

THE CITY OF GOLD

The last thing I remember of that night was lying in bed with a smile on my lips and dreaming of a pair of laughing deep black eyes and a soft, lilting voice; but a sudden jolt jerked me awake in the early hours and I found myself flung down violently on the floor. There was a loud rumble and the floor heaved up and down. I thought the roof would come crashing down on my head. I rushed out into the courtyard and cried, "Ma, are you all right?" Then I walked a few steps and stood outside another door. "Nivya, are you okay?" Confused, scared, everyone was up and rushing out of the house.

The rumbling and heaving stopped by the time we came out, but the streets were full of frightened people walking around in a daze. Suddenly, everything became very still. We could almost hear each other breathe. Then it came, gentle at first and then more powerful – a low-pitched whine that seemed to envelope everything. Instinctively, I turned left – the sky was turning orange and a waist-high, thick mist with ochre edges was creeping down the street. The whine stopped as suddenly as it had begun and everything went quiet again. The air was still. And there was something else, something missing – the birds! Thousands of birds normally would descend and settle on the rooftops of the Harappan houses at daybreak raising a cacophony. But this morning the rooftops were empty, the trees deserted. A thick dust cloud slowly rose up above the mist and streaked across the distant northern sky. Something was wrong.

"That was a very strong quake. We have not had such a strong tremor in a long time," Skanda, our neighbour, said worriedly.

He looked at the sky, trying to take in as much of the cosmic chaos as possible.

“Yes, I hope there has not been much damage,” Father said. “Last time we were lucky and got away without any damage or casualties.”

Suddenly, a cockerel appeared and announced a belated daybreak. A baby started crying somewhere and the neighbours gathered themselves together and returned to their homes.

“We should get to work and check the extent of damage and see if any help is needed,” Father said, turning to us.

I had a quick bath, said my morning prayers and rushed to the hospital, hoping that not many injured people needed medical attention. Master Ashwin was already there and a few patients were waiting to be seen. Luckily, the injuries were minor and only one young lad had a broken arm. He looked rather sheepish, as he had actually fallen down when he was going back into the house after the earthquake! I took him into the treatment room and set the arm with bamboo splints and paste. A slow trickle of patients started coming in for minor cuts and bruises and before I knew it, the midday sun was in full glare. Master Ashwin had to attend a meeting of the Council of Elders and I was left in charge.

I was getting used to being in charge of the hospital. I still remember the first time the master had to go away, when Sage Shunahotra had summoned him urgently. He had called me and said, “Upaas, you have been training to be a physician now for over five years. It is time you started to take some independent decisions about patient management.” I had been thrilled and terrified. I did not know if I would be able to treat patients properly without his guidance. What if I made someone worse? What if I got the diagnosis wrong and gave the wrong medicine?

What if, God forbid, I killed someone? There had been a million questions and I knew I would have to find the answers myself. I had bowed my head and said, "Yes, Master. I will do my best."

That day had gone by very quickly with an interminable number of patients and numerous problems that had to be handled. Master Ashwin was very pleased with me and I began to manage the hospital on my own in his absence. I did not make any major mistakes. So, I was quite confident of handling things now.

By lunch, we had treated well over a dozen people with minor injuries and I congratulated our team members on their heroic efforts and a job well done. Then all of us took a break for a few minutes. Just as we were patting ourselves on the back, a soldier rushed in. "Master Upaas, Master Upaas, come quickly. There is trouble near the northern wall." The disaster that I had dreaded that morning had happened.

The man had run hard and was out of breath and sweating profusely. "Calm down, soldier," I said. "Take a deep breath and tell us what the problem is."

"A part of the northern wall has collapsed on some neighbouring houses," he was panting. "There are people trapped under the rubble."

