva. It is just one of those things that we *have* to do in Meluha. Lady Ayurvati is considered to be the best doctor in the land.'

'If you are free right now, I can give you your instructions,' said Ayurvati.

'I am free right now,' said Shiva with a straight face. 'But I may have to charge you later.'

Bhadra giggled softly, while Ayurvati stared at Shiva with a blank face, clearly not amused at the pun.

'I don't understand what you're trying to say,' said Ayurvati frostily. 'In any case, we will begin at the bathroom.'

Ayurvati walked into the guest house, muttering under her breath, 'These uncouth immigrants...'

Shiva raised his eyebrows towards Bhadra, grinning impishly.



Late in the evening, after a hearty meal, all the Gunas were served a medicinal drink in their rooms.

'Yuck!' grimaced Bhadra, his face contorted. 'This tastes like Yak's piss!'

'How do you know what yak's piss tastes like?' laughed Shiva, as he slapped his friend hard on the back. 'Now go to your room. I need to sleep.'

'Have you seen the beds? I think this is going to be the best sleep of my life!'

'I have seen the bed, dammit!' grinned Shiva. 'Now I want to experience it. Get out!'

Bhadra left Shiva's room, laughing loudly. He wasn't the only one excited by the unnaturally soft beds. Their entire tribe had rushed to their rooms for what they anticipated would be the most comfortable sleep of their lives. They were in for a surprise.



Shiva tossed and turned on his bed constantly. He was wearing an orange coloured *dhoti*. The tiger skin had been taken away to be washed – for *hygienic* reasons. His cotton *angvastram* was lying on a low chair by the wall. A half lit chillum lay forlorn on the side-table.

This cursed bed is too soft. Impossible to sleep on!

Shiva yanked the bed sheet off the mattress, tossed it on the floor and lay down. This was a little better. Sleep was stealthily creeping in on him. But not as strongly as at home. He missed the rough cold floor of his own hut. He missed the shrill winds of Mount Kailash, which broke through the most determined efforts to ignore them. He missed the comforting stench of his tiger skin. No doubt, his current surroundings were excessively comfortable, but they were unfamiliar and alien.

As usual, it was his instincts which brought up the truth: *'It's not the room. It's you.'*

It was then that Shiva noticed that he was sweating. Despite the cool breeze, he was sweating profusely. The room appeared to be spinning lightly. He felt as if his body was being drawn out of itself. His frostbitten right toe felt as if it was on fire. His battle scarred left knee seemed to be getting stretched. His tired and aching muscles felt as if a great hand was remoulding them. His shoulder bone, dislocated in days past and never completely healed, appeared to be ripping the muscles aside so as to re-engineer the joint. The muscles in turn seemed to be giving way to the bones to do their job.

Breathing was an effort. He opened his mouth to help his lungs along. But not enough air flowed in. Shiva concentrated with all his might, opened his mouth wide and sucked in as much air as he could. The curtains by the side of the window rustled as a kindly wind rushed in. With the sudden gush of air, Shiva's body relaxed just a bit. And then the battle began again. He focused and willed giant gasps of air into his hungry body.

Knock! Knock!

The light tapping on the door alerted Shiva. He was disoriented for a moment. Still breathing hard! His shoulder was twitching. The familiar pain was missing. He looked down at his knee. It didn't hurt anymore. The scar had vanished. Still gasping for breath! He looked down at his toe. Whole and complete now. He bent to check it. A cracking sound reverberated through the room as his toe made its first movement in years. Still breathing hard! There was also an unfamiliar tingling coldness in his neck. Very cold.

Knock! Knock! A little more insistent now.

A bewildered Shiva staggered to his feet, pulled the *angvastram* around his neck for warmth and opened the door. The darkness veiled his face, but Shiva could still recognise Bhadra. He whispered in a panic stricken voice, 'Shiva, I'm sorry to disturb you so late. But my mother has suddenly got a very high fever. What should I do?'

Shiva instinctively touched Bhadra's forehead. 'You too have a fever Bhadra. Go to your room. I will get the doctor.'

As Shiva raced down the corridor towards the steps he encountered many more doors opening with the now familiar message. 'Sudden fever! Help!'

Shiva sprinted down the steps to the attached building where the doctors were housed. He knocked hard on the door. Ayurvati opened it immediately, as if she was expecting him. Shiva spoke calmly. 'Ayurvati, almost my entire tribe has suddenly fallen ill. Please come fast, they need help.'

Ayurvati touched Shiva's forehead. 'You don't have a fever?'

Shiva shook his head. 'No.'

Ayurvati frowned, clearly surprised. She turned and ordered her nurses, 'Come on. It's begun. Let's go.'

As Ayurvati and her nurses rushed into the building, Chitraangadh appeared out of nowhere. He asked Shiva, 'What happened?'

'I don't know. Practically everybody in my tribe suddenly fell ill.'

'You too are sweating heavily.'

'Don't worry. I don't have a fever. Look, I'm going back into the building. I want to see how my people are doing.'

Chitraangadh nodded, adding, 'I'll call Nandi.'

As Chitraangadh sped away in search of Nandi, Shiva ran into the building. He was surprised the moment he entered. All the torches in the building had been lit. The nurses were going from room to room, methodically administering medicines and advising the scared patients on what they should do. A scribe walked along with each nurse meticulously noting the details of each patient on a palm-leaf booklet. The Meluhans were clearly prepared for such an eventuality. Ayurvati stood at the

end of the corridor, her hands on her hips. Like a general supervising her superbly trained and efficient troops. Shiva rushed up to her and asked, 'What about the second and third floor?'

