

sundar nathan
AUTHOR

www.sundarnathan.com

Twice-Born

Chapter 2: The Way the Lotus

Burns

Soor Pan was livid. *No. Livid isn't the right word. Irritated is closer, though that too is a touch off.*

“Miffed, perhaps,” she said, nodding at its sound. It rang true. “I’m miffed. By Kaala, Har Shaa. If he does it anymore, I’ll get irritated, and then it’s far beyond livid. I’ll explode. I’ll *kill* him.”

“That would be a thing to see.” Har Shaa grinned wryly. “The daughter of the *Maharaja* going at it with High Priest Shuk Raa, of all Asuran temples on Naraka.”

“You just *watch* me,” she growled. “He tries anything like that with me, and you’ll see it soon enough.” According to Shuk Raa, her brother Koom Karn had been ‘sulking’ about Raa One’s Trial. Sulking, when he should have been thanking the ancient *shaastra* laws for their clear stipulation on who in a noble family had the first right to attempt the Trial.

Sulking, by which Shuk Raa meant Koom Karn had been devoting more time to his *Kalari* martial arts practice and less to his prayers. A noble decision, she thought.

“The *shaastras* say only boys get to do this,” she complained. “And as far as I can see, chattering into the sacrificial fire and paying fat, bald men who sit around and chant all day is hardly helpful. Much better to practice sparring. That way, if Raa One does manage to survive the Trail of Seven Days, we’ll be prepared to go in and save him when he needs it.”

“Fat bald men, who sit around and chant all day?” Har Shaa looked horrified. “Those aren’t the words you *used*, right?”

Soor Pan sniffed and glanced away. “Well,” she muttered softly, “I may have thrown in an adjective or two.”

“But you called Shuk Raa’s priests *fat*?”

“सत्यमेव जयते नान्तं or Truth ultimately triumphs, not falsehood, the Vedas say.”

“And bald!”

“संयनेन वधतं सव संय परति।Sठतम or Everything is upheld by truth, and everything rests upon truth, so do it even if it’s hard, the Vedas say.”

“And you said the Ancient *Shaastra* Laws wouldn’t help?” Har Shaa clutched his head in both hands and looked away, muttering in distress.

“Look!” Soor Pan snapped. “Shuk Raa was getting on my nerves. He’s always saying our ancestors *watch*. They *judge*. And he accused me of trying to supply Raa One with special weapons and talismans.”

“You were,” Har Shaa pointed out.

“Yeah, but Raa One would never *take* them! He’s far too noble. Shuk Raa should know that by now.”

“Ah. So you’re offended on Raa One’s account, not yours.”

“Exactly.”

“Ever the selfless *saadhvi*.” Har Shaa enfolded her in his bronzed arms, thrumming with the warmth and vigor of the sun elemental. She liked the way his arms flexed when they curved around her. She savored the subtle ways the tiny muscles of his forearms danced across her stomach. She adored his musk.

She liked the way he hardly wore any clothes.

“I don’t know why Mother makes me wear a sari every day,” she pouted. “All these drapes and paints and heavy gold jewelry. It’s like I’m a chandelier, not a person. How am I supposed to climb?”

She jerked a thumb around them, indicating their perch high on a giant *shaala* at the edge of the Aranya where Har Shaa had flown them on his *pisacha* dragon, Uluka. The Vidyadharan prince lived as one with the high peaks of the north, vast forests of *deodhar* and pine trees. It was a simpler life, as he tried to rediscover the fundamental ways of Narakankind. As did the *sapta kula*, the seven clans of his people.

Trying to rediscover, as Har Shaa would put it, the art of living in Oneness with Goddess Shakti. All that had faded; so many ancient ways, songs, and bonds with the One had been lost. All he had was his bond with Uluka.

That was something she loved about him, one thing among so many. The way he doted on his *pisacha*, for example. His fluency with *Sanskritam*, the Asuran language, for another.

Were all Vidyadharas multi-lingual? Soor Pan wondered.

Har Shaa gave himself entirely to the creed of his people, holding nothing back. The Vidyadharans had found, very early in their civilization, that material and ephemeral substances exist and subsist in terms of elaborate, interdependent, and malleable contexts and

relationships. They believed from their earliest days that interconnection was the key to their survival as a species, not only on the physical plane but on social and political strata as well.

It made him alive, fierce in a way, but at the same time gentle, innocent, and kind.

Her own brothers, Raa One and Koom Karn, were mostly fierce. They took after Father.

Father...

“Soor Pan, look at me.” His breath was warm upon her bejeweled neck. She looked.

“I see you,” he said. “I see your worry. I see how deeply you care for Raa One. But don’t let your worry eat you up from the inside. Don’t fear for your *jyeshtha*’s life. Many weaker Vidyadharans have made it a week in the jungle. Raa One will survive.”

“I’m not worried!” she protested. “I’m—”

“Right now, you’re wielding a tongue as sharp and as childish as our fop cousin Dush-Ana,” he chuckled. “Everyone knows you have a sharp wit. But when it becomes as childish as this, I know something’s amiss. You’re trying to mask your worry, I understand. But look at me. No, really look at me. Raa One will be safe. Say it.”

She sighed and stuck out her tongue, but quickly turned away before he could see genuine emotions.