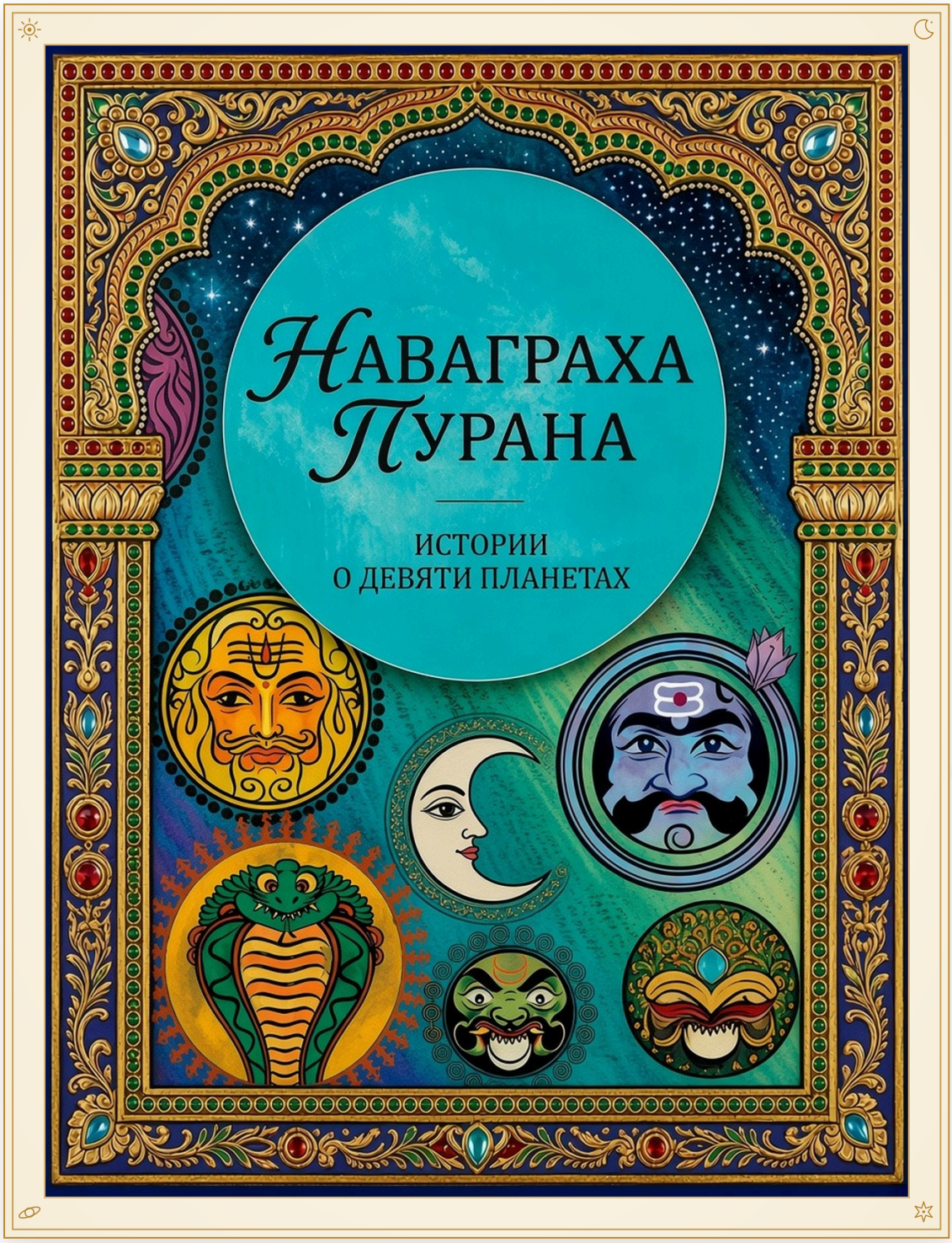
Navagraha Purana

Tales of the Nine Planets



The Birth of Budha



The soothing rhythm of Vedic hymns filled the air of the ashram. Brihaspati's disciples sat in neat rows beneath the trees, chanting their lessons under the watchful eye of their teacher. Bright parrots, hidden in the thick leaves overhead, chanted the mantras right along with them. The endless chatter of birds, broken now and then by the cry of a peacock, made a gentle background to this peaceful music. Then a sudden movement caught Brihaspati's eye, and he looked up from his pupils. His thick brows drew together in surprise: along the grassy path, without a sound, a young man was walking toward the hermitage. The guru took in

the finely built body and the glowing face. Here was a man of astonishing beauty — the kind of beauty that captures every eye at once, a man's or a woman's. *Who could this be?* Brihaspati wondered.

Even in Indra's Svarga you would not meet such dazzling beauty!

The stranger came closer, stopped behind the last row of disciples and waited respectfully. Brihaspati, curious now, called out, "And who are you, young man?"

"I have come to you, teacher," Chandra answered politely.

Brihaspati raised his hand, and the chanting stopped. The parrots took the hint and fell silent on their branches. The guru beckoned the newcomer forward. The young man stood before him and bowed his head, while the disciples craned their necks to get a look at him.

"I am Chandra, son of the sage Atri and of Anasuya."

"Ah, Atreya…" Brihaspati nodded, and Chandra went on:

"I am here to receive the highest knowledge from you, as my father commanded."

"Is that so?" said Brihaspati, struck once more by the young man's extraordinary looks. Chandra lay down at the guru's feet and said humbly:

"Teacher, accept me as your disciple and bless me with the gift of knowledge."

"May you be happy," Brihaspati replied.

Chandra looked up in surprise. "Teacher, I have come to be your disciple!"

The frown that had begun to gather on Brihaspati's face turned into a smile. The young man had made his point: that was not the right blessing for the moment. "You are right, child — a disciple is not meant to live in comfort." He raised his right hand in blessing. "May all knowledge be yours!"

"Now I am truly blessed, teacher," said Chandra, greeting his new guru, who told him:

"Chandra, go and perform your morning rites and rest after your journey. Then…"

Chandra interrupted:

"Teacher, I performed my morning rites on the way here."

He looked around at the pleasant grounds of the hermitage.

"And my weariness has melted away in this refreshing place."

Brihaspati smiled. "Very well, Chandra… And tell me, how is the sage Atri?"

"He is well, teacher."

"And your mother Anasuya?"

"She gives herself completely to caring for my father."

Brihaspati smiled with approval. "That is what I call a perfect couple! And you are fortunate to be their son." He pointed to the back row.

"Sit over there, Chandra. This evening I will test how deep your knowledge goes, and then I will decide what course of study to set you — including whatever needs correcting."

He broke off as a young woman of the hermitage came up with a vessel of water and offered it to Chandra. Brihaspati introduced

Atma School

her:

“This is Punjikasthala, the maid of our hermitage. She looks after the disciples’ quarters and helps around the ashram.”

Chandra sipped the cool water and made his way to the last row. A pair of hungry eyes followed his broad retreating shoulders, unblinking. Those large eyes were peeping out through an open window of the inner rooms. They were not Brihaspati’s eyes, nor the eyes of any of his pupils. No — those eyes full of longing, pure as lotus petals, belonged to Brihaspati’s wife, Tara.

Late that evening Brihaspati came into the bedchamber. Tara sat on the bed as still as a statue, wrapped in a sari that stirred in the breeze drifting in through the open window, sweet with the scent of flowers.

“Tara!” Brihaspati exclaimed in surprise. “You are still awake!”

Tara started at her husband’s voice like a frightened doe. “Swami, it’s you!” she said quickly. “I can’t sleep…”

Brihaspati lay down, and his hand reached for his wife without thinking. Tara looked down at him. “Your new disciple…” She swallowed hard, cleared her throat and murmured, barely audible, “Chandra…”

“You mean Chandra, my dear?”

“Yes, that’s his name, isn’t it?” She hesitated. “He seems much older than the other boys, doesn’t he, Swami?”

“He is not only older. In obedience, in learning and in wisdom he is far above all the rest.” Brihaspati smiled approvingly.

“Really?”

Atma School

“Tara, do you know who Chandra is? He is none other than the beloved son of Atri — Brahma’s manasaputra, born of his mind — and of Atri’s chaste wife Anasuya.”

“They are said to be a model couple, Swami.”

“Yes, my dear.” A note of pride crept into Brihaspati’s voice. “And Atri chose me, of all people, to be his son’s guru!”

“That is a great honour, Swami. And it’s good to have a young man among all these children — they can’t even carry water up from the river without spilling half of it on the way!” Tara paused, then asked, “Swami, may I ask Chandra to bring the water from the river every day?”

Brihaspati smiled indulgently. “Tara, you don’t need my permission for that! You know that for every disciple, serving the guru’s wife is the same as serving the teacher himself.”

A deep sigh escaped Tara’s lips.

Brihaspati drew her gently towards him. “Come, Tara, it’s time you rested. You are always up before dawn.”

Tara slipped her hand deftly out of his embrace and rose in one smooth movement. “You need rest too, Swami. I’m not sleepy at all. I think I’ll walk in the garden for a while. I’ll be back soon — don’t wait for me.”

Without waiting for an answer, she hurried out of the room. The cool night breeze played in her thick curls. A sudden gust tore the upper cloth from her shoulders and tossed it about mischievously, but Tara did not notice that she was uncovered. Her sari fluttered in the wind and then clung to her like a second skin, tracing every sensual curve of her body.

A dark wave of desire rose from the depths of her being and swept over her: she knew very well why she could not sleep that night! *Chandra draws me like a tide I cannot resist*, she thought. *I long for his touch.* Brahma's words echoed in her mind: "*Brihaspati, the teacher of the devas, a man of matchless intellect, is destined to be your husband.*" Tara sighed. Could Brahma have been wrong? Perhaps Chandra was the one fated to be her husband. Had she made a mistake?

Then she froze — someone behind her had tugged at the hem of her garment! She gasped and turned slowly, expecting to see Chandra. But no: with a sharp stab of disappointment she saw that the cloth had merely caught on the branch of a flowering bush.

She freed it and threw it carelessly over her shoulders. Again Tara raised her eyes: before her stood the disciples' huts. In one of them Chandra lay peacefully asleep, blissfully unaware of the storm raging in her sleepless heart! The heady scent of the flowers wrapped around her senses. With a soft moan of pain Tara ran back into the ashram. As she walked slowly to her room, Brihaspati's snoring reached her ears.

It was the hour of the midday meal. Brihaspati's disciples sat in two long rows facing each other, while their teacher took his place at the head, where he could watch them both. Tara came to Brihaspati and served his food onto the banana leaf in front of him. Suddenly her husband frowned and called out to one of the boys, "Sanatana! Where is Chandra?"