Ayurvati answered without turning to him. 'Nurses have already reached all over the building. I will go up to supervise once the situation on this floor has stabilised. We'll cover all the patients in the next half hour.'

'You people are incredibly efficient but I pray that everyone will be okay,' said a worried Shiva.

Ayurvati turned to look at Shiva. Her eyebrows were raised slightly and a hint of a smile hovered on her serious face. 'Don't worry. We're Meluhans. We are capable of handling any situation. Everybody will be fine.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'Yes. Please go take a bath.'

'What?!'

'Please go take a bath. Right now,' said Ayurvati as she turned back to look at her team. 'Everybody, please remember that all children below the age of fifteen *must* be tonsured. Mastrak, please go up and start the secondary medicines. I'll be there in five minutes.'

'Yes, my lady,' said a young man as he hurried up the steps carrying a large cloth bag.

'You're still here?' asked Ayurvati as she noticed that Shiva hadn't left.

Shiva spoke softly, controlling his rising anger, 'What difference will my bathing make? My people are in trouble. I want to help.'

'I don't have the time or the patience to argue with you. You will go take a bath right now!' said Ayurvati, clearly *not* trying to control her rising temper.

Shiva glared at Ayurvati as he made a heroic effort to rein in the curses that wanted to leap out of his mouth. His clenched fists wanted to have an argument of their own with Ayurvati. But she was a woman.

Ayurvati too glared back at Shiva. She was used to being obeyed. She was a doctor. If she told a patient to do something, she expected it to be done without question. But in her long years of experience she had also seen a few patients like Shiva,

especially from the nobility. Such patients had to be *reasoned* with. Not *instructed*. Yet, this was a simple immigrant. Not some nobleman!

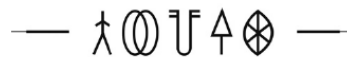
Controlling herself with great effort, Ayurvati said, ‘Shiva, you are sweating. If you don’t wash it off, it will kill you. Please trust me. You cannot be of any help to your tribe if you are dead.’



Chitraangadh banged loudly on the door. A bleary eyed Nandi woke up cursing. He wrenched the door open and growled, ‘This better be important!’

‘Come quickly. Shiva’s tribe has fallen ill.’

‘Already? But this is only the first night!’ exclaimed Nandi. Picking up his angvastram he said, ‘Let’s go!’



The bathroom seemed a strange place for a bath. Shiva was used to splashing about in the chilly Mansarovar Lake for his bi-monthly ablutions. The bathroom felt strangely constricted. He turned the magical device on the wall to increase the flow of water. He used the strange cake-like substance that the Meluhans said was a soap to rub the body clean. Ayurvati had been very clear. The soap *had* to be used. He turned the water off and picked up the towel. As he rubbed himself vigorously, the mystifying development he had ignored in the past few hours came flooding back. His shoulder felt better than new. He looked down in awe at his knee. No pain, no scar. He stared in wonder at his completely healed toe. And then he realised that it wasn’t just the injured parts, but his entire body felt new, rejuvenated and stronger than ever. His neck, though, still felt intolerably cold.

What the devil is going on?

He stepped out of the bathroom and quickly wore a new dhoti. Again, Ayurvati’s strict instructions were not to wear his old clothes which were stained by his sweat. As he was putting on the angvastram around his neck for some warmth, there was a knock on the door. It was Ayurvati. ‘Shiva, can you open the door please? I just want to check whether you are all right.’

Shiva opened the door. Ayurvati stepped in and checked Shiva’s temperature; it was normal. Ayurvati nodded slightly and said, ‘You seem to be healthy. And your tribe is recovering quickly as well. The trouble has passed.’

Shiva smiled gratefully. ‘Thanks to the skills and efficiency of your team. I am truly sorry for arguing with you earlier. It was unnecessary. I know you meant well.’

Ayurvati looked up from her palm-leaf booklet with a slight smile and a raised eyebrow. ‘Being polite, are we?’

‘I’m not that rude, you know,’ grinned Shiva. ‘You people are just too supercilious!’

Ayurvati suddenly stopped listening as she stared at Shiva with a stunned look on her face. How had she not noticed it before? She had never believed in the legend. Was she going to be the first one to see it come true? Pointing weakly with her hands she mumbled, ‘Why have you covered your neck?’

‘It’s very cold for some reason. Is it something to get worried about?’ asked Shiva as he pulled the angvastram off.

A cry resounded loudly through the silent room as Ayurvati staggered back. Her hand covered her mouth in shock while the palm leaves scattered on the floor. Her knees were too weak to hold her up. She collapsed with her back against the wall, never once taking her eyes off Shiva. Tears broke through her proud eyes. She kept repeating, ‘Om Brahmaya namah. Om Brahmaya namah.’

‘What happened? Is it serious?’ asked a worried Shiva.

‘You have come! My Lord, you have come!’

Before a bewildered Shiva could react to her strange reaction, Nandi rushed in and noticed Ayurvati on the ground. Copious tears were flowing down her face.

‘What happened, my lady?’ asked a startled Nandi.

Ayurvati just pointed at Shiva’s neck. Nandi looked up. The neck shone an eerie iridescent blue. With a cry that sounded like that of a long caged animal just released from captivity, Nandi collapsed on his knees. ‘My Lord! You have come! The *Neelkanth* has come!’

The Captain bent low and brought his head down to touch the *Neelkanth*’s feet reverentially. The object of his adoration however, stepped back, befuddled and perturbed.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ Shiva asked agitatedly.

Holding a hand to his freezing neck he turned around to the polished copper plate and stared in stunned astonishment at the reflection of his *neel kanth*; his *blue throat*.

Chitraangadh, holding the door frame for support, sobbed like a child. ‘We’re saved! We’re saved! He has come!’



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