"We should take some supplies and get there as soon as possible," I said to Ubhaya and the two trainee doctors, who looked terrified. I could not have two of my assistants scared out of their wits right now. "Snap out of it, you two," I said cheerily. "Get going and gather the supplies. We will need plenty of bamboo sticks, paste, ropes, salves and potions with us. Load a cart and let's go." There was something in my voice – a sense of urgency, a touch of authority too, perhaps – that pushed them come out of momentary stupor and plunge into action. They

rushed around gathering supplies and loading the cart. The soldier helped load the heavy stuff and we set off towards the northern wall of the city.

Everyone we passed on the way looked worried and tense and my heart filled with dread at the thought of what I would see at the disaster site. Was it only yesterday that I had looked upon this serene city from my favourite place on the hillside?



It was peak summer and the days were hot. Chopping wood all afternoon had exhausted me. I slowly lay down the heavy axe, pulled off the towel that I had tied round my head and mopped the sweat off my face. The sun was a bright crimson ball in the west, suffusing the sky with shades of red and edging the clouds with a golden tinge. A gentle breeze now cooled the sultry summer air at this height, rustled the leaves at my feet and brought with it the distinct wet, earthy fragrance of the first summer rain from somewhere in the distant hills. Crows cawed loudly as they returned to their nests and I could hear cowbells and cattle calling out 'ambaa' as Pindaara hustled them home. Towering trees all but obscured the mountains of the north behind me and coloured the landscape green as far as the eye could see. In the distance the snowy peaks gleamed like pearls and narrow streams of fresh water from the melting snow shone like mirror shards in the slanting rays of the sun.

The city was spread out before me on the plains. A change of guard was taking place at the western gate. The gates were manned by the elite guard commanded by Master Nahusha. The men were specially chosen for their alertness and skill with arms

and had to undergo two years of rigorous training before they were posted at the gates and on the walls. All of them wore bronze shields and carried tall brass tipped spears, which made patterns of dancing stars on the walls in the evening light.

Many bullock carts were waiting at the gate to enter the city before they closed the doors at nightfall. The dock just off the gate was quiet – all the boats had moored down for the night. The River Parushni kissed the wall just south of the gate, flowed gently southwards along the western wall and again turned southwest past the city disappearing into the dense forest. As it neared the great Sarasvati River, a two-day ride away, it became a raging torrent, swollen with the several streams that joined it on the way. I spotted a lone boat hurrying towards the dock, eager to be moored before dusk melted into the darkness of the night. The fisherman manoeuvred the boat deftly towards the moorings and threw the rope to a guard who had stepped forward to help; he steadied it against the dock wall and then helped to tie it down to an anchoring stump.

Within the walls, the muted light shone off the copper and bronze plates and finials on the doors and windows and turned the city golden. No wonder they called it the 'City of Gold'. Behind the towering, flag bedecked walls was the imposing Temple with its great, gleaming copper and gold dome that dwarfed everything else in sight, even the large Gurukul beside it. It was this magnificent Temple, rather than its walls, which gave the city its sense of invincibility and power, I thought. It certainly gave me a sense of safety and belonging.

The upper town was a little smaller than the lower town and obviously more prosperous. All the houses there were large two storeyed structures and belonged mainly to the priests and the Elders of the Council. Past the Temple towards the east, the small

flat roofed houses of the lower town crowded together in a huddle of perfect order. The prosperity and safety of the city attracted men from far and beyond and there were people from the Dravida Kingdom, Elam, Sumer and Median living alongside the native Harappans in the Lower Town. As a result, it had nearly doubled in size over the past ten years.

Just past the eastern gate was the massive Peepal tree on top of the hillock, which marked the start of a deep forest beyond it. I could not see the northern gate as it lay behind the large houses of the middle town, where all the rich merchants and some of the senior officers of the army resided. Beyond the city, on all sides, the countryside was lush and green with large expanses of barley fields interspersed with tall trees gently swaying in the breeze. A thin line wound through the trees: it was the road starting at the southern gate and going down all the way to Sindhu, only a two-day ride away.

I turned with a sigh to the neat pile of logs I had chopped down in the past four hours, enough for both my Master's household and ours for the month. I fetched the donkey a pail of sweet, cool water from the shallow stream that came all the way down from the Shivalik Mountains. The sun was going down rapidly and I would have to hurry. It was hard to get the guards to open the gates once they had been shut for the night.