"He hasn't come yet, teacher," the boy replied.

Tara stepped in:

“Chandra? Swami, I sent him to the river for water. I’m afraid I knocked over the pot by accident and spilled it all.”

“But it is mealtime, Tara…” Brihaspati reproached her gently.

“Swami, I asked him to eat first — it was he who insisted on going for the water straight away.” She paused.

“Go on with your meal, Swami. Chandra can eat with me.”

Chandra stood uncertainly on the threshold of the dining hall. On the floor before him lay two banana leaves, and on one of them a meal had been served.

“Come in, Chandra.” He started at the sound of her voice. “Sit down at your leaf. I’ve already served you.”

Chandra turned and saw Tara, his teacher’s wife, holding a bowl of steaming rice in one hand and a ladle in the other. He stayed where he was by the door. Tara laughed merrily.

“Well, what has bewitched you so — me or the banana leaf?”

Chandra came to his senses and bowed respectfully. “After you, lady.”

“No, Chandra, I told your guru we would eat together. Join me!”

It was an order. Chandra moved slowly towards the leaves. Tara smiled a mysterious smile.

“Why do you hesitate, Chandra? Aren’t you hungry? I’m simply starving.”

She waved him to his leaf. “Sit down and eat.” Without taking her eyes off his face, she sat down opposite him. “Give me a moment — I’ll serve myself.” As she bent over her leaf, her upper cloth slid down onto it. At her sudden little gasp Chandra looked up — and

Atma School

froze. He could not tear his eyes away from the stunning beauty of her bare breasts. Tara gave a breathless laugh.

“Oh! This cloth just won’t stay in place!”

With a wry smile she held out her hands, both busy with food. “Chandra, would you cover me?”

Chandra did not move; his eyes were fixed on her. “Chandra!” Her insistent voice broke the spell. He leapt up, lifted the cloth with a trembling hand and laid it carefully over her shoulders. Tara sat up straight, and now the cloth lay like snow upon twin peaks. She went on eating as if nothing had happened. Chandra, on the other hand, had lost his appetite. The sharp pangs that gnawed at him and burned in his eyes had nothing to do with food.

“Well, is it tasty?” Tara asked casually. Chandra came to himself and began to eat.

A playful smile hovered on Tara’s lips. Chandra ate mechanically, his eyes darting from the leaf to her face and back again. “Your guru says your mother is a great woman,” Tara remarked.

“Yes…” Chandra stammered.

“I’ve heard she is very beautiful, too.” She stopped eating. “Is she really so lovely?”

“Yes,” said Chandra, his voice growing steadier as her questions slowly put him at ease. “My mother really is very beautiful.”

“More beautiful than me?”

Chandra looked into her mischievous eyes. Her teeth gleamed like jasmine buds between parted ruby lips. “Tell me, Chandra,” she teased, “who is more beautiful — your mother or I?”

Chandra said nothing. “Come on, Chandra, answer me,” she urged.

“Both… you are both beautiful…” he mumbled.

Tara burst out laughing. “Poor Chandra!” She pointed at his leaf. “Hm… eat.”

Chandra folded his leaf abruptly and stood up. “I have had enough.”

When Tara bent to gather up the leaves, her wayward upper cloth slipped down again. She turned to Chandra.

“Oh dear! Here we go again! This garment has a mind of its own today! Chandra…”

She spread her hands helplessly. Standing right behind her, Chandra caught the unruly cloth and laid it over her. Tara’s eyes sparkled.

“My saris are always like this — they slip at the slightest excuse!”

She walked away, and her flowing gait reminded Chandra of a swan gliding across the mirror of a lake. He stood rooted to the spot, spellbound. Could she be even more beautiful from behind? He thought of his mother. Yes, Tara and Anasuya were both beautiful, but each in her own way.

When darkness wrapped the ashram, Chandra wandered sleepless beneath the trees. A muffled cry made him turn and peer anxiously into the leaves. Was she hiding there in the dark? Was she, too, awake tonight, just like him? Was she haunted by the same wild thoughts that tormented his heart with such exquisite pain? Again and again the picture came back to him: Tara’s garment slipping, revealing her breathtaking beauty.

A voice as sweet as a vina rang in his ears. Chandra moved silently through the garden, looking for Tara. Again something rustled in the bushes. He spun round — it was only the beat of wings. A bird flew off. Chandra sighed with regret. Tara was his teacher's wife. Perhaps it was nothing unusual for her if her upper cloth slipped… perhaps it was quite natural for anyone nearby, teacher or pupil, to set it right. Was it his own inexperience with women that had raised this storm in his heart? Chandra shook his head. Was he reading more into her mysterious glances than the day's events deserved?

He shrugged helplessly and, with a heavy heart, went back to his hut. As he walked away, the bushes rustled and parted, and out stepped Punjikasthala. The maid smiled to herself and went off to her own hut.

Atma School

Punjikasthala was an apsara. Much to her annoyance, Indra had ordered her to serve Brihaspati, which in effect cut her off from Svarga. The sameness of ashram life weighed on her: a dull, endless round of sweeping, gathering flowers for the daily offerings and meekly doing whatever the teacher's wife told her. There were no handsome young devas here to admire her beauty, no dancing and no singing to brighten the long evenings.

Had she possessed the rare gifts of Urvashi or Menaka, Indra would never have condemned her to such a dreary existence. Punjikasthala sighed heavily: her lot was to live in the ashram, far from the excitements of Svarga.

Brihaspati's disciples were reverently chanting the Vedas with their eyes closed. Their teacher watched them closely, and his gaze came to rest on Chandra. The young man sat apart from the chanting, his eyes fixed on the hermitage, where Tara stood at the open window with a dreamy smile on her lips.

“Chandra!” Brihaspati’s stern voice made the young man start and pull himself together. “You are not paying attention.”

Chandra flushed with shame. “Forgive me, teacher,” he murmured.

“Concentration is absolutely essential if you are to understand the Vedas,” Brihaspati told him. “Attend to your lessons.”

Brihaspati finished his morning rites and made ready to leave for Svarga. After a breakfast of fruit offerings he turned to his wife. “Tara, today I am needed at Indra’s council.”

“When will you be back, Swami?”

“By evening. I shall leave Chandra in charge of the disciples.”

“Yes,” Tara agreed. “They need a firm hand, or they will run wild while you’re away.”

Brihaspati looked closely into her face and said tenderly, “Let Punjikasthala see to the chores, my dear. You look tired.” His eyes were full of concern. Tara nodded obediently.

Tara stood at the open window, watching Brihaspati’s disciples sitting in their neat rows, chanting mantras. Chandra had taken his place before them, standing in for their teacher. Thoughts swarmed in Tara’s head like bees in a hive. At last she roused herself and turned decisively away from the window, a playful smile on her lips. She went over to the clay jars that stood along the wall, filled to the brim with water. She carried one outside and poured it out on the ground. Leaving the empty jar where it stood, she did the same with the rest. When she had finished, she looked at the row of empty vessels with a satisfied smile.

“Punjika!” Tara called. “Punjikasthala! Where are you, girl? Come here.”

The maid came running. “Mother, what has happened?”

“Dust got into the water, so I poured it all out. Go down to the river and bring fresh water. The children need clean water to drink. Fill all the jars.”

“As you wish, Mother,” said Punjikasthala meekly. She picked up the jars and set off for the river. Tara went over to the front rows of disciples, pointedly ignoring Chandra.

“Your teacher has gone to Indra’s court. I know he set you lessons for today, but we have run completely out of firewood. Instead of studying, I want you all to go into the forest and gather wood for the ashram. Sanatana, you will lead them.”

She turned to the others. “I expect every one of you to obey Sanatana…”

“But Mother,” Sanatana objected, “the teacher put Chandra in charge while he’s away.”

“I know, Sanatana.” There was irritation in Tara’s voice. “Chandra is needed here for jobs that are too much for either you or me. So off to the forest with you!”

The disciples needed no further persuading. They happily abandoned their lessons and marched off cheerfully towards the forest. Chandra glanced doubtfully at Tara. “But the teacher told me…”

Tara cut him short. “Chandra, I am well aware of your guru’s instructions.” Then, more softly:

“But I hope you understand that serving your teacher’s wife matters no less than obeying the teacher himself!”

Chandra gazed, spellbound, at her profile, as flawless as the rest of her.

I have never once called her "*Mother*," he thought. *I wonder why.*

Tara turned to him with a smile, her pearly teeth gleaming between coral lips.

"Chandra, why are you the only one of the disciples who doesn't call me 'Mother'?"

Chandra's heart began to race at the unexpected question. Could she read his thoughts?

"Come on, tell me why." Chandra was silent. He nervously licked his dry lips.

"Come on, tell me why." Chandra jumped: the words had rung out loudly right behind him. He spun round — there was no one there!

"Come on, tell me why." Again the words sounded in the silence. What kind of sorcery was this? Then a rustle of leaves made him look up in alarm: a parrot was perched on a branch, fluttering its wings. Tara burst into delighted laughter.

"Until you answer, the parrot will keep repeating my words!"

She came closer and for an instant brushed her feather-light fingers across his parted lips. "But not here — you will give me your answer in the garden."

"Come, Chandra," she said, taking his hand and pulling him after her.

"Come, Chandra," the parrot repeated from the tree.

"Come, Chandra," Tara beckoned with a teasing smile.

“Come, Chandra,” the parrot echoed from above.

Tara’s hand, slender as a lotus stem, had become a tight knot of desire, and he was its willing captive. With a reckless laugh Chandra followed the vision of beauty moving ahead of him.

Chandra tossed and turned on his mat. It was long past midnight, and still sleep would not come.

Pictures of that afternoon in the garden turned over and over in his mind like a kaleidoscope. “Come on!” Seizing his hand, Tara had broken into a carefree run. She stopped, out of breath, in the thick undergrowth beneath the spreading branches of a tree, and looked up at him, smiling. Chandra could not tear his spellbound eyes from the rise and fall of her breasts. Sweat was running down his face in little streams.

“You’re perspiring, Chandra. It must be from running…” Tara remarked. He flinched as she lifted the edge of her garment to dab his face. The heady fragrance of flower pollen drifting from the cloth, mingled with the petal-soft touch of her hand, made his head swim.

Atma School

“You’re still perspiring! Are you tired?” Tara looked at the beads of sweat on his forehead. Chandra did not answer. He knew perfectly well that neither his mind nor his body was the least bit tired!

“We’re in the garden! Shall we pick some flowers?” Tara suggested brightly.

“If you like…” Chandra could barely get the words out.

