

Chapter 1 (The Combat and Bonding)

It was pitch dark, well past midnight, with only a few stars twinkling in the sky alongside a lovely crescent moon. The feeble glow came from the torches flickering near the tents, scattered across the desolate hill. In the distance, the enemy's torchlights blinked ominously, their presence a constant reminder of the horrors that had unfolded during the previous day's brutal war. The darkness and tranquility concealed the grim reality of the bloodshed and the haunting specter of death.

Unable to find solace in sleep, the captain sat upon a boulder in front of his tent. His long, wide sword stood planted firmly in the ground, while wounds adorned his arms, back, and hands. An arrow's cruel cut marked his left shoulder. Although his eyes were fixated on the dancing flames of the campfire, his mind wandered, lost in the depths of his thoughts.

Unbeknownst to the captain, a shadowy figure crept silently behind the tents. The figure moved with utmost caution towards a large tent and stealthily peered inside, only to find it empty. Spotting the captain seated outside, the intruder drew their sword, poised to strike. As the attacker advanced like a cat, the captain, in one swift motion, hurled a small, sharp dagger that found its mark, piercing the intruder's throat. The life ebbed away from the fallen figure without a sound.

Startled, the captain turned to face his would-be assailant, the bright torchlight casting a revealing glow upon his face. Agnibrahma, the warrior, sat majestically upon the boulder—tall, well-built, and handsome, his eyes exuding a fierce power reminiscent of a young tiger.

As Agnibrahma reflected on the events of the previous day's battle, his mind wandered back to the moment when he, atop his horse, had fought with untamed ferocity. The enemy soldiers, overwhelmed by fear, had fled before him, unable to withstand his might. However, amid the chaos, an arrow had found its mark, piercing deep into Agnibrahma's left arm. The agonizing pain and the relentless assault did not deter him, though; he continued to wield his sword with unmatched resolve. It was then that an archer from the opposing army aimed, launching arrows in Agnibrahma's direction. But before another arrow found its mark, a rider swiftly dismounted, leaving the reins behind, and expertly beheaded the archer with a single stroke. The rider approached Agnibrahma, removing the helmet to reveal none other than Ayapali, the fearless warrior.

Recalling countless instances that showcased Ayapali's valor, Agnibrahma delved deep into his thoughts, remaining ever-vigilant amidst the solitude of the night.

His thoughts went about a few months back at Pataliputra.

A few months ago, in Pataliputra, the court of Samrat Ashoka bustled with courtiers filling its grand chambers. The elevated areas flanking the court were reserved for the queens and members of the royal family. On one side sat Rani Devi and her daughter, Ayapali, while Rani Asandhimitra and her attendants occupied the other. Mahendra, seated in the right-hand row of King Ashoka, observed the scene.

A spy stood before the king, delivering disconcerting news. The Kingdom of Kalinga had ignited a revolt, refusing to acknowledge their subservience to the Mauryan Empire and neglecting to pay taxes. The spy further revealed that Ashoka's stepbrother, Sugatra, resided in Kalinga, using the stolen wealth as a catalyst for the uprising. Anger surged within Ashoka. He turned to his Mahamatya, Radhagupth, seeking counsel on the appropriate course of action against the rebellious Kalinga kings.

Radhagupth responded, "Samrat, for over two decades, you have shown mercy to Kalinga, refraining from declaring war. However, their revolt, fueled by Sugatra's treachery, is deeply troubling. I believe it is time to wage war upon Kalinga, bringing an end to this rivalry once and for all." Ashoka agreed, recognizing the validity of the suggestion, and officially declared war on Kalinga. He ordered his army supervisors to make the necessary preparations for battle.

A murmur of unease and whispered conversations rippled through the courtiers. Queen Devi and Asandhimitra, discontent with Ashoka's decision, possessed little influence over the situation. Rani Devi rose from her seat and departed for the palace, while Rani Asandhimitra, her face etched with frustration, retreated to her chamber. Ayapali, however, remained seated, keenly observing the proceedings.

Army generals meticulously calculated their forces, considering strengths, necessary support, and other logistical details. During their preparations, a falcon swooped into the court, landing on the shoulder of one of the spies. All eyes, including those of King Ashoka, turned towards the spy. Attached to the falcon's leg was a small metal capsule, which the spy promptly opened, revealing a finely folded red silk cloth with a written message.

Reading aloud, the spy conveyed a message from the Mahanarapathi ¹of Gandahar, the head of the infantry. "With utmost respect to Samrat Ashoka," the message began, "I inform you of a rebellion in neighboring villages. They have ceased paying taxes and joined forces with Turkmenistan rebels, resulting in the deaths of several of our soldiers. The revolt intensifies by the day, with offices burned and tax money looted. The Turkmenistan Tekke leader has incited the villagers, and they have declared war against us. Our current infantry and cavalry forces are insufficient to combat this war. We cannot win without reinforcements. I implore you to dispatch an army to confront the rebellion and the Tekke forces, restoring order to the region."

Fury ignited within King Ashoka as he abruptly rose from his throne. Pointing to his son-in-law, Agnibrahma, with his left hand, he declared, "Agnibrahma, I command you to lead an army and proceed to Gandahar. Your mission is to eradicate the rebels and Tekke forces, triumph in battle, and restore order. Complete this task as soon as possible; it must serve as a lesson to Turkmenistan, ensuring they never dare to interfere with our kingdom again. Go and accomplish this, and I will grant you any reward you ask for."

Agnibrahma bowed respectfully and replied, "Samrat, I accept this order. I will eliminate our enemies and restore control over the region. I request permission to lead two thousand infantry, one thousand cavalries, and five hundred elephants, along with a support troop of one thousand individuals responsible for cooking, nursing, and tending to animals and other duties. With your blessing, I shall return safely and with victory to the palace." Hearing this, Ayapali's heart filled with joy as her husband was making an important decision in safeguarding his motherland.

Ashoka adjourned the court and retreated to a secret chamber with his ministers and commanders to discuss the impending Kalinga war. Meanwhile, Agnibrahma busied himself with the arrangements for the upcoming campaign, giving instructions to soldiers, commanders, chiefs, and others. As he prepared, Ayapali, overwhelmed with excitement, sought out her mother, Rani Devi, informing her that she would be accompanying Agnibrahma to Gandahar. Devi was taken aback by the news, feeling uneasy about her daughter a mother of an infant child venturing into war with her husband and following in her father's footsteps. Devi, unable to find the right words, offered a hesitant blessing before

¹ The chief army commanding officer

retiring to her Anthahpura, the Rani's quarters. Ayapali, filled with anticipation, made her way to her chamber to prepare for the impending journey.

Ayapali called out to Agnibrahma, her voice cutting through the darkness, accompanied by a cool breeze that sent shivers down his spine. He turned, coming out of his reverie, and looked at Ayapali. Concerned, he asked, "Why are you not sleeping? It's not yet time for you to wake up. We have a long day ahead, and you need more rest."

Ayapali spoke in an emotional voice, "I was thinking about yesterday's battle. I have never taken someone's life before, but yesterday, I don't know how I found the courage to behead a person. Thinking about that incident, I couldn't find peace and woke up."

Agnibrahma consoled her, "Devi, that is the nature of war. To defend ourselves and fight our enemies, we must sometimes take their lives. You did nothing wrong, and I admire your bravery and courage."

Ayapali seemed somewhat consoled, but she still felt a sense of guilt for taking someone's life. To change the mood, she asked, "Why are you awake and not sleeping? Are your wounds bothering you, or are you worried about the war? Shall I apply some herbs to your wounds?"

"I am not worried about the war we are fighting. I know that my strategic moves are causing the enemy to lose hope of winning, and I am confident that within the next two days, we will raise our victory flag over the enemy camp, silencing them forever. I am thinking about the Kalinga War. The latest news from our Vayuvega² was that the war is horrifying, with thousands of deaths on both sides, and it is still ongoing. I cannot comprehend how the Kalinga warriors are defending against our larger army. I wonder if our forces need more intelligence or guidance to overcome the situation."

"Arya, you don't need to worry about that. Mahayodhas like Kevala, Satrudastra, and Virudhaka are leading our army there. They have extensive experience in warfare and have helped Samrat conquer most of Jambudweepa³. For them, Kalinga is child's play, and soon we will be victorious over them," Ayapali assured him, moving closer and leaning on his shoulder, her gaze fixed on the night sky and the twinkling stars. She spoke, her voice filled with longing, "Arya, do you remember our first meeting at the Gurukul? I never expected our relationship to deepen this much, and now I yearn to be with you. I wish we could finish this war assignment

² Falcon spy messenger

³ Land from Afghanistan to Mynamar (A major portion of Asia including India)

and return to Pataliputra as soon as possible and take care of our son Sumana. We need to think about his future and raise him as a scholar, warrior, and great human being. I don't want to be apart from you and Sumana any longer." Ayapali slowly moved her head from Agnibrahma's shoulder to his lap, holding his arm with hers.

Agnibrahma gently raised Ayapali and said, "We are here on a mission to save our motherland from those squats, Samrat has assured me of this task with confidence in me that I can achieve it. I'll accomplish my mission here in Gandahar. As a reward, I'll ask Samrat to make me the ruler of Ujjain. We will be together soon and live happily ever after. It's just a matter of a few more days." He kissed her forehead, and both of them stood up, noticing the sky slowly brightening as the day approached.

"Ayapali, dawn is approaching, and we have a long day ahead of us. I have already planned a different strategy for attacking the enemy today. I need to brief the army once again. You should also get ready," Agnibrahma said, pulling his sword from the ground. They both headed toward their respective tents.

It was Brahma-muhurta⁴ time, and slowly, all the soldiers and others began waking up in their tents, preparing for the day's battle. Smoke rose in the distance where breakfast for the army was being prepared, soon to be served hot. Agnibrahma gathered in his tent, a separate area where he usually met his commanders and chiefs. Ayapali joined them, and they were all dressed in full war attire, carrying their weapons - swords, daggers, shields, spears, bows, and arrows. Agnibrahma explained the new strategy using a large canvas, placing horse, elephant, chariot, and soldier figurines to illustrate his plan. The commanders and chiefs listened attentively, assuring Agnibrahma that they understood the strategy and were confident of victory. Meanwhile, a servant served them hot soup and boiled beans for breakfast. They placed their helmets on the table, which they had been holding, and began eating.

Drums beat, horns sounded, and conches blared, alarming the enemy. It was the ninth day of the war. The commanders of both armies faced each other on their chariots, reading out the Panchanga, a detailed calendar describing the auspicious time of the day, week, and star, and offering prayers to the gods. With the war cry of "Akraman"⁵, both commanders returned to their teams, blowing conches, and the battle commenced. The infantry marched at the front, followed by archers on horseback. Chariots with soldiers armed with spears, bows, and arrows

⁴ Early hours of a day (usually between 3 and 4 AM)

⁵ Attack

came next, with soldiers on camels and elephants bringing up the rear, also equipped with spears.

Agnibrahma's soldiers attacked the enemy, splitting into different teams and surrounding them from all sides, showering arrows upon them. The enemy troops were confused and unable to defend themselves, as they were encircled and under attack. The war raged on, and that day the enemy suffered heavy casualties. Some sustained severe injuries and fell on the battlefield. The sight of the enemy's defeat boosted the morale of Agnibrahma's soldiers, doubling their determination to shoot more arrows and wield their swords.

Agnibrahma, on his horse, held a long spear in his left hand and a wide, long sword in his right. He was in the midst of the enemy army. The enemy was terrified and fled the area to save their lives, but Agnibrahma seized every opportunity, beheading those in his way with his sword and impaling others with his spear. Ayapali, in her chariot, shot arrows at the enemy, her aim unerring as each arrow found its mark, felling the enemy. She focused on attacking enemies mounted on horses, elephants, and camels, and she never missed her mark.

The battle continued until dusk. Just as Ayapali pulled the string of her bow, ready to shoot an arrow at an enemy captain, horns and conches were blown once again, signaling the end of the day's fighting. Ayapali refrained from releasing her arrow, adhering to the rules of war. Both armies halted and retreated to their respective camps. Support staff went to the battlefield with large carts to collect the dead and injured soldiers and bring them back to the camps. The sunset in the west and the dust from the battlefield still hung in the air. The sun seemed redder, stained with the blood that had been shed.

Agnibrahma, Ayapali, and their commanders and chiefs gathered outside Agnibrahma's tent, discussing the day's casualties and planning for the following day. Suddenly, a falcon descended from the sky and landed in front of Agnibrahma. It carried a small capsule tied to its leg. Agnibrahma recognized the falcon as one of the Vayuvega messengers from Pataliputra and took it in his hand. He carefully untied the capsule and extracted a yellow silk cloth with a message. The message read, "Summon Ayapali at once to Pataliputra - Samrat Ashoka." It bore the official seal of Samrat.

Agnibrahma adjourned the meeting and informed Ayapali, "We must honor Samrat's message. You need to depart for Pataliputra early tomorrow morning. Make the necessary arrangements and take some people and soldiers with you. By taking the shortest route, crossing the desert, and passing through Indraprastha, you can reach Pataliputra in just 8 to 10 days depending on

the weather conditions. I will handle the war, fly our flag over enemy territory, and establish our rule here. I will join you in Pataliputra with the troops and the army in a month. We will meet again soon." With a heavy heart, Ayapali returned to her tent to prepare for her journey.

As Ayapali packed her belongings, her mind brimmed with thoughts and mixed emotions.

"Why did Samrat summon me back to Pataliputra? Is everything normal there? Is Sumana unwell and yearns to see me? Is Mother Devi's health deteriorating, or are there other unfavorable occurrences? The message, however, failed to provide any specifics and arrived enclosed in a yellow silk cloth. This implies that I needn't fret over anything but must make my way to Pataliputra."

Five years ago...

Ayapali was at Gurukul, receiving education in Ganitha, Tarka, Ardhasastra, Rasayana sastra, and martial arts. She excelled in all these areas, being the top performer in every subject, including martial arts. Nandavarya, the dean of the Gurukul, was highly impressed with Ayapali's abilities, surpassing those of any other royal child in the Gurukul. He recognized that no one could match her skills, and believed that she should receive the best-advanced training in all fields, preparing her to become a valuable person or minister in the king's team.

During this time, Agnibrahma, an alumnus of the same Gurukul and a distant relative of Samrat Ashoka, arrived to deliver an invitation for the Gurupooja felicitation taking place at the king's palace. As Agnibrahma entered the Gurukul, he witnessed Ayapali engaged in combat with six other students, all wielding swords and shields. The intense bout lasted for a few minutes until Ayapali emerged victorious, defeating all six opponents. Impressed by her sword skills and her triumph, Agnibrahma, who had been observing from behind the bushes, applauded her success. Blushing, Ayapali returned to her teacher and stood behind him, while Agnibrahma emerged from the bushes and approached, clapping.

Agnibrahma respectfully bowed to Nandavarya and presented him with a plate containing fruits, flowers, and the invitation he had received from his orderly. Nandavarya offered Agnibrahma a seat beside him and inquired about his well-being and whereabouts. After exchanging a few pleasantries, the disciples of the Gurukul offered fruits and water to Agnibrahma and his orderly.

Reading out the invitation, Agnibrahma invited Nandavarya to the Gurupooja. "Gurudeva, I witnessed Ayapali's extraordinary sword skills during her combat, and I couldn't believe her

stamina and ability to outwit her opponents. I believe she should receive advanced training to face even more challenging battles," expressed Agnibrahma.

Impressed, Nandavarya responded, "Agnibrahma, you are correct. However, the issue lies in finding someone who can truly challenge her. I have been deeply concerned about this for the past few weeks."

"Gurudeva, I too received my education and training in this Gurukul. If you don't mind, I would be delighted to serve as Ayapali's opponent and assist her in honing her advanced skills. I can come to the Gurukul in the evenings, before sunset, and dedicate my time to giving her tough competition, aiding her in becoming the best," offered Agnibrahma.

"Wonderful! I admire your humility, helpful nature, and devotion to our Gurukul. You are welcome to visit whenever you have time and challenge Ayapali," responded Nandavarya appreciatively.

Nandavarya then turned to Ayapali and asked, "Would you feel comfortable and be interested in accepting challenges from Agnibrahma? He is one of our Gurukul's former students and a distant relative to you, always at the top, and now serving as the chief of your father's army. He is one of Maghadha's bravest and most formidable warriors."

Ayapali was well aware of Agnibrahma's bravery and reputation. She had heard of his victories and contributions to the kingdom, knowing that he was the youngest warrior in his father's army and highly regarded for his skills, bravery, and intelligence in overcoming any situation.

With respect, Ayapali bowed to Nandavarya and replied, "Gurudeva, I respect your decision and gladly accept Agnibrahma as my opponent. I will seek his guidance in refining my infantry and other skills."

Agnibrahma stood up, bowing once again to Nandavarya, and informed him that he would now take his leave. He reminded Nandavarya to attend the Gurupooja and addressed Ayapali with a pleasant smile, saying, "My salutations to the princess of Magadha." She blushed and departed with her companions. Agnibrahma bid farewell to Nandavarya and departed with his orderly.

On his way back, Agnibrahma couldn't stop thinking about Ayapali—her beautiful face, her enchanting smile, and her well-toned physique. His mind was consumed by thoughts of her and her exceptional sword-fighting skills. Back at the Gurukul, Ayapali was also lost in

thoughts of Agnibrahma—his charming face, his youthful physique, and his captivating smile. She found it difficult to concentrate on anything else and seemed completely absorbed in her thoughts. Her companions, Soudhamini, Chitra, and Vidhushi, teased her, joking that she had already lost to Agnibrahma even before the fight had begun, and they laughed at her. Ayapali warned them playfully and ran to a corner of the room, hiding her blushing face in her hands.