There was a crowd of travellers and foreign merchants at the western gate. Those who could not find a place to stay within the city had camped outside the gate, close to the walls, so that the guards were near enough for their security. I counted at least fifteen wagons, heavy with goods, parked in a circle in the field just across the gates. Small fires had been lit and I could smell their cooking. Some were from as far as Sumeria, judging by the smells wafting off their cooking pots. I smelt garlic in the air and

that meant Dasyu merchants and their precious gold from the Dravida Kingdom in the far south. There were people sitting around a large campfire right in the middle of the circle of wagons and some men were playing wonderful rhythms on their drums; another musician joined in with a wind instrument and the music became almost bewitching. A couple of men stood up and started to dance. I stood there mesmerised by it all.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

The pleasant female voice startled me and I turned to look at her. She had come up from the dark shadows of one of the caravans and stood beside me.

"I have been listening to this music almost every night for the last few weeks. It is enchanting."

She was the most beautiful creature I had seen and I gazed at her in wonder. It was as if in the mellow light of dusk, the moon stood before me!

"Yes. It...it is very beautiful," I stammered, staring at her eyes. They were black as coal and glittered like diamonds.

"I am Lopa, daughter of Avisthu, from the city of Sarasvata."

"I am Upaashantha, son of Kapila Angirasa," I managed to say.

"I saw you come down the hills. Do you go up there often?" she asked.

"No, not very often. I had to get firewood for my master's house."

Someone started to sing a Dasyu song in a deep and gentle voice filled with passion and melancholy.

"Do you know what he is singing?" I asked.

"He is singing about his homeland."

“I can feel how much he misses his home.”

“It has been several months since they left their homes. You should hear the songs he sings about his beloved. They are haunting.”

“How do you know the language so well?”

“We get a lot of travellers from Dravida, Elam, Sumeria and even Median in our city. They come to my father to learn languages. He is a teacher of languages, you see,” she said with a smile. She turned to look at the traffic trickling in through the gate and added, “You better go back into the city before the gates close.”

Before I could reply, she disappeared into the darkness around the ring of wagons as quietly as she had come. I stood there for a few minutes trying to figure out what had just happened. Had it been a dream or a vision?

Cowbells tinkled behind me and a voice called out, “Namaste, Master Upaas.”

It was Pindaara hurrying through the gates with his large herd of cows, half pushing, half cajoling one of the calves which obviously did not want to go back home. Pindaara was a cheerful, stocky, well-built character and he ambled rather than walked.

“Namaste, Pindaara. I see that Navika is still causing you trouble,” I said.

Pindaara loved his cattle and had names for all of them. Navika was born on the day he had met a sailor who was on his way to the port of Sarasvata. The sailor had told him of a distant place in the middle of a desert and described the building of large pyramids. Pindaara was impressed and it was his dream to go to this land of the pyramids one day.

“Yes, Master Upaas. But one of these days she will learn that I am

the boss," he said, smiling and goading his favourite cow through the gates. "It is already late for the evening feed and I still have to clear up afterwards."

"Master Upaas, you should not stay outside the city walls so late," one of the guards called out. "It is not safe. There have been reports of Avestan attacks in Sindhu. Sage Shunahotra and the Council of Elders are planning to provide accommodation within the city for all travellers."

"I lost track of time in the woods," I replied and hurried my donkey on.

As I passed through the gate, I looked up, as I always did, at the sign on the top of the stone column to the left. It read 'Sunset Gate' to mark the western gate. The two large stone columns on either side towered above me to a height of over thirty feet. Each of them was crowned with six large lamps, which were alight at this time of evening. Brass finials and plates embellished the two massive wooden doors of the gate and shimmered in the light of the burning lamps. These finials were sharp, with points large enough to kill a man if impaled on it. The brass sheets had patterns depicting the emblem of the city – a rising sun – that also adorned the flags on top of the gates and the walls. No arrow or spear could get through the brass sheets covering the doors. The doors themselves were so thick and heavy that ten people were needed to open or close each one of them. Each door had six heavy brass hinges and three latches, each weighing a few kilos and their edges were covered with bronze strips.