“Wonderful — you pick on that side and I’ll pick on this one. Let’s see who gathers more.”

Tara laughed playfully and added one condition: “And the flowers must all be different colours.”

Chandra picked flowers without thinking, his mind in turmoil. Every flower he touched was a caress of Tara’s soft hand. Soon her sweet words floated to him on the breeze: “Chandra, where are you? Come here.” He walked slowly towards the sound of her melodious voice. “I’m here.” He could not see her. Was this a game of hide-and-seek? “Chandra, here — in this bower!”

His blood sang in answer to her rippling laughter. He walked slowly towards the bower; the fragrant air drew him on like a potent love potion. He stooped to enter beneath the thick canopy of climbing vines.

The tinkling of Tara’s bangles met him in the soft green half-light of the leafy hideaway. Suddenly a shower of flowers fell over him. As he gasped in surprise, her musical voice rang out in teasing laughter. “I picked these flowers for you — not for the gods!” She paused. “And now tell me — who are your flowers for?”

He flinched; her question struck him like a light slap. “Come on, Chandra, tell me,” her insistent voice would not let him go. Not knowing how to address her, Chandra silently held out his flowers.

“For me! Then why don’t you shower me with them?” Tara laughed. “But wait… no… not like this… not while I’m standing…”

She lay back on the soft carpet of petals that covered the ground. Beauty itself, she reclined on her bed of flowers — one slender arm propping up her head, the other resting at her waist, one knee drawn up. Chandra gazed at her as if in a trance.

“And now, Chandra, cover me in flowers!” she smiled sensuously.

“Slowly, slowly! Don’t throw them — I want to be bathed in a soft rain of petals.”

Gathering his courage, Chandra began to shower Tara with flowers. His trembling hand gradually grew steady. He was a devoted worshipper at the altar of her beauty, honouring her exquisite body with his flowers.

“Chandra,” her voice came softly from the depths of the bower. “Do you know who you look like right now?” She paused.

“You are Vasanta, the spring, Manmatha’s companion — the one who helps the god of love adorn the maiden goddess of nature.”

Chandra emptied his upper cloth of the last flowers over her and gazed adoringly at Tara’s body, lost among the blossoms. She glowed like a supple vine covered in flowers of every colour. Her radiant face turned towards him like a sunflower; her white teeth gleamed like jasmine buds. “You still haven’t answered my two questions,” she reminded him slyly. He looked at her, puzzled.

“It seems I shall have to teach you the art of conversation first!”

Tara smiled indulgently and reached out to take his hand. “Come here, Chandra.” She drew him gently down to sit beside her. “Now tell me: what is my name?”

“Tara…”

“Good. And now tell me why you don’t call me ‘Mother’, as a disciple should.”

She looked at him intently. “Tell me, Chandra. I want to hear the answer right now.”

“I don’t like calling you that,” he murmured softly.

“Oh! So that’s how it is!” she laughed. “Then call me Tara!”

His eyes widened at her boldness. Her own eyes silently repeated the command of her tender lips, trembling in the cool breeze. As if by themselves, his lips whispered, “Tara…”

“Yes! Chandra, call me Tara!” Had she not heard him? He said it again, more firmly: “Tara…” She laughed with pure delight.

“There’s something in the way you say my name… I don’t know what… but it makes my heart sing!”

She paused.

“I heard you the first time… but I want to hear it again and again!”

Her infectious smile was now reflected on his face.

Atma School

“Do you know you become even more handsome when you smile?” she asked. “And now answer my second question: who is more beautiful — your mother or I?”

He had forgotten the question she had asked him over the meal — how long ago that seemed! He looked into the bottomless pools of her eyes. Her robe of flowers rose and fell with every sweet breath, as if trembling in a light breeze, and her own glowing body outshone the brightness of the blossoms.

“Tell me, Chandra. Who is more beautiful — your mother or I?” she repeated, a teasing smile on her lips.

The image of his beautiful mother flashed through his mind, and in that same instant he understood: his mother’s beauty was a healing balm, Tara’s a blazing fire; his mother’s loveliness wrapped him in calm, while Tara drove sleep from his eyes. She squeezed his hand insistently.

“If you don’t answer, I shall have to call my parrot,” she laughed teasingly. “Well, tell me now: who is more beautiful — your mother

or I?”

“You…” he whispered. “You are more beautiful.” His eyes roamed hungrily over her body, drinking in her supple beauty.

“And do you know who is more handsome — you or my husband?” she asked.

He gasped at her boldness. “Tara!”

“Go on, ask me!” she insisted. Her fingers caressed his arms, intoxicating his senses.

“Tara…” was all he could manage. She took his hand and pressed it to her cheek, soft as a petal.

“I’ll tell you even if you don’t ask: you are more handsome than my husband.”

Her voice grew husky with desire. “Chandra, come closer to me.”

“Tara…” Once again it was the only word he could say. Her wandering hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“Closer… closer! I want you close to my heart!”

Her voice trembled with passion. A last cry of reason broke from his lips — “The teacher?!” — but it was smothered by her eager mouth.

“I won’t let even a breath of wind come between us — let alone your teacher!”

Anna School

Her arms wound round his neck like unbreakable vines. He pressed his cheek to hers. Like a river rushing headlong to the sea, Chandra lost himself in her exquisite charm.

Chandra rolled over on his mat and smiled at the memory. His thoughts ran on. He had fallen under the spell of Tara’s eyes from

the very moment he arrived at the hermitage. One glimpse of her face at the window had been enough to make him lose his head! What was the secret of this instant attachment? Could it be the strength of bonds formed in their past lives? "*Meet me at the river before sunrise. We'll play in the cool water while the whole world is still asleep.*" Tara's parting words rang sweetly in his ears, promising delights to come. He smiled once more and at last fell asleep.

Chandra lay back on a grassy mound, watching Tara frolic in the river.

She had the soul of a water nymph. Her golden arms cut through the water with clean strokes like slender vines; now she floated lazily on her back, now she flashed beneath the waves like a shoal of silver fish. Chandra drank in her loveliness. Standing waist-deep in the water, she looked at him. Her face was like a lotus, with strands of hair floating about it like water weeds. "Come on, Chandra!" she called. He shook his head; he preferred to admire her exquisite body from the bank. Tara swam swiftly to the shallows and stood up. The water lapped at her slender waist. Chandra felt a fire kindling inside him. She raised her arms to gather up her hair, then held out a hand to him.

Chandra stood up to help her out of the water — and in the blink of an eye he was splashing in the river beside the laughing Tara. When he came up for air, her golden arms reached for him again and took his breath away.

Brihaspati was deep in a difficult lecture when Chandra came creeping towards the back row of attentive disciples. He was just sitting down quietly when — "Chandra!" — Brihaspati's voice cut the air like the crack of a whip. Chandra froze. "Where have you been?" The harmless words hid a dangerous undertone.

“At the river… teacher… bathing…” He could do nothing to hide the guilty flush spreading over his face.

“Why did you not bathe with the other disciples in the morning?” the stern voice pressed on relentlessly. “Why did you go to the river on your own?”

Chandra thought for a moment. What if someone had noticed that he and Tara had both been away from the hermitage at the same time? A lie would only make things worse. “Teacher, I went with the teacher’s wife to the river — at her bidding.” He bowed his head.

Brihaspati gave him a stern warning. “Chandra, your first duty here is to study. Your second is to serve your teacher. There is no excuse for a disciple who waits on the teacher’s wife during lesson hours.”

He paused and went on gravely. “Keep your mind on your studies and prove yourself worthy of the name Atreya — son of the sage Atri.”

“Yes, teacher,” Chandra mumbled.

“And one more thing. I have learned that you spend most of your time carrying out the orders of the gurupatni, your teacher’s wife. Let me make myself clear: the ashram does not need your help with its daily chores. I shall tell my wife so. From now on I expect you to give yourself entirely to a disciple’s duties.”

“Yes, teacher.”

Brihaspati motioned to Chandra to sit and took up the lesson again. Chandra stole a glance towards the ashram and caught the

flutter of Tara's sari as she slipped silently away from the open window.

It was long past midnight. Chandra wandered restlessly about the garden, coming back again and again to the secluded bower. Why wasn't Tara here? Would she come? Hadn't her signal meant that she would meet him here? Had Brihaspati kept her? A wave of fury against his teacher rose in his chest. Coming to his senses, Chandra realised he must not be seen by the watchful maid or run into some sleepless disciple, and he hurried to hide in the bower. Suddenly the breeze carried a fresh fragrance, and after it came the sweet chime of anklet bells. Chandra's heart beat faster. Tara!

"Chandra…" Her voice was soft and searching. He hurried out of the bower. Tara rushed towards him in an agony of longing. A sudden gust of wind threw her upper cloth over Chandra's face: he was a willing fish caught in the net of desire. Tara fell into his arms, and he held her tight against his chest. He bent his ear to her lips, and they whispered, "Chandra!" One in their thoughts, they went into the bower and sat down, wrapped in each other's arms.

"Tara," Chandra said with a heavy heart, "these two days have felt like an eternity…"

"For me too, my love. But you know we must be careful. That's why I didn't try to see you."

"Tara… Tara… Tara… I will never tire of saying your beloved name."

Her arms were vines of love twined about his neck. She drew his head gently into her lap.

"I want to shout your name at the top of my voice — it's so hard to keep silent," he said.

She smiled tenderly down at him. “We are fated to love each other in secret, my dear.” Her fingers stroked his hair.

Chandra sat up suddenly in a burst of anger. “I won’t accept that,” he said sharply. “I won’t let the world come between us!”

“Chandra!” She pressed her fingertips to his mouth.

He would not be stopped. “We must be together every moment of our lives. Just the two of us, living in blissful solitude in a world of our own.”

Tara stroked his cheeks. “I want to be with you always too, my love.”

“Then come with me!” There was an anxious urgency in his words.

“Where could we go, my dear?”

“Somewhere no one can disturb our love.”

“Is there such a place, Chandra?” She took his face gently in her hands and sighed.

“Yes, there is — my own home.”

“Your home?” she asked in surprise. “You mean your parents’ house? The hermitage?”

“No! Vishvakarma has built a palace for me. It is waiting for me to return when I finish my studies and marry.”

“Really?”

Chandra smiled. “I finished my studies the very day I first saw your beautiful eyes at the hermitage window!” Tara stroked his hands. Chandra went on: “And as for marriage, it has already taken place — with you! It was sealed when I took your hand.” He bent to

kiss her palms tenderly. “Our sacred scriptures recognise it as panigrahana, the rite of taking the bride’s hand.” His voice grew firm. “Soon I shall carry you away in secret. That too is in the scriptures — it is the way laid down for the asuras: rakshasa vivaha, marriage by abduction.”

“Chandra… can all this really come true?” she asked dreamily.

He was certain. “It will. You were born to be mine. Your marriage to Brihaspati was only the prelude to your life as my wife.”

Tara nestled against him. Her lips whispered in his ear, “Chandra, at first I tormented myself with the thought that you would slip away from me like a frightened child. But now you are a man — and you are mine.”

“And do you know when I became a man?” he whispered back, his lips brushing her ear. “I became a man the first time I held the beautiful Tara in my arms.”

She drew reluctantly out of his embrace and said, “Tomorrow morning your teacher leaves for Indra’s court.”

Chandra laughed softly and clapped his hands without a sound. “Good! The disciples will go to the forest for firewood, and Punjikasthala will go to the river to fill the empty jars!”

“And we…?” asked Tara.

“We will be together, my love. Together for ever and ever.”

Brihaspati sat in his usual place under the tree, waiting for the disciples to gather for the morning lesson.

“Om! Om! Om!”

The guru looked up with an approving smile as the ancient chant rang out from the branches above his head: it was the ashram parrot, fluttering among the leaves! Brihaspati was proud that his beloved parrot faithfully repeated the mantras he taught his pupils. Everyone knows that in a truly holy hermitage the parrots recite Vedic hymns, and lions and deer live together in happy harmony.

The parrot's chant served as a summons to the disciples, and soon they were sitting in neat rows before their teacher. Brihaspati looked over the familiar faces — everyone was there... no... where was Chandra? Before he could ask, Punjikasthala came hurrying up to him.

"Teacher..." The maid hesitated. Brihaspati waved impatiently for her to go on. "Your wife is not in the hermitage..." She stood with lowered eyes.

"What? Tara is not at home?" Brihaspati exclaimed. "How can that be? She was here yesterday when I left for Indra's court!"

"She is nowhere to be found, teacher," Punjikasthala murmured.

An excited whisper ran through the class.

"What does this mean, Punjika?" Brihaspati frowned.

"I don't know, teacher. She disappeared after you left for Svargaloka. I thought she had gone with you..."

The eldest disciple rose respectfully and backed the girl up. "Yes, Gurudev, we also thought Mother Taradevi and Chandra were with you..."

Brihaspati's eyes narrowed. "I went alone." There was reproach in his voice. "You were supposed to keep an eye on Chandra..."

“The last time we saw him was at the river early this morning, teacher,” the disciple replied. “He didn’t bathe with us.”

Leaving the lesson, Brihaspati stepped aside for a few minutes, lost in thought. Then he turned back to the whispering disciples. “Perhaps they went into the forest for ritual twigs, sacred grass or firewood…” He cleared his throat, trying to rein in his racing thoughts. “Sanatana, take Suneta and a few of the older disciples and search the forest. I fear something bad may have happened to them.” He turned to Punjikasthala. “Punjika, prepare food for everyone.” With a sharp gesture he silenced the disciples’ lively whispering. “The rest of you — go over yesterday’s hymns.”

In the silence that followed, a cheerful cry rang out from above: “Come on, Chandra!” Brihaspati looked up anxiously at his clever parrot.

“Come on, Chandra!” Tara’s warm call caressed Chandra’s ears as he stood on the threshold of his home, admiring the riot of flowering plants that filled the garden with colour. He turned obediently at her sweet call and went back into the bedchamber. Tara stood by a bed piled with the softest down mattresses. He came up to her and put his arm round her slender waist. She leaned back, resting her head on his broad shoulder.

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“What a wonderful bed!” she exclaimed.

“Vishvakarma, the divine architect, made it,” Chandra added with a smile. “For you!”

Tara shook her head wryly. “No, Chandra, this palace and everything in it was made for you.” Then, passionately: “But now I want it all! For ever! These beds soft as down, the golden swing — all of it mine for ever! Will you let me have it?”

Chandra smiled tenderly. “My beloved, why so fierce all of a sudden?”

“I’m tired of the austerity of the ashram — the hard grass mats, the rough deerskin blankets, roots and leaves for food… Ugh!” She gave a dainty snort of disgust. “I hate ugly things!” She turned to him. “Look at me, Chandra,” she commanded.

Chandra obeyed with pleasure, his eyes passionately tracing her supple, exquisite body. She was beauty itself — made for him alone, not for Brihaspati!

“How do I look?” she asked.

“You are a delicate golden vine…” He paused, drawing her closer. “And I am the support around which you will twine.”

“And is it fitting for a vine to lie on hard mats and animal skins?”

“Never again, my love,” Chandra declared fervently. “I will never allow it. That is exactly why I dared to bring you here, to our Abode of Bliss!”

A teasing smile played on her lips.

“Then tell me, where should this lovely vine rest?”

Chandra pointed to the bed and whispered, “There, on the softest bed of all.”

She looked into his eyes. “Not there, my Chandra.” She pressed her soft cheek to his broad chest. “Here!”

His eyes melted with love as he looked down at her upturned face, and her eyes answered with the same feeling. He held her passionately close.

“Chandra, may I ask you for one thing?”

“Anything, my love, anything!” he whispered, his lips brushing her hair.

“I want a son,” she said, her voice barely audible, “who will inherit your beauty — to hold him at my breast.”

Chandra held her tighter.

The long search for Chandra and Tara came to nothing. Brihaspati had to admit that his wife, blinded by passion, had run away with his disciple. Yet he clung to the hope that she would soon come to her senses and return. After all, Tara was his adored wife, given to him by Brahma himself! He kept up the routine of the ashram, teaching his disciples and carrying out his duties at Indra’s court, while Punjikasthala ran the household. Brihaspati did not tell Indra of his troubles. He knew that the king of the devas revered Tara as a mother — the proper attitude towards the wife of their preceptor.

He did not want to spoil that good opinion. He was sure that Tara would soon come back and no one outside the ashram would ever know.

The golden swing with its precious burden flew straight towards Chandra. He reached out and gave it a gentle push. His heart contracted at the sight of Tara’s sweet smile as the swing carried her away from him, and when it brought her back again a fierce pride of possession swept over him. Just as this swing, which tried to carry her off, brought her back to him again and again, so it would be with every opposing force in the world! She belonged to him and to him alone! When the swing swept back towards him, Tara leapt into his open arms. She laid her head on his shoulder and whispered, “I’m tired.”

“Tired of your favourite pastime so early in the morning?!” He smiled down at her indulgently.

“The swing makes my head spin,” she said softly.

“You used to swing for hours while I pushed you!” he teased.

Tara gave him a mysterious look. “Chandra,” she said, “look at me.” He went on admiring her lovely face. She smiled at him.

“Oh, your sweet innocence! What am I to do with you!”

She paused and went on seriously:

“I don’t enjoy the swing any more, because a little copy of you is swinging in my womb!”

“Really?” He was overjoyed. He held her tenderly against his chest and kissed the top of her head. Nestling against him, she whispered:

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“Only now do I understand Brahma’s blessing: ‘Your one marriage to Brihaspati will bring you a double happiness!’”

She stroked his strong shoulders lovingly. “Truly, my joy has multiplied many times over!”

Brihaspati, finishing his morning worship, folded his hands in silent prayer.

“Narayana! Narayana!” The familiar chant reached him, announcing the arrival of the sage Narada, the very embodiment of the cosmic messenger. Brihaspati hurried to greet his guest.

“Pranam, revered sage.” Brihaspati bowed to receive Narada’s blessing.

“May you soon be reunited with the wife who has left you!”

Brihaspati started in surprise. “Narada!”

The sage smiled gently.

“Brihaspati, why are you surprised that I know of your wife’s long absence?” He paused. “After all, spreading news is the very purpose for which my father Brahma created me!”

Brihaspati stood silent, his eyes lowered. The sage went on:

“Call off your disciples’ fruitless search in the forest — Tara and Chandra are not there.”

Brihaspati looked up with dawning hope. “Narada, do you know where Tara is?”

“Of course, Brihaspati. Tara lives in a beautiful abode built for Chandra by the incomparable Vishvakarma.”

The Deva-guru flushed and asked haltingly, “Narada… how… how is Tara?”

“Oh, Tara is blooming in health and spirits. What is more, she seems happier with your disciple than she ever was with you.”

Brihaspati hung his head.

“Chandra has made her his wife there. Let me tell you where his Abode of Bliss lies. Then you can send some of your disciples to him as messengers.”

“Come on, Chandra!” Brihaspati started as Tara’s voice broke into his gloomy thoughts. He looked up at the parrot preening its feathers among the leaves. Cursed bird! He would gladly have wrung its neck — or burned it to ashes with a single curse! He sighed and mastered his unreasonable anger: at least the faithful parrot had warned him in time that his wife had fallen in love with Chandra. He went on gazing at the spreading branches of the tree, where the flowers had turned into fruit, a reminder of the

relentless march of time. His hope that Tara would come back had already faded to a smouldering ember.

Following Narada's advice, Brihaspati had sent his senior disciples to Chandra's abode to bring Tara back and talk sense into Chandra. The mission failed: Tara turned on them furiously, and Chandra frightened them with threats and threw them out of his house. Then Brihaspati swallowed his pride and went himself to plead with the defiant pair. In his heart he made excuses for them: *After all, Chandra is my disciple… and Tara is my lawful wife… she deserves forgiveness.*

But as soon as he reminded Chandra that a union with one's teacher's wife is one of the five great sins, the arrogant young man snapped back:

"This is not your ashram — stop preaching morality here!" He looked at his former guru with contempt. "Besides, for your information, refusing a woman who longs for love is also a great sin."

Brihaspati flushed at Chandra's cutting tone. To add to his humiliation, Tara tossed her head haughtily and burst into mocking laughter. In those few moments he lived through a lifetime of shame.

"Pranam, Gurudev!" Brihaspati looked up and saw Indra standing before him.

"Mahendra!"

"You left my court, Gurudev," there was reproach in his voice, "and you never told me that Mother Tara had run off with that boy Chandra."

"Yes, Indra. I foolishly hoped it would all be settled soon."

Brihaspati stood with downcast eyes.

“Take heart, Gurudev. You have forgotten how deeply the devas revere their preceptor.” He gave a scornful snort. “Forget those foolish runaways — I shall find you a wife far more beautiful and virtuous than wilful Tara.”

“Mahendra!” Brihaspati gasped.

“Yes, Gurudev,” Indra went on firmly. “By loving her husband’s disciple, Tara has lost not only her chastity but her right to be your wife.”

Brihaspati turned to the king of the devas with great seriousness:

“Indra, let me tell you of a little-known law of dharma: the sin of adultery is washed away by a woman’s monthly bleeding. Her menses cleanse the impurity and restore her chastity.”

Indra listened intently. For him, his guru’s word was law. He bowed his head, acknowledging Brihaspati’s wisdom.

“Gurudev, as always, I shall do your will. In that case I shall bring Taradevi back and lay her at your feet as my guru-dakshina, my offering to my teacher!”

He drew himself up.

“I shall not hesitate to declare war on foolish Chandra to see it done.”

Brihaspati blessed him. “May victory be with you, Indra!”

Vrishaparva ascended his throne, ready to attend to affairs of state. Acharya Ushanas, the preceptor of the asuras, sat in the place of honour at the king’s right hand. No sooner had the assembly of asuras settled down than a thunderous voice rang through the hall: “Victory to Emperor Vrishaparva!”

It was Timirasura, the king's trusted envoy and most skilful spy. Every eye turned to him as he approached the throne and bowed low.

"Ah, Timirasura!" boomed Vrishaparva. "Your haste tells me you bring important news." He raised his bushy eyebrows enquiringly.

"Indeed, my lord. I bring tidings that will gladden your heart."

The asuras pricked up their ears. A dead silence fell over the hall as the spy cleared his throat.

"My lord, you know that Brihaspati, the preceptor of the devas, married Tara. Now Tara has run away with Chandra, one of his disciples. Chandra has settled her in his own palace as his wife and spends his days enjoying her company. Brihaspati, still hopelessly in love with Tara, has made several vain attempts to win his wife back — both in person and through messengers." He paused meaningfully. "And now Indra, king of the devas, has given Brihaspati his solemn word that he will return Tara to him — even at the cost of war with young Chandra…"

"Enough!" thundered Vrishaparva. "What nonsense! Have you lost your mind, Timira?" He snorted in disgust. "What do we care if some lovesick boy has run off with his teacher's wife?" He glared at the spy. "If you have anything truly important to tell, then speak — otherwise…"

Ushanas raised a calming hand. "Wait, Vrishaparva, wait." He went on thoughtfully, "There may be more here than meets the eye." He turned to the nervous spy. "Come, Timira, tell us whatever else you have found out."

The spy, much relieved, went on: "My lord, I have learned that Indra is ready to send Chandra an envoy with an ultimatum: either

return the runaway Tara to Brihaspati, or face the wrath of the devas."

Ushanas sprang from his seat in excitement. "There is not a moment to lose! Vrishaparva, I must set out at once!"

The asura king stared at him in bewilderment. "Where to, teacher?"

"To Chandra's abode."

"Teacher! To the home of that worthless boy?... You, in person?... But why?" Vrishaparva was astounded.

Ushanas laughed. "So that Chandra does not give in to Indra's ultimatum."

"But why, teacher? Why should you meddle in this silly love affair?"

"Think, Vrishaparva," Ushanas pressed him. "If Chandra refuses to give up Tara, what will Indra do next?"

"To make good his ultimatum, Indra will have to declare war on Chandra."

"Exactly! And what will happen if we, in turn, declare our support for Chandra?" He paused, smiling at the frowning asura king. "Listen: the moment we join the fight, this petty quarrel between Indra and Chandra will grow into full-scale war between the devas and the asuras. The devas will be defeated, and the glory of Svarga will be yours!"

Vrishaparva's face lit up with the broadest of smiles. He rose from his throne and bowed respectfully to his preceptor. "Gurudev, we

asuras are truly fortunate to have you as our teacher! What cunning! What a brilliant plan!"

Ushanas smiled and strode swiftly towards the great doors of the hall.

Chandra looked in confusion at the majestic figure standing on his threshold. By instinct he bowed low. "Greetings, noble one! May I know who you are?"

"Chandra, I am Acharya Ushanas, the preceptor of the asuras."

Chandra folded his hands respectfully. "How have I earned the honour of your visit, revered Acharya?"

Ushanas looked at him closely and announced solemnly, "I have come to protect you from a danger that is close at hand."

"Danger?!" Chandra gasped.

"Yes." Ushanas paused for effect. "You and Tara are in great danger." The authority in his voice held Chandra's full attention. "Let us go inside and talk over these grave matters."

Sitting side by side, Chandra and Tara waited anxiously for Ushanas to speak.

"A treacherous plot has been laid to part you," the preceptor of the asuras began darkly. Chandra and Tara exchanged shocked glances. Chandra tried to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. Ushanas went on relentlessly: "Indra has promised his preceptor Brihaspati that he will present Tara to him as guru-dakshina. He has sworn to declare war on you if you defy him."

Tara reached out and gripped Chandra's fingers. Chandra patted her hand tenderly and looked anxiously at Ushanas, who

continued: “Indra’s envoy is already on his way. He will hand you an ultimatum: either give Tara back to Brihaspati, or face the might of the deva army. He will threaten to lay siege to your home…”

Chandra turned pale and put a protective arm around Tara. He was speechless with fear. Ushanas’s voice rang firm and confident, and his piercing gaze went straight through Chandra: “Chandra, do not be afraid. Your beloved Tara will stay with you.”

“But… I… I cannot stand against Indra’s army…” Chandra whispered, lowering his eyes.

“You will not have to fight the devas. The mighty army of the asuras, under the wise leadership of my disciple King Vrishaparva, will be your shield against Indra’s aggression. The devas will be defeated if they dare attack you. I give you my word — from this day on, you are both under the protection of the asuras.”

Chandra and Tara looked at each other. The fear in their eyes gave way to relief and growing confidence. With one impulse they turned to Ushanas and reverently touched his feet.

“Teacher,” said Chandra, “we are moved by your kindness and by your understanding of our love.” His voice faltered. “We are truly blessed by your friendship.”

A sardonic smile flickered across Ushanas’s face. He fixed his eyes on Chandra and declared proudly, “I, Ushanas, preceptor of the asuras, am no hypocrite! It is neither affection nor compassion that has won you the protection of the asuras. We are ready to fight for you for one reason only: our all-consuming hatred of the devas.”

He rose majestically to leave. As Chandra and Tara bowed their heads respectfully, he said, “Chandra, trust me. Do not fear Indra’s threats. Challenge him to war!” His eyes fell on Tara. “Do not abandon the protection of this innocent woman who has entrusted her life to you.”

He raised his hand in blessing. “May victory be yours!”

Ushanas’s rousing words and promise of support strengthened Chandra’s resolve. Indra’s envoy was met by a proud Tara and a defiant Chandra, who flung Indra’s ultimatum back in the messenger’s face. “Let Indra do his worst!” Chandra spat at the envoy.

Indra mounted his war chariot, driven by Matali, and at the head of his army marched on Chandra’s abode, with Brihaspati at his side. When they reached it, the devas saw to their dismay that the asura army had drawn up in a bristling ring around the palace. Vrishaparva and Ushanas stood at the head of this fearsome host. At the sight of the devas, the asuras let out bloodcurdling war cries that shook heaven and earth like peals of thunder.

With a sinister clang, thousands of weapons flashed in the hands of the warlike hordes.

“Naraya…” The sage Narada, travelling across the sky, broke off his sacred chant as the menacing roar reached him. One astonished glance below was enough to show him how serious things had become. In the blink of an eye the sage stood before Brahma and told him how Chandra’s flight with Tara had brought the devas and asuras face to face on the field of battle. Alarmed, Brahma rose from his lotus throne and hurried out of Satyaloka.

Accompanied by Narada, Brahma took his stand between the two armies, which stood ready for battle. He addressed Ushanas and Vrishaparva sternly: “I am shocked to see you here! Can a trivial love affair really be a reason for war between you and the devas? What is more, Chandra’s flight is without doubt a sin. Nothing can justify it. Come to your senses!”

Turning to the devas, he called Brihaspati and Indra to him. “I hope you will show the patience and steadfastness that befit your nature,” he said, with a note of reproach.

Brahma went into Chandra’s palace, where Tara and Chandra received him with palms joined in reverence. The Creator rebuked them sternly: “You have both strayed from the path of dharma, giving way to base lust. Your double betrayal of Brihaspati — as husband and as teacher — has caused him unspeakable suffering.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “No doubt your sins of the flesh have given you untold pleasure — let that be the end of it!” Brahma’s words rang through the hall with the merciless clarity of a bell.

The Creator’s piercing gaze cut into Chandra like a knife. *That is exactly what my own soul whispers to me*, the young man thought bitterly. Tara agreed sadly: “Brahma’s words are surely true.”

Brahma turned to Tara. Carrying a child in her womb, she looked like a full lotus bud. His gaze softened. “Tara, I hope you now understand the meaning of my blessing: ‘Your one marriage to Brihaspati will bring you a double happiness!’” He smiled at her gently. “Go back to the husband destined for you. Be happy serving him!”

As Tara reverently touched his feet, Brahma blessed her: “May you live long with your husband!” He turned to Chandra. “As for

you, young Chandra: Tara rightfully belongs to your teacher. You will hand her over to your guru yourself — that will be your atonement for your sin."

Chandra bowed to Brahma in submission. Then he turned slowly to Tara with an anguished smile and held out his hand. Tara's fingers twined round his like a vine seeking the kindly support of a strong branch. Their eyes met in aching longing. It seemed as if whole ages of unspoken tenderness and love were pressed into those fleeting moments. Tara brushed away her unshed tears and squared her shoulders. Brahma stood with a gentle smile, watching Chandra and Tara walk away from him.

A joyful murmur ran through the waiting disciples when Brihaspati stepped down from Indra's chariot with Tara beside him.

Paying no attention to anyone, Punjikasthala included, Tara followed her husband quickly inside. Brihaspati went straight to the shrine room, folded his hands in prayer and gave thanks to God. Then he turned to his wife. Tara stood before him like a statue, her face empty of all expression.

"Welcome home, Tara," Brihaspati said gently.

A slight tremor ran through her body. Her tender lips quivered like leaves in the wind, and a veil of tears clouded her beautiful eyes. She stepped forward and tried to touch Brihaspati's feet, but the weight of her pregnancy made it hard to bend. Brihaspati raised her tenderly and looked into her eyes.

"I have got back my lost treasure," he whispered.

At these words Tara burst into sobs. Hot tears ran down her smooth cheeks. "Swami… forgive me… I betrayed you…" she wept

inconsolably.

Brihaspati wiped away her tears with gentle fingers. “No, Tara, it was Chandra who betrayed me.” He lifted her chin.

“Look at me. We all have nightmares. Let us think of this as one of those bad dreams and forget it.”

“Swami…” she whispered.

“Yes, Tara, we shall go on.” He paused, looking proudly at her rounded belly.

“Brihaspati’s line — the Angirasa gotra — will flourish through you!”

His voice softened. “I cannot live without you, Tara.” She looked up at him, her eyes full of tears.

Tara gave birth to a boy at an auspicious moment, under the nakshatra Purva Bhadrapada. Brihaspati’s ashram was filled with joy. Narada spread the happy news far and wide, and Indra and the devas celebrated the birth of their preceptor’s son. The naming ceremony was held at the hermitage. Angiras and Shraddha came to bless their grandson, and Brahma, Narada and the devas honoured the occasion with their presence.

Angiras turned to his son. “Brihaspati, have you chosen a name for the boy?”

“Brihaspati has no right to name my son!”

Every eye turned towards the angry voice. It was Chandra! Tara froze, the baby in her arms. Brihaspati, who had been sitting beside her during the jatakarma rite, leapt up in fury, his eyes blazing.

“You!.. You contemptible traitor to the sacred bond of guru and shishya!” he shouted scornfully. “You stole my wife — and now you have come for my son. You will not escape retribution! Get out!”

He took a threatening step forward. Chandra held his gaze steadily.

“This boy is my son. If you choose to deceive yourself, you are simply claiming my line as your own!” he laughed mockingly.

“Silence!” Brihaspati shouted. “My blood flows in the boy’s veins.”

“Go on believing that if you like. But no one can stop me from claiming my son.”

Chandra moved towards Tara, who shrank back.

“Stop, Chandra!” Brihaspati’s voice thundered.

Indra leapt to his feet. “Gurudev, keep calm.” He turned angrily to the intruder. “Leave this turncoat to me.”

“Indra! Chandra!” Brahma’s stern voice cut in, demanding instant obedience. “Do not turn the ashram into a battlefield.” The Creator turned to Brihaspati. “Brihaspati, keep your feelings in check.”

The Deva-guru protested:

“Grandfather, this concerns the most vital question of my line. Chandra…”

Brahma cut him short with a sharp gesture.

“Neither you nor Chandra can judge who fathered the child. Only the mother can bear witness to the true father.”

“I agree with Lord Brahma.” It was the sage Angiras.

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Brahma turned to Tara. “Tara, bring the child and come with me.”

Tara obediently followed him with the baby in her arms. Every eye waited anxiously for their return. Brihaspati and Chandra smiled confidently at the guests, shooting angry glances at each other in turn. A few moments later Tara came back into the hall with lowered eyes. Her arms were empty. Brahma followed, carrying the baby. A dead silence fell over the hall. The Creator stepped up onto the dais and gave his verdict:

“A child’s parentage must be established beyond the slightest doubt. Only the mother can say with certainty from whose seed her child was born. I have explained to Tara how important this principle is.”

He paused and held up the child.

“Does he belong to Brihaspati?.. Does he belong to Chandra?..”

Brahma fell silent again. “Tara has revealed the truth about the boy’s father…” He looked around at his attentive listeners.

“Chandra is the boy’s father!” Brahma’s voice rang through the whole hall. “In your presence I name this child Budha and give him to his father, Chandra.”

Brihaspati stood in speechless amazement. Chandra bowed respectfully to Brahma and took the baby carefully in his arms.

“Chandra, Budha is your son,” said Brahma. “Raise him worthily and give special care to his education. Like you, he will be granted a place among the Navagrahas.”

Chandra bowed low. “I ask your leave to place Budha in the care of my father, the sage Atri.”

“You have my leave, Chandra. You may go.”

Through her tears, Tara watched Chandra's figure walk away, full of longing. Brahma turned to Brihaspati. "Brihaspati, take heart: your line will continue and flourish. Tara will bear you many descendants." The Creator stretched out his hand in blessing over the Deva-guru, and Brihaspati bowed his head respectfully.

Nirvikalpananda softly repeated a mantra and fell into thought, looking at his disciples.

"And now we come to the birth of the remaining grahas, in their proper order."

A wave of excitement ran through his four shishyas. Sadananda could not contain himself:

"Teacher, so now it's time to hear about Shani!"

Nirvikalpananda smiled at his enthusiasm.

"Yes, Shani is the seventh of the Navagrahas. The story of his birth is full of extraordinary events and unexpected turns." He paused. "Shani is the son of Surya. So let us go back a little in our story. We know that Surya married Samjna, the daughter of Vishvakarma, and settled in a secluded palace. Do you remember how Samjna asked Surya to grant her two sons and a daughter?"

The disciples nodded eagerly.

"Well, Surya granted her wish…"

"Ah!" cried Shivananda. "So Shani was one of the three children!"

The teacher smiled indulgently.

"No, Shivananda. The eldest son was Vaivasvata, the second was Yama, and the daughter was called Yami. Since Vivasvan is one of the twelve names of Surya, the eldest son was named Vaivasvata. He was, in fact, Vaivasvata Manu, who became the forefather of

the Solar Dynasty. Ikshvaku, Nabhaga, Sharyati and other famous figures were his descendants."

He paused, looking round at his attentive pupils.

"As for the second son, Yama, he was none other than Yamadharmaraja, the god of death. The girl Yami took form as the river Yamuna..."

"Oh, teacher," Vimalananda marvelled, "so Shani was their younger brother?"

Nirvikalpananda laughed softly.

"Now, now, let me tell the whole story!" His voice grew serious again. "Vaivasvata, Yama and Yami grew up in their parents' care. At the time of these events they were still children. One night..."

And the teacher went on with his tale.

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An uneasy silence hung over Surya's abode. When Surya walked into the bedchamber, the usual noise of the children at play was strangely missing. Samjna stood motionless at the open window, gazing at the sky. Her sari fluttered in the breeze, outlining the beauty of her figure against the evening light. Surya came up close behind her and laid his hands on her slender shoulders. Samjna flinched and pulled sharply away from his touch. She glanced at him for an instant and quickly turned away.

"Samjna, what are you afraid of?" Surya teased her tenderly.

To his astonishment she admitted gloomily, “Yes, I am afraid…”

Troubled, Surya moved protectively closer to his wife. “My dear, what has happened?”

Samjna stepped back from him, covering her eyes with trembling fingers. “Do you want to know who fills me with dread?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“Tell me!” Surya demanded angrily. “Whoever it is, I’ll make him pay!”

His wife made a soothing gesture. “First, listen…” She paused. “I am afraid of you!”

“Samjna!” Surya gasped. It was like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

“Yes!” she repeated. “I tremble in your presence…”

Surya stepped towards her with open arms.

“Swami, don’t come any closer!” Samjna backed away. Surya froze in bewildered disbelief. She went on:

“Forgive me, my lord — I can’t help it. I cannot bear the heat that pours out of you.”

Surya could not believe his ears. He stood there stunned, staring at his wife, who still hid her eyes behind spread fingers. A faint hope flickered in his eyes — could this be a joke? He asked:

“Devi, are you punishing me for some fault of mine?” He smiled. “Are you cross with me, my love? Is this a lovers’ punishment?”

Samjna let out an anguished cry.

“No! This is no lovers’ punishment — it is love’s curse!” She went on, almost shouting: “I cannot stand the scorching heat of your

body… and my eyes are blinded by the blazing light of the fire inside you!”

Even as she spoke, she was edging away from him. A shadow of hurt crossed Surya’s eyes.

“Then tell me, how have you managed to live with me all these years?” he asked quietly.

“I endured it… what else could I do?” she pleaded pitifully. “Don’t judge me harshly, Swami! I simply cannot bear your fiery presence… please, keep away from me… it is torment for me!”

She drew away from him, retreating into a corner of the room. Surya smiled gently.

“Have you forgotten the days when you loved to caress my body?” he reminded her. “The days when you said my warmth lit the fire of passion in your heart?”

“Those days are gone! That was at the start of our marriage — how can you expect the thrill of something new and close to last forever? Back then I was blind to all your faults.”

She still kept her face turned away.

“Samjna!” A note of impatience crept into Surya’s voice. “With this unreasonable behaviour you are practically making me an untouchable.”

She begged him:

“Swami, don’t say that!” At last she turned to face him. “Will you do one thing for me?”

“What?” he asked.

“For my sake, could you soften your heat and your radiance?”

“Impossible!” he snapped at once.

“Swami, I am your wife — the love of your life!” Now it was Samjna who was offended. “We are everything to each other!”

“Samjna, you are everything to me!” he went on gently. “But, my love, I cannot grant your wish. Lessening my heat and light is beyond my power.”

“Swami… but why?”

“Be reasonable, Samjna. Can you change the natural warmth of your own body?”

She shook her head uncertainly.

“No — and in the same way I cannot change my own nature,” he went on firmly. “You will have to learn to bear my presence, as you did before.”

“Swami…”

Brushing her hesitation aside, Surya said firmly:

“Samjna, until you can arm yourself with enough love and patience to face what I am by nature, I shall not trouble you with my presence.”

He paused, and his voice softened. “I will wait until you come to me yourself.” And he left her.

Samjna sank helplessly onto the bed, her face full of despair.

“Swami…”

Hearing his wife’s soft call, Surya looked up at her and smiled encouragingly.

Aum School

“I have thought a great deal about how things stand… I… I can’t bear being apart from you any longer…”

Surya’s face lit up with radiant hope. Samjna went on:

“But I need time to gather my strength.” She paused. “Swami, let me go to my father’s house for a while. There I can think things over in peace and strengthen my spirit. I will come back to you the true wife I ought to be.”

“What a wonderful idea, my dear!” Surya exclaimed happily. “Go… and come back soon. I shall be waiting impatiently for your return.”

In a trembling voice Samjna begged him:

“Swami, while I’m away, promise me you’ll take care of Vaivasvata, Yama and Yami.”

“Of course, my love, but you must come back quickly!”

Samjna returned his tender smile.

Samjna had no intention whatever of going to Vishvakarma’s house. She was sure she could never again bear Surya’s all-consuming heat and light. She had to decide what to do next, and time was running out: in a few days Surya would go to her father in search of his wife, and her absence would be discovered. She made her way into the forest, where the kindly shade of the trees wrapped her in coolness. Samjna sat down beneath the spreading branches and thought. She was needed as Surya’s wife — but more important still, her beloved children needed their mother.

What was she to do? By instinct, Samjna sank into deep meditation. Her whole mind was fixed on her dilemma; with closed eyes she shut out the world. Hours passed. Suddenly her still body stirred with excitement. Her eyes flew open, full of

hope. What if she could find a woman exactly like herself? A woman identical in looks, with her voice and her gestures — her perfect copy in every way? Such a double could easily pass for Samjna, become Surya's wife and, more important, a mother to her children! The thought of being free forever from Surya's burning presence brought Samjna to her feet.

Oh, how she longed to spend the rest of her days in peaceful penance amid this coolness! Lost in thought, she wandered among the trees as dusk gathered and the shadows grew long. She had to fan the tiny spark of this idea into a bright flame… Samjna sat down on the ground again and returned to her meditation.

The days flew by. Samjna kept searching for a way out, lighting her path with the keen light of meditation. One evening she came to a lake and sat down by its clear water. Her mind kept wrestling with the one question that mattered: where could she find a woman who was her exact copy? Her eye was caught by the lotuses crowding the shore.

She smiled at their beauty — and her reflection smiled back from the mirror of the lake. A light breeze lifted the edge of her garment, and Samjna smoothed it down. The reflection in the water repeated her modest gesture exactly. Samjna's heart beat faster. There it was — her double! Her shadow was her exact copy in every way. But it was only an appendage of her body, without a self of its own, without a form of its own. She frowned thoughtfully. What if she breathed a life of its own into the shadow? Created an independent being? A thrill of discovery ran through her. Yes — she would make a copy of herself out of her shadow and give it every trait of her own personality.

Her shadow would become her double. Samjna squared her shoulders confidently. She could do this — she was Vishvakarma's

daughter, after all! From birth she had had rare powers, including the gift of taking any form she wished. Bringing a shadow to life should be easy!

Samjna bathed quickly in the lake. As she turned towards the forest, her shadow fell across the path. She stopped short, seized by the thought. Then, scooping up water in her cupped palms, she closed her eyes, softly whispered a spell and sprinkled the shadow. To her delight, where the shadow had been there now stood a living copy of herself! The double's face was frozen in bewilderment.

"You are my double," Samjna said gently, and led her to the water. "Look at our reflections."

The copy clapped her hands with childlike joy. "We're the same!"

Samjna smiled and nodded.

"And what is my name?" the copy suddenly asked.

Samjna started at the sound of her own voice coming so strangely from her double's lips. "You are my shadow... so your name is Chhaya." She hesitated, then added, "And I am Samjna."

Atma School

"Why did you make me?" Chhaya asked curiously.

"I need someone to take my place as Surya's wife and as mother to my children," Samjna explained seriously. "While you play the part of wife and mother, I can give myself to the penance I long for, here in the forest."

"I'm your copy, so playing your part will be easy enough!" Chhaya smiled. "How long must I play it?"

“Forever,” Samjna declared. “I allow you to enjoy closeness with my husband, of body and of mind, for all time.” She paused. “But on one condition…”

“And what is that?” asked Chhaya.

“Just as you take my husband as your own, you must take my children — Vaivasvata, Yama and Yami — to your heart, and always surround them with boundless care and love.”

Chhaya looked at Samjna gravely. “Samjna, you gave me life. My body and soul rightly belong to you. Your wish is my law.” She paused. “I give you my word: I won’t just play the part — I will live it! I will be a wife to your husband and a mother to your children.”

Deeply moved, Samjna said, “Chhaya, your words warm my heart. Looking at you fills me with joy — we are so alike that I think of you as my younger twin sister.”

“And I feel that you are my dear elder sister,” Chhaya replied. “We are identical twins!”

Samjna squeezed Chhaya’s hand tenderly and led her to her place of meditation. Sitting beside her, Samjna went on:

“Chhaya, for our deception to work, you must know absolutely everything about me — and I mean everything!”

“Just tell me once, Samjna. Believe me, I learn fast.” Chhaya smiled confidently.

Samjna was delighted by Chhaya’s quickness and sharp mind, and began to tell her the countless details of her life. “I am the daughter of Vishvakarma. My father is the son of a Vasu and the architect of the gods…”

“Samjna!” Chhaya interrupted with a mischievous smile. “I am the daughter of Vishvakarma — not you! Tell me about me.”

Samjna laughed at her eagerness and went on. “All right. You are married to Surya, the son of Kashyapa and Aditi. You have two sons, Vaivasvata and Yama, and a daughter, Yami. A few days ago, unable to bear the constant heat and light that pour from your husband, you went away to your father’s house.” She paused. “Is that clear?”

“Perfectly! So I left my husband’s home. Go on!”

“Now you are going back to your husband, armed with the strength to bear his radiance.”

“I am going in your place, as Samjna, Surya’s wife.” She smiled reassuringly at Samjna. “I will love your children as my own.”

Samjna hugged her warmly. “I’ll tell you the intimate details of my life with Surya. Then you’ll be ready.”

“Samjna!” Surya gasped in surprise, seeing his wife in the doorway.

“Swami,” answered Chhaya, just as Samjna had taught her.

Surya hurried to her, holding out his arms joyfully. “Samjna, our home has been plunged in darkness since you left.”

Chhaya smiled to herself. *How naive Surya is! He is the source of all light, and yet he says the house grew dim without Samjna!*

Aloud she said, “Swami, I couldn’t bear to be away from you and the children.” Her voice trembled. “I have come back to you renewed — I have been born again for you.”

“Really?!” Surya was deeply moved. He opened his arms, and Chhaya rushed into them. As he held her, he overflowed with

tenderness for his wife. Samjna had come back: just as she had promised, she had gathered the strength to bear his light. Her trembling in his arms spoke of her resolve.

“Samjna.” Surya looked down at her face pressed against his chest.

“Swami?” she whispered.

“Never leave me again.”

“Never, Swami.”

“I’ll keep you by my side forever,” Surya said passionately.

In reply she held his shoulders tighter.

“Mother!” cried a joyful child’s voice. Surya and Chhaya drew apart as Yami came running towards them. “Mother!” her brothers echoed. Chhaya hugged the little girl and turned to the door. Vaivasvata and Yama burst into the room hard on their sister’s heels.

Just as you take my husband as your own, you must take my Vaivasvata, Yama and Yami to your heart as your own children — Samjna’s words rang in her ears. Chhaya held the three children close and kissed their chubby cheeks. Her heart overflowed with gratitude to Samjna, her elder sister, for this gift: the life of Surya’s beloved wife.

Time went by. Chhaya grew completely into the role of Samjna, enjoying the closeness of a wife with Surya and caring for Samjna’s children as if they were her own. Surya, for his part, gave Chhaya his boundless love, never doubting for a moment that she was Samjna.

“Narayana!” the sage Narada proclaimed, greeting Sri Mahavishnu and Lakshmi.

“Well, Narada,” said Vishnu with a smile of blessing, “I was just thinking how good it would be to see you here!”

“And here I am!” cried Narada. “Since I have come in answer to your thoughts, Bhagavan, may I suppose you have a task for me?”

“The time has come for the seventh of the Navagrahas to take birth, Narada.” Vishnu smiled at the sage. “It seems it will not happen without your help.”

“Narayana! Narayana!” Narada laughed. “If you wish it, who can stop it from happening?”

“No, Narada,” Vishnu said seriously. “Your help is needed. The seventh graha is to be a son of Surya.”

“Narayana!” Narada was surprised. “A son of Surya, my Lord? But Surya already has two sons.”

“Narada, those two sons were born to his wife.” Vishnu went on mysteriously, “But our seventh graha will be born to a wife who is not his real wife.”

“Narayana!” Narada sounded puzzled. “A wife who is not his real wife?!”

“Unable to bear Surya’s fierce heat and radiance any longer, Samjna breathed life into her own shadow, Chhaya, and sent her to Surya’s abode in her place. Now Chhaya lives there as Surya’s wife and mother to Samjna’s children, playing her part flawlessly.” Vishnu added:

“Chhaya is so wrapped up in Samjna’s children that the thought of having children of her own has never even crossed her mind.”

He looked at Narada gravely.

“That is where you come in, Narada. You must nudge Chhaya towards bearing children of her own. Advise her to ask her husband Surya for this blessing: only then can the seventh of the Navagrahas be born.”

“As you command, Lord!” Narada bowed at once to Vishnu’s will.

“But one small question — where is Samjna? At her father’s?”

“Oh no, Narada! Don’t you see that her presence in Vishvakarma’s house would give away her secret?.. She is doing penance in the forest.”

He raised his hand in blessing. “Go to Surya’s abode, Narada.”

“Chhaya!” Narada called. He smiled as she turned round. “You really are Samjna’s double!”

Chhaya, alone at home while Surya was away, started and stammered, “I… I… I am Samjna.” She pulled herself together. “And who are you?” she asked haughtily.

“Narayana!” Narada said calmly.

“I am Narada, and I know the secret of how you came to take her place.”

He went on soothingly:

“Don’t worry, Chhaya — I wish you nothing but good. Do you realise that you are an innocent victim in this play Samjna has staged?”

“Maharishi…” Chhaya said, confused.

“Yes, think about your position. However much love you give them, Samjna’s children will never be yours.”

He paused for effect. Now he had her full attention.

“You are a woman with rights of your own. Only by bearing Surya’s children can you make your bond with him secure. It is children who give a marriage its true meaning.”

“But… Samjna’s children…” Chhaya frowned thoughtfully.

“Of course they will stay here and go on enjoying your care.”

He added slyly:

“Besides, did Samjna ever forbid you to have children of your own?”

Chhaya shook her head.

“Then you are not betraying Samjna in any way.” He said firmly:

“Chhaya, put your doubts aside and ask your husband to bless you with children — three at least. Then you will be Surya’s wife in every sense.”

Narada raised his hand in blessing. “Narayana!” His task done, the sage departed well pleased. He had skilfully sown the seeds of discord in Chhaya’s receptive mind.

Samjna’s children will never be yours. It is children who give a marriage its true meaning. Ask your husband to bless you with children. Narada’s words beat ceaselessly in Chhaya’s heart. Her thoughts grew dark. Her secret was no longer a secret. How long before everyone knew? If Surya discovered her deception, he would surely turn away from her. She had to protect herself before it was too late. Narada was right: the only way to secure

her place was to bear Surya's children. After all, she had given up her own self to take on Samjna's form.

She had given her love without reserve to her elder sister's husband. She lived in constant fear of being found out, playing the dangerous game of a double life. Surely her courage deserved a reward — and that reward should be children of her own. Chhaya made up her mind. *Yes, Narada was right.* She squared her shoulders and walked resolutely to her bedchamber.

Chhaya was braiding her long, lustrous hair in front of the mirror. Surya came and stood right behind her. She straightened the garland of flowers in her plait and smiled at his reflection. Surya put his hands on her shoulders.

"Samjna… your beauty never stops enchanting me."

He rested his chin tenderly on the top of her head.

"Always ready with a compliment — as ever!" she smiled coquettishly into the mirror. "But not so generous with gifts!"

"I have given you my whole being!" Surya smiled back. "What more can I give you, my dear?"

"What about a gift for coming back from my father's house? Don't I deserve one?" Chhaya smiled slyly.

"Yes, my dear, you are right." He stroked her shoulders. "I should have given you something then, or some other time." He paused and smiled at her reflection. "Well, better late than never. Choose your gift now, Samjna."

"Really?" asked Chhaya.

"Yes. Tell me what you desire. Whatever it is, it will be yours."

“I want children,” said Chhaya.

Surprise showed on Surya’s reflection. “Children?! Samjna, we have children. Ask for something you lack.”

Chhaya insisted, “The only gift I want from you is children.”

Surya turned her gently round to face him. He looked into her eyes, drowning in their dark pools of longing.

“Very well!” He laughed softly and teased her: “You made your wish to my reflection, but I’m ready to grant it in person!”

Chhaya wrapped her arms tighter around his broad chest. Her eyes shone with triumph. “Three children, Swami: two boys and a girl. Agreed?” Her coral lips parted in sweet invitation.

“Agreed, my dear. How could I refuse such a charming offer?!”

In the mirror behind them, their reflections merged into one.

A tender smile played on Surya’s lips as he watched Chhaya walk towards him. Her pregnancy weighed on her and slowed her step.

“Samjna, pregnancy suits you: how your body glows!” he said.

Chhaya smiled back at him. “Swami, it is only a reflection of your own radiance.”

Surya shook his head. “The inner light that makes you shine belongs to neither of us, my dear. It comes from the son in your womb.”

“Then tell me, Swami: will my son’s skin be golden like mine, or will it take after your flaming colour?”

“Why, my dear, his fresh ochre glow will blend all our yellows and oranges into a palette that will be his alone!”

Atma School

Chhaya beamed with pride. “Yes, he will take the best from both his parents!”

It was the eighth day of the month of Pushya in the year Pramoduta. When the star Swati stood at the zenith and the waning Ashtami moon hung in the sky, Chhaya gave birth to a boy. Against all his mother’s hopes, the baby’s skin was far from bright gold: in fact, it was the darkest of all! Chhaya looked askance at the feebly whimpering infant, with his dark, thin, ill-proportioned body and strange golden-brown eyes. She turned to Surya in confusion.

“What is it, Samjna?” Surya smiled gently. “Does his colour trouble you?”

“Swami, I expected him to look like you…”

“My son does look like me, my dear: he is my other self. My golden body has its own inseparable dark shadow. My son is my shadow — naturally his skin is dark.”

Aditi and Kashyapa, and Vishvakarma and his wife, were the proud grandparents at the baby’s naming ceremony. To their delight, the Trimurti and Narada unexpectedly appeared for the occasion. Sri Mahavishnu turned to Surya:

“Your son will always walk with a measured step. Restraint will be the mark of all he does. The name I have chosen for him will reflect these qualities.”

Surya broke in respectfully: “Lord, our son is truly blessed to receive his name from you!”

Vishnu smiled. “Your son’s name is Shanaishchara,” he said.

The Trimurti blessed the infant. Shiva and Brahma advised Surya to give special care to his upbringing and education, since the boy was destined to be one of the Navagrahas. Kashyapa was overjoyed to learn that his line had now risen so high as to include two of the Navagrahas.

Shanaishchara thrived under Chhaya's special care. In due time Chhaya gave birth to a second boy. Surya named him Savarni, in recognition of his fiery appearance — a true reflection of his father's radiance.

Finally Chhaya gave birth to a girl, whom Surya named Tapati. Chhaya raised her three children together with Samjna's three. But as her joy in Shanaishchara, Savarni and Tapati grew, her old affection for the others slowly faded.

"And now we come to the birth of Rahu, the eighth of the Navagrahas."

Nirvikalpananda paused, looking round at his disciples. "Listen carefully," he said, in the tone of a teacher.

"Teacher, Rahu is also known as Simhikagarbhasambhuta, isn't he?" Shivananda broke in. "Does that mean he is the son of Simhika, Kashyapa's wife?"

"Excellent, Shivananda!" The teacher smiled approvingly.

"You are right. Rahu is the son of Simhika, wife of Kashyapa and daughter of Daksha Prajapati."

He paused.

"The story of Rahu, the graha mighty enough to swallow both Surya and Chandra, is quite simple. It begins in Kashyapa's abode..."

And Nirvikalpananda went on with his tale.

The Birth of Rahu



Kashyapa's wives sat together in their abode, chatting pleasantly to pass the time.

"We are all mothers — except Simhika," Danu remarked.

"Danu, how could she ever have children? She's far too slow!" Diti laughed, and added mockingly, "She doesn't pray to God for offspring, as Aditi did, and she doesn't go to our husband, as all the rest of us did!"

Stung by the laughter Diti's words had raised, Simhika burst out: "Please! I may be slow, but I'm certainly no fool!" She looked at each of the women in turn. "Tell me, whom should I go to — God or my husband?" Her voice was resolute. "I shall ask for a child and prove my worth to your satisfaction."

"If you pray to God, he'll tell you to go to your husband. So you may as well save time and go straight to our husband, our visible and merciful god!" joked Kala. The other women laughed knowingly.

Aditi, gentle as ever, turned to Simhika with a smile. "Our husband has great power, Simhika. Go to him: he will show you the right way. Pray to him — you will surely be blessed with motherhood."

Kashyapa sat in deep meditation beneath a tree on the riverbank. Simhika settled herself in front of him and waited. Kashyapa, his eyes closed, remained unaware of her presence. Unable to hold back her impatience any longer, Simhika said, "Swami!"

Kashyapa slowly opened his eyes and looked at his wife enquiringly. "Simhika, why have you come?"

Alarmed now at her own boldness, Simhika stammered, "I… I… I have come to ask you for a boon…"

"A boon?" Kashyapa smiled indulgently. "Very well, Simhika. What do you want?"

"I want a son."

"That is surely a worthy wish," Kashyapa said encouragingly.

"My son must have great strength and tremendous might." She paused, then went on excitedly: "Everyone must look at him with fear."

Kashyapa grew serious. “A son whom everyone will fear?!” He warned her, “Think carefully before you name your boon, my dear.”

Simhika would not be moved. “I don’t need to think again. I know what I want: a son who strikes terror into every heart. He must fill everyone with the deepest awe.”

Kashyapa sighed. “Very well, Simhika. Come here.” He beckoned her closer and laid his palm on her head. “I grant you what you ask: soon a son with the qualities you have named will be playing in your lap.”

“Swami,” Aditi brought Kashyapa the happy news, “Simhika will soon be a mother.” She went on, “She longs so much to have a son — I do hope you have blessed her with a beautiful child, just as she wishes.”

“Aditi, your younger sister did not ask for a handsome boy.” Kashyapa gave a bitter smile. “On the contrary, she insisted that her son should strike fear into all who look at him.” He sighed. “It was a case of asking for the wrong boon at the wrong time! She will bear an ugly son, the colour of raging fire.”

“Swami!” Aditi was shocked by his words.

“Don’t worry, Aditi,” Kashyapa reassured his wife.

“Remember, everything happens by the will of God. I am sure Simhika’s wish, too, was inspired from above.”

When nine months had passed, Simhika gave birth to a boy whose skin glowed a deep red. Daksha and his wife, together with Brahma, Narada and Indra, honoured the naming ceremony of Simhika’s son with their presence. Brahma told Kashyapa that his youngest son was destined to take a place among the Navagrahas,

and advised the sage to give special care to the boy's upbringing, saying:

"This child will be known throughout the world and will shape the destinies of all living beings. He will seize and let go. In keeping with his nature, he should be named Rahu."

Rahu grew up in the care of Simhika and Kashyapa's twelve other wives. In due course Kashyapa began the boy's education.

"We have heard the stories behind eight of the grahas," Nirvikalpananda told his disciples. "Now we come to the birth of the ninth graha — Ketu."

"Teacher, Ketu is almost always mentioned together with Rahu: there seems to be a special bond between them," said Vimalananda. "Was Ketu, like Rahu, a son of Kashyapa?"

"That is a very fitting question, Vimalananda," the teacher replied.

"But it cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The ancient tales give several versions of Ketu's birth."

He paused, gathering his thoughts.

"According to one version, Kashyapa and his wife Danu had a son named Ketuman. This Ketuman is held to be the graha Ketu — and here their kinship explains the close bond between Rahu and Ketu. It is also said that Ketuman was later born again as Amitaujas in the time of the Mahabharata."

Nirvikalpananda went on:

"The Vishnudharmottara Purana, however, one of the eighteen Puranas, gives a different account of Ketu's origin. According to it, Brahma was deeply troubled because the earth was groaning under the unbearable burden of life. To ease the earth's suffering,

he created Mrityu, the goddess of death, and commanded her to destroy all living things. Tender-hearted Mrityu wept at his cruel command and refused to obey. When Brahma demanded her obedience, the goddess let out a furious sigh; that sigh became a fiery banner, and from its flames the infant Ketu appeared. Brahma proclaimed that the boy would be famed by the names Ketu and Dhuma Ketu."

Nirvikalpananda paused, giving his disciples time to take in this long explanation.

"The third account turns on the famous Churning of the Ocean of Milk. One version says that the asura Rahu, taking the form of a maiden, managed to taste the amrita that Mohini was handing out to the gods. The Skanda Mahapurana, however, gives a different version: '*Tada Rahush cha Ketush cha dvav etau daitya-pungavau, devanam rupam asthaya amritartham tvaranvitau, upavishtau tada panktyam devanam amritarthinau*' — which means that two mighty daityas, named Rahu and Ketu, took on the form of gods so as to share in the amrita."

He paused enquiringly as Chidananda raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Teacher, which version should we accept?"

"Whichever we like," Shivananda suggested.

Nirvikalpananda smiled and shook his head. "No, Shivananda. If each of us picks the version he personally likes best, the conflicting accounts will never agree." He urged them, "We must examine the different versions closely, find the common thread that runs through them all, and only then come to a conclusion." He paused for effect. "And that conclusion must be true to the

ancient beliefs." He smiled at their puzzled faces. "Let us give each version a fair hearing."

"But, teacher… how can we be so impartial?" It was Vimalananda, rather embarrassed.

"Let us first hear the version of Ketu's birth that links Kashyapa and Mrityu. That may answer your question." Nirvikalpananda's voice took on its storytelling tone again. "In ancient times the earth groaned under the unbearable weight of living beings, which multiplied rapidly and had not yet come under the power of death. Bhudevi, the goddess of the earth, saw the disaster that was coming…"

This is the end of the preview. The story continues in the full book.