Four days after the incident, Agnibrahma visited the Gurukul again. Nandavarya summoned Ayapali for a test against Agnibrahma. Ayapali was delighted to hear that Agnibrahma had arrived and felt a sense of unknown eagerness to see and meet him. However, she cleverly concealed her feelings. Dressed as a warrior, Ayapali emerged with a sword and shield to meet Agnibrahma.

Upon seeing Ayapali, Agnibrahma admired her dedication and enthusiasm for martial arts and warfare. Both Ayapali and Agnibrahma bowed to Nandavarya and proceeded towards the arena, while Nandavarya retired to his cottage to perform Sandhyavandana.

As a few Gurukul students and Ayapali's friends, Soudhamini, Chitra, and Vidhushi, watched, the fight commenced. The clash of swords and shields echoed like thunder. Ayapali leaped into the air, executing acrobatic twists and turns, striking Agnibrahma with her sword. Agnibrahma skillfully defended himself with equal grace. The fight continued, and Ayapali began to tire, but she never lost her grip on the sword. She attempted different angles to strike Agnibrahma, but he, being a master of the art, skillfully countered her attacks. He moved as gracefully as one strolling through a garden of flowers, parrying her sword with his own. Then, with his left hand, he grabbed Ayapali, turning her backward, and held her tightly against his body, restraining her left hand behind her back. He locked her right hand, still holding the sword, with his right hand and sword. Ayapali found herself unable to break free from his hold.

At that moment, Agnibrahma felt the fragrance emanating from Ayapali's mesmerizing body. He inhaled it slowly, moving closer to her. Ayapali could feel Agnibrahma's warmth and the touch of his body as he held her hand. It was as if a vibrant current coursed through her. Both of them remained locked in that embrace for more than a minute, enjoying the closeness. Agnibrahma could hear Ayapali's racing heartbeat, perfectly in sync with his own, as if their hearts beat as one. They were released from their hold when they heard the applause and praise of the surrounding students and Ayapali's friends. Blushing, Ayapali ran shyly to her friends, while Agnibrahma couldn't believe what had just transpired and was still pleasantly surprised.

Nandavarya emerged from his cottage and saw all the students, Ayapali, and Agnibrahma gathered there. He inquired about the outcome of the fight and their performance. Agnibrahma spoke, "She is extraordinary. She wields the sword with great skill, and her movements are splendid. She fights like a seasoned warrior. She needs practice in reading her opponent's actions and adjusting her strategy accordingly, but apart from that, she is perfect."

Nandavarya responded, "I have full confidence that she can learn those tactics under your guidance. As a senior student of this Gurukul, I believe you can share your personal experiences and provide her with valuable training in the secrets of the war. Samrat will be immensely pleased and impressed with both what you have taught Ayapali and her performance. I hope you can visit often, whenever you have the time, to provide further invaluable training to Ayapali."

Agnibrahma agreed, accepting the invitation to frequent the Gurukul. In his heart, he felt that this was a blessing in disguise—an opportunity to see and meet Ayapali more often. Ayapali felt an immense joy within her but kept her happiness concealed.

Agnibrahma took his leave from Nandavarya and slowly made his way to his horse. However, he felt a heavy heart, as if leaving behind something important and valuable. Nonetheless, he couldn't stay back and had to depart, reluctantly moving toward his horse. Ayapali, on the other hand, felt as if an invisible force was pulling her, leaving her in a state of longing. Both of them experienced peculiar feelings, unable to name or describe them, and reluctantly returned to their respective duties.

Night fell, and darkness engulfed the Gurukul. It drizzled outside. Ayapali sat near the window in her cottage room, lost in her thoughts, reminiscing about the events of the evening. She had been caught in Agnibrahma's arms during their fight. She didn't feel regret about losing the match and being held by him; instead, she felt something different, something she couldn't quite comprehend. She couldn't focus on anything else, continuously replaying the incident in her mind. Soudhamini called Ayapali to have her glass of milk and go to bed, but Ayapali remained unresponsive, still gazing into the dark void from her window. Concerned, Soudhamini observed Ayapali for a few minutes and realized that something was amiss. She took a peacock feather and gently tickled Ayapali's neck and arms, yet there was no response. Shocked, Soudhamini concluded that Ayapali was either unwell or not in a normal state, as Ayapali had always reacted strongly to tickling in the past. Soudhamini summoned Chitra and Vidhushi, showing them Ayapali's condition. Without warning, Vidhushi hugged Ayapali, and

in response, Ayapali exclaimed, "Arya!" This unexpected reaction surprised Soudhamini, Chitra, and Vidhushi, who burst into laughter. Blushing, Ayapali covered her face and smiled. Soudhamini sat on the wooden swing in the cottage's portico, its ropes adorned with creepers and flowers. Ayapali rested her head on Soudhamini's lap, idly playing with a peacock feather. Chitra and Vidhushi occupied small tables nearby, their questions to Ayapali a mix of sarcasm and playfulness.

"Are you still scared and feeling attacked by Agnibrahma? Haven't you moved on from that fight earlier? What's wrong with you? Are you doing well? Do you need a massage or some medicine?" they asked, exchanging amused glances.

Ayapali shyly concealed her face behind the peacock feather, causing Chitra to burst into laughter. "You're an incredible warrior, and no one can defeat you. But what happened during your combat with Agnibrahma? I think you lost, both in the fight and in your heart," she teased. Soudhamini and Vidhushi joined in the laughter, their mirth filling the air.

Ayapali gathered her thoughts and responded, "I can't quite explain what's happening within me. The moment I think of him, warmth courses through my body. My eyes instinctively search for him, my heartbeat quickens, and my lips grow dry. My eyelids become heavy, and a rosy blush paints my face. I'm not certain if I'm in love with him, but I need more time to be sure."

Meanwhile, Agnibrahma stood in the portico of his house, gazing at the aftermath of the rain. The drizzle had ceased, and water droplets fell from the roof, splashing onto the ground and caressing the nearby plants. The scent of wet earth filled the air, yet his thoughts kept returning to Ayapali—the fragrance she carried and the touch of her body. Despite the chilly breeze, warmth enveloped him as he contemplated her, their heartbeats seemingly entwined. As he glanced at the crescent moon gracing the clearing sky, it felt as though Ayapali smiled down upon him. At that moment, he acknowledged his love for her, but uncertainty plagued him—how to express his feelings and whether she reciprocated them. Lost in his thoughts, he retreated into his house, passing a small pool in the front yard adorned with lotus flowers. Two swans glided across the water, their beaks tenderly rubbing against each other. Agnibrahma felt a peculiar sensation in his heart, prompting him to retire to his bedroom for the night.

Early in the morning, Ayapali and her pals found themselves in the Gurukul garden, busily collecting flowers and plucking leaves. Chitra watched Ayapali's absent-minded actions with astonishment and voiced her concern. "Ayapali, are you even present? Your physical form is

here, but your mind seems distant. Be cautious, or Guruji may notice and reprimand you." Startled, Ayapali snapped back to reality and hurriedly returned to her cottage. There, she sought solace in meditation, attempting to regain her focus and consciousness. However, concentration proved elusive this time.

Feeling lost, Ayapali sought out Soudhamini, who possessed greater wisdom and experience. Whispering, she asked, "Sakhi, do you believe I am in love with Agnibrahma, or is it mere infatuation? I am unable to decide. Please advise me."

Soudhamini placed her hands on Ayapali's shoulders and guided her to a nearby wooden bench. Both sat down as Soudhamini responded, "I won't provide an immediate answer. Instead, I suggest you wait a couple of days to confirm whether it is attraction or true love. If Agnibrahma is equally interested, he won't fail to visit here at the same time every day."

Time seemed to stand still for Ayapali. She peered out of her window, gazing at the sky and carefully observing the sun's position. Occasionally, she would venture outside, straining to hear the resonating gong that marked each passing hour. Inquisitively, she approached Chitra, seeking confirmation if the evening had arrived. Upon hearing Nandavarya's call, the four of them swiftly made their way to the central hall of the Gurukul. Nandavarya sat in his designated seat, surrounded by other revered gurus and Mahamatya Radhagupth, who had journeyed from the royal palace. Ayapali and her friends humbly bowed to Nandavarya, the other gurus, and Radhagupth. Standing obediently, they kept their heads down, intently listening to the conversation.

Radhagupth addressed Ayapali, saying, "Ayapali, it has been more than 8 years since you arrived at this Gurukul for your education. Guru Nandavarya has informed me that you have completed all the education available to you here, including mastery of martial arts and other essential subjects. Your final evaluation will take place on the next full moon day, after which you will return to the palace as ordered by Samrat. I have been sent here to discuss this with Guru Nandavarya and you, to clarify the plan."

Chitra and Vidhushi attempted to interject and speak, but Ayapali warned them, saying, "Guruvarya and Mahamatya, I will obey my father's orders, complete my evaluation process, and return to the palace with Guru Nandavarya's permission. You can convey the same to my father and mother."

Impressed by her obedience and respect, Nandavarya and Radhagupth expressed their approval. Nandavarya instructed Ayapali to practice for her final evaluation and then return to her cottage. Ayapali and her friends left for their cottage, while Radhagupth bowed to Nandavarya, took his leave, and walked out.

Back at the cottage, Soudhamini spoke to Ayapali, saying, "Sakhi, it is now evident that we will all soon be leaving Gurukul after our evaluations and returning to Pataliputra. We need to decide on our plans. While destiny will guide us, in your case, being a princess, you need to carefully plan your future and that of your future husband."

Ayapali replied, "I understand what you're saying. I need at least another two days to determine if my heart truly loves Agnibrahma. Until then, I cannot make a decision. My heart yearns to be with him, but my mind advises me to think before making any moves."

The next day, after the Pratahkala Pooja⁶, Nandavarya announced the day of the final evaluation for all the students in Ayapali's batch. He urged them to practice and prepare for the finals before heading towards the Samaavesa Mandira along with the other teachers.

Ayapali struggled to concentrate on her practice as her thoughts continually wandered, her eyes searching for Agnibrahma in every direction. Her lack of focus affected her performance, and her opponent took advantage. Although she managed to defend herself, Ayapali missed a few strikes, resulting in a minor scratch on her left forearm. She signaled to her opponent, who appeared scared, to come and attack again. With swift movements, Ayapali disarmed her opponent, causing his sword to fly high in the air and land with a loud thud on nearby boulders. The onlookers erupted in applause, admiring Ayapali's royal grace. Soudhamini immediately leaped from her seat and ran to Ayapali, while the opponent retreated in fear. Ayapali gestured to the opponent, assuring them that it was not his fault and that there was nothing to worry about. Soudhamini tore a piece of cloth from her garment, wrapped it around Ayapali's bleeding hand, and led her to a shaded area. Chitra rushed over with a healing ointment made of Haldi⁷, Chandana⁸, and Tulsi⁹, while Vidhushi arrived with a pot of water.

The three friends assisted Ayapali in applying the ointment to her wound and provided first aid. Though her injury did not concern her as a formidable warrior, it paled in comparison to

⁶ Early morning worshipping

⁷ Turmeric

⁸ Sandalwood paste

⁹ Sacred basil

the pain in her heart caused by being away from Agnibrahma. Ayapali looked directly into Soudhamini's eyes, and at that moment, Soudhamini confirmed that Ayapali was deeply in love with Agnibrahma, and it was not mere infatuation or attraction.

Soudhamini said to Ayapali, "I confirm that you are deeply in love with Agnibrahma. However, you must be careful not to become too lost in his thoughts and end up getting injured like this. Fortunately, Guru Nandavarya didn't witness this, as it could have caused a significant problem, preventing you from participating in fights and meeting Agnibrahma. Take care. We will observe Agnibrahma today if he comes and make a plan to convey your love to him." Ayapali blushed, and her face turned pink.

On that particular day, Agnibrahma arrived at the Gurukul earlier than usual. He dismounted from his horse and tied it to a post near the entrance before hastening into the Gurukul. Meanwhile, Nandavarya and the other gurus were in a meeting, discussing the categories and types of tests for the student's final evaluation.

Agnibrahma encountered Soudhamini at the main door of the Gurukul. Soudhamini asked him where he was rushing off to. Agnibrahma replied that he wanted to meet Ayapali and practice with her. Soudhamini warned him, saying, "Ayapali won't be able to practice today as she sustained a minor injury during the morning session. So, you should leave for the day."

Upon hearing this, Agnibrahma was emotionally shaken and asked, "What happened to Ayapali? Is she all right? How did she get injured? I know her well, and no one can defeat or harm her in combat. Let her skip practice, but I must meet her immediately. Please don't stop me." Soudhamini could sense and understand Agnibrahma's feelings. His voice was filled with sorrow, and his eyes were brimming with concealed tears. Soudhamini confirmed that Agnibrahma was also deeply in love with Ayapali and said, "Please come with me." The two of them walked into the cottage.

Agnibrahma's steps were hurried, driven by his eagerness to see Ayapali. With each passing second, his anticipation grew stronger. Finally, he entered Ayapali's cottage and found her lying on the couch with a bandage on her left forearm. He rushed over to her and asked, "Sakhi, what happened? Who dared to injure you? Was that person a better warrior than you? Let me know, and I will punish them. Are you all right? I can't bear to see you in this state. I'm deeply worried about you." Unaware of his actions, he was unintentionally embarrassing her while drawing her closer to his heart. Soudhamini coughed, alerting them to the presence of others. Agnibrahma and Ayapali shyly moved apart, gazing into each other's eyes. Soudhamini, Chitra,

and Vidhushi surrounded them, laughing. Soudhamini asked Agnibrahma, "Are you truly in deep love with Ayapali?"

Agnibrahma replied, "I love Ayapali more than I love myself. My heart beats for her, and I will never let go of her hand. I have already made up my mind that the rest of my life will be spent with her. Without her, life holds no meaning. I feel that we were both born for each other," he said, holding her hand.

Ayapali drew nearer to him.

There was a knock on the door, and Ayapali snapped out of her thoughts on the current situation. One of her servant maids was standing at the door with a soldier. He said, "The horses and the necessary luggage for our early morning travel, along with a troop of 50 people, are ready to depart for Pataliputra tomorrow morning. I came to inform you and inquire if you have any special instructions for us." He bowed and stood there. Ayapali replied, "I don't require anything else. I hope you have taken care of all our necessary preparations for the journey back. In the morning, I will meet Agnibrahma before we commence our journey. For now, you all can take leave and rest for the night. We have a long journey ahead starting in the morning."

The servant maid and the soldier left, and Ayapali lay on her bed and slowly drifted to sleep.

Early in the morning, a line of horses, carts, and a chariot stood in front of their tents. Ayapali, dressed in her yellow and red attire adorned with ornaments, looked stunningly beautiful. She walked from her tent towards Agnibrahma's tent. A soldier stationed in front of Agnibrahma's tent noticed Ayapali approaching and informed Agnibrahma. Agnibrahma emerged and welcomed Ayapali into his tent, where they found themselves in the Samavesa-Kaksha¹⁰. Ayapali hugged Agnibrahma and said, "Please take care of yourself. I'll be waiting for you in Pataliputra. When you return. It will be very difficult for me to be away from you, and I'll be thinking about you every moment."

Agnibrahma replied, "Sakhi, my heart beats for you constantly, and I'll miss you immensely. Samrat has entrusted me with the responsibility of resolving the disputes in Gandahar and establishing our administration and welfare for the people here. I will fulfill that duty and come to Pataliputra. I understand the difficulty of our separation, but my loyalty and duty are important now. I have arranged for efficient and noble workers to accompany you on your

¹⁰ Meeting/Conference room

journey, ensuring a smooth passage. I have already sent communications to our Palakas¹¹ in Indraprastha, Prayagraj, and Varanasi to make the necessary arrangements for you. As I instructed, you will need to pass through the desert, which is a shorter route. I have made arrangements for the required camels at the beginning of the desert. Have a safe journey, and we will be reunited in Pataliputra soon."

Agnibrahma accompanied Ayapali to her chariot and bid her farewell. The journey of Ayapali to Pataliputra began.



¹¹ The heads of cities or places

Chapter 2 (The Journey)

Chatraveer was leading the journey from Gandahar to Pataliputra. The troop was riding on horseback, with the men carrying flags of the Mauryan dynasty, painted yellow with peacocks. The horses, chariots, and people were moving swiftly to reach Pataliputra within 10 days. By noon, they reached a village on the edge of the desert. The Palaka of the village had prepared 20 camels, along with food and water stored in mashks¹². They halted in specially arranged tents and had their afternoon meal. The Palaka and his men arranged for food and water to be carried on the camels for the remainder of the journey. The horses were released and replaced with camels, as the Palaka informed Chatraveer that the heat and conditions of the desert would be too much for the horses to endure. They had to leave the horses in the village, and a new set of horses would be arranged when they emerged from the desert, at the other end of the village, by another Palaka. Chatraveer thanked the Palaka and they resumed their journey. Ayapali had a few fruits for lunch and wasn't very interested in eating. She boarded her chariot along with her assistant Champa, and they began their journey through the desert.

The afternoon sun and the desert heat were scorching, so everyone on the camels wore long white robes that covered them from head to toe, protecting them from the heat and sandstorms. Ayapali's chariot was covered with white curtains to shield it from the sun's heat and the sand winds. In the chariot, Ayapali and Champa passed the time by playing a dice game. After a while, Ayapali asked, "Champa, what could be the reason for Samrat summoning me to Pataliputra so urgently? Do you have any guesses?" Champa replied, "I'm not sure, but it could be anything like joining and celebrating the victory over Kalinga, or Mahendra being felicitated as the prince of Maghada, or your son Sumana is missing you" Champa responded with a smile.

"Champa, your guesses are quite imaginative. The first two reasons are possible, but not the third one. Sumana would never miss me or Agnibrahma as he has been taken care of diligently by my parents and others. I'm surprised they didn't mention the reason in the message. Perhaps they want to surprise me when I arrive in Pataliputra. Are you certain that everything is well in Pataliputra and there is no bad news?" Ayapali felt a bit anxious.