My father was the architect of Harappa and he had designed the gates. It had taken more than a year to build them all. When the gates were being built, Father used to go away for several days to the quarry, which was a day's ride from the city, to supervise the

stone cutting and I remember going up the steep and narrow paths with him on one occasion.

I could hear the temple bells as I passed through the gate. The bells got louder as I walked down the street with my donkey and as I got close to the Temple, the fragrance of sandal incense wafted on the gentle breeze. I could not see the top of the spire when I was near the Temple – it was too high. It was built hundreds of years ago at the time of Lord Indra; its construction was supervised by one of the Saptarshis, the great Sage Bhrigu, and it was built to the plans of the heavenly architect, Vishvakarma.

The streets were completely deserted save for Pradipaka who was going around lighting the street lamps. He carried the torch in one hand and slung the ladder over his left shoulder and looked like Father Time! I do not know how old he was, but he had been lighting the street lamps for as long as I could remember and Father used to say that he was ancient. Though old, he was very steady on his feet and strong as an ox. He never bumped his ladder against any of the bolsters that Father had installed in the corners of the streets to stop carts and chariots from hitting the buildings.

I turned the corner in front of the great Pushkarni and saw the wide open gates of the Temple. One had to wash hands and feet in the tank before entering the Temple. Inside, the priests were reciting the Vedic hymns in an incantatory tone. It was soothing and gentle and yet powerful enough to lift one's spirits. I had learnt several hymns from the book composed by Sage Vishvamitra Gathinah from Sindhu, and I took pride in reciting them in the proper metre.

It was dark by the time I reached Master Ashwin's house. I tied

the donkey to the post outside the door, pulled down the two piles of logs off its back and carried them one by one into the courtyard.

"Is that you, Upaas?" Ma Ashwin called out.

"Yes, Ma. I have got some wood for the house."

She came out and I knelt down and touched her feet.

"Dheergayushman Bhavah, Upaas. We were running out of wood. The master will be out as soon as he finishes his evening prayers. Say your prayers, Upaas," she said affectionately.

She had lost her son a few years ago and now depended on the the master's students for all these chores.

"As soon as I put these logs in the store room, I will go home and say my prayers," I said.

"Have a jar of cold buttermilk before you go."

A glass of her cold buttermilk at the end of a hot, sweaty day's work was most welcome. She kept the buttermilk in a mud pot, which chilled it, and added just a touch of spices and fresh coriander leaves. It was delicious.

"Thank you, Ma. I am really grateful," I said, as I gulped it down.

"Upaas? It is dark; you should not be out this time of night, especially outside the city walls. It is dangerous." Master Ashwin walked into the courtyard.

I kneeled and touched his feet.

"Ayushman Bhavah. May God bless you."

"Namaste, Master Ashwin," I said standing up. "I do tend to lose track of time when I am out in the woods. I will be more careful next time."

“We must start early tomorrow, we have many patients to see. You had better get home and have some rest. We have a long day ahead of us,” the master said.

I was training to be a physician under the tutelage of Master Ashwin after leaving the Gurukul in Sindhu five years ago. He was considered the best physician in Bharata and he chose his apprentices very carefully after several tough tests. It was very hard work, but very gratifying. He was a hard taskmaster and did not take kindly to shirkers or malingerers. There were six apprentices working under him and all of us wanted to impress him with our knowledge, skill and our ability to learn.

“Yes, Master. I will be there early tomorrow. Do you want me to get anything from the forest before we start?” I asked.

“No. I think we have enough stocks of medicine for now. We may need some palm leaves and steatite pencils for writing. I am sure we can buy them from the travelling merchants camped outside the walls. Go to the travellers' camp tomorrow and see if there are any merchants with writing materials. Now, you better hurry back home.”

My eyes lit up and my heart gave a leap. There was every chance that I would see the girl again. It was not such a large camp, after all. I would speak to her properly this time. I could still feel her presence near me and her lilting, soft voice echoed in my ears.

“I will go there first thing tomorrow morning, Master,” I said quickly, before he could change his mind, and hurried home.

As I walked into the courtyard, my sister Nivya called out, “Upaas? It's you at last!”

“Yes. I know it is late. I was in the forest getting wood for Master

Ashwin's household."

"Father has been waiting to talk to you," she said, as she poured water for me to wash my hands and feet.

"You know how it is when I am in the woods."

"I know and so does Father. Your habit of getting lost in daydreams worries all of us. You better say your evening prayers and then speak to him."

I changed into fresh clothes and sat down for my prayers. Master had taught me the Gayatri hymn and he had insisted that I recite it at least five times a day. This would be my fifth one. I really should have recited it at sunset as per the instructions of the great sage Vishvamitra. After my prayers, I went into the hall where Father was sitting and touched his feet.

"How was your day, Upaas?" he asked.

"It was good, Father. A little tiring. I had to get some wood for Master's house today," I replied.

"I am glad that you are serving your master well. How is your training coming along?"

"Quite well, Father. I am now fairly good at diagnosing many conditions myself. Master often lets me treat patients on my own."

"Have you thought about what you want to do once you finish your training?"

"No, I have not had much opportunity to think about it. My friend Bhashagvida went east last year when he finished his training. I believe there is a large city on the banks of the Ganga where there is a lot of work for people like me. But now I am busy helping Master build up his collection of new drugs."

“How long do you think that will take? I am sure your mother will not be pleased at the idea of you going away.”

“I don't know, Father. People tell me that when his work is finished, Master Ashwin will have the largest collection of medicines in the known world and I, as his apprentice, will be a sought after physician anywhere.”

“That is not the only reason you should move east. Lately, there have been several reports of Avestan attacks on Sindhu and it won't be long before they attack Harappa as well. They were very quiet since Lord Indra had destroyed Vratra and his army hundreds of years ago. But now, they have regrouped and have set their eyes on the riches of our Bharata.”

“Will they really attack us? We have always welcomed Avestans here. In fact, I have treated several Avestans under my Master.”

“That is true. But, you should make sure you are within the city walls before it gets dark. Sage Shunahotra discussed many safety concerns at the meeting of the Council. The reports from Sindhu are not good. The Avestans seem to have raised a well-equipped army and are using the big and very fast Elamite horses to raid outlying farms and steal cattle. They have killed quite a few people in and around Sindhu.”

Just then Mother walked in and said, “What is all this talk of war and strife at this auspicious hour? Upaas, you must be tired. Dinner is ready. Come and eat now.”

I touched Mother's feet. For Mother, there is a time and a place for everything. Nothing inauspicious should be discussed or even thought of during “auspicious hours”, that is, at sunrise and sunset. She says it is the time when Goddess Lakshmi enters the house and she won't come in if there are inauspicious thoughts or sounds in the house.

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“Your mother is right, Upaas. You should have dinner now. It has been a long day,” Father said.

My brothers, Vidhaayaka and Satakratu, were already in the dining room. My elder brother, Vidhaayaka, had finished his apprenticeship as an engineer and he worked with the Central Works Department. My younger brother Satakratu was to start training as an architect at the university in Sindhu this autumn.

The delicious smell of Mother's cooking was floating around and made us hungry. Nivya was hovering around the corner, fretting as usual. Father sat on the floor and we sat on either side of him. He prayed, asking the Lord to bless us and thanking Him for the food we were about to receive. Mother and Nivya served us. As usual they would eat after us. In our home traditions were strictly followed. We wolfed down the hot rotis and perfectly cooked vegetables and meat. The dessert of barley and the sweetest honey was, as always, delicious.

I went to bed that night content with my life and dreamed of a pair of deep black eyes and a soft lilting voice that called out to me.