

Uncharted

By

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Dedicated to the first story
teller of my life - my
grandfather

With special thanks to my
editorial team & sounding
board - my dear wife Divya,
Sowjanya & Chitra

Chapter 1

He got out of the house with a sense of relief and expectation. This year was bad. More than the divorce, he missed his son badly. He was determined to forget his life for sometime. He started his bike. For over three years, his life was about work and home even though on the side he wondered how people found meaning in these two places. Most of his friends were either workaholics or home bound. He never quite belonged anywhere. His life was only tolerable because of one gift of mankind - books. And, it is to find them that he started on that Sunday early morning to the road side bazaar of books in Abids.

In three years his life moved from the perfect - from a thirty, six foot tall, fair, slim built, with a 'though-not-a-playboy-but-good-with-girls', working at a MNC stage, to 'happily married with a kid' stage to divorced. He didn't know if he should feel sad that he failed at a major relationship so soon in life or happy that he was finally out of the poisonous relationship. He shook his head as if to push out all thoughts and parked his vehicle in the shopping complex right behind Hollywood footwear and started walking. Abids - he liked the smell of it. It represented a middle ground between the posh locales of Banjara hills where he now lived but never quite could be a part of and the densely populated lb nagar where he used to live but always wanted to escape. His mood picked up as he took steps towards the latest display of books spread on a thick blanket on the road on the steps of a closed shoe shop - from the latest Coelho to the old Papillon, one could treat himself on these roads to an array of books that could not be rivalled by any bookshop in Hyderabad. He enjoyed grazing through the books after a harrowing week at work of unrealistic deadlines & horrible back ache. He kept looking for that one book, that promised him of adventure, of danger, of promise, of treasure. Re-reading Harry Potter or Da Vinci Code could do that. But, he wanted some uncharted territory this time and he kept looking.

After an hour of haggling and picking up a few new books he noticed a new stall had come up towards the end of the shopping complex where he parked his vehicle. It was far from the rest of the vendors which was odd. Proximity to other vendors generally brought-in customers; so vendors stuck to each other, so this stuck him odd but made him curious. He quite didn't have the energy, but still walked up to the stall. There was no one. He stood for a few minutes looking at the books, mostly tattered when one caught his eye - a book without a cover, but with some name written in telugu in 'golusukattu' script. He smiled. The writing reminded him of his grandfather. He glanced through the book which seemed to be a history of Sri Krishna Devaraya. He rummaged through the pages, the handwriting appeared in a few more places with notes, question marks and some weird symbols. As he was checking the book, a loose page slipped out and fell to the ground. He bent to pick it up but found an old frail hand reaching for it at the same time.

'Careful son' said the old man

'I'm sorry', Rushi apologised and smiled understanding he was the vendor of the stall

The old man returned his smile with a toothless grin.

'I'm Rashid'.

'I'm Rushi'.

'Ah! like a sage?'

'Yea, just like a sage'.

'Do you want that book?'

'Hmm, 'thinking, not sure if I want to read it, 'not my style and 'don't think I'm in

for history lesson today’.

‘Ah, that's fine. People of your age seem to find King Henry and the likes of England more appealing than ours’. Wolf Hall perhaps?’ indicating another tattered book.

Rushi smiled. 'It's alright, I'll take this one'. He didn't want to tell Rashid that he had already read Wolf Hall.

'20 rupees'

'Ok'

'Thank you'

'Let's meet again sometime'

With no intention to go home he turned his bike towards city central mall, on the second floor of which was his second home - Crossword & Cafe Coffee Day. He ordered for his usual, sat at his usual and checked his purchases. He opened the old book and started reading. It was the story of the great king starting from his childhood to his glorious reign to his death. Rushi put the book down. He wasn't upto books like these. Facts bored him, he wanted a story. It reminded him of hi social teacher who turned history into stories that came alive.

Reminiscing, he was about to put it down, when he noticed something.

Had he looked through the glass door of the cafe, he would've seen the person staring at him.

Chapter 2

The story of Sri Krishna Devaraya finished halfway through the book. Then, what's in the second half? 'footnotes?' Rushi wondered. 'Waste of time' and was about to put the book back when he noticed a lot of handwritten notes, question marks on the pages. The second part looked like a personal diary - of the great king himself. Sri Krishna Devaraya wrote a journal? He chuckled to himself. Great. Let's see and started to read. There were no dates. Only passages. The King seem to be concerned about his son.

"He is coronated, but I doubt if he'll be able to manage. I can see my enemies laying in wait for revenge. I need a successor who can strike fear in their heart and the same time be benevolent to my subjects. Tirumala is good. But, will he rise to the occasion? May the blessing of Lord Venkateshwara be with him. Need to talk to Maha mantri."

What then followed were entries about taxation, the Portuguese and the King's thoughts on secularism. Then again, Rushi noted a personal entry.

"He is dead. Tirumala is no more. Who killed him? Who? I'm waiting for him. Once he is back, I'll know who. And, then..."

Rushi read-on

"Maha mantri! you? I need to hide it"

Some pages were torn after this. He looked at the words again - 'I need to hide it'. What needed to be hidden? Rushi wondered. His interest peaked. It was like reading the Da Vinci Code with pages missing. He flipped through the rest of the pages. Apart from a few cryptic handwritten notes nothing held his interest. Who wrote this book? His knowledge about the great king was limited to what he read in his school textbook. Who can help him? He didn't know. Just as he was thinking, his phone rang. It was Sandeep. His mind lit up suddenly. He took the call.

'Wassup dude?'

'Where are you?'

'I'm home, you?'

'CCD, alright listen, your uncle is a Telugu historian right?'

'Yess, but I'm in no mood for lecture, you hang in there, i'll join you in an hour'

Before Rushi could say anything, Sandeep cut the call. Sandeep & Rushi were childhood friends, though their life paths were different they managed to keep in touch and now knew each other like brothers. He wanted to discuss the book with him. After an hour Rushi saw Sandeep entering the mall. No one could miss him. Tall, hefty, dark, at first glance people would mistake him for a rowdy, but, those close to him knew he was as kind & jovial as a Santa Claus. After ordering his usual Sandeep took the seat opposite to Rushi, who showed him the book. After reading the passages pointed out by Rushi, Sandeep without prompting, called his uncle. He was at home and said they could join him for dinner. They paid the bill and walked out.

 He could seem them afar getting out of the car and walk-in to a house. No one noticed him following them. He took his phone out and made his second call of the day.

'Uncle, you've grown your tummy since the last time I saw you' joked Sandeep resting one hand on his Uncle's tummy as he entered his house. Professor Murthy, a Telugu lecturer and historian who worked in the Telugu University was one individual who turned out lucrative jobs to do what he loved best - teach Telugu. Just like Sandeep he was also rotund, kind in demeanour, and a foodie. He gave a gentle wack on Sandeep's head, and lead them both to his dining room where a sumptuous dinner awaited with Dal, curry, sambar, papad & curd. 'What's this? Dine like a beggar, Uncle, not like a King. You have a banquet here. Now we know the secret to your ever increasing circumference'.

Professor Murthy guffawed.

'Shut up and eat, your friend seems to be famished' he said looking at Rushi.

Only did then Rushi realize how hungry he was.

After the dinner they sat down in the small veranda behind the house enjoying the cool breeze. Rushi decided it was the time to ask Mr. Murthy about the book.

'Uncle, Sandeep told me you are an expert on Telugu history'

'It's my job Rushi, tell me, what do you want to know?'

'What can you tell us about Sri Krishna Devaraya?'

'Ah! the Andhra Bhoja? What about him?'

Rushi, looked at Sandeep who nodded, took out the book he bought in the morning and gave it to the professor. 'Please start from here' he said pointing to the second part of the book. Sandeep and Rushi waited anxiously as the Professor glanced through it.

After completing he looked at both of them.

'It doesn't make any sense' he said at last.

'The entries seem to be from some kind of a diary of the King, but, as far as we know the king never maintained one. However..'

'What?'

'Recently a book called 'Krishna Deva Rayana Dinachari' was found. But, there is no way to ascertain if it was written by the king himself. Nor, is it a diary of any sorts. It was more of observations of daily life in Vijayanagara at that time'

'But, if you see, these paras are preceded and followed by information on the day to day life in the then Vijayanagara'

'I know'

'So, then could these paras also belong to the King?'

'We cannot say for sure, they might, they might not'

Professor Murthy looked at Rushi in the eye and asked, 'What do you want to know?'

'Tell me what do those paras mean' Rushi asked.

Chapter 3

'What do you know about Sri Krishna Devaraya?' Professor Murthy asked.

Before Rushi could reply, Sandeep sat up and said, 'all that was shown in Aditya 369'

Professor Murthy almost hit him, but Sandeep escaped.

'Nothing but that he was a great King' Rushi replied smiling.

'Hmm.. There's a lot to be told about Sri Krishna Devaraya. Let me just concentrate on the bits we are interested in'

'In 1524, Sri Krishna Devaraya made his son Tirumala Raya the king of Vijayanagara. But, his son passed away very soon - he was poisoned. The great king was appalled. He charged his spy network to find the people. He knew it was the Gajapatis. But, more than that, he was worried there was an insider hand. When circumstantial evidence pointed out to his minister whom he treated like Father - Mahamanthri Timmarusu, he was shocked. He couldn't bring himself to kill his favourite minister so, had his eyes removed. Later it was found Thimmarusu was not responsible for the killing. But, it was too late. Though the King repented, the great minister never forgave him. It was long rumoured that Tirumala Raya was killed 'cause he knew a secret which he did not yield to the Gajapatis. A secret to the great King's success. Something only the King and his progeny knew'.

'What was it?'

'We don't know'

'Where is it?'

'We don't know. We don't even know if it's true or just another myth. And, this one line 'it must be hidden' in a book which may or may not be legit, cannot prove it is real.'

Rushi was disappointed. He looked at his watch. It was late and the thought of office the next day frustrated him. He stood up to take leave.

'Thank you, uncle'

'Ha, I should thank you Rushi, being Historian is a boring job, I wish I knew that before I let Indiana Jones influence me, but you've given this old man some excitement today. I'll see if I can validate the legitimacy of these paragraphs. But, I'm afraid it may not yield anything. Let's just call this a wild goose chase and call it a day. Off to your homes both of you.'

Sandeep and Rushi said their goodbyes and reached their respective homes. They still didn't spot the car following them.

Rushi dreamt of hidden treasures and dragons that night. After all, his trip to Abids did yield result.

Once in office the next day, he did what he was good at - put himself on autopilot. The good thing with his work was that he didn't have to use his brain. Just a little excel logic and his career in that company was set. Given the emotional turmoil he was going through in his personal life, he was glad he could sleep-walk through his work. His divorce had been bitter. There was no one reason to point out for the cause. There was nothing major. Just as in every case of divorce there was no right or wrong side, only two sides of the same issue. Small issues piled up like straw on a camel's back till 'twas difficult to say which one broke them. The judge did not take much time to give a verdict. Though Rushi was relieved, he was not entirely sure if it was a wise decision, he often missed his wife & son. This self doubt was so very characteristic of his, he smiled as he thought. In the early days he had wondered if the marriage was a right decision, now the opposite. He reached his home confused and dejected.

As Rushi reached the door knob he noticed it was unlocked, he pushed it open, but everything was normal, he inspected the whole house, nothing seem to be taken. That was strange. Then instinctively he ran into the bedroom, opened the cupboard where he had put the books he bought the day before; the book was missing. That's when he heard footsteps behind him, and as he was about to turn, he felt metal hit his head. He didn't remember anything after that.

Chapter 4

'Rushi, Rushi, are you alright?'

He felt someone was shaking him vigorously.

He opened his eyes slowly, could only see the outline first, but when his eyes adjusted he saw Sandeep. He tried to get up when he felt a stinging headache. He caught his head in both of his hands as if to stop it from toppling down from his neck.

'Rushi, are you OK?'

He didn't answer.

'I came by when you didn't pick up the phone, and I'm glad that I did. What happened?'

'Someone hit me, they took the book' Rushi stammered.

'Alright, let's call the police'

'What will you tell them? Someone stole a book? and hit me?'

'Of-course'

'It won't do any good'

Sandeep couldn't help but agree. The police in this country had a lot on their plate to worry about lost books.

'What shall we do?'

'Call your uncle and tell him we'll meet him when he logs off from work. In the mean time, let me see how bad this bruise is and send an email to my manager for leave for a day or two'

'OK'

Traffic was moving at a snail pace as they neared Telugu University in Nampally. Rushi was still reeling from the headache. They got down the car and waited for Mr. Murthy. Sandeep had phoned his uncle and told him what happened. After ten minutes they saw Mr. Murthy walking towards them. He motioned them to come with him, and they entered the university together when he lead them to his staff room closing the door behind them. Even before they could sit, Mr. Murthy started speaking.

'I made some inquiries in my circle, nobody's talking. That's never a good sign. It means something's being hidden. A little birdie told me, an anthropologist working in Hampi has been missing for a couple of days. Though a case has been filed, nothing's seem to be going on in that front. As if someone's deliberately stalling it. This book could have been his. And, the bruise on your head only adds credence to the story.'

'I can ask the vendor who sold me the book' Rushi said.

'I doubt that'd yield any result'

'Then what do you suggest?'

'I don't know'

Rushi didn't say anything, Professor Murthy started pacing the room.

'I wonder what was in that book? I wish I could take a second look' he muttered.

'Didn't you take a look yesterday uncle?' Sandeep asked.

'I just looked through the passages, not at the remarks/notes that were made on the pages.

Come to think of it now, if Rushi was attacked, there must've been something there'.

'I still have the book'

Sandeep & Professor Murthy stared at Rushi.

Chapter 5

'What?'

'No, I don't mean to say, I have the book, but a copy of it'

'What do you mean?'

'I scanned it'

'Oh!'

'The other day before I went to office, I scanned the book to my online account'

'Does it mean we can view the entire book?'

'Yes'

'Wonderful, let's see'

'let me login'

Rushi used Professor Murthy's desktop and logged-in to his account.

'There you go'

'Hmm, I wonder what do these symbols mean?' Sandeep asked

'Don't know. Take a pen and make a note of them'

U
T
C
V
H
B
E

2
 7
 6
 5
 0
 0
 0

'I just recognise two telugu letters, 'oo' & 'tha' but what are the rest' Rushi asked to no one in particular.

'the rest are numbers' Professor Murthy added
 'numbers?' Rushi & Sandeep asked together
 'yes, telugu numbers'

'We have telugu script for numbers?'

'Yes you educated illiterates'

Rushi & Sandeep smiled sheepishly

'what are the english equivalents of these?'

'grab a paper'

'1,5,1,9,5,9, 7,6, 2,8,0,0'

'What do they indicate?'

'lines of the pages, perhaps?'

'Let's check'

'No, they don't'

'Why?'

'What would 0,0 then indicate?' Asked Rushi

'Hmm'

'Wanna google?'

'sure'

'na, it's all gibberish'

'try keying-in the first 6 numbers and then the second 6'

Sandeep fed the numbers into google search

'these are coordinates'

'how did you know?' Sandeep & Rushi asked Professor Murthy

'intelligent guess I suppose. If you notice, every 6 numbers are followed by an alphabet; thought it would be some kind of a break'

'Excellent - let's see what these co-ordinates represent'

'Kuhlja - google maps' Sandeep waved his hands like a magician at the screen of the laptop

The screen flickered showing them an empty area'

'zoom out - what area is it?'

Rushi zoomed out and looked at the screen.

'Hampi' Professor Murthy said not wholly surprised.

Hampi - The temple city at the heart of erstwhile Vijayanagara empire - The location of the latest archeological dig - the last known location of the missing archaeologist.

Chapter 6

Sandeep, Rushi reached Hampi in the morning. They had decided to check the co-ordinates and booked tickets to Hampi immediately. The journey was tiresome. The road near Andhra Pradesh/Karnataka border was full of potholes and all they remembered was bumping into each other giving themselves a head & body ache in the process. As soon as they reached the hotel, the first thing they did was take a hot shower. Once out of the hotel, they hired bicycles from the hotel and set out. Before they could even think of exploring, Sandeep suggested breakfast. They entered the famous Hampi Bazaar and made way to 'Garden Paradise'. The atmosphere was pleasant and the food good. With their stomachs full and energy restored, they opened google maps again and checked the co-ordinates. They were approximately 15 kms from the spot they intended to explore.

'15 kms? how to reach it?'

'On our cycles'

'15 kms? are you kidding me? you expect me cycle all that distance?'

'Shut up and move your lazy ass'

'Wait, let's pack some food and water' and before Rushi could argue Sandeep again disappeared into the hotel. He emerged after 20 minutes with two packets in both his hands and they started towards their destination.

It took them approximately two hours to reach a juncture which looked like the end of the road. A fence was setup closing off the road.

'We might've took a wrong turn somewhere' said Rushi

'I'll kill you, do not expect me to cycle back. This better be the correct road'

'Stay here, let me have a look around and go easy on the food, you finished one already'

'Yea, yea'

Rushi got down his bicycle and walked around.. the fence seemed to go a long way, he followed it. After walking for a while, he found the sign - 'Danger; Daroji Bear Sanctuary' with a crudely drawn bear picture underneath it.

'Fabulous' Rushi muttered to himself and returned to Sandeep.

'Let's go; we'll have to leave our cycles and walk from here'

'You gotto be joking'

'No, move'

'Do you promise to buy me biryani when we get back to Hyderabad?'

'Yes'

'Good, now I can walk'

As Rushi held down the fence, Sandeep crossed it and held it down from the other end for Rushi to cross it. Once in, they started to walk. The rocky terrain of Hampi slowly started giving way to a verdant forest rich with flora and fauna. They tried sticking to the rocks as much as they could and walked for almost an hour when they heard rustling of leaves behind them. They turned back together, for a second, all they could see was black fur, then, they saw the face - a bear. Rushi & Sandeep jumped never seeing a bear up so close which equally startled by their reaction stood on its hind legs reaching upto 6 feet. They began to run throwing away the food packet at its feet. After ten minutes they stopped, panting. They

couldn't hear anything.
'Looks like we are safe'
Rushi nodded.

They stood like that for ten minutes catching their breath.

'Let's just get this whole thing done with and go back soon. It's already afternoon and I want to be on that damn road before nightfall'
'Yes, check how far it is'

Sandeep opened the app.
'We reached' he said.
They looked around but found nothing.

Chapter 7

"What do you mean we reached? I don't see anything"
 Sandeep showed Rushi the red spot, indicating the location, the blue arrow indicating, them, aligned together.
 'OK, let's look around' hoping Google didn't screw up.

Rushi & Sandeep started walking in opposite directions pushing leaves & branches out of their way, trying to make a way.

'Rushi, Rushi; I found it'

Rushi turned back and ran towards Sandeep. He joined Sandeep in silent wonder as both saw a small cave like temple ruins neatly camouflaged by nature as if it didn't want the temple to be found. Looking at it, Rushi was not sure if he should call it a temple. Rushi & Sandeep started walking towards it.

'Man, this looks scary' said Sandeep stopping at the entrance. 'Should we do this?'
 Rushi didn't respond. He just looked into the darkness in the temple. Hoping his eyes would adjust to the dim light soon, he stepped forward into what looked like a corridor. Sandeep followed him. Leaves crunched as they walked leaving a trail of footsteps in the dust. Luckily there were not many cobwebs to clear. The corridor soon gave way to a small open space with a room like structure. They approached the room.

'What's that?'

'Looks like an idol - broken'

'Here, there are hands, head, torso, legs, shankha & chakra'

'Lord Vishnu?'

'Who else?'

'OK, are we going to find anything else here other than broken idols?'

Rushi went around the garbhagudi (main part of the temple) running his hands over the walls and was about to turn back when his hand hit a loose stone which fell to the floor. In the empty space Rushi & Sandeep, who had rushed to Rushi after hearing the stone crash, found a latch. They looked at each other and pulled it. It did not yield, it held back as if someone was reluctant to let it go.

'There seems to be some kind of mechanism here, look at the way it is stuck' Rushi said

'Or it could just be stuck, you do realise it is old right?'

'Shut up, the stone was loose, it meant someone accessed it recently. So, whatever is the contraption hidden, it was accessed recently. Switch on the flash light and look for any hand prints or dust-cleared areas'

Rushi & Sandeep slowly started looking around, all the walls were dusty.

'Everything's old here dude, let's go, it's getting dark'

'Wait, look at the idol parts. They seem to be a bit clean compared to the others'

'Hmm, not sure'

Rushi stepped into the square enclosure in which they found the parts. As he took steps to bring all the parts to one place, his one step sounded different. He stopped, that small part which seemed to be the place of the idol was a little hollow.

'Can this be? Oh what the heck, let's give it a try' Rushi thought out loud.

'What?'

'Here, help me assemble everything'

And, Sandeep & Rushi put the legs (which fit in perfectly into the hollow), attached the torso, the face and the hands. Everything fit perfectly.

Sandeep said, 'are you thinking what I am thinking?'

'Yes, how did they fit so perfectly?'

'Isn't it as if this idol was built like this?'

'But, I don't know of any idol made from broken stones'

'OK, give me the shankha and chakra'

'What? you think I can't put them in place?' Sandeep retorted.

Rushi raised his hands as if giving up.

'Shankha goes to the right, Chakra to the left' Sandeep said placing them in the hands of the idol.

Rushi laughed out saying, 'no, that's wrong' when both heard the wall behind the idol give a thud as if released.

Both looked at the wall in stunned silence.

'I didn't do anything'

'Shut up, looks like you opened it'

Rushi & Sandeep together pushed the wall, it did not yield, they however pushed it enough to squeeze through to the other side.

On the other side..

Chapter 8

Complete darkness. They switched-on their cellphone flash light and peered into the darkness. Steps - in a circle with no railings, leading to an unknown below. Sandeep & Rushi stepped-in precariously. After a descent of around ten minutes, the steps ended in what seemed to another tunnel. Rushi leaned towards the wall on the left, took a few steps when his leg hit, what seemed to be a column stretching along the wall of the tunnel till what seemed to be its end. He stopped to rub it and smelled, dry oil.

'Do you have a match stick'
'Here - homelight match sticks, lasts long'
'Dude, not now'
'Hehe, Sorry'

Rushi lit the match stick and brought-it in contact to the powder. It burnt brightly. The fire immediately travelled in a straight line ending at what looked like a wall.

'Woah'
'Don't woah now, light the column to your right'

Sandeep lit the second column. With both the columns lit, they examined the walls, which were covered in paintings. Sandeep & Rushi gazed at the paintings in awe.

'Who ever did this, wow..'Rushi silently nodded in agreement.

With each step, the cave seemed to take them through a journey from birth, adolescence, coronation, war, & success of Sri Krishna Devaraya's life, finally reaching to the end of the tunnel whose wall was not painted, but sculpted. It showed the great King doing tapasya (meditation) and Lord Maha Vishnu revealing himself & blessing him. Beside them, was another sculpture.

'what's the symbol of Kamineni hospitals doing here?'
'Shut up, it's not Kamineni's symbol, but that of medicine. It's the staff of Aesculapius, the ancient mythical Greek god of medicine.'
'OK, by the way how do you pronounce that?'
Rushi rolled his eyes ignoring him.
'Look at this, the top of the symbol does not end in wings, as should the symbol. Instead the joining of serpents seem to result in the top exploding.'
'I don't know what you are talking about. But, why a western symbol in our cave?'
'That's an interesting question'.
'Probably it is not a western symbol after all' Rushi said after a minute.
'It could be the ida & pingala nerves' he continued.
'What?'
'What do you know about yoga?'
'It is whatever Baba Ramdev does on TV'
Rushi mockingly banged his head to the wall
'Sorry, know nothing but that it's exercise'
'OK, listen, according to Kundalini yoga there are three nadis: *Ida* that lies to the left of the spine, *pingala* that lies to the right, and *Sushumna* running along the spinal cord in the center,

through the seven chakras connecting the Mooladhaar at the base, and Sahasrar at the top (or crown) of the head. It is at the base of this sushumna where the Kundalini lies coiled in three and a half coils, in a dormant or sleeping state. When a yogi does penance, the Kundalini rises like a snake through the three nadis and reaches the Sahasrar in the mind, thus awakening him to a different dimension, the presence of God'.

'Ok, so you mean to say, the King awakened his Kundalini?'

'Don't know'

Sandeep stretched his hand along the staff

'Hey, there's a hole here where the King's Sahasrar is supposed to be. It exploded'

'Here, take a look here, there's a hole, if we had a ladder, we could climb and peer down through it'

'Yes' said Rushi running his hand along the staff. As he reached the end of the stick towards the joining of the two serpents, he noticed one of the serpents eye was at the base. But, when he looked up, he could see the two serpent's heads near the head of the staff. Then, what is this? A two headed snake? He examined the sculpture closely again - 'the serpent needs to rise from the base', thinking to himself and pressed the eye at the base. Suddenly something shot out of from the open head of the staff and fell to the ground. And, as soon as it fell, the ground under their feet started shaking.

'Earthquake'

'what did you press?'

'Don't know'

'Take that thing and run'

Sandeep grabbed it and started to run. All they could see was sand, rocks falling and the walls slowly crumbling.

'faster'

They kept running without pause. Had they turned their heads they would've noticed the ground being swallowed and the steps crumbling behind them. But, they were not fast enough.

Rushi could only see dust everywhere, the approaching evening, only complicated matters. He squeezed from behind the wall, ran past the garbhagudi, watching the idol break into pieces from the corner of his eyes, running in full abandon hoping, just hoping Sandeep was behind him. That's when he heard - 'Rushiii'

Now almost out of the temple, Rushi turned to see Sandeep stuck under a pillar. But, worse was that the ground was sinking under their feet as if being swallowed by something. Rushi ran, caught Sandeep's hands and pulled. He had heard of people capable of doing extraordinary stuff in a spurt of adrenaline. Probably it was because of this that Rushi managed to pull Sandeep from under the pillar and both ran till they were out of the temple premises and turned back only once to see the whole temple collapse and boulders surrounding the temple take it's place.

Finally after what it seemed like an eternity, the ground stopped shaking. Rushi & Sandeep

eyed each other, both on their knees panting.

'go easy on the biryani will you?'

'Why? you pulled me out easily, I just look fat, but all this is water' pointing to his stomach.

'Shut up you asshole'

'Why? It is you who have to be blamed for all this. What on earth did you press?'

Then Rushi remembered.

'Do you still have it?'

'What?'

'The thing which fell on the ground'

'Yes, in my bag. Here, it is'

Rushi was already staring at it. A key with a serpent coiled around it with its tail starting at the bow and head rising in a hood at the end of the blade.

'I believe it belongs to us'

Rushi & Sandeep looked up towards the source of the voice.

Chapter 9

'Who are you?'
'don't recognize me?'

Rushi looked at the stranger donned in white khaddar, tall, dark, well built, a gold bracelet on the right hand, a heavy gold chain in his neck, reminding him of Rayalaseema henchmen frequenting Telugu movies these days. But, there was also a hint of intelligence behind those eyes. He was simply not some guy, he had to be a leader of sorts. As if to make his judgment true, Rushi noticed few more figures close-in around them in a circle from behind.

'Still didn't recognise me? I'll give you a hint. How's your head?' and he smiled

Sandeep was looking at Rushi who did not betray any emotion on his face.

'Alright, enough of introductions. Give that to us and follow me'

Sandeep stepped forward hesitantly and handed the key to him.

'Thank you, my name is Vinay' he stretched his hand to Sandeep, who eagerly shook it, and tightened his grip, pulled Sandeep towards him and hit him hard on his head with the butt of the colt revolver in his hand.

Sandeep fell back holding his head, Rushi rushed to pick him up.

'Sorry, just wanted to level things between you and your friend' said Vinay as the others laughed.

Asshole, Rushi thought.

'Get him up quickly and follow us. There's someone who wants to see you'

The group tightened behind them as if to push them forward, Rushi & Sandeep calmly followed Vinay. Neither did they have the energy to fight nor skill. After what seemed to be an hour of walking into the forest they reached some forest guest houses. A few cars parked were in front. Rushi read a number plate - 'Department of Devadaya'. He saw Vinay walk into a hut. After a few minutes they were called-in.

He climbed the wooden stairs and walked-in to the hut, Vinay stood outside guarding the door and closed it behind them as they entered it. Sandeep & Rushi looked around, apart from guns hanging on all four walls, a bed, a writing table and a closet, the room seemed to be very spartan. But, somehow, someone managed to fit an AC in here.

'Sorry to keep you waiting gentlemen, hope you recognize me, or do I need to give you an intro?'

Rushi & Sandeep stared at the current 'Devadaya Sakha' minister Mutyala Rao. Rushi had expected someone in the ministry might be involved but did not expect the Minister himself

would be. He knew from the papers that Mutyala Rao was a man with two personalities - an ex home minister, sixty years of age, generally portrayed as an benevolent, old patriarch bent on saving the hindu dharma from the clutches of westernisation, a Venkateshwara Swamy devotee almost ever present in Tirumala and on the other hand a highly corrupt individual, known for 'operation greyhounds' that resulted in illegally mutilating a lot of naxals.

'Yes sir, we know, who you are' Rushi replied.

'I'm sorry, who are you?' asked Sandeep.

Rushi could not believe this. He caught Sandeep's sleeve and said, 'He is the Devadaya Sakha minister you idiot'.

'Oh, sorry'

'Good, now that we have the introductions out of place, let me come to the point. You guys are meddling into the government's works. I wanted to keep you all out of it. I believe one of you was even warned. But, you didn't stop. But, I do have to thank you guys. When the professor escaped our clutches we thought we lost our only hope. But, when we did find him, and trust me, we do find them, he said he threw the book away. Ah, the poor fellow was telling the truth, but, you know once I decided, it's a decided - all it took was one bullet, to have his head plastered to the very wall behind you. An ugly scene it was, it never gets better you see. We traced the professors last few days, it didn't take us much time to find Rashid, who said he sold it to someone just then, since we knew the time and location when the book was picked up, with a little help from our facial recognition software, it took us less than an hour to track you. See, honestly, I didn't want to kill you both, too many bodies is difficult to cover up and I'm too old for this shit. But, you both have exceeded my expectations. How did you break the code? We did find the temple, but, couldn't find anything. How did you guys do it? No, no, don't tell me. I have something better for you coming - to test your intelligence. But, do you guys even know what you are involved in?'

'Treasure?' Sandeep blurted

'Haha, of course treasure'

'you guys are nuts, do you both really think there's treasure buried down somewhere? and you keep murdering people for it? What the fuck is this? an English movie?'

It was Mutyala Rao's turn to respond - 'Of course, there is, haven't you heard of 'Nelamaliga' in Padmanabha Swamy temple of Kerala?'

'That might be an exception'

Mutyala Rao scoffed.

'Rushi, you don't want to believe it. Why do you think Mohammed Ghazni attacked India 17 times? Do you know there's a treasure hidden under the garbhagudi of Ahobhila temple? Do you know there's a treasure in Vundavalli rock caves that houses another 'Padmanabha Swamy' statue that exactly resembles the one in Tirvananthapuram? Yes, Oh yes, Rshu, there are treasures hidden, and it's just not treasures, there are great powers hidden with them, that is what I'm seeking now. Power. Power to consolidate the country, the world. A task which the great Sri Krishna Devaraya could've completed, but failed miserably, a task to establish one Dharma, one religion, one God, and to be one on this earth. What the hell do you think I'm searching? Ha? Golden trinkets?'

Rushi could feel Mutyala Rao's breath on his face. His eyes betraying the depths of madness of his soul.

Chapter 10

Mutyala Rao continued, 'Around 500 years ago there was a meteorite crash in around here. The farmers who saw the event later described it as 'fire raining from the heavens'. As was the custom then, the King was informed. Sri Krishnadevaraya who was still not a King, not even a close favourite to the then King Vira Narasimha Raya. But, since the King was out on war, Krishnadevaraya the ruler in his absence, went in search of the meteorite crash site. Nobody knows what he found, if he found anything at all. But, legend has it that he found something that seemed to have given him atindriya sakthis making him powerful enough to unite the whole of south India. All this was legend, a chandamama katha told to kids, till that book was found in which he referenced the existence of the stone. The King when his son died hid the stone and the funny point is, he barely survived for five years after that. No one knew where the King hid the stone, but, 200 years after the King's death, Vijayanagara empire lay in tatters. After the sack of Hampi at the hands of Bahamani sultanate, the then King Tirmumala Deva Raya fled to Penukonda with vast amounts of treasure on the back of 1500 elephants. No body knows what happened to the treasure, but, it is here again a rumour was heard about something the King was hiding preciously more than the treasure he was carrying.

The book provided clues of its existence and this key proved it's existence. Now all that I need is to find out where the treasure was hidden. If only the professor was alive. Not to worry though, I have your friend on the way.' Mutyala Rao smiled.

'Vinay!'

'Anna'

'Have them in your custody, in case we need to leverage them for professor Murthy.'

'Yes, Anna'

Vinay directed Rushi & Sandeep out, as Rushi stepped out he noticed two files with his wife and son's names written on it. He was stunned. 'Leverage' replied Vinay.

They were moved to an adjacent cottage and locked-in. After an hour one of their guards walked-in to give them some food. 'Good luck ass holes, we have some chicken left, treat yourselves'. At the same moment, they heard tremendous roars all around them and in the confusion to know what was happening Ruhi, Sandeep & the guard ran out together forgetting for an instance who was the captor and who was the captive. Out they found, a sloth of bears roaring all around the cottages. With the guard distracted, Rushi calmly signalled Sandeep to run, and before the guard turned, they had already covered some distance. Sandeep was laughing when he heard, 'Stop' and a bullet whizzed by. The roars only doubled after the bullet was fired. The bears in fear started attacking the men.

'Come this way' shouted Rushi who spotted a motor bike. He started it as Sandeep ran towards him. Together they sped.

'We need to warn Professor Murthy immediately.

'And, Sandeep ask your parents to go hide too.'

'OK'

Rushi was thinking how he would warn his estranged wife now.

It was early morning by the time they reached the city. Life was just about beginning. As Rushi rushed towards the phone booth, Sandeep stopped near a tiffin centre.

'Professor, this is Rushi'

'Good morning' replied Murthy sleepily.

'Listen to me carefully uncle, please get out of your house now and goto some hotel and stay there till we come to Hyderabad and figure a way to sort this issue out'.

'Too late'

Rushi feared the worst.

'What do you mean too late?'

'I'm here in Hampi'

'What?'

'Tell me where you guys are, or better still tell me where you are staying, I'll come over'

'No, don't do that, let's meet at Matanga Hill'

'Why?'

'No time to explain'

'OK, will see you in an hour'

Rushi made another call.

He stepped out the telephone booth, irritated after his call to his ex-wife. She thought he was joking. Rushi needed to find a solution this situation soon, before things got out of hand.

Sandeep was blissfully finishing his breakfast.

'Idly?' he offered looking at Rushi.

Chapter 11

Matanga Hills located at the centre of Hampi seemed to be the best spot to get an aerial view of the entire place thought Rushi as they climbed the narrow trail leading to the top. Surrounded by the Tungabhadra river in the north, the Achyuta Raya temple to the east, Hampi settlement towards the west, and Turthu Canal in the south, it provided visitors a great place to get panoramic view of the ruins and marvel at the erstwhile glory of the city. They were greeted by a few coming down the hill probably after watching the sunrise. It would've been a sight to behold, had they come a little earlier and without the emotional turmoil of the last night.

They climbed for thirty minutes and finally reached the top of the hill and sat near the Veerabhadra temple.

'Matanga hill' exhaled Sandeep.

Rushi smiled, as he looked over Hampi. So much history. He felt small. His worries felt small. His life felt small. Kings bit the dust, kingdoms bit the dust, of what value was his life? Still men crave for power, the thought felt ironic.

'History wherever you look, god only knows, what happened on this hill' Sandeep mirroring Rushi's thoughts.

'I don't know what happened, but, I'll tell you a small story my grandmother told me about the sage Matanga, till the professor comes. Game?'

'Yup'

'OK. Matanga Hill was one of the important locations mentioned in Ramayana. The place was the home of Sage Matanga. When the monkey prince Vali killed Dundhuvu (a buffalo demon) he threw the carrion onto this hill which exactly fell where the sage was performing a yagna. Outraged at this act, sage Matanga cursed Vali that since he desecrated his prayer his head would explode if he ever stepped foot onto the mountain where he lived. When Maayavi turned up to avenge his father's (Dundhuvu) death, and a fight ensued, Maayavi ran into a cave which was the entrance to the underworld hoping to lose Vali who was winning, and Vali asked his brother Sugreeva to stand guard at the cave and went after Maayavi. After a few days, with still no sight of Vali, Sugreeva closed the cave thinking that Vali was killed in the fight. But, Vali emerged victorious from the cave and blamed Sugreeva for leaving him and chased Sugreeva out of the kingdom. Sugreeva along with his warrior general Hanuman, took refuge at this place, the Matanga hill, as Vali could not come here.'

'Ah!'

'Story time up and there comes your uncle' Rushi said as he saw the rotund professor huffing and puffing from climbing the stairs. Branches of the same tree, he smiled to himself turning towards Sandeep.

'Uncle, how are you? what are you doing in Hampi?'

'Hang on guys, give this old man some breathing space'

After five minutes, Professor Murthy smiled.

'Alright, what are you doing in Hampi?'

'I'll come to that, but, what is with you both, why here? and not your hotel' sipping coffee?'

Rushi narrated what all happened from the time they came to Hampi. Professor Murthy's was stunned. As if understanding the gravity of the situation, he started: 'Look, after you people

left, I called up my contacts in the police department about the missing professor, just days before he went missing, the professor bought a ticket to Srisailam. There is no evidence that he made it there. And, after hearing what you said, we know for sure he didn't make it. But, there is proof that he had already made one trip to a place near the tiger reserve a few days earlier. I could get one of the forest rangers confirm that he saw him and that he was inquiring about some temple ruins in the forest but was advised against entering the area due to it being a tiger zone and a naxal area. If we can get to that temple, I think we'll find what we are looking for'.

'And, what are we looking for?'

'Whatever the key opens'

'Nice, I feel like fucking Indiana Jones. But, just don't know how to get the minister and his goons off our backs'

'We'll worry about that once we make the discovery Rushi. If it was something the Minister is looking for, I'm sure it must be huge and once we hand it over to the government we can ask it for protection'.

Rushi turned towards the professor, he didn't know if the professor was naive or just plain innocent.

'There's a small complication, though' Professor Murthy said.

'We still need that key'

'We won't be able to enter the temple without it'

'We'll just break and enter?'

Professor Murthy disagreed. He took out a paper from his bag and turned towards Rushi & Sandeep.

'do you know what this is?'

'muggu?'

'Shut up, Sandeep. Not the time for jokes'.

'No' replied Rushi. All he could see were thick ropes running parallel to each other interlinking and curling into each other at what seemed like the four corners of the painting.

'I found this on the last page of the book'

'But, there was nothing on it'

'no, you wouldn't have seen it. It was very faint and even I wouldn't have if I was not zoomed in'

'OK'

'What is it?'

'It's what we all know as 'Naagabandhanam'

Chapter 12

He woke up with bruises on his arms and chest. His head throbbed as if someone hit him, groggy and weak he looked around. The five they hired lay dead among a few bears. The bears were ruthless. He was surprised at their behavior, bears never attacked humans. This was new. Something really spooked them and they lost Rushi & his friend. The minister, he suddenly remembered and ran towards the main cottage. He could hear someone banging the door. Ah, he relaxed. That bastard is still alive. It was his fucking idea to hire the locals instead of letting Vinay bring his team. 'The locals wont recognize you and once the mission is over, we can part ways without issues and even if someone tried to be smart, you can take care of them' he had replied. But, Vinay was always weary of this plan. 'They are not professionals' he had said. But, Mutyala Rao never bothered. Let him bang the freaking door. Let him feel helpless. After sometime, the knocking stopped. Vinay, a little tensed, opened the door.

'Fool, where have you been? This damn cell network doesn't work here and I thought you all were dead. Where are the others? What happened? I barricaded the door from the inside when I heard gun shots and the roars'.

Vinay narrated everything.

'Find them and end it once for all'

'Hey Chandramukhi!' shouted Sandeep

Then he saw Rushi's & the professor's expression and said, 'Sorry'.

'Even I know the term - naga bandhanam, from Chandramukhi' Rushi replied hesitantly, 'but what does it entail?'

'Kings in those days to protect their kingdom treasures used to hide them below temples or in dens to protect them from being plundered by enemies, by invoking certain powers like "Naga Bandhanam" or "Yuksha Bandhanam" or "Bhetala Bhandanam" or "Shakinee Bandhanam" etc. These invisible powers were said to protect the treasures. The Naga Bandham consists of a drawing of at least two (and some have said eight) intertwined snakes and placed on the door while a priest simultaneously chanted a mantra meant to protect the contents of the vault from all intruders. These mysterious powers or 'Bhandanams' (ties) continue to exist protecting the treasures till they are extricated or released by chanting withdrawing (like anti-dotes) mantras. And, this here is an "asta naga bandhanam"

'8 snakes?'

'Yes, according to Indian mythology there are eight powerful 'nagas' - Anantha, Takshaki, Vasuki, Shankapala, Padma, Karkotaka, Krownda, Sesa each bearing the weight of the planet from eight corners - East, West, North, South, North-East, South-East, North-West and South West. Each serpent has its own power (linked to one or the other god in the Hindu mythology) passes some of it to "Siddhapurushas" or "yogis" who pray to them. Only those persons can execute this "Nagabandham", and it is these yogis who executed them can alone withdraw them, by using withdrawal mantras chanting them to Garuda, the winged carrier of Vishnu. But, there are no such siddhapurushas now who can invoke the 'Garuda Mantra', which dilutes the power of "Nagabandham".

'Then are we screwed?'

'I thought so, until you mentioned the key. It could be a key with the power to open the doors

of the temple'.

'Then we do need that key'

Rushi, Sandeep & Professor fell silent.

'I can give you the key'

All the three looked towards the voice and for the second time found Vinay with a gun in his hand.

Chapter 13

'What the ..'

Rushi instinctively stepped before Sandeep and Professor Murthy.

'Ah, look at you, trying to save your friends? cho chweet. Don't you think I would've killed you all and taken the paper if I really wanted to? Come-on use your brain'

'What do you want?'

'Ah, direct to business. Don't like small talk do you? Very well, I come with a proposal. I have the key, and you know what it opens. Take me with you and we'll split the proceedings.'

'What makes you think we will'

'Because you have no fucking option. That's why. Do you really think Mutyala Rao would let you all just walk away? He'll kill you, your families and wipe the whole lineage unless I go and tell him, that I off'd you all.'

'Why would you do that for us?'

'Simple dumbo, 'cause I want to be rich. I fucking don't care about any power and mumbo jumbo. All I want is the treasure. Power comes only from money. I let you guys decide if whatever you find other than gold is worthy or not.'

'What about Mutyala Rao? Will he tolerate your betrayal?'

'He won't. That's why he'll have a heart attack, which can be arranged'

'Talk about raising a serpent'

'I agree. I'm a fucking cobra' Vinay started laughing at his own joke.

He suddenly stopped in the middle. 'You guys were talking about snakes, are there going to be? 'Cause I'm shit scared of them' he looked anxiously towards all the three.

Even Rushi & Sandeep looked at Professor Murthy.

Feeling all the attention on his face, Professor Murthy blurted 'What do I know? I'm not an expert. There are conflicting views. Naga bandhanam might just mean a powerful spell; it need not mean you'll see snakes. But, in our mythology, treasures are protected by snakes. So, we may find or we may not. Only one way to find out.'

'Hmm, where are we going?' asked Vinay.

'First of all, show me the key' said Professor Murthy.

'Here' said Vinay pulling it out from his backpack.

Professor Murthy stared at it running his hand almost affectionately, as if caressing it muttering to himself 'beauty. whether we find something or not, this itself seems to be a valuable find.'

'Interesting. Will it fetch money?' asked Vinay.

'I think so'

'Good, then hand it over, I'll take care of it'

Professor Murthy handed it over with a pained expression.

'So, you guys didn't answer me, where are we heading to?'

'Nallamala'

'forest?'

'Yeah, but, we need to buy some gear first'

'We don't have the time. I have enough gear with me. Let's go'

As they neared the tiger reserve, all the four of them stopped at the barricade. Professor Murthy got down. Rushi and the others could see him walk up to the policemen stationed at

the check point. He spoke for few minutes and came back to the jeep they were traveling. It was a gruelling journey from Hampi to Srisailam. The sun was setting, but, Rushi knew the route very well. When his grandfather was alive they used to visit this place almost every year traveling through the same roads. Check points were common in the area, it being a Naxallite hot zone, not that they were found frequently, but Nallamala was home to various dangerous species including the Naxals.

'Take a left over here and follow the trail' said the Professor as he climbed back into the jeep.

It was not a road; barely a trail left by people walking. It was very bumpy and the ride - very slow. Finally they stopped at what seemed like few tents surrounding a fire guarded by policemen. Professor Murthy got down again. This time a police officer came to greet him extending his hand.

'Inspector Ranjit. How nice to see you' said the professor.

'The pleasure is all mine, Sir'

'Guys, this is Ranjit a fellow scholar I should say. If some of us became professors & archaeologists, Ranjit became a policeman, but a Telugu literature graduate and aficionado at heart, we've met on lectures and exhibitions from time to time and solidified our friendship over whiskey'. He laughed patting his tummy.

Rushi hoped they wouldn't sit for another round.

Ranjit smiled at all of them and shook their hands. After the introductions and small round of tiffins, Ranjit got up and called for a small boy.

'Here, he is Raju, a localite. He knows the forest very well. He'll take you to the ruins the other professor was enquiring about. By the way, I expected even him to come with you guys, where is he?'

Professor Murthy didn't answer probably not wanting to lie to his friend.

Rushi spoke up, 'He is busy with other projects as of now and asked us to follow this trail and see if something turns up'

'Ah, ok. Fine then, rest for today, and tomorrow Raju will take you there.'

'Thank you, Raju, you and I are going to be good friends.' said Rushi turning towards him. He reminded him of his son.

'I forgot to tell you, Raju is dumb. He cannot talk'

'Oh!'

Rushi smiled at Raju who smiled back and waved his hand departing into the shadows descending all around them.

Chapter 14

'Is it true?'

'Yes, he is coming. We have our people tracking him. By the day end we'll know where exactly he is headed to'

'He should not escape this time'

'He will not'

Ramaiyya closed his eyes. Five years, five years he lay low. A betrayal he would never forget. His aides had warned him, they said, the peace treaty was just another ambush, but he lay of their points aside. His movement was losing steam and relevance. If there was a way to broker peace securing the minister's agreement on the issues he had at hand, it would be a biggest success for him. He took his wife, two commandoes, and came to Hyderabad.

Mutyala Rao was rude, he was demeaning, he made fun of the movement, all that happened in the meeting was Mutyala Rao threatening him. All that he hoped had gone down the drain. But, since there was a lot of media coverage they were safe in the city. The attack happened when he was least expecting it, as they entered their area after the talks concluded.

Surrounded by police their car was attacked from all sides. Luckily for Ramaiyya, his team intervened in the right moment. But, it was too late. He lost his wife.

Now, he'll make him pay. He'll show the world why he was feared.

Rushi woke up to the sounds of birds chirping and the smell of wet grass. The journey was so exhausting that he fell asleep soon even in the tent with no proper bed. He smiled as he stretched his arms and would've been happy had he not seen Vinay sleeping on the ground. He was sure he can not trust Vinay. But, he didn't know how to get rid of him either. Gotto play along for the time being. Rushi was now worried, in a week's time he had gone from a possible treasure hunt to life threatening situation. He wondered what lay in front of that day.

'What are you thinking?'

Rushi jerked out his reverie when Vinay suddenly opened his eyes and asked him.

'Why this jungle?'

'Ask your professor friend'

'I don't know, all I can think is when Tirumala Raya started from Hampi, he would've come to Adoni which was the then military capital of the Vijanagara empire. From there, I believe he continued his journey into the very dense Nallamala forest to hid the treasure with the Gods. Between Sri Sailam, Ahobhila & Mahanandi - all holy places that were developed by the empire' added Professor Murthy as he joined them.

'We better keep going, I had a chat with Ranjith, apparently the ruins are half a day walk from here and Raju is already here'

'Walk again for half a day? Why can't they hid it somewhere nearby?' sighed Sandeep.

As they started walking, it started to drizzle. The weather was romantic but for the task at hand, thought Rushi. They stopped from time to time through the journey for Sandeep to catch up. Rushi took these breaks to look out at the fog covered mountains. 'I need to come back here, if I survive this trip' he thought to himself. Half way through, Raju halted them

and signalled them to hide. They all came to a halt to let a tiger pass. Other than that, there journey was eventless. They saw parrots, peacocks, rabbits & snakes on their way. Raju told them he saw bears, crocodiles (on the bank of Krishna) occasionally.

They emerged from the thick jungle to gaze at the ruins of a brick temple surrounded by hills in a valley hidden not by human effort but by nature herself. The temple lay captive by tangled roots and a forest that was growing within and around it. Unlike other temples Rushi had seen, this temple interior was circular in shape and the walls though crumbling lay so close to each other that it was almost impossible for them to get in; as if the temple was trying to hide something in. Rushi and the others walking over the moss covered steps started examining every nook and corner to find a small crack they could use to sneak through to the inside. 'Here' shouted Sandeep, we can get through from here. Rushi and the others one after made past to the interior. The first thing they saw as soon as they entered was a huge well surrounded by a parapet wall and directly opposite to them a 'garbha gudi'.

The water in the well seemed to have stagnated for a long time, a foul gut wrenching smell arose from it almost making him want to leave its vicinity. From there, straight ahead of him, Rushi saw a familiar statue in the garbha gudi - the same broken statue they assembled in Hampi - but standing erect here. Rushi knew this could not be a coincidence. He immediately walked towards it, and as he walked towards it, he noticed something change, from afar he was sure he saw a halo to the statue, but from near there was none. So, he walked back to the place he thought he saw the halo and found it again. But, this time he saw properly, the halo was actually a carving right behind the statue on the wall of the temple. He walked towards the statue and saw the wall behind it this time. There was the same Pathanjali sculpture they saw in Hampi cave. The halo was the sahasrar. Rushi had goose bumps.

'Sandeep' he shouted.

All of them came running.

Sandeep and Rushi exchanged knowing glances. As if coming to an invisible agreement, they both nodded together. Is this the way? He ran his hands on the serpents and pressed the eye again wondering what would happen this time.

Chapter 15

The earth shook, but there was a lot of noise coming from the well. They ran forward to see what it was. A column began to rise from the water, pushing it away. The earth stopped shaking when the column completely rose and halted. Steps were etched to the walls of the column in a downward spiral at the end of which they saw a door. They stared at each other with their mouths open.

'Let's go down'

'I'm not coming down. The last time I was involved in something like this, I almost died. You guys carry on. I'll stay here' said Sandeep.

'I'm not going down their alone. Shut the fuck up and let's all go.' shouted Vinay.

'Who the hell made you in-charge?' shouted back Sandeep

'This did' said Vinay drawing out his revolver.

Rushi stepped-in again. 'We both will go down. They can stay here.'

Vinay hesitated but nodded in agreement.

'First you' he said.

'Be safe' the Professor's eyes seemed to say.

Rushi got the hold of the column and started to climb down step by step which were wet and slippery. Vinay followed him. Professor Murthy and Sandeep stared down.

Rushi & Vinay reached to the bottom of the well to the door. What they saw made their hair stand on end. The door was entirely covered in what looked like scales, of a fish? no, of a snake, in the middle, standing on its head, its hoods raised, fiercely staring was a seven headed seshu naga, with its mouths open hissing. Just below the hood was a hollow engraving. Rushi very fearful, but curious and touched the engraving - its for the key. Above it was something written.

'What is it?'

'hang on, let me read'

'N... ni... Ninnu... n... u.. nuvu.. ja...n...chu... jayinchu'

'Ninnu nuvu jayinchu'

'Win over yourself'

'Meaning?'

'No idea apart from the literal one'

Vinay had enough of this, he pushed Rushi aside and put the key in the engraving. For a second, nothing happened. Then, as if someone called it from inside, the door moved back giving them way with a loud hiss.

'Did you hear that?'

'What? this snake made a noise'

'It's just the door moving, mr. courageous'

'No, but, it It sounded more... alive'

Rushi rolled his eyes and moved forward. It was pitch dark but, Vinay had come prepared, he took out the fluorescent glow sticks and handed one to Rushi. They could not however see for more than a few steps and Vinay seemed to be thinking the same, he threw a glow stick as far

as he could, it flopped in water.

'Water?'

'Wait'

And, Vinay stopped to pull out two high power torch lights. Then they saw, it was a cave and they were on thin walkway surrounded with water. Towards the end of the cave, they could see sun rays trickle-in onto a piece of land. At its center was a pedestal. Surrounding it was a lot of shimmering.

'Gold?'

'Don't know'

'Let's first cross this darkness and emerge into the light'

'Win over yourself?'

'Can you swim?'

'No'

'Then pray the water is not deep'

They slowly made way into the cave with an eye on the goal. Slowly the walkway started to submerge in water. Soon, both were waist deep in water. After a minute,

'Something's in the water'

Rushi stood still. He could see Vinay tensed. He was desperately looking everywhere in the water.

'Are you sure?' asked Rushi.

'Yes, something's in the water'

'Keep walking'.

'Stop, I feel it too, there's something' Rushi shouted.

They both stood where they were not sure what to do.

'It makes no sense, let's move slowly'

As they took two steps, Vinay caught his head and started to shout, 'Noooooooooooo, no, leave me, leave me and he started trashing everywhere'

There was nothing around. Rushi was stunned. Suddenly Vinay started to run towards the pedestal, 'noooo, noooo' and then took his gun out and started to fire blindly. He was acting as if he was seeing something. As he reached the land on other side he flopped to the ground covering his head. Rushi was still transfixed to his position. He slowly moved wondering what happened. That's when he heard the hiss behind him.

Rushi turned back, a long mass of scales rose ahead of him, as he raised his head to see, what he saw was terrifying beyond his wildest dreams, a giant snake with seven heads, hoods raised, eyes red & fierce, baring its teeth, hissing down at him. Rushi stood like a statue engulfed in fear when the snake bent back as if to attack, taking it as a cue, some reflex action in him jolted him forward and he started running towards the land. He could feel something

move between his legs in the water, he could feel the foul breath on his neck, but he didn't want to think, lest his mind would explode in fear. He kept running till he reached the higher ground where the pedestal stood.

Vinay slowly lifted his head and saw Rushi who was drenched and panting. The snake didn't follow them onto this land. Rushi stood up trembling. He looked around, wherever he could see, it was gold, it lay in heaps one ornament on another, bars, necklaces, anklets, chains, pendants, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, pearls, the amount of wealth he saw made him dizzy. In the middle of it all was a pedestal - made of gold modelled like a throne. At its middle was a box with Sankhu, chakra carved on the lid. Is this it? He could feel energy pulsating from the box. He opened the two latches closing the box, on sheets of satin and the finest silks of red lay a necklace with a black stone as pendent. Rushi stared at the necklace, is this it? A stone? Is this what the King found? Is this the meteorite? he stretched his hand and ran across the necklace admiring it. He stopped at the stone, it was too plain and was standing out in the presence of these riches, Rushi touched it, as soon as he did it, he was outside his body as if his soul was yanked out. He could see himself touching the necklace. He could see Vinay. He could see the whole cave, he could see the water moving, he brought his eyes down to the fist that still held the necklace. He let it go. And, zap he was back in his body. Rushi couldn't explain this otherworldly experience. He stood for five minutes to get his bearings back.

Vinay said, 'We won't make it out, we'll die here'

Rushi sat down beside him, though Vinay revolted him, he couldn't bring himself to leave him there.

'We passed the snake once, we can escape it again'

Vinay shook his head in disagreement.

'It was all around me. I could feel it's breath on my neck. I can't.. I can't take it'

'You can, just see all around you, see the gold, you'll be a richest man alive when you are out of here. Here, let me fill your bag' and Rushi slowly removed its content and filled the bag.

'See, let me help you, put your hand on my shoulder, if the snake comes again, just remember, run..but, ok?' Vinay nodded.

Rush got up and turned towards the pedestal. He closed the box. If Indiana Jones had taught him anything, he'd start off a booby trap as soon as he moved the box from its place. Just like Indy, he took a gold bar he thought would weigh the same as the box and quickly in a swipe replaced the box with the bad. This time nothing happened. He was happy with himself.

Then he noticed, the water was coming onto the piece of land they were standing on; and the water level started to rise with the door at the end of the walkway starting to close.

'Run' shouted Rushi with the box in hand.

Both of them started into the water, as they reached to its centre, the snake rose in front of them, hood raised ready to strike. Both of them stood transfixed. Before Rushi could do anything, Vinay took his revolver, aimed at his temple and pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening. Rushi was blank. He did not know what to do. As if he was a robot obeying some invisible command, he started to run. The heavy weight of the bag was slowing him down. Then he heard the hiss. The giant snake rose in front of him again. This time directly staring at his hand holding the box. Rushi was sure it would bite him this time, he waved his hand which held the box, the snakes eyes followed the movement. It was transfixed on the box. Rushi understood, there was no way he would step out alive with the necklace. He threw the

box towards the pedestal with as much force he could muster, the snake immediately moved its heads towards the necklace, Rushi used this momentary distraction to run towards the closing door. He stepped out just as it was about to close and a loud hiss right next to his ear. Water in the well was raising fast and the column was sinking back into to the bottom of the well. Rushi ran as fast as he could along the sinking column and when he was almost close to the top, water engulfed him from all sides. There were no more steps, the current was too strong. He swam, his lungs burned as he craved for oxygen. Just when he thought he saw the sky he started to lose consciousness. Dragged by the weight of the bag he started to slip back into the darkness.

Just then, two hands caught him and pulled.

Chapter 16

Rushi choked out water as he came back to consciousness. Sandeep and Professor Murthy were staring at him concernedly.

'What happened? Where's Vinay?'

Rushi shook his head.

'What happened inside?'

He didn't respond. he was too terrified. After a minute, he started narrating. Professor and Sandeep looked at each other.

'Did you lose it?'

Rushi didn't respond, simply held his head as if it would explode.

'Vinay shot himself. He was scared. He couldn't overcome his fear'.

Murthy & Sandeep didn't say anything. Slowly Rushi came back. He took the box from his pocket. He had dislodged the rock from the necklace before putting the necklace back in the box and throwing it away to distract the snake. He had put the stone in the box professor Murthy had given him before going in.

'That belongs to me'.

They all stared at Mutyala Rao who was pointing a gun at them. There were three policeman behind him.

'What the ...'

Mutyala Rao ignored the comment. He calmly walked towards Rushi, snatched the box from his hand and hit him hard on his face with the butt of his gun. Rushi fell backwards. When he got up on his knees he could see Mutyala Rao crying looking at the box.

'Where's Vinay? This was his last known GPS location' he asked trying to get a hold of himself.

'So that's how you found us. The dog did lead the master' thought Rushi wiping blood from his mouth.

'He didn't make it'

Mutyala Rao looked confusedly from Rushi to Murthy to Sandeep.

'He killed himself'

'Venkateshwara!'

Mutyala Rao stood still digesting the information. After a minute he said, 'It's clean up time' raising the gun to Rushi's face.

Rushi closed his eyes expecting death when, suddenly there was commotion. He could hear the police shouting something and bullets being fired. He was about to get up when two arms

pinned him down.

'Naxals. Lie still' said Sandeep as the firing continued.

'Ramaiyya?' Rushi heard Mutyala Rao call out. A shot was fired as soon as the words were uttered.

They lay still for god knows how long and there was no more firing. Rushi got up. He came out of the temple, there were four bodies. Mutyala Rao body lay mutated among them.

Rushi looked around, the box lay few feet away from Mutyala Rao, he bent down, retrieving it and opened it, the stone was safe.

'Here, uncle, be careful, this needs to be tested', handing it over to Professor Murthy.

'We shouldn't be here when the police finds him'

'We will not.'

'Let's go'

'Wait' said Rushi.

He ran towards the well and found Vinay's bag. He held it towards them and smiled, 'for our hard work'.