¹² Traditional water-carrying bags made of waterproofed goatskin

Champa immediately reacted and asked, "Devi, when the message was sent to summon you, what color was the message cloth? With that, I can guess the intensity and importance of the message."

Ayapali blinked and recollected the details of the message that had arrived the day before. She said, "Champa, it was a yellow silk cloth." Champa smiled and explained, "A yellow silk cloth indicates that the message is meant for a royal family gathering or a meeting with all the royal relatives to celebrate something." Ayapali was impressed by Champa's knowledge. She realized that in her hurry to pack and think about Agnibrahma, she had forgotten about the message color coding and the different colored clothes used for communication. She smiled to herself, realizing how deeply she had been lost in Agnibrahma's love, even forgetting a few basic things. The travel troop was slowing down in their movement, so Ayapali asked Champa to see what was happening outside.

Champa peeped outside the chariot curtains and asked the charioteer why their pace was slowing. The charioteer explained that they were nearing a Shaadval¹³ and it was also time for the sunset, so they would make a night camp there and resume their journey early in the morning. Champa relayed the information to Ayapali.

After half an hour, they halted near a Shaadval (*Oasis*) in the middle of the desert. The charioteer got off the chariot and stood outside, announcing that they would stop there for the night. He invited Ayapali and Champa to get down and relax near the oasis.

Champa got down from the chariot and extended her hand to help Ayapali alight. The place was beautiful, surrounded by golden sands, with a blue water lake in the middle. On the banks of the water, there were several palm and cactus trees. The cool breeze from the water, along with the wild fragrance of the cactus flowers, was energizing and refreshing. Chatraveer was instructing a few people to set up tents for the women's night halt. Ayapali expressed her desire to take a dip and swim in the lake, and Champa conveyed the same to Chatraveer, asking him to make the necessary arrangements.

As the evening sun went down, the sky was still illuminated with golden shades from the sun and the reflection from the sand. The eastern side of the sky grew darker, while the western side had a golden tint.

¹³ Oasis

The attendants arranged cloth curtains in a wall-like formation near the oasis to conceal it from outsiders. Ayapali, accompanied by Champa and a few other Paricharikas¹⁴, slowly descended into the water to swim. The water in the oasis was cold, with a distinctive aroma of desert sand and wild cactus flowers. As Ayapali immersed herself in the cold water, she felt refreshed from the hot afternoon sun and the fatigue caused by travel. She spent some more time in the water before emerging. Meanwhile, the attendants lit torches and placed them in front of each tent. Ayapali changed into dry clothes and joined Champa and the other attendants in their tent.

A campfire was set in the center of the tent cluster, and a few soldiers stood guard, taking turns to ensure the safety of the area and the tents throughout the night. Dinner, consisting of food brought from the village, was distributed to everyone. Ayapali preferred to eat only fruits and had a particular desire to taste some desert dates. Chatraveer arranged to have fresh, ripe dates picked from the trees and sent them along with goat milk for Ayapali. After finishing her dinner, she engaged in a conversation with Champa in their tent, discussing the war they fought and the celebrations in Pataliputra. Eventually, they both fell asleep on their beds, unaware of when their conversation ended or what the last topic of discussion was.

Outside, the sound of a drumbeat woke Champa, who realized it was dawn and they needed to prepare to resume their journey. She approached Ayapali and whispered that it was time to wake up. Murmuring, Ayapali responded, "Agnibrahma, are you awake and ready? Please allow me a few more minutes of sleep." Champa smiled and gently shook Ayapali's shoulder to rouse her. Ayapali regained awareness, opened her eyes, and realized she was in her tent in the desert and needed to get ready.

Within an hour, everyone had gathered outside, observing the glow of the rising sun on the eastern horizon. Ayapali's chariot was prepared as the attendants swiftly cleared the area, dismantling the tents and extinguishing the campfires and torches. Chatraveer ensured that all the people were ready to travel and inspected the surroundings. Satisfied that the area was safe and clear, he gave the order to begin the journey. And so, their expedition commenced.

The goal was to cross the desert before sunset. The weather was pleasant, and there was no gale. Chatraveer thought that if the weather remained favorable, they could easily cross the desert by evening. As time passed, the sun reached its peak, and the sand grew hotter.

¹⁴ Lady attendants

At the front of the caravan, the person leading the way noticed a tornado in the distance. They could see the sand swirling and the hot air blowing in all directions. Chatraveer quickly alerted everyone to tightly hold their camels and cover themselves with their clothes to protect against the sand and wind. There was little time before the sandstorm hit. The frightened camels began running in all directions, making it difficult for the cameleers to control them. They managed to make the camels sit on the ground and hold onto them tightly. In Ayapali and Champa's chariot, the curtains flapped violently, and sand blew inside. Champa and Ayapali wrapped themselves completely in long sheets of clothing to shield themselves from the sand. After almost half an hour, the tornado passed and moved away. Once the sand settled, Chatraveer cautiously stepped out of his chariot and, with the help of a few attendants, checked on the people to ensure their safety. He went to Ayapali's chariot and inquired if they were fine. The chariot had accumulated piles of sand and the curtains were torn, but both ladies were unharmed. Ayapali slowly unwrapped herself and reassured Chatraveer that they were safe and could take care of the sand in the chariot. They didn't want to delay their journey any further, so, they resumed their travel.

By sunset, the caravan was almost out of the desert. They could see vegetation and diminishing sand heaps. Chatraveer felt relieved that they had successfully crossed the desert without any major disruptions. They traveled for a few more hours until they exited the desert and entered a vibrant village adorned with colorful clothes and banners. The village dazzled with various styles of lighting, including torches, lamps, and chandeliers. Champa folded the curtains of the chariot, revealing the village and its beautiful decorations. The caravan came to a stop near a garden where a few attendants awaited to welcome them. Chatraveer signaled the cameleers to halt there for the night.

Chatraveer was received by the Palaka of the village, who ordered his attendants to take care of the camels, carts, and chariots. A few female attendants approached Ayapali's chariot to greet her. The place was beautifully decorated with flower garlands, cloth decorations, and various lights. They had placed special earthen bowls emitting a mild, refreshing fragrance. Once all the travelers had gathered in one place, the Palaka instructed his people to distribute refreshing fruit juice, sweets, and snacks. Ayapali was escorted to a tent adorned with red, green, yellow, and white colors, featuring beautiful paintings and arts and crafts on the walls. The tent boasted colorful shaded glass chandeliers and soft silk curtains. Ayapali was captivated by the arrangements and entered the tent with Champa.

The tent resembled a palace, spacious with different sections for bathing, dressing, dining, and sleeping. Ayapali refreshed herself and changed into new clothes, feeling rejuvenated and free from the fatigue caused by the travel and sandstorm. In the center of the tent, there was a recliner where she lay down to relax. Champa approached and said, "Devi, we will stay here tonight and start our journey early tomorrow morning. They will replace all the camels with horses, enabling us to travel faster. We will no longer encounter the desert and will be traveling on land. They are going to serve us a delicious hot meal now." Ayapali smiled and replied, "That's wonderful news. I think we can have a good night's sleep as we are quite exhausted." She understood how tired Champa was and how eagerly she anticipated a hot meal and a good rest.

Dinner was served, consisting of six varieties of rotis¹⁵ and several dishes of cooked vegetables with cashew nuts and various spices. The food was prepared using pure ghee. There were colorful sweets, flavored rice, curd, cut fruits, and salads. Village attendants served the food on silver plates to Ayapali, who enjoyed the rich and flavorful meal. Champa delighted in her food, eating as if she hadn't eaten in days. After dinner, Ayapali and Champa strolled around the tent, praising the arrangements that had been made. They returned to their tent after a few minutes and went to sleep. Ayapali's thoughts wandered to Agnibrahma and the war in Gandahar. For the past two days, there had been no news as they were traveling. She imagined the war would have ended in their favor and Agnibrahma would return to Pataliputra with the army. The thought of their reunion filled her with joy. Content with these thoughts, she slipped into a deep sleep. Champa was already asleep.

Ayapali was awakened by the noise outside and the sounds of people and objects moving around. The cold, pleasant weather and the cozy bed with silk pillows and soft blankets tempted her to stay in bed longer, but she knew she had to wake up for the journey back to Pataliputra. She looked around and saw that Champa was ready and prepared for travel, patiently waiting for Ayapali to wake up and get ready. Ayapali looked at Champa and asked why she hadn't woken her up. Champa replied, "Devi, you were in a deep sleep and murmuring something that I couldn't quite make out, but I could hear 'Agnibrahma.' Nevertheless, Chatraveer is coordinating with the villagers and our people to make the necessary arrangements for our travel. You can get ready and have your breakfast so that we can start our journey." Ayapali

¹⁵ Indian bread

blushed and smiled inwardly. After half an hour, Ayapali got ready and had her breakfast, while the attendants packed her belongings and waited outside the tent.

Ayapali emerged from the tent along with Champa, and the Palaka of the village, accompanied by his team, stood nearby. She greeted them and praised their arrangements and the care they had taken to ensure her comfort and happiness. She presented small bags of gold coins to the Palaka and asked him to distribute them among his staff. After bidding farewell to everyone, she walked towards the chariot. Suddenly, someone called out to her from behind, "Devi, please wait a minute. I have something specially made for you." Ayapali turned back and saw a teenage girl approaching her. The girl was radiant, dressed in a colorful outfit, and adorned with dazzling bangles, anklets, and ornaments. She introduced herself as Triкта, the elder daughter of the village Palaka, and presented Ayapali with a dress adorned with intricate threadwork, dangling pearls, beads, and multicolored stone jewelry. The jewelry included bangles, anklets, chains, necklaces, and various other ornaments, reminiscent of bridal wear. Ayapali was overjoyed and expressed her gratitude, giving two golden bracelets as a gift in return. She hugged Triкта and then proceeded toward her chariot. Triкта bid farewell with excitement, saying goodbye to Ayapali and the entire team. Chatraveer raised his voice and alerted the team to start moving. The travelers were now on horses, the chariots were pulled by horses, and the camels had been replaced. It was a bright and cold day as their journey resumed.

Champa showed Ayapali the colorful lac bangles adorned with beads and chains with ornamental colored stones, explaining that they were given by the Palaka to all the ladies in the team. Ayapali was thrilled to see such a beautiful collection.

As they ventured out of the village, they traveled at a faster pace with the horses along a clear and tree-lined route. After a few hours, they entered a small forested area where they encountered herds of deer, antelopes, and peacocks. The forest boasted tall trees adorned with colorful flowers and fruit-bearing trees, while the melodious sounds of various birds created harmonious music. They continued their journey.

By afternoon, they were nearly out of the small forest, and they could see a few scattered huts and houses in the distance. Chatraveer spotted a location with banyan, neem, and mango trees, as well as a small water reservoir and a nearby temple. He ordered the team to stop there for their lunch break before continuing their journey. Chatraveer consulted his aide to confirm that they were on schedule to reach Pataliputra, and upon receiving confirmation, the team halted for their lunch break.

Ayapali and Champa alighted from their chariot and walked towards the temple. It was a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, and it appeared as if someone performed some rituals in the form of worship that had taken place just a few minutes ago. The oil lamps were still flickering, and the freshly decorated flowers adorned the surroundings. Both of them offered their prayers and returned to have their lunch. The attendants had arranged a meal brought from the village, which was served to everyone. After lunch, Ayapali contemplated how there were many things in the world that she had yet to come across. This journey presented an opportunity for her to explore and learn about things she had never encountered or heard of before. She felt delighted with the experiences she had gathered during her travel back to Pataliputra. Following the meal, the team took a half-hour rest before resuming their journey. They planned to spend the night at Indraprastha.

The horses galloped swiftly, and the dust kicked up by their hooves resembled a dark cloud about to rain. Chatraveer led the way on his horse, accompanied by Sourabh, the expert on routes, travel, and horses. Chatraveer initiated a conversation with Sourabh as they rode, "Sourabh, can you estimate if we can reach Indraprastha for our night halt today? I sense the weather turning colder, and there's a hint of the fresh scent of rain-soaked mud in the air. We must reach Indraprastha before it starts raining; otherwise, camping tonight will be challenging." Sourabh replied, "Yodha, we can reach Indraprastha tonight as long as no obstacles arise. However, I planned a shortcut route to reach Indraprastha earlier. We'll take the Merchants' cart route. After a mile, we need to make a left turn near the Kali Matha temple to enter the Merchants' cart route for Indraprastha. I can guide the team." With a gentle kick to his horse, Sourabh spurred it to run faster, and the rest of the team followed him.

They passed through a small village where villagers and children waved their hands and shouted with joy. Soon, they reached a Kali Matha temple, and a lamp post stood in front of it. Sourabh took a left turn at the lamp post, and the path ahead bore the marks of cartwheels. Large earthen vessels filled with water lined the roadside at regular intervals. Small resting spots with raised platforms and water pots were available for travelers to rest and refresh themselves. The sky grew darker as clouds gathered, and a cool breeze swept through. All the trees seemed to yearn for a shower to quench their thirst. Scattered showers began, and the team traveled for another two hours before entering the outskirts of Indraprastha.

Upon arriving at the Pradhanadwara¹⁶, the Dwarapalaks¹⁷ warmly welcomed them and opened the massive doors. As the entire team entered, the sky unleashed a heavy downpour. They proceeded to the Rajaprasada, the royal palace, where the Sevaks¹⁸ honored them with garlands and offered fruit juices for relaxation. Each member of the team was allocated quarters following the instructions of Balhanth, the head of the Nagarapalaks the chief administrator of Indraprastha.

Ayapali was allocated a luxurious royal suite and served hot food and all the necessary comforts. Chatraveer and Sourabh were given individual rooms, while the other attendants had separate dormitories for men and women. The plan was to depart from Indraprastha the next afternoon. All the team members retired for the night and went to sleep.

Early the following day, Ayapali was ready and emerged from her room. Champa was also prepared, and there were a few individuals to attend to their needs. The plan for the day included a small organized tour of Indraprastha, a city renowned for its grandeur and its significant role during the Dwapara Yuga, under the reign of the Pandavas and Kauravas. Mallika served as their tour guide, and they embarked on a chariot ride, during which she explained and showcased various notable locations. The tour lasted for approximately two hours, and they returned to the Rajaprasada, where lunch had been arranged. Balhanth oversaw the preparations. Following the meal, Balhanth presented Ayapali with gifts and tokens of gratitude for her presence as their esteemed guest. As noon approached, the attendants began preparations for the onward journey.

The journey would continue for another two days until they reached Pataliputra, passing through Prayagaraj and Kasi. Ayapali and Champa sat in the chariot, eagerly examining their gifts and tokens. Champa was astounded by the transformation she witnessed in Ayapali, who appeared wild and fearless on the battlefield but now exuded an innocent princess-like aura. She marveled at how Ayapali could adapt to different situations.

The journey pressed on, and they arrived at the outskirts of Panchala, where they made a stop at a grand Shiva temple and made arrangements for Ayapali. She performed a Pooja¹⁹ at the temple, and then the journey resumed to reach Prayagaraj by nightfall.

¹⁶ The main entrance

¹⁷ The gatekeepers

¹⁸ The attendants

¹⁹ Ritual worship

The journey was pleasant, thanks to the favorable weather and the absence of excessive heat. The horses galloped at a brisk pace, with Chatraveer and Sourabh leading the way. Ayapali's chariot was in the middle, accompanied by other attendants and individuals at a safe distance, all progressing together.

Time flew by swiftly. They could now see ahead of them Prayagaraj, the sacred Triveni Sangam, where the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati converge—a revered site for all Hindus.

Early the following morning, the team arrived at the Triveni Sangam to take a holy dip and offer prayers to the gods. Ayapali was overjoyed to have experienced the best of her journey, visiting numerous cities, holy places, and temples. Although she felt content, there was a sense of longing within her, missing Agnibrahma's presence in these significant locations.

After completing their lunch, the team resumed their journey. They planned to reach Kasi by night and have their final stop before proceeding to Pataliputra. They made swift progress towards Kasi.

The travel route followed the banks of the river Ganga, offering splendid views of temples and the cool river breeze. Ayapali admired the heritage, culture, and architecture displayed by these sacred structures. She fondly recalled the teachings of her guru, Nandavarya, about the customs, traditions, and practices of the people, which she now witnessed firsthand. It brought her immense joy to see the practical application of what she had learned.

By sunset, the team arrived in Kasi, the city of temples and the abode of Lord Shiva. It was the first prahar²⁰ after sunset, and the priests stood on the riverbanks with massive panchaharathis, holding sacred fires for the ritualistic offering to the gods. The scene was awe-inspiring, with drums playing in the background, conches and horns being blown, and numerous priests chanting hymns in honor of the river Ganga. The ceremony continued for several minutes, and the rhythmic beats of the drums and the resonating horns created an atmosphere that seemed to wash away all fears and fatigue, leaving everyone feeling rejuvenated.

Following the sacred Harathi ceremony, the team retired to the specially arranged palace for their stay. Early the next morning, Ayapali and Champa dressed in new silk attire, carried large bronze plates adorned with fruits, flowers, sandalwood paste, garlands, and Bilvapatra²¹, and

²⁰ A measure of time, A day has 8 prahars

²¹ *Aegle marmelos*, more commonly called wood apple

made their way to the Kasi Viswanatha temple to offer their prayers. The entire team accompanied them, offering their prayers as well. The head priest of the temple blessed Ayapali with flowers and the holy water of Mahadeva. Overwhelmed with joy, Ayapali fervently prayed for the victory of Agnibrahma and King Ashoka in their wars.

The team returned to their palace to prepare for their journey when the Nagarapalaka of Kasi arrived with some good news. As the team gathered and packed their belongings, the Nagarapalaka announced, "I am pleased to share the good news that Samrat Ashoka has emerged victorious in the war against Kalinga and has returned to Pataliputra." The announcement was met with loud cheers and expressions of joy, with people exchanging sweets to celebrate the triumph.

The team appeared even more energized and active as they rode towards Pataliputra, perhaps fueled by the proximity to their home or the victory over the enemy kingdom. Ayapali was elated by the journey itself and the news of the victory. She excitedly discussed plans for decorating Pataliputra and organizing celebrations, eager to be an active participant and even lead the festivities.

Ayapali explained to Champa that the entire city of Pataliputra would be adorned with red, green, and yellow flags. The paths and walkways would be embellished with intricate designs and rangoli patterns. The city would be adorned with beautiful flower garlands, and people would receive new clothes and groceries. Festive decorations would be seen throughout the city, accompanied by various musical performances and plays. Champa was astonished by Ayapali's enthusiasm and became excited about being part of such grand celebrations. The journey continued.

During the journey, Ayapali observed groups of peaceful Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis²² walking along the way. While such sightings were not uncommon, she noticed a higher number of groups compared to before, speculating that they might be traveling for a grand religious ceremony or a similar event.

As they traveled, heavy rain and strong winds forced the team to seek refuge in an old temple. Chatraveer and Sourabh decided it was impossible to continue the journey in such weather, leaving them no choice but to stay the night and resume in the morning. Chatraveer discussed

²² Buddhist saints

the situation with Ayapali, who agreed that they had no other option but to remain there until the rain subsided.

The team made arrangements within the temple for everyone to spend the night, providing food for all. They settled in for the evening, ready to wait out the rain and resume their journey at daybreak.



Chapter 3 (Back To Home)

Early in the morning, the rain stopped and the wind turned into a lovely breeze. Chatraveer deemed it suitable to begin their journey. He announced that they would soon depart for Pataliputra, with an expected travel time of 2 to 3 hours. Immediately, everyone started packing their belongings and clearing the area. Ayapali went to the temple well with Champa, washed her face, and returned to the temple to pray for the victory of Agnibrahma. Afterward, she went back to her chariot. Within a few minutes, the entire team was ready to travel, with Sourabh leading as usual, followed by Chatraveer and the rest of the team.

On the way, Ayapali thoughtfully explained the decorations in Pataliputra to Champa. She described how the city would be adorned with red, green, and yellow flags and flower garlands. The streets would be filled with the rhythmic sounds of drums, trumpets, and conches. Joyful people would be distributing sweets and performing various acts and shows depicting the war and the victory. At the city center, there would be a grand celebration ceremony where the Samrat, along with his queens, ministers, army chiefs, and the people of Pataliputra, would be present. The procession would include decorated elephants, horses, camels, and carts, followed by the march of the brave soldiers who had fought and triumphed in the war. The people would shower them with flowers and praise their bravery. The Samrat would honor the soldiers and army commanders with special swords, felicitating them for their courage and contributions to the war. The event as a whole would be spectacular, with rulers and Palakas from different states in the Magadha Empire gracing the occasion. The celebrations would last for four days, culminating in a grand feast for all the people of Pataliputra. Ayapali was thrilled as she explained all of this to Champa. They had already covered half the distance and would soon enter the boundaries of Pataliputra.

Ayapali gazed outside her chariot, filled with happiness knowing she would be part of all the celebrations. She eagerly anticipated Agnibrahma's return and his request to announce as a ruler for Ujjain by the Samrat. Her excitement grew. Suddenly, she noticed more Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis chanting and moving. She assumed they must have been invited to the celebrations and paid them no heed.

An hour later, they arrived at the Mahadwara of Pataliputra. To Ayapali's surprise, no warm welcome or people were waiting to garland them. She thought perhaps everyone was

preoccupied with the upcoming celebrations and disregarded their arrival. The Dwarapalakas opened the gates for them, allowing them to enter Pataliputra.

There were no celebrations or decorations; Ayapali was taken aback. The city was silent, and the people of Pataliputra seemed neither excited nor in a joyous mood. She noticed that all the flags and decorations in the streets were white. There were no drums, trumpets, or conches playing, and no one was distributing or sharing sweets. Most people appeared sad or worried. The entire place seemed to be in mourning rather than celebration. Although she knew they had emerged victorious in the battle at Kalinga, Ayapali couldn't comprehend the current situation. She felt a sense of unease, and negative thoughts started creeping in. She desperately wished nothing bad had befallen her family or the Samrat. Fear began to grip her, and she clung onto Champa, her face turning pale. Champa reassured her that everything was normal and there was nothing to fear.

The team of people who had returned from Gandahar found themselves in an ambiguous situation. They couldn't understand why Pataliputra was so silent and devoid of celebrations. Chatraveer exchanged a questioning look with Sourabh, who mirrored the same expression.

The team slowly made their way through the streets of Pataliputra, witnessing the same somber atmosphere everywhere. There were no celebrations, decorations, or the sound of drums and trumpets. Sweets were nowhere to be found. The people seemed quiet and lacked enthusiasm. They noticed numerous Bhikkhus silently moving and chanting something. The horses and chariot turned onto the main palace street and continued forward. Even there, they found no signs of celebration, only a multitude of white flags fluttering in the air. The horses and chariot finally came to a stop in front of the main palace. Ayapali stepped down from the chariot, holding Champa's hand. To her astonishment, there was no one there to receive her. There was no grand welcoming ceremony awaiting her. She could see Bhadrani, Rani Devi's headmaid, standing there to receive her, but she remained silent, leading Ayapali into the palace without uttering a word. Ayapali was left speechless.



Chapter 4 (The Silence)

Ayapali walked through the palace corridor alongside Bhadrani. The palace was eerily quiet, with still air that offered no movement. Apart from the faint clinking of Ayapali's anklets, there was no other sound. The lamps and torches lining the corridor remained motionless. The guards stationed there stood immobile, devoid of any action or acknowledgment toward Ayapali. In the distance, she could hear a whisper-like chant, as well as the sound of Mani Khorlo²³, and a subtle fragrance of sandalwood and roses, filled the corridors. Bhadrani walked slowly by Ayapali's side.

The surroundings perplexed Ayapali. The pervasive silence and Bhadrani's lack of speech heightened her tension, making it difficult for her to comprehend what was happening. Determined to find answers, Ayapali picked up her pace, and Bhadrani followed suit, catching up to walk alongside her. Together, they walked through the long corridors until they reached the main Darbar hall, where the doors stood wide open. The resounding chant of "*Buddham saranam gacchami, Dharmam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami*" and the continuous turning of Mani Khorlos could be heard, emanating from the Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis inside the hall. Ayapali and Bhadrani stepped inside.

In the center of the hall stood an elevated mandap²⁴ adorned with various fruits, flowers, and colorful fabrics, upon which a bronze idol of Buddha resided. Flanking the mandap were two Priests, dressed in saffron robes, sitting with closed eyes, engaged in silent meditation while turning their Japamalas²⁵. On the ground, Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis sat on individual square carpets in rows. The Bhikshunis held the Mani Khorlos, while the Bhikkhus held the Japamalas. Clad in maroon and brown robes, their eyes closed, they chanted the mantra. The atmosphere exuded an immense sense of tranquility, a place where anyone who entered would find relief from stress, and tiredness, and feel a deep sense of relaxation. Ayapali, although eager to uncover the reasons behind the peculiar ambiance, couldn't help but pause at the entrance of the hall, captivated by the ceremony before her. Amid the Bhikkhus in white robes, with a Japamala in his hand, Ayapali spotted her brother, Mahendra. The sight left her momentarily frozen in astonishment.

²³ handheld prayer wheel used by Buddhists

²⁴ Stage

²⁵ A string of 108 beads

Ayapali found herself perplexed by the sudden changes and the ongoing ceremonies. Unable to progress beyond a certain point, she sat in a corner, waiting for someone to notice her and provide answers. The prayers continued for some time until a bronze bell, shaped like a round plate, rang. All the Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis ceased their meditation and slowly opened their eyes. The Priests on the Mandap rose from their seats and approached the idol of Buddha, offering flowers. Then, they turned towards the Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis, who also stood up. Ayapali stood in her place, hoping to catch the attention of the Priests.

In the midst of this, Radhagupth, the chief minister of Samrat Ashoka, entered the main Durbar hall accompanied by his associate ministers. He made his way towards the mandapa, with a servant beside him carrying a large round plate covered in bright saffron-colored silk, filled with fruits and flowers.

Ayapali spotted Radhagupth and moved slowly toward him to meet him. After a brief exchange with the lamas, Radhagupth descended from the mandapa and noticed Ayapali. Sensing that it was an opportune moment, Ayapali briskly walked towards him. Radhagupth instructed his associates and others to wait in the durbar hall and invited Ayapali to accompany him.

Radhagupth and Ayapali took their seats in a corner of the durbar hall. Ayapali, feeling confused, asked Radhagupth about the ceremonies and what she had witnessed. She expressed her expectation of grand celebrations across Magadha following the victory in Kalinga.

Radhagupth replied, "Yes, we emerged victorious in Kalinga. The brave Kalinga army fought our forces with great courage. Led by their king, Raja Anatha Padmanabhan, the Kalinga army consisted of 60 thousand skilled and courageous soldiers who displayed immense patriotism. During the first 18 days of the war, they managed to kill around 60 thousand Magadha soldiers, including our esteemed warriors Kevala, Satrudashtra, and Virudhaka. In response, Samrat Ashoka himself took to the battlefield accompanied by Veerabahu, devising a new battle strategy. Over the next two days, he managed to eliminate nearly 20 thousand Kalinga soldiers. Raja Anatha Padmanabhan continued leading his army, but as they suffered heavy losses, their strength waned. The battlefield was strewn with piles of dead bodies, horse and elephant carcasses. The blood of the fallen soldiers flowed into the Daya River, turning it crimson. On the 21st day of the war, Raja Anatha Padmanabhan engaged in direct combat with Samrat Ashoka. The encounter was horrifying, with Samrat Ashoka launching fierce attacks. Realizing that victory was out of reach and having witnessed the decimation of his army, Raja Anatha Padmanabhan chose to end the bloodshed by surrendering. He threw down his sword and

kneeled before Samrat Ashoka. However, in a split second, before Samrat Ashoka could comprehend the situation, his sword descended, severing the head of Raja Anatha Padmanabhan, who was kneeling in surrender. Samrat Ashoka was taken aback by this unforeseen turn of events. He threw his sword aside and collapsed. It took him several hours to regain his composure, but he was filled with shame for killing a king who had surrendered. Witnessing the devastation caused by the war, with over 150 thousand soldiers from both sides losing their lives, countless horses and elephants falling in battle, families torn apart, the cries of parents, spouses, children, friends, and relatives of the fallen soldiers echoing in his ears, Samrat Ashoka's remorse grew uncontrollable. He vowed never to return to Pataliputra after the Kalinga war and sought solace. Upagupta²⁶, the Buddhist monk, assisted the injured soldiers on the battlefield and led Samrat Ashoka to his hermitage, where he preached about peace and the value of life. Impressed by these teachings, Samrat Ashoka desired to embrace Buddhism and establish peace and unity throughout the kingdom of Magadha and beyond. The Bhikkhus and Bhikshunis you see here are chanting verses for peace. Samrat Ashoka is currently in seclusion and does not wish to meet anyone for some time. You may return to your Anthapura or visit your mother." With these words, Radhagupth slowly rose from his seat, and Ayapali, still feeling confused, stood up as well.

Ayapali struggled to focus her thoughts as she listened to Radhagupth. The memories of her involvement in the war, and Samrat Ashoka beheading Raja Anatha Padmanabhan, repeatedly haunted her, causing deep trauma. Radhagupth departed with his associates, and Ayapali slowly made her way out of the Durbar Hall.



²⁶ A Buddhist monk, spiritual teacher to Samrat Ashoka

Chapter 5 (Sinhala Conflicts)

Anuradhapura is the capital of Sinhala Dweepa²⁷, a beautiful place surrounded by oceans and fertile lands. The Dweepa has many freshwater lakes and rivers. The country is home to people with different beliefs; there are various ideologies in their religions and trust in gods. The Yakkhas and Nagas are aborigines; Yakkhas have a lineage connecting to the Asuraraja Ravana and worship Lord Shiva, while Nagas believe in worshipping Snakes and trees as gods. Some migrants from the southern part of Bharathvarsha settled in Sinhala Dweepa (Sinhala) a few generations ago and believe in worshipping Lord Vishnu as their God. The Buddhists, who arrived in Sinhala about a century ago, follow Buddhism, while others follow Jainism. However, these people with different beliefs have started quarreling among themselves, claiming their religion and beliefs are superior to others, causing a communal exigency across Sinhala. Taking advantage of this unrest, enemies are waiting for an opportunity to wage war on Sinhala, which is worrying Raja Devanampriyatissa (Raja Tissa).

Mahamatya²⁸ Yasoguta of Anuradhapura, along with five other ministers, was in a meeting that had stretched on for hours; it was already night, and the discussion continued. Mahamatya Yasoguta said, "If we cannot restore peace to the country soon, the entire nation will be ruined, and no one will survive. The situation today is beyond our control, and our soldiers have even started fighting among themselves over religion and their beliefs. We've been discussing this for a long time, and yet, we haven't found a viable solution. Raja Tissa expects a proper solution by tomorrow morning. We cannot fail to provide one."

The other ministers exchanged glances and bowed their heads, unable to offer a solution.

A few minutes later, Minister Ariththa, the youngest of them all and a distant relative of Raja Tissa, spoke up, "Mahamatya Yasoguta, we know that our king, Raja Devanampriyatissa, and Samrat Ashoka are good friends. Ashoka has always been ready to assist our king in any manner. Recently, Samrat Ashoka fought and won the Kalinga War, demonstrating his courage, strength, intelligence, power, and determination. He can offer us his assistance and guidance, considering his vast empire, which is almost ten times larger than ours, with diverse languages, cultures, traditions, and religions. He may have encountered similar problems in his empire and found solutions. In my opinion, if we approach him, he might provide a better

²⁷ Present-day Sri Lanka

²⁸ Chief Minister

solution or offer assistance to resolve our problems. I sincerely apologize if my suggestion exceeds my limits."

Yasoguta thought that Arittha's suggestion was appropriate and believed it could work without hindrance. He started considering how to communicate this idea to Raja Devanampriyatissa.

Yasoguta liked the suggestion given by Arittha. Immediately, he concluded the meeting and instructed all the ministers to reconvene in the King's court the next morning.

The following day:

A grand palace courtroom adorned with opulent golden decorations, vibrant, flowing silk curtains, and throne-like golden chairs on both sides with enormous diamond chandeliers hanging from the ceilings came into view. The spacious hall could accommodate around 1,000 people. At the center of the hall, towards the end, an elevated, grand golden throne in the shape of a peacock, adorned with colorful cushions and a large golden Lion symbol at the back, stood. The center of the courtroom was covered with a plush, red cushioned carpet, extending from the entrance to the steps leading to the throne. The entire courtroom was richly decorated with colorful flowers, creating an aromatic and splendid atmosphere. The kingdom's opulence and the palace's grandeur were visually evident in this setting.

Raja Tissa arrived at the royal court, with a few pundits and praisers leading the way. The pundits recited auspicious verses to bless the king and the kingdom, while the praisers announced Raja's arrival. A few ladies showered flower petals and sprinkled aromatic rose water on the king. As Raja Tissa walked through the corridors and entered the royal court, a large bronze gong in the royal court rang three times, demanding the attention of all present.

Raja Devanampriyatissa, a tall, well-built man in his mid-thirties, with a wheat complexion and sharp eyes, was an attractive figure. While the pundits continued with their blessings and the praisers praised him, he ascended the steps towards the throne. He bowed to all the attendees and took his seat. The royal court fell into silence. Mahamatya Yasoguta, along with his other Amatyas, presented updates on the current situation in the country. Amatya Arittha, responsible for the country's finances and accounting, provided updates on taxes, revenue, expenditures, and the reserves in the royal treasury. After the ministers' updates, Raja Tissa turned to Yasoguta and inquired if he had any suggestions or plans to regain control of the country's current situation.

Mahamatya Yasoguta rose from his seat, bowed to Raja Devanampriyatissa, and said, "Raja, after a thorough discussion yesterday, we analyzed the current situation. Amatya Ariththa proposed a solution: Samrat Ashoka recently won the Kalinga war. His empire is almost ten times larger than ours, encompassing people with diverse cultures, traditions, beliefs, religions, and various deities they worship. It is likely that he faced similar problems in his empire and found solutions. Samrat Ashoka is your well-wisher, and you can send him a letter congratulating him on his Kalinga War victory. You can inquire about his well-being, and his empire's status, and describe our problem, seeking his advice. We believe that contacting Samrat Ashoka can provide valuable insight, as he has proven successful in bringing peace and harmony to his country. It would be feasible for Sinhala to adopt his methods to restore peace. We respect all religions and their beliefs, and no one should be compelled to abandon their faith. However, we request everyone to respect other religions as they do their own."

Hearing Mahamatya Yasoguta's suggestion, Raja Tissa contemplated it. After a few minutes, he looked at Mahamatya Yasoguta and said, "Mahamatya, I find your advice sound. We can seek suggestions or a solution from Samrat Ashoka. Let us send a message to him as you suggested, explaining our current situation, and await his response."

Mahamatya Yasoguta accepted this responsibility, bowed to Raja Devanampriyatissa, and returned to his seat. He began mentally composing the letter he would send to Samrat Ashoka.

Meanwhile, several groups of people from different parts of the country were waiting to meet Raja Devanampriyatissa, seeking his support and assistance on various matters. A group from the northeastern part of the country approached and complained that the people from Yavadvipa²⁹ and Siam³⁰ were attempting to seize their coastal territory. This situation disrupted the lives of fishermen and business ships trying to access Sinhala ports, causing significant disruptions to their businesses, and affecting both exports and imports.

Raja Tissa inquired, "What happened to the Prantapa³¹ and the local army responsible for protecting the area? How is it that the Yavadvipans are trying to capture it while our army is guarding it?"

The group leader replied, "Pranam Raja Devanampriyatissa, the Yavadvipans have bribed some of our soldiers in the area, providing them with intoxicating drinks and substances,

²⁹ Present-day Java island

³⁰ Present-day Thailand

³¹ The local area supervisor

allowing them to infiltrate our land. Although our Prantapal used the army to resist their land invasion, preventing their intrusion over the sea has become challenging, leading to these problems."

Raja Tissa was infuriated by the Yavadvipans for causing trouble and was now concerned about conflicts within the country and the challenges posed by the Yavadvipans. He assured the people that he would establish peace at the earliest and asked them to leave. Raja Tissa adjourned the Royal court for the day and wanted to discuss the matters with his ministers. He instructed Mahamatya Yasoguta to include the northeastern situation and the Yavadvipans invasion in the letter he was going to compose to Samrat Ashoka, to which Mahamatya Yasoguta agreed.

Mahamatya Yasoguta pondered the rising problems in the kingdom. As the Mahamatya of Sinhala, he was unable to provide a solution to control the situation. He understood that the people in the kingdom were divided over their religions and beliefs, neglecting the nation's well-being and protection. Taking advantage of this situation, enemies were attacking the country, which deeply troubled him. He entered his home, and his wife Somali, rushed to him, appearing frightened and gasping for breath. Yasoguta was shocked by her condition and asked, "Devi, what has happened? Why are you frightened and gasping? Is everything all right?"

Somali replied, "Natha, communal fights are escalating daily. Vasudha, our chief cook, lost her husband to a mob because they had a Shiva Linga in their house and worshipped it. She fled with her two children and sought refuge in our home. The mob attempted to enter our house as well, but your security personnel drove them away. Our children and I feel very insecure here, and I don't know how to protect ourselves." She began to weep.

Yasoguta now grasped the gravity of the situation in the country. If rebels could attempt to attack the house of the Sinhala Mahamatya, there was little assurance of security for the common people in the country. He headed straight to his room, opened the red cloth scroll, and began composing the letter to Samrat Ashoka.



Chapter 6 (The Bad Dream)

Ayapali left the Durbar hall and walked towards Sumana's chamber. Sumana, her five-year-old son, was sitting on a wooden horse swing and playing with his wooden and cotton toys. Ayapali rushed to him, took him into her arms, hugged, kissed, and cuddled him. Sumana was very happy to see his mother and hugged her back. Ayapali and Sumana moved to her anthapura³². She played with Sumana for a few hours and fed him. Both Sumana and Ayapali were tired and fell asleep. Champa came, took Sumana, and placed him in a small bed nearby, then she left.

Agnibrahma was fearlessly fighting and leading toward victory. He was chasing a few enemy soldiers and had almost entered the enemy's area. Slowly, the enemy soldiers surrounded Agnibrahma, and their numbers were almost fifty. While Agnibrahma was combating the enemy soldiers in front of him, the soldiers from behind attacked him with arrows, swords, and spears. Agnibrahma was deeply injured, and meanwhile, the Turkmenistan Tekke leader took his long sword and beheaded Agnibrahma.

With a scream and shouting "Natha," Ayapali woke up from her weird dream, gasping and sweating a lot. Hearing her scream, her attendants rushed to her and consoled her. She drank a glass of water but was still gasping. Champa was next to her, taking care of her, and Ayapali's eyes were filled with tears as she hugged Champa. Ayapali told Champa that she had a very bad dream about Agnibrahma and was frightened. Champa consoled Ayapali, encouraging her to be brave and confident. She expressed her confidence in Agnibrahma's valor to defeat the enemies and return with victory.

Ayapali's scream and the commotion woke up Sumana, and he started crying. Champa took him and brought him to Ayapali. Ayapali was still shivering with fear and couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. She held Sumana in her arms, trying to make him sleep, and asked Champa to stay with her and not to leave her. Sumana eventually fell asleep in Ayapali's lap, and she gently placed him on the bed before lying down next to him, talking to Champa. It was about to dawn, and Ayapali and Champa eventually slipped into sleep. They woke up suddenly to the sound of a gong.

³² Private chamber

Champa rushed outside and inquired about the reason for the gong's sound. She learned that Rani Devi was arriving to meet Ayapali, so she hurried back inside Ayapali's anthapura to alert her. Ayapali got up from her bed and prepared herself to meet her mother, Rani Devi.

After a few moments, Rani Devi arrived at Ayapali's anthapura, and Ayapali went to welcome her. It had been about six months since they last met. Ayapali bowed and touched her mother's feet, and Rani Devi blessed her. They both took nearby seats and sat down. Rani Devi expressed her concern for Ayapali's well-being and asked for updates about Gandahar and her journey. Ayapali shared some updates about Gandahar and her journey and inquired about the current situation in Pataliputra and the ongoing ceremonies in the country and the palace.

Rani Devi fell silent for a few moments and then spoke, "A king should only fight wars to protect his kingdom and people, not out of greed, haste, anger, or revenge. Engaging in such wars can cause great grief and a huge loss to the country and its people. The war in Gandahar you participated in was to save our motherland and its people from enemies. However, your father had developed a grudge against the king of Kalinga because he was told that your step-uncle Sugatra was hiding there with the loot he took away from our kingdom. The king of Kalinga resisted and rejected your father's offers to hand over your step-uncle and the wealth, which led to your father declaring war. You are aware of all this. For as long as I have known your father, I have been urging him to embrace ahimsa³³ and end wars, which would bring him immense peace. But it took a long time and cost many lives before he understood the importance of ahimsa and peace. Now, your father wishes to embrace Buddhism and establish peace across the land. Before that, he wanted to make some key decisions and have discussions with all his subordinate kings and rulers. When is Veer Agnibrahma coming back to Pataliputra? Samrat³⁴ wants to talk to both you and Agnibrahma about establishing peace and harmony. He is deeply concerned about the welfare of the country and its people. Now, I am going to the main hall where there will be a meditation session. You should get ready and join us there." Rani Devi got up from her seat and walked out of Ayapali's anthapura, leaving Ayapali looking at her mother's departing figure with no reaction on her face.

Ayapali was sitting back and looking at her son Sumana sleeping with an innocent smile on his face, not knowing the facts of life's struggles. Champa came and alerted Ayapali to get ready

³³ Non-violence

³⁴ The Emperor

for the meditation. Ayapali stood up and started walking to get ready for the meditation, her mind restlessly thinking of Agnibrahma, the Gandahar war, and the situation in Pataliputra.

Ayapali went to the main hall where all the monks, Mahendra, and other family members gathered for meditation. Everyone had an allocated seat with a red cushioned carpet a few flowers and a Japa mala³⁵ in front of them. The hall was silent and decorated with red and orange flowers, filling the air with a fascinating and soothing fragrance.

Ayapali took a seat in one of the corners. The key members of the family were provided with white silk cushioned carpets in the front rows, and Rani Devi was sitting in the middle of the seats. On a slightly elevated platform, there was an aged monk with dark red robes who was meditating with his eyes closed. He seemed to be already connected with the cosmic world and almost looked like an idol.

One of the Bhikkhus came to Ayapali and requested her to sit in the front row seats allocated to the royal family. Ayapali declined with respect, stating that she was comfortable where she was and did not wish to move.

The hall filled with the pleasant rhythmic sound of a hymn narrated by one of the monks on the elevated platform, and everyone closed their eyes and started to meditate. Ayapali tried to concentrate and meditate, but her thoughts were wandering, and she found it difficult to focus. She felt bad, nervous, and uncomfortable in that place. Her mind was overwhelmed with thoughts about Agnibrahma, the Gandahar War, the country, the future of the country, and its people. She also thought about Sumana and his future, wondering if he would become a monk like her brother. She was thinking about why Samrat wanted to involve the entire country and the royal family in embracing Buddhism. She pondered why the learned ministers in her father's court couldn't guide and offer suggestions to him and why Mahamatya Radhagupth was not involved in solving this issue. The weight of these thoughts made Ayapali's head spin, and she couldn't bear it, leading her to faint on the ground.

Champa, who was waiting nearby, rushed in with two attendants and gently carried Ayapali away without disrupting the meditation ceremony.

³⁵ String of 108 beads

Ayapali was taken to her anthapura and put on her bed, she was given some medicated basil water and fanned with a cool breeze. A paste made of camphor and sandalwood was applied to her forehead, palms, and feet. She was relaxing and getting better.

After a few hours, Ayapali was sitting on her bed and was lost in her thoughts. Champa was feeding Sumana. Bhadrani the head maid of Rani Devi arrived at Ayapali's anthapura, she walked to Ayapali and asked "How are you doing now? I think you became sick due to the long journey and lack of good food and sleep. Rani Devi is involved in some other rituals and she will not be free until sunset today. She wanted me to take care of you and your welfare." Ayapali returning from her thoughts saw Bhadrani. Bhadrani was a fostermother to Ayapali. At the time of Ayapali's birth, Rani Devi became very sick and was bedridden, at that time Bhadrani became a foster mother to Ayapali and took care of her until she was 3 years old. Ayapali and Bhadrani share good love and affection toward each other. Champa is Bhadrani's niece.

Tears started to roll down from Ayapali's eyes seeing Bhadrani, she hugged her at once and said "I feel much better now, but I don't feel comfortable, my thoughts are all over, my biggest question is why did Samrat decide to bring the entire nation and its people into Buddhism? What are the thoughts of Samrat on the nation's administration? Brother Mahendra is also in meditation and will not take care of the kingdom, Agnibrahma is complacent and restricted to Ujjain and doesn't want to become the king of this Akhanda Bharatavani³⁶, If there is no king or ruler then the enemies will ride on us like hungry wolves and foxes. What happens to me, Rani Devi, Rani Asandhimitra, and others, I know I might be thinking beyond my age and responsibility but these should be answered."

Bhadrani comprehended Ayapali's concerns and tried to address them. "My dear, I understand your worries, fears, patriotism, and your contemplation for the future. Do you believe that Samrat made this decision without pondering its consequences and outcomes? It wasn't an easy choice for him. After his return from the Kalinga war, we were all elated and joyful about the victory. However, Samrat seemed lost in contemplation. We had never seen him in such a state of mind before. He used to display his valor after triumphing in battles or conquering kingdoms. Even the soldiers, commanders, and others who participated in the Kalinga war appeared despondent. Most of them suffered injuries, and amputations, and fewer than half of the soldiers returned from the war. Witnessing their condition devastated many families. The plight of the

³⁶ Indian sub-continent (Persia to Mynamar)

widows, orphaned children, and elderly parents who lost their sons in the war is unimaginable. Pataliputra resonated with more cries and sorrow than celebrations. The initial enthusiasm for victory waned as soon as the soldiers and Samrat entered Pataliputra. Instead of receiving praise, the citizens began to criticize him. Samrat was deeply affected by the citizens' emotions and condemnation. He was overwhelmed with grief and secluded himself for two days in his aantarangika mandapa³⁷. On the third day, he emerged and met Rani Devi. They engaged in extensive discussions, which led Samrat to the decision to embrace Buddhism. He desired that people make their own choices and embrace Buddhism voluntarily, without any coercion. He believed that Buddhism could bestow peace upon the minds and the nation. While the past cannot be rewritten, it can craft a luminous and serene future for the generations to come. He aspires to promote tranquility and unity among all humanity, eradicating hatred and putting an end to wars between kings and kingdoms. Consider the plight of our soldiers; now imagine the condition of the Kalinga soldiers and civilians. I cannot fathom how they endured and survived."

Upon hearing Bhadrani's words, Ayapali slowly rose from her bed and walked over to where Sumana was engrossed in playing with his toys. Unbeknownst to her, tears streamed down her cheeks as she envisioned the war scene, picturing the lives lost and the bodies maimed, leaving families bereft as they dedicated themselves to Samrat. The recollection of the battle where she fought and took a life, along with thoughts of Agnibrahma and the situation in Gandahar, shook her deeply. Gradually, she succumbed to unconsciousness once more, collapsing onto the floor. Bhadrani and Champa hurriedly rushed to Ayapali's aid, calling for assistance.



³⁷ A personal chamber for solitude

Chapter 7 (Sanghamitra)

Ayapali woke up in her bed. She had a wet cloth on her forehead, and her feet and hands were being massaged with herbal oils. She felt very relaxed and energetic, but she also felt weak somewhere. Rani Devi was sitting beside her, watching over her. Bhadrani and Champa were by Ayapali's bedside. Champa brought some soup and cut fruits with nuts, which Ayapali consumed.

Rani Devi was deeply concerned about Ayapali's well-being. The Vaidya gave some medicine and instructed Ayapali to take it with milk. Champa promptly prepared the medicine and milk for Ayapali. Rani Devi held Ayapali close to her heart and asked, "My dear, are you troubled by the events around you? Are you worried about yourself, Agnibrhma, and Sumana? Or perhaps you have many thoughts about Agnibrahma and the Gandahar? Please, dear, I can't stand to see you like this; it's distressing."

Ayapali gently moved away from her mother's embrace and replied, "Mother, I'm doing better now. I'm not worried about anything or anyone. I have faith in Agnibrahma's courage and skills; he will return victorious. Sumana is content here, and there are many people to care for him even in my absence. However, I can't stop thinking about the devastation and suffering in Kalinga. Those people are innocent, patriots who sacrificed their lives for their nation, dedicating themselves to defending it against their enemies. I want to go to Kalinga and assist them in recovering from their losses. I want to provide aid to the injured, support the affected, and help rebuild their shattered lives. This would satisfy me and help erase the stain caused by this war. I ask for your permission to embark on my mission to Kalinga."

Rani Devi admired Ayapali's noble intentions and said, "My child, you have a heart of gold, and I bless you. You may go on your mission to Kalinga and serve there, but please remember that similar service is also needed for the people here, who have suffered great losses and are broken. Think of ways to assist them, and then you may proceed to Kalinga."

With her mother's blessing, Ayapali promised to return with a plan to execute her mission in both Pataliputra and Kalinga. She felt much more relaxed as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her head. She turned to Champa and asked her to take care of Sumana while she went to take a shower.

Meanwhile, a letter arrived from Gandahar, brought by Vayuvega. The letter mentioned that Agnibrahma had won the war and captured all the surviving Turkmenistan Tekke rebel leaders and soldiers. He had begun his journey back to Pataliputra with the soldiers and others who had accompanied him. He would return to Pataliputra in a few months and wanted to share this news with the Samrat.

Ayapali was overwhelmed with joy upon hearing the news. She believed that the good times had begun and that everything would soon return to normal. She devised a plan to assist the war refugees in Kalinga and Pataliputra and sent a messenger to Rani Devi to discuss her plans.

Later that day, Rani Devi and Ayapali sat on the palace lawn, where Ayapali explained her plan. She requested a few attendants, a list of herbal medicines, and a few Vaidyas to accompany her to Kalinga for the mission. Additionally, she needed clothing, food grains, pulses, and edible oils to distribute among the refugees. Ayapali intended to set up tents in Pataliputra, where those in need of medical assistance could receive treatment. She instructed her entourage to distribute the necessary food grains, pulses, and edible oils to the families of the soldiers who had fought in the Kalinga war. Ayapali also wanted to provide moral support to those families who had lost loved ones in the conflict, personally spending time with them to reassure them of the royal family's support. She was willing to extend her assistance in any other way that the people required to rebuild their lives.

Upon hearing Ayapali's plan, Rani Devi was greatly impressed. She told Ayapali that she would now be known as "**Sanghamitra**"³⁸. Rani Devi praised her good heart and deeds, acknowledging that they would help and support the people. She assured Ayapali that she would receive everything she had requested and urged her to find a suitable day and time to go to Kalinga, planning to return before Agnibrahma reached Pataliputra.

Ayapali was delighted with her new name, **Sanghamitra**. She received her mother's blessings and enthusiastically set out to accomplish her tasks.

As Ayapali made her arrangements to go on her mission, Rani Devi wanted to leave for Vidisagiri³⁹.



³⁸ Socially friendly person

³⁹ Present-day Vidhisha

Chapter 8 (The Rise Of Conflict)

A wealthy Yakkha merchant staggered into his house, completely intoxicated and out of control. The dimly lit house hindered his ability to walk and see clearly, causing him to collide with nearly everything in the spacious hall. He struggled to make his way toward his bedroom, ultimately stumbling and hitting a nearby table. As he teetered on the brink of falling flat on his face, fortune intervened in the form of a servant maid who happened to be lighting lamps in the room. She rushed to his aid, preventing his fall.

The servant maid, a young Naga clan girl in her mid-twenties, found herself in an uncomfortable situation. The intoxicated merchant, in a moment of misguided affection, hugged her, and his inappropriate advances left her frightened. He pushed her onto the bed, and the girl, alarmed, screamed for help.

Hearing her distress, the merchant's younger brother entered the room and, without hesitation, struck the servant girl forcefully, causing her to faint. Realizing the gravity of the situation, he feared the consequences if the girl were to disclose the incident to others. In a desperate attempt to conceal the incident, he dragged the unconscious girl to the backyard, doused her with oil, and set her ablaze. Tragically, the girl met a fiery demise. Another Naga servant, concealed in the shadows of the hall, witnessed this horrifying act and silently fled the house.

The Naga woman ran to her community, crying bitterly and unable to stifle her screams. People gathered around her, eager to learn the cause of her distress. She wasted no time recounting the gruesome events at the Yakkha merchant's house. The revelation incited anger among the onlookers, particularly the father and brother of the deceased Naga girl, who reacted violently. They rushed toward the merchant's house, followed by an enraged mob. Together, they set fire to the merchant's residence, resulting in the deaths of all the merchant's family members.

Upon witnessing the chaos, other Yakkha individuals armed themselves with swords, spears, and long sticks, preparing to confront the Naga mob. A fierce clash erupted between the two factions, and news of the conflict quickly reached the palace, prompting soldiers to be dispatched to the scene.

The soldiers arrived at the scene and discerned the cause of the unrest. A factional division had emerged among the soldiers themselves, with some aligning with the Yakkhas and others with

the Nagas. The situation had spiraled out of control. A trusted aide of Mahamatya Yasoguta rushed to the palace to apprise Mahamatya of the crisis.

Mahamatya Yasoguta, accompanied by the Senapathi (*Chief Army Commander*) and a battalion of soldiers, swiftly arrived at the conflict zone and managed to bring the situation under control. Word of the unrest reached Raja Devanampriyatissa, who expressed deep concern for the nation's well-being.

As the evening wore on, conflicts, clashes, and mobs were quelled, leaving behind a landscape marked by smoldering ruins, cries, and screams. Guarded by soldiers, the affected areas remained tense. Raja Tissa convened a meeting with Mahamatya and other ministers to address the worsening situation.

Raja Tissa said, "While it has been relatively easy to wage wars against external enemies, maintaining peace within our borders is proving to be increasingly complex. Mahamatya, have you dispatched the letter to Samrat Ashoka, seeking assistance in this dire situation? What immediate actions can we take to regain control over these conflicts?"

Mahamatya replied, "Devaanampiya, I sent the letter to Samrat Ashoka late last night through a trusted envoy. He is the fastest Aswachodaka (*Jockey*) and should reach Pataliputra by tomorrow evening. I have provided a detailed account of the situation here, emphasizing the urgency of our plight and requesting his aid. I am confident that we will receive a prompt response and substantial support from Samrat Ashoka. I have also ensured that the soldiers prioritize the protection and security of our nation over any affiliations or divisions among races or clans. The Senapathi has issued strict orders to punish those who incite trouble. For now, the situation is under control."

Despite his apprehension, Raja Tissa found solace in the hope that Samrat Ashoka would send his army to restore order. The meeting drew to a close, but a messenger waited with important information.

The messenger entered and delivered grave news: Yavadvipa and Siam enemy troops were approaching Sinhala with their sea fleet, raising the specter of war between them. Silence fell over the gathering as they contemplated the uncertain future.



Chapter 9 (The Rescue)

It was the first prahar of the night, and the entire city was sleeping, except for the night vigil soldiers; there were no civilians to be seen. The main entrance mammoth wooden doors to Pataliputra were closed. A man in his early thirties, wearing maroon and yellow robes and wrapped in a black apron with a maroon turban and a long sword, had arrived on his horse at the Pataliputra main entrance. However, his calculations went awry, and he was delayed in reaching there due to unexpected rain on his route. He stopped in front of the main door, dismounted from his horse, walked a few steps, tied his exhausted horse to a nearby pole, and approached the main entrance. Uncertain about how to enter the city in the darkness with the doors closed, all he could see were two torches burning on both sides of the entrance door. Hesitating to knock on the door, he tried to find a smaller entrance where he could speak to someone or peer inside. Unbeknownst to him, some soldiers on night patrol were watching him from atop the tall entrance walls. After several unsuccessful attempts, he approached the main entrance door and prepared to knock. To his surprise, ten soldiers surrounded and captured him from all sides.

The captured person was tied to a pole near the entrance door and was questioned by a soldier who appeared to be the night sentry. The captured person explained that he was coming from Anuradhapura of Sinhala to request the help of Samrat Ashoka and that he had a letter from his king, Devaanampiya, addressed to Samrat Ashoka. The sentry took the letter from a capsule that was hanging from the captured person and opened it. Inside, he found a red scroll sealed with the mark of Sinhala. He immediately ordered his soldiers to release the captured person, expressing his apologies and stating that it was their duty to safeguard the entrance, and they had to be cautious about anyone approaching after the main entrance was closed. The soldiers untied the captured person, and he expressed his gratitude. He was then escorted inside Pataliputra and brought to Mahamatya Radhagupth.

At the beginning of the next prahar, Mahamatya Radhagupth emerged from his residence and met with the soldier and the person who had come from Sinhala. The visitor from Sinhala introduced himself, and he gave a golden chest filled with many spices and gifts sent by Raja Devaanampiyatissa. He said, "Pranam, my name is Kapila. I have come here on the instructions of Sinhala's Mahamatya Yasoguta. We are facing a dire situation in Sinhala, and our Samrat wishes to seek support and assistance from Samrat Ashoka. I carry a letter from them." He

respectfully handed over the scroll to Mahamatya Radhagupth. Radhagupth received the scroll and opened it to read. He first noticed the Sinhala seal at the bottom of the letter, confirming its authenticity. He then instructed his soldier to arrange accommodation for Kapila and requested that Kapila be brought to the court hall in the morning.

The following morning, in the court hall, Mahamatya Radhagupth summoned his army chiefs and other ministers. Kapila sat in the court hall, eagerly awaiting a solution and support to protect his country. Before addressing the council of ministers and the army chiefs, Radhagupth read the Sinhala scroll once again and provided a summary to everyone present. He said, "Samrat Ashoka and King Devanampriyatissa have enjoyed cordial relations, engaging in foreign trade and cultural exchange. As we receive this letter from Sinhala seeking our help to bring peace to their country, we must do everything in our power to assist them. Despite the challenges we faced after the Kalinga war, our army is in the process of rejuvenation, and Samrat Ashoka is currently in seclusion. However, these circumstances should not deter us from aiding our friendly nation. Raja Tissa and the people of Sinhala place great hope in receiving support from Magadha Samrajya. Therefore, we shall work on the necessary arrangements and take appropriate action by tomorrow. In the meantime, Kapila, you shall be our guest." Kapila was then escorted to his accommodation. Radhagupth held discussions with his council of ministers and army chiefs to plan the assistance they would provide to the Sinhala people and their kingdom.

The discussions went on till evening and it was decided that a battalion of six hundred well-trained soldiers from Amaravathi in the south would be sent to Sinhala in three ships and they would stay there until all the riots were suppressed, the people of Sinhala felt comforted and the situation was back to normal.

It was dinner time, Kapila was invited to the dinner hall, and Mahamatya Radhagupth was present there. After the dinner, Mahamatya Radhagupth explained to Kapila about the plan and asked him to go back to Sinhala the next day and the Maurya soldiers would arrive in Sinhala at the earliest for their rescue.

Kapila felt happy and was satisfied as his trip didn't go to waste. He returned to his accommodation to prepare to leave the next morning for Sinhala.



Chapter 10 (The Noble Service)

Ayapali is now revered as Sanghamitra. Sanghamitra, after consulting with a few ministers and administrative heads of her father's court, made the necessary arrangements. She selected the best Vaidyas (*doctors*) to treat the war victims. A few senior Vaidyas accompanied her to Kalinga, and she ordered the establishment of camps in and around Pataliputra to provide the best possible treatment to the war victims with the remaining identified Vaidyas.

Sanghamitra also requested her old friend Soudhamini to lead and oversee the Pataliputra camps for distributing food grains and pulses and providing necessary treatment to the injured soldiers. Sanghamitra set off for Kalinga with her Vaidyas, assistants, workers, and other individuals to assist. She brought loads of pulses, grains, oils, and edible items, along with medicinal herbs, plants, and other materials for treating the injured people in Kalinga.

Sanghamitra was assisted by Champa on her travel. After four days of travel, Sanghamitra and her convoy reached the outskirts of Kalinga. The convoy displayed different flags and placards of the Maghadha empire, clearly indicating its association with the Princess of Magadha. As the convoy approached Kalinga, the local people, fearing another war or harm, hid in their homes to protect themselves.

Upon arriving at the location, Sanghamitra found only deserted houses and desolate places. Recognizing the situation, she instructed her team to find a suitable place to set up tents. She also directed some to announce the presence of medical camps and the distribution of food items. She aimed to spread the word that they were there to help and be a part of the community. Her instructions were followed as the tents were erected, and announcements were made regarding food distribution and medical support.

Initially, the people in hiding were hesitant to accept the announcements and come out. However, one elderly person took the courage to approach one of the tents, where he received a warm welcome and food to eat. The team in the tents identified the needs of the elderly man's family and provided them with essential food grains, pulses, and medicines. Encouraged by this, the elderly man returned to his hideout and shared the news, leading more people to come out and move towards the tents.

Sanghamitra was delighted and actively became a part of her working team, offering assistance and support. As days passed, she witnessed the suffering of the injured, orphaned children,

widowed women, and grieving parents who had lost their young ones in the war. These interactions weighed heavily on Sanghamitra, leaving her deeply saddened by the situation.

The camps gained momentum, operating from early morning to late evening, sometimes even until midnight. The number of injured people seemed endless, underscoring the magnitude of the war.

One day, Sanghamitra called upon one of her trusted assistants, Vasistapal, and expressed her desire to visit the Kalinga battlefield. With some hesitation, Vasistapal agreed to accompany Sanghamitra. Along with a few attendants, they traveled to the Kalinga battlefield. Although it had been almost a month since the war, they still saw people cremating bodies on pyres. Piles of broken weapons, chariots, and other war equipment were scattered around. In the distance, people were disposing of dead horses, camels, and elephants in large pits dug in the ground. The air was filled with a foul odor, and Sanghamitra could see bloodstains on the ground as if rivers of blood had flowed. The sight overwhelmed her, causing nausea. She hurried back to her chariot, where she vomited and continued to feel sick. Vasistapal and the others quickly decided to return as well, with Sanghamitra still experiencing nausea.

After returning from the Kalinga battlefield, Sanghamitra needed a whole day to recover and return to her normal state. She gradually began to understand the reasons behind her father's pursuit of peace and his embrace of Buddhism.

Sanghamitra made sure to meet all the people who had received medical support and assistance from her team. She visited every house, met with every individual, and conveyed her apologies for the events that occurred during the war. She assured them of peace and harmony, promising to safeguard future generations. Her remorse and the pain she felt for witnessing the devastation caused by the war were evident to everyone.

Sanghamitra noticed that there were over 300 children who had become orphans or lost their fathers in the war. They ranged in age from 2 months to 16 years, with more girls than boys among them. She was concerned about their future and gathered information about nearby Gurus, Gurukuls, and scholars. She called for a meeting with them.

One fine morning, all the Gurus, Gurukul heads, and scholars gathered together. Sanghamitra expressed her intention to care for all these children, taking responsibility for sheltering them, food, necessities, and education.

The local community cheered and expressed their happiness. All the Gurus, Gurukul heads, and scholars praised Sanghamitra's decision and lauded her good deeds.

Sanghamitra sent a messenger to Pataliputra, addressing Mahamatya Radhagupth and seeking support for the rehabilitation of war-affected people, the establishment of necessary Gurukuls for the children, and support for the Gurus, Gurukul heads, and scholars. Impressed, Radhagupth sent his approval message along with trusted individuals bearing the required monetary funds for Sanghamitra.

The residents gained confidence in Sanghamitra and celebrated her efforts. The work to set up Gurukuls and Paathashalaas (*Schools*) began, and within a month, everything was ready. They found an auspicious time and inaugurated these institutions. Sanghamitra was pleased to achieve her goal and set off back to Pataliputra, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Agnibrahma.



Chapter 11 (The 3rd Council)

Samrat Ashoka completely immersed himself in the devotion to Gautama Buddha's teachings. He began to spend a significant part of his wealth on the construction of numerous stupas, pillars, temples, and viharas⁴⁰ in the Magadha kingdom. He governed the country according to Dharma, as taught by Gautama Buddha. Many people, including teachers and leaders from other religions, started converting to Buddhism. However, this influx led to unexpected issues. Some individuals, without formally becoming Bhikkus, merely shaved their heads and adopted the attire of Buddhist monks to take advantage of the free shelter and food provided by the viharas. Teachers and followers of other faiths also exploited the benefits of the viharas, spreading incorrect messages and teachings. Some individuals, posing as monks, engaged in deceptive practices to exploit the goodwill of unsuspecting civilians.

A few monks and Bhikkus who had spent time in the viharas began crafting their interpretations of Dharma texts and disseminating them. Unfortunately, Samrat Ashoka's original intent of spreading peace and Dharma started to lose its focus. Some dishonest monks emerged, collecting money under the guise of promoting Buddhism. Upon learning of these issues, Samrat Ashoka felt a deep concern and contemplated ways to address these challenges.

It was discovered that different schools of thought were teaching their versions of Dharma and Vinaya⁴¹, leading to conflicts among monks from different schools. These conflicts started to affect communal harmony and fostered misconceptions about Buddhism and the teachings of Gautama Buddha among the people. To resolve these issues, Samrat Ashoka engaged in lengthy discussions with Upagupta and sought a solution.

Upagupta suggested inviting the knowledgeable Thera Moggaliputtatissa to address the problems. Moggaliputtatissa, born in Pataliputra, had become an Arhat and was well-known for practicing Theravada⁴² Buddhism. Samrat Ashoka agreed with Upagupta's suggestion and invited Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa, who was residing in the Ahoganga mountains, to Pataliputra.

⁴⁰ A residence for monks, a centre for religious work and meditation and a centre of Buddhist learning

⁴¹ A disciplinary code for self-training that the Buddha laid down for monks and nuns

⁴² A type of Buddhism that originated in India. It's based on the original teachings of the Buddha

Samrat Ashoka constructed a massive monastery named Ashokarama in Pataliputra, intending to dedicate it to the Sangha under the guidance of Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa. As desired by Ashoka, Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa organized a festival to inaugurate and dedicate the Ashokarama monastery. During the festival, Samrat Ashoka asked Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa about his efforts to support the Sangha and spread the teachings of Tathagata. In response, Moggaliputtatissa emphasized that mere wealth and construction were insufficient; true devotion involved allowing one's children to enter the Sangha. Inspired by this, Samrat Ashoka approached his son, Rajkumar Mahendra, who willingly became a Bhikku to serve the Sangha.

Samrat Ashoka briefed Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa on the prevailing issues in Pataliputra and Bharatavarsha⁴³, particularly concerning malpractices in Buddhist temples and viharas. In response, Moggaliputtatissa explained the historical development of different Vinayas after Gautama Buddha's final nirvana, highlighting the conflicts between the Mahasanghikas and the Sthaviras (*Buddhist Council 1, and Buddhist Council 2*).

Upon hearing this, Samrat Ashoka agreed with Mahathera Moggaliputtatissa's suggestion to convene a Council of Elders. The council, held at Ashokarama with 1000 Arhats and Theras under Moggaliputtatissa's guidance, aimed to purify Buddhism from opportunistic factions and corruption in the Sangha. Samrat Ashoka actively participated in the council alongside his son Mahendra. The primary objective was to send missionaries to other countries to preach Dharma, propagate the values of the Sangha, and promote peace.

Following the council's conclusion, it was decided to dispatch missionaries to various locations, including Kashyapa Rajya (*Kashmir*), Gandhara (*Kandahar*), Mahisamandala (*Karnataka*), Vanavasi (*Tamilnadu*), Aparantaka (*Northern Gujarat, Kathiawar, Kachch, and Sindh*), Maharatta (*Maharashtra*), Yona (*Greek*), Himavantha (*Nepal*), Suvarnabhumi (*Thailand*), and Sinhala Dweepa (*Sri Lanka*).



⁴³ Indian sub-continent

Chapter 12 (The Peace Mission)

Mahamatya Radhagupta was seated with his council of ministers, discussing the plan to send soldiers to Sinhala. Radhagupta was troubled by the circumstances. Still reeling from the irreversible damage caused by the Kalinga war, Samrat Ashoka questioned the wisdom of dispatching Mauryan soldiers to Sinhala to quell their internal riots. He worried that such a decision could further disrupt the peace, given the recent devastation caused by warfare. Ashoka sought alternative solutions to pacify the unrest in Sinhala, hoping for suggestions from his council of ministers.

Despite a lengthy discussion, no resolution emerged from his subordinates. Radhagupta felt the need to find solace and ponder a solution in solitude. He dismissed his subordinates and assumed a meditative posture, focusing all his senses. After a while, he felt a profound clarity and walked towards the royal chambers to meet Samrat Ashoka.

Mahamatya Radhagupta arrived at the royal chambers and dispatched a messenger to request permission to see Samrat Ashoka. After a brief wait, Radhagupta was granted an audience with Samrat Ashoka.

Upon seeing Samrat Ashoka, Radhagupta paid his respects with a Pranam. Ashoka, dressed in white robes, was seated on a cushion on the ground, with his legs crossed and his hands resting in his lap. His eyes were half-closed, and he appeared to be in a state of deep tranquility. The chamber was softly lit and had a subtle lavender scent. A cushion was arranged opposite Ashoka, and Radhagupta was invited to sit. Ashoka nodded, silently inquiring about the purpose of Mahamatya Radhagupta's visit.

Radhagupta then recounted the events in Sinhala, including their plea for assistance in restoring peace. Speaking in hushed tones, Samrat Ashoka responded, "Raja Tissa is one of my dearest friends, and we must support him in his quest for peace. However, I abhor the idea of more bloodshed. We must find an alternative through arbitration or negotiation to bring about peace."

Radhagupta concurred, saying, "Samrat, I share your sentiments, and I too wish to avoid further conflict. To achieve this, I propose sending our warships, not with soldiers, but with intellectual

peacemakers who can convey the message and convene religious leaders for an amicable solution. We will also include a few experienced diplomats to prevent any unforeseen complications. I am in the process of identifying wise individuals for this mission."

Samrat Ashoka seemed satisfied with this approach and suggested, "Mahamatya, we can send Mahendra on this mission. Raja Tissa is like family to me, and I cannot go there personally at this time. Therefore, I will send Mahendra as my representative to oversee matters in Sinhala and ensure that peace is restored and spread Dharma, Sangha, and teachings of Tathagata. Summon Mahendra."

Radhagupta promptly instructed a messenger outside the chamber to call for Mahendra.

Mahendra entered the chamber, and upon seeing him, Radhagupta greeted him warmly and exchanged pleasantries. Mahendra stood there with folded hands, bowing respectfully. His head was shaven, and he wore a simple white linen cloth with no adornments. Once a prince of great wealth and pride, he now stood before them in humility as a Bhikshu, having embraced Buddhism.

Mahendra bowed to Samrat Ashoka and said, "Samrat, please guide me. How can I be of service to you?"

Samrat Ashoka and Mahamatya Radhagupta fell into contemplative silence. Eventually, Ashoka spoke, "Mahendra, Raja Tissa of Sinhala faces a dire internal crisis marked by religious conflicts, which have disrupted peace and left the country vulnerable to attacks from neighboring nations. He is unable to deploy his army due to the ongoing riots and has requested our assistance. I am determined to help him and his country but do not want to resort to war. Instead, I wish to send a peace delegation under your leadership. Your task will be to oversee the mission's success. Mahamatya Radhagupta has devised a plan which he will discuss with you. Will you accept this mission, Mahendra?"

Mahendra's face lit up with responsibility and aim, and he replied, "Samrat, I will exert all efforts to restore peace in Sinhala without any bloodshed. I consider this mission an honor and will lead it with utmost dedication. Please bless me for its success. Mahamatya Radhagupta, I am eager to hear the details of our plan."

Impressed by Mahendra's commitment, Mahamatya Radhagupta took his leave from Samrat Ashoka and proceeded to discuss the rescue plan for Sinhala with Mahendra.

After explaining the plan to Mahendra, Mahamatya Radhagupta summoned his most skilled arbitrators and negotiators to join the mission.

Mahamatya Radhagupta also called upon his trusted aides and outlined the plan to them. He instructed them to prepare three warships, each equipped with two hundred highly skilled warriors, along with the necessary war equipment. Their mission was solely to protect the intellectual peacemakers and not to engage in warfare unless it became unavoidable.



Chapter 13 (Ashoka and Mahadevi)

Sanghamitra began her journey back to Pataliputra from Kalinga Desa, and her mission was successful. She could see happiness in the native people, and she had done her utmost to improve their livelihoods and make arrangements for their future. She provided essential medical support and organized educational opportunities for their children. She spread the message of peace wherever she went, feeling a deep sense of fulfillment as she returned.

She boarded her chariot with Champa, and their convoy set off. Champa was astonished by Sanghamitra's remarkable transformation from the fearless warrior she had witnessed in Gandahar a few months ago to the humble servant of the people she had become in Kalinga. She couldn't help but voice her doubts about Sanghamitra's dramatic change. Champa asked, "Devi, I have a question. You were a fearless warrior on the Gandahar battlefield, but now I see you serving the people selflessly. How did you undergo such a profound transformation? It's hard for me to believe my eyes, seeing these two extremes."

Sanghamitra smiled at Champa's question and replied, "Champa, to understand the reason for my transformation, you need to know some things about my childhood that you are unaware of. I'll share my story with you, and we can take some time to discuss it and put our journey aside for a while."

Champa felt excited and eager to hear Sanghamitra's childhood tales, and Sanghamitra began her narrative.

Approximately thirty years ago, there was a little violence rising in Ujjain. Samrat Bindusara appointed and deputed Rajkumar Ashoka to Ujjain as a Rajaprathinidhi⁴⁴. He served as a direct deputy of Samrat Bindusara. Rajkumar Ashoka governed Ujjain from Vidisagiri. On occasion, he would venture into the city to assess its conditions, ensure that the tax revenues were being appropriately utilized for the welfare of the people, and solicit feedback and suggestions from the locals.

⁴⁴ Viceroy

In Vidisagiri, there lived a family of Shakyas⁴⁵, descendants of Buddha, who had migrated from the northeastern region known as Eesanya Pradesha. They had started a small business, trading in cotton, pulses, and spices, all while practicing Buddhism. Among them was a teenage girl of extraordinary beauty, who seemed almost angelic. Although their business was flourishing, they were struggling to meet their tax obligations promptly.

News of this reached Rajaprathinidhi Ashoka, who grew increasingly frustrated by the delayed tax payments. He decided to personally visit the Shakyas to issue a warning about their tax responsibilities.

Upon his arrival, the Shakya family's daughter, who was managing the business, greeted Ashoka. Unaware of his identity, she asked, "How may I assist you? What would you like to purchase?" Ashoka, momentarily captivated by her beauty, was at a loss for words. Eventually, he regained his composure and revealed his identity, saying, "I am Rajaprathinidhi Ashoka Maurya, and I have come to inquire about the reason for the delay in your tax payments."

The girl rose from her seat and respectfully greeted Ashoka, saying, "Pranam Rajaprathinidhi. My father recently started this business after we migrated from Eesanya Pradesha. We are still in the process of establishing ourselves, and we will ensure timely tax payments. At present, my father is away, procuring additional merchandise for sale, and I am managing the business in his absence."

Ashoka inquired further and learned that the girl's name was Mahadevi Sakhyakumari, and her father was Devasetthi Shakya. Ashoka found her name charming and responded, "For now, I shall not impose a penalty for your delayed tax payment. However, be aware that I will not be as lenient next time. Please convey this message to your father as well." He then departed, feeling a strange infatuation.

Upon returning to his quarters, Ashoka found himself restless and eager to see Mahadevi again. He devised various excuses to visit her shop, even though he had little knowledge of spices, their names, or their uses. During one such visit, he asked for cloves while pointing to cardamoms and attempted to purchase black pepper by indicating other spices. Mahadevi, understanding his lack of knowledge, laughed gently and advised, "I believe you should send someone more knowledgeable about spices, like your cook, or specify the spice you require. Let's not waste your time or mine, especially during our peak business hours." She then

⁴⁵ an ancient eastern sub-Himalayan ethnicity and clan of north-eastern region of the Indian subcontinent

attended to other customers, leaving those around them surprised to witness the Rajaprathinidhi personally shopping for spices. Ashoka, feeling embarrassed, left the shop.

From that day onward, Ashoka frequented the marketplace for various reasons and often positioned himself in front of Mahadevi's shop. This continued for several days, and with each visit, Mahadevi observed Ashoka closely.

One day, Ashoka finally encountered Devasetthi Shakya, a practicing Buddhist with a calm and peaceful demeanor. Ashoka introduced himself, saying, "Shrestha⁴⁶, I am Rajkumar Ashoka Vardhana Maurya, the son of Samrat Bindhusara Maurya. Deputed as a Rajaprathinidhi here in Ujjain. I have been informed that you have been inconsistent in paying your taxes promptly. Your daughter, Mahadevi, informed me that your family recently began this business. While I issued a warning during my previous visit, I hope you have received the message. Please ensure regular tax payments."

Devasetthi, with his soothing voice, responded, "Pranams Arya. I received the message from my daughter, and I apologize for the delay in tax payment. I assure you it will not happen again. We recently moved here from Eesanya Pradehsa, and it took time to establish ourselves and initiate this business. I promise timely tax payments from now on."

Ashoka was impressed by Devasetthi's assurance and his manner of speaking. His visits to Mahadevi's shop continued, and he gradually started engaging in direct conversations with her. Mahadevi, however, attempted to keep her distance from Ashoka, showing more interest in her merchandise. While Mahadevi came from a Vaishya (*Merchant*) family, Ashoka belonged to the Kshatriya family.

Over time, Ashoka's affection for Mahadevi deepened, and he decided that he wanted to marry her. He approached Devasetthi Shakya along with his mother Subhadraangi with a marriage proposal for Mahadevi. Devasetthi found himself torn between accepting or rejecting the proposal and requested some time to discuss it with Mahadevi and other family members before making a decision.

Devasetthi initiated a conversation about the marriage proposal from Rajakumar Ashoka to Mahadevi. Devasetthi had certain concerns: (1) Ashoka's rough skin and numerous deep scars resulting from a childhood lion attack had left him with an unconventional appearance. (2) Mahadevi hailed from a Vaishya family, while Ashoka belonged to a Kshatriya family as the

⁴⁶ A notation for the merchant

son of Bindusara Maurya. (3) Devasetthi was well aware of Ashoka's challenging childhood, marked by humiliation due to his birth to Bindusara and Subhadra, a Brahmin lady. The royal family had not accepted Subhadra as the Pattamanishi⁴⁷ because she was not from the Kshatriya clan. Devasetthi worried that a similar situation might arise if Mahadevi married Ashoka. Moreover, (4) Mahadevi was a Buddhist practitioner, whereas Ashoka identified as a Nastik⁴⁸.

Deep in thought, Mahadevi deliberated before reaching a decision. After some time, she spoke to Devasetthi, saying, "Pitashri⁴⁹, I have considered all the aspects you mentioned and made up my mind. Ashoka's rough skin and scars will not change his love and affection for me. Since we are impermanent, why should we worry about temporary physical flaws? With my knowledge of herbal medicine, I can attempt to treat his skin roughness and scars. Ashoka has already developed love and affection for me without knowing my caste background, and I am more concerned about his love and affection than our family clans. As for our religious differences, I am willing to make a compromise with him: either he embraces Buddhism or does not interfere with my Buddhist beliefs. If Rajkumar Ashoka has no objections, I am ready to marry him. Nevertheless, I value your opinion, and you are my father and well-wisher."

The next day, when Rajkumar Ashoka visited Devasetthi's residence, he eagerly awaited the decision regarding the marriage proposal. Devasetthi welcomed Rajkumar Ashoka into his home and, with complete transparency, conveyed his discussion with Mahadevi. He said, "If you are aligned with Mahadevi and her principles, we can proceed with the wedding. I would be delighted to unite you both at the earliest auspicious muhurta."

Upon hearing Devasetthi's words, Ashoka felt overjoyed. He declared, "Although I am a Kshatriya and you are a Vaishya, my love for Mahadevi is based solely on our hearts and minds. I promise always to respect, honor, and take pride in Mahadevi as my wife. She will receive all the respect from my family and relatives. I have no intention of forcing Mahadevi to change her beliefs or abandon Buddhism. Her faith in God is her choice, just as my faith in our love is mine."

⁴⁷ Maharani. Chief Queen

⁴⁸ An Atheist

⁴⁹ Dear Father

Devasetthi and Mahadevi were elated after Rajkumar Ashoka confessed and agreed to Mahadevi's conditions. Devasetthi found an auspicious muhurta for the wedding, and Rajkumar Ashoka married Mahadevi in the presence of his mother Subhadrangi.

Rajkumar Ashoka, by nature, was a very short-tempered person who did not care for anyone. If he noticed something not going his way, he would become angry and did not hesitate to engage in arguments, quarrels, fights, or even attempts to harm his opponent. Mahadevi began to observe Rajkumar Ashoka closely after their marriage. She noticed his behavior and decided to persuade him to change his attitude, as it could hinder his life and future as the king's successor. She wanted to find moments to talk to Rajkumar Ashoka, fearing that he might become irritated and start a quarrel.

She tried to convey to him the importance of changing his attitude and, if necessary, embracing Buddhism to cultivate peace. It became a regular activity for Mahadevi, but Rajkumar Ashoka consistently argued that, as a ruler, he needed to be tough and resolute in making difficult decisions.

A year passed, and Mahadevi gave birth to a baby boy, they named the baby boy Mahendra. Mahadevi wanted her son not to follow in his father's footsteps and instead become a promoter of peace. However, Ashoka wanted Mahendra to receive a comprehensive education, acquire the necessary skills, and become an efficient Kshatriya for future rule. Mahadevi was not pleased with Ashoka's decision.

Rajaprathinidhi Ashoka was a very tough person, he administered harsh and often cruel punishments to lawbreakers and criminals, occasionally even ordering the death penalty. His methods earned him the nickname "Chanda Ashoka"⁵⁰. Mahadevi was unhappy about Ashoka being called "Chanda Ashoka" and wanted him to show more humanity and restraint when punishing criminals, but Ashoka consistently ignored her pleas.

Almost a year later, Ashoka traveled to Pataliputra with his mother Subhadrangi, his wife Mahadevi, and his son Mahendra. Mahadevi was pregnant with her second child. Bindusara was becoming old and wanted to identify his successor. The competition for the Magadha throne began among the sons of Samrat Bindusara Maurya, with Sushim, the eldest, aspiring to become king after Bindusara.

⁵⁰ The cruel Ashoka

The competition between the half-brothers was becoming severe, and they were plotting different schemes to eradicate each other. One of the half-brothers of Rajkumar Ashoka tried to kill Mahendra and pregnant Mahadevi. Rajkumar Ashoka came to know about the plot and could save Mahadevi and Mahendra. He felt it was not safe for them to be in Pataliputra, so he sent Mahadevi and Mahendra back to Vaidishi with his trustworthy people. He stayed in Pataliputra.

After a few days of returning to Vaidishi, Mahadevi gave birth to a baby girl, they named the girl Ayapali.

After the death of Samrat Bindusara Maurya, many incidents took place in the race for the Magadha throne. Rajkumar Ashoka Vardhana Maurya ascended to the throne of the Magadha empire with the help of Amatya Radhagupth. However, Mahadevi was not accepted as the Pattamanishi⁵¹ because she was not from the Kshatriya clan or any royal lineage. Later, Samrat Ashoka married Asandhimitra a princess from Asandhiwat Kingdom, who became the Rani. Unwilling to stay in Pataliputra Mahadevi stayed in Vidisagiri with Mahendra and Ayapali.

Mahadevi was in Vidisagiri with her children for five years before she came to Pataliputra. During those five years, Mahadevi taught Mahendra and Ayapali about Buddhism, service to the people, peace, harmony, and respect for all. She imparted the principles of life and how one should live in society.

As Sanghamitra narrated all this, she looked at Champa with a radiant smile. Champa was fascinated by the details of Ayapali's childhood and the reasons behind her kind heart.

Champa appeared satisfied and said, "Now I understand the source of your kind heart and your dedication to serving the people. Your Gurukul education molded you into a strong warrior and proficient in various fields. My father used to tell me that Acharya Chanakya designed the educational curriculum for all royal family members, and that explains why you all stand out."

The journey was halted for a night stay, it would commence the next day early morning and would continue for one day and night before they reached Pataliputra.

That night Sanghamitra had a weird dream, in her dream she saw Tathagata⁵² requesting Sanghamitra to give Sumana in his alms and told her that She and Sumana were born for a noble cause and it was time for her to give away Sumana to him. Sanghamitra was hesitant to

⁵¹ Maharani, Chief Queen

⁵² An enlightened one, Pali and Sanskrit names of Gautama Buddha

give away Sumana to Tathagata. She could see grownup Sumana being an Arhat and having many Bhikkus following him. Tathagata told her that Sumana was born with his blessings and to spread his message to the world. He also mentioned soon she would soon be starting her journey in the service of Tathagata. Sanghamitra bowed to Tathagata and gave Sumana's hand to Tathagata and bowed to him. Sanghamitra suddenly woke up from her sleep and was gasping, her heartbeat was fast, and she was coughing, hearing her Champa woke up and came to her and inquired about the reason for coughing. Sanghamitra narrated her dream to Champa for which she said "All these days you were doing the service and yesterday you narrated your parent's story, that could be the reason you had this dream which has no other relevance to Sumana, you can rest peacefully."

Sanghamitra was not convinced by Champa's words, she was still thinking of the dream and slowly slipped into her sleep.



Chapter 14 (Mission to Sinhala Dweepa)

Six years Sumana was dressed in white robes as a Samanera⁵³, with a shaved head, sitting next to Mahendra in the meditation hall. Despite his age, he seemed to have outgrown it, displaying immense maturity and disciplined behavior. In the past, he had learned all meditation techniques and rituals step by step under Rani Devi's guidance and his maternal uncle Mahendra's supervision.

In the meditation hall, three hundred monks were seated, with Mahendra in the front row alongside Bhaddasala, Sambala, Ittiya, Uttiya, Samanera Sumana, and Bhanduka Mahendra's cousin who had embraced Buddhism along with Mahendra. After prayer, there was a meditation session as the entire team prepared for the Sinhala mission. Outside the meditation hall, another seven hundred monks were meditating. Radhagupth observed them from his corridor, contemplating the success of the Sinhala mission and the establishment of peace and harmony.

After lunch, the monks bowed to a large statue of Buddha and packed their belongings for the journey to Sinhala. Outside the main entrance of Pataliputra, a hundred horse-drawn carts, each accommodating ten people, stood. Mahendra, along with Bhaddasala, Sambala, Ittiya, Uttiya, Samanera Sumana, and Bhanduka, boarded a chariot drawn by two horses, leading the other hundred carts. Another chariot carried four distinguished noblemen known for their intelligence and knowledge in negotiating and arbitrating situations. They all traveled for two days and two nights to reach Amaravathi in the south, where six hundred warriors would join them, and they would sail in three large warships to Sinhala.

The journey commenced with several horses in front of the carts carrying the Magadha empire symbols and Mauryan flags. The first row of horse riders blew horns to alert everyone that a convoy was following them as they headed south.

Radhagupth sent a message with his Vayuvega to Amaravathi Pranthpalak Jayavanth that the convoy started from Pataliputra and to make necessary arrangements for the Sinhala mission.

⁵³ A Buddhist monk below age of 20 years

Samanera Sumana was excited to be part of the mission, and appeared calm, suppressing his eagerness with a pleasant smile on his face as he sat next to Mahendra. Instead of a toy or doll, Sumana held a Japamala in his hand, his face glowing with purity and innocence.

Mahendra wanted to go to Vidisagiri where his mother Rani Devi is residing, he wanted to meet her and take her blessings before he moved ahead on his mission. The convoy made its way to Vidisagiri and from there to Amaravathi.

Just before sunset, Amaravathi Pranthpalak Jayavanth received the Vayuvega with a capsule tied to the falcon's leg. He understood the message was from Mahamathya Radhagupth, having received a similar message a week before for making necessary arrangements and identifying the six hundred soldiers for the Sinhala mission. Opening the capsule, he received the details, understanding that the convoy had left Pataliputra and would arrive in Amaravathi on the third day. Touched by the message, Jayavanth touched his forehead with the capsule in both hands as if it were a gift from the gods. Confident, his chest grew a few inches, he twisted his mustache with a heroic smile, and walked towards the open courtyard next to his place.

Jayavanth clapped his hands loudly; his horse came running, and he rode to a nearby place where soldiers were practicing combat exercises, testing the armory, and packing necessary goods for travel. As Jayavanth arrived, the sentry rang a bell, and all the soldiers aligned themselves, stopping their activities.

Still sitting on his horse, Jayavanth spoke loudly for all to hear. "Today, the convoy from Pataliputra left; they will be here on the third day. On the same night, all of you will travel to Sinhala on your mission. Remember, you are going there to establish peace and engage in combat only if it is inevitable. Ensure all required items are packed and arranged for convenient travel. You may complete the work for today and rest until you start to travel." All the soldiers cheered loudly and were excited. Jayavanth returned with the same speed as he came.

Amaravathi has already experienced the presence of Buddhism. The disciples of Upagupta started spreading the teachings of Buddha, and whoever was interested in Dharma was given a chance to embrace Buddhism. There is already a monastery and a stupa under construction.

A few elder Bhikkhus are running small monasteries under the canopy of large trees. Many families embraced Buddhism long ago, and they sent their children to those monasteries for education.

Jayavanth rode his horse, stopped, and dismounted. The place was covered with many trees, and the fragrance of the wildflowers was mesmerizing. The tranquility of the place was captivating, and the peace of mind one gets upon entering that place was amazing. The place is called Shanthi Vana.

Jayavanth removed his footwear and walked on the lush grass, which was soft and more comfortable than any carpet. Walking on that grass gave a wonderful experience and a massage to the feet, making the entire body relax. He walked a few yards, and there was a huge Banyan tree spreading its branches extensively, giving abundant shadow and a cool breeze. Many boys aged between 3 to 13 were meditating in that Banyan tree's shadow. On a little elevated place was Phushyamitra, the guru of those boys who were also in meditation.

Jayavanth wanted to wait until Phushyamitra came out of his meditation. As Jayavanth entered that area, even while walking on the grass without making any sound, Phushyamitra noticed that someone was coming towards them and opened his eyes. Jayavanth was standing at a distance, and Phushyamitra recognized him, waving his hand toward Jayavanth, and asking him to wait near the hermitage. Jayavanth walked towards the hermitage and waited there for Phushyamitra.

After a while, Phushyamitra came to the hermitage, and both Jayavanth and Phushyamitra bowed to each other. Phushyamitra offered water in a small earthen pot to Jayavanth; the water was cold and tasted very good. Jayavanth relaxed and started to speak, “Pranam⁵⁴, a convoy from Pataliputra has started and will be arriving in Amaravathi 3 days from today. There are 1,000 Bhikkhus, and Mahendra, along with Bhaddasala, Sambala, Ittiya, Uttiya, Samanera Sumana, and Bhanduka, accompanied by other noblemen, are arriving three days from now and will be leaving for Sinhala on the same night. I want to make the necessary arrangements for welcoming them to Amaravathi. I am not knowledgeable about those arrangements and want to hear from you. Please guide me.”

Phushyamitra was pleasant and had a mild smile on his face. In a whisper, he spoke, “You have brought very good information. I knew that they all were going to establish peace in Sinhala. You may happily return to your residence. I’ll send a few volunteers with all the information by the evening; they will help you in making all the required arrangements for the welcome ceremony. You make the other necessary arrangements for them to relax and for food.”

⁵⁴ A Respectful salute

Phushyamitra gave a few raisins to Jayavanth and asked him to eat them and return to his residence.

Jayavanth ate those raisins; they were very tasty. He had never had such wonderful raisins in his life, and at once he felt very energetic and relaxed. He stood up, made his Pranam to Phushyamitra, and walked towards his horse. He wore his footwear, and he was surprised to see that his horse looked more energetic than earlier. He sat on his horse and rode off.

In the evening, there were six Bhikkhus in front of Jayavanth's residence. He went and welcomed them into his residence with a lot of respect. Jayavanth also invited his key members who would be part of the welcome arrangements, and all of them discussed and worked out the plan. By the time they concluded the discussions, it was late at night. Jayavanth arranged dinner for all the guests. All of them dispersed after the dinner.

Two days passed. On the third day, early in the morning, a messenger came running to Jayavanth and said, "Arya, from the top of the hill, I spotted the convoy of chariots, carts, and a few horses that are coming towards Amaravathi. They all have our Magadha flags; they might be arriving here in another hour." He was still gasping. Jayavanth gave him a few gold coins and sent him. Jayavanth immediately called for one of his attendants and asked to make arrangements to go to the city entrance and call others for the welcome ceremony. He rushed inside to get ready for the ceremony.

There was a large gathering near the Amaravathi city entrance. Phushyamitra, along with his disciples and others, was already present there. Jayavanth had made arrangements for a group of people to play welcome music, garland the guests, and engage young girls to shower flowers on the guests as part of the welcome ceremony, inviting them into the city with a Tilak⁵⁵.

By the time all the arrangements for welcoming at the Amaravathi entrance were done all the chariots from Pataliputra had arrived. The guests were happy with the welcome ceremony. They all dismounted from their horses, chariots, and carts and walked into the city. Jayavanth had already made the necessary arrangements for all the people who had arrived from Pataliputra for their accommodation and food. All the people went to their designated places to relax and get ready for their journey to Sinhala that night.

⁵⁵ A red paste/powder made of saffron and turmeric, usually applied on the forehead

Phushyamisra had a meeting with Mahendra, Bhaddasala, Sambala, Ittiya, Uttiya, and Bhanduka. They all discussed the situation in Pataliputra and Sinhala. After some time, they all meditated for a while and dispersed for the lunch arranged by Jayavanth.

Three mammoth magnificent warships were ready on the Amaravathi shore. Already, the 600 soldiers who were ready from Amaravathi had boarded the ships and were waiting for the others. It had been one prahar after the sunset, and it was getting dark. All the 1,000 Bhikkhus boarded the three ships while chanting “*Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami, Dharmam Sharanam Gacchami.*” Mahendra boarded the ship along with his team and noblemen and bid farewell from the deck of the ship to the people of Amaravathi, Jayavanth, and Phushyamisra. The ships slowly moved out of the shore and sailed in the waters. The people at the shore were watching until the three ships disappeared into the night, and all of them returned to their residences.



Chapter 15 (Sumana's Destiny)

Sanghamitra and her convoy were at the entrance of Pataliputra. The news had already reached the royal palace, and Radhagupth arranged to receive them with honors. It had been nearly three months since Sanghamitra had gone to Kalinga for service. As her chariot moved into the Pataliputra city, she observed the streets and other places, finding no changes from when she left. Eager to go to the palace and meet Sumana, she was recollecting her dream about how she had given Sumana to Tathagata. She noted that Agnibrahma would be arriving in a day or two from Gandahar.

At the palace, Bhadrani received Sanghamitra and took her into her anthapura. Sanghamitra was eager to meet Sumana and asked Bhadrani about him. Bhadrani had no answer; instead, she advised Sanghamitra to rest, considering her recent travels. Sanghamitra grew suspicious and insisted on seeing Sumana. Bhadrani then took her to the main meditation hall, where Samrat Ashoka was engaged in a discourse led by Upagupta.

Sanghamitra silently entered the hall, where several monks were sitting on the floor, listening to Upagupta. Samrat Ashoka was seated diagonally opposite Upagupta, engrossed in the lecture. Taking a seat in one of the corners, Sanghamitra waited for the lecture to conclude, constantly searching for Sumana and Mahendra but couldn't find them.

After Upagupta stopped his lecture, the monks left the hall chanting “*Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami, Dharmam Saranam Gacchami,*” Bhadrani signaled to Sanghamitra that the hall was empty. Sanghamitra approached Upagupta and said, “Pranam Acharya, I returned from Kalinga Rajya today, having rendered my services to the war victims. I made the necessary arrangements for their recovery. I didn't see Sumana after returning, and I was directed to meet you to learn about him. I request you to provide me with his whereabouts and help me.”

In a kind whisper, Upagupta said, “My child, Sumana is a remarkable child. At the young age of six, he attained knowledge and wisdom beyond his years. He is chosen by the Tathagata, it is very kind that you have given Sumana to Tathagata demonstrating a keen interest in him

becoming a Samanera⁵⁶, much like his maternal uncle Mahendra. He has displayed exceptional concentration and endurance, becoming a Bhikku and accompanying his uncle to Shinala on a mission.”

Hearing this, Sanghamitra was almost faint. Unable to control her tears, she cried louder, exclaiming, “Acharya, I was scared of that dream now which came true, Sumana is a six-year-old kid. He doesn’t even know how to ask for food or anything. All he knows is to play, eat, and sleep. How can he express his willingness to become a Samanera when he doesn’t understand his responsibilities or tasks, or what being a Samanera entails?”

“You’re the mother of that child, and I can understand your pain in accepting the truth that he’s now a Samanera. But let me tell you something that you didn’t experience. During one of the meditation sessions, Sumana was sitting next to Mahendra. After a while, he fell asleep, chanting *Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami, Dharmam Sharanam Gacchami* in his subconscious sleep. We saw an aura around him, and the next moment, he was in deep meditation. He never thought or asked for food, water, or anything. After a long time, he opened his eyes, bowed to the Buddha's idol, and again went into deep meditation. We were all surprised by his actions,” revealed Upagupta.

Samrat Ashoka opened his eyes and added, “My child, you are blessed to have such a wonderful child. I think Samanera Sumana is an incarnation of Tathagata. If not, at that young age, how did he achieve that maturity and desire to become a Samanera? Feel proud of your son. He will be praised and well-known to future generations.”

Sanghamitra, still weeping but now calm, was consoled by Bhadrani, who took her to her anthapura. Sanghamitra could not easily accept that young Sumana was now a Samanera. She had envisioned him growing as a warrior, becoming a prince in Ujjain, and eventually ruling after Agnibrahma.

The following day Agnibrahma arrived from Gandahar, he got the news of Samrat Ashoka in solitude and constantly in meditation. He came to know about Ayapali whom she is now called Sanghamitra and about her noble services. He went to Sanghamitra’s anthapura, it was dimly illuminated and there was no excitement about his arrival. He was in doubt if Sanghamitra was aware of his arrival. He was also eager to meet Sumana.

⁵⁶ A novice male monastic, or the first of two levels of ordination in the Buddhist tradition

Sanghamitra, upon seeing Agnibrahma, cried loudly and hugged him. “Devi, I am back. Why are you crying? From now on, we will not be living separately. I’ll talk to Samrat, and soon we will go to Ujjain,” reassured Agnibrahma.

“Natha, I am happy that you have come back, but equally, I am sad for Sumana becoming a Samanera and going on a mission to Sinhala with his uncle Mahendra,” Sanghamitra expressed. Her emotions were uncontrollable, and she continued crying.

Hearing this, Agnibrahma, holding his head in his hands, fell to the ground. “Is this the reason I have traveled all the distance from Gandahar to Pataliputra? I was dreaming of a beautiful life with you, Sumana in Ujjain. I wanted him to be a prince and then rule Ujjain after me. How did he become a Bhikku? Did someone forcibly do this to him? I want to know all the reasons,” he demanded, his voice loud and filled with anger.

Sanghamitra narrated her dream and all that she learned from Upagupta to Agnibrahma. Unconvinced, he suspected a conspiracy against Sumana. Both of them struggled to accept the reality of Sumana becoming a Bhikku.

Late in the night, both Agnibrahma and Sanghamitra, tired and without having dinner, slept. In their dreams, they saw Tathagata holding the hand of young Sumana, walking in Lumbini. Sumana appeared to be very happy, learning as an obedient student while Tathagata preached to him. Agnibrahma and Sanghamitra both woke up suddenly and they were sweating. They both looked at each other and said together “I had a dream and saw Suaman with Tathagata.” The couple realized that they both had the same dream and understood that Sumana becoming Bhikku was not serendipity but it was destiny.

Sanghamitra said, “Arya, as Samrat mentioned, Sumana has blessings from Tathagata. He was born for a reason. If his destiny is already decided, there is no point in repenting. I think we should accept this fact wholeheartedly and bless our child.” Agnibrahma, seeming to accept the fact, agreed with Sanghamitra.



Chapter 16 (The Spread of Peace)

The three warships sailed at high speed, propelled by favorable sea winds. Mahendra stood on the ship's deck with Bhanduka, while Sumana slept in one of the designated areas. The rising sun glimmered on the left horizon, casting its glow over the clear sky and calm sea.

"Bhanduka, observe how calm and peaceful this sea is. However, in Sinhala, at the end of this sea, intelligent people with all their senses and knowledge are causing destruction, fighting in the name of beliefs and religions. These conflicts can lead the younger generations to form wrong opinions and develop hatred, resulting in further destruction," remarked Mahendra.

Bhanduka nodded in agreement, adding, "Mahendra, ill and negative things spread quickly. Just as a jasmine flower next to a fish may be overshadowed by the fish's smell, so does negativity overpower positivity. However, those who understand and embrace peace and harmony, like the fragrance of a jasmine flower, find lasting joy in their lives. Let us spread the fragrance of peace and harmony in Sinhala and help others understand its importance."

Ittiya informed them that arrangements for the early morning worship and meditation were ready and invited Mahendra and Bhanduka. As they descended from the ship's deck, the journey continued for another day and a half. In the distance, a thin line of coconut trees marked the shores of Sinhala as noon approached.

Viswajith, the chief of the soldiers, informed Mahendra that they would reach Sinhala in half a day. Mahendra signaled Ittiya and Bhanduka to prepare for disembarkation upon arrival. He called Viswajith and said that neither he nor any of the Bhikkus would accompany the soldiers, but they would stay in a monastery. Already, Sinhala is impacted by religious riots, and at a time, a thousand Bhikkus coming would make it worse.

The drums on the ship alerted the soldiers, and the Magadha flags were hoisted. Armored soldiers with spears and swords stood on the decks as all three ships sailed toward the shore at the same speed. The magnificent ships were visible from Sinhala's shores, causing the Yavadvipa and Siam armies to scatter and flee in fear.

Mahamatya Yasoguta and Raja Tissa were overjoyed, expressing their gratitude to Samrat Ashoka for the timely rescue. They welcomed the Magadha soldiers with garlands as the ships arrived.

Viswajith, leading a troop of Magadha soldiers, handed a scroll to Mahamatya Yasoguta. The message conveyed Samrat Ashoka's concern for the internal disputes in Sinhala and the dispatch of Magadha Soldiers to restore peace. The soldiers had come to establish peace and harmony, guided by Mahamataya Radhagupth's message.

Mahamatya Yasoguta inquired about Samrat Ashoka and his family. Viswajith presented a letter from Samrat Ashoka to Raja Devanampriyatissa. The letter read, *“Priyamisra Devanampriyatissa, I have taken refuge in Buddha, his Doctrine and his Order, I have declared myself a lay-disciple in the religion of the Saakya son; seek then, O best men, converting your mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems.”*⁵⁷

Raja Tissa, initially confused, understood the situation after Mahamatya Yasoguta explained the contents of the letter. Viswajith then addressed Raja Tissa and presented the letter, emphasizing Samrat Ashoka's refuge in Buddha and his desire for peace in Sinhala.

Raja Tissa welcomed Viswajith and his soldiers into Sinhala. The Magadha soldiers formed an outer shield, while the noblemen walked into Anuradhapura. Mahendra and his companions waited in the ships until the Magadha soldiers, Raja Tissa, and others left, after a while they all disembarked the ships and left for the nearby forest.

The news of the Magadha army's arrival spread throughout the city. Those causing disturbances fled, and the Magadha soldiers were accommodated with proper arrangements. In the next few days, Sinhala recovered from the riots, and peace was established. Raja Tissa and Mahamatya Yasoguta were happy for the Magadha soldiers in establishing peace in Sinhala, and their arrival made all the difference. They were concerned about the situation after the Magadha soldiers left Sinhala after a few days.

Raja Tissa had a commotion within, restless, and was searching for something that he didn't know. He was fond of hunting, and Raja Tissa wanted to have a change of mind and go hunting. He went to the forest near Missaka⁵⁸ Hill for hunting. While he was waiting for the prey, he saw a light and felt as if someone was flying in the sky up there. The hill was filled with green

⁵⁷ From the texts of “Buddhism in Sri Lanka”

⁵⁸ Present day Mihintale hill in Sri Lanka

grass and colorful flower trees, making it very pleasant. He followed the light and climbed the hill, where he could see the entire Anuradhapura from the hilltop. It was a full moon day of Poson, in the evening, and there was some more time for the full moon to appear in the sky. He was delighted and felt relaxed on that hill and was walking when suddenly he encountered a Mahathera⁵⁹ who was wearing saffron-colored robes with a pleasant smile on his face. Raja Tissa could understand that the bright light he saw from beneath was of this Mahathera's Aura. He was surprised and scared to see a Mahathera in that remote place as if he was waiting for him. In a stumbling voice, he inquired, "Who are you, master? What are you doing here?"

The Mahathera replied, "*Monks are we, O great king, Disciples of the king of Truth Out of compassion for thee' Hither have we come from Jambudweepa.*"⁶⁰ He introduced himself to Raja Devanampriyatissa, "Raja, I am Mahendra, son of Samrat Ashoka. I have come to Sinhala on my father's order. I arrived here with my companions and a thousand Bhikkus. We arrived on the same warships but wanted to be away as the situation was not amicable at that moment." His voice was mesmerizing. Raja Tissa was surrendering himself to Mahendra without his concern. He was experiencing peace and happiness from the inside. Without his knowledge, his eyes were filled with tears and happiness. Raja Tissa was now on the ground on his knees and requested Mahendra to come to Anuradhapura and enlighten the people, which Mahendra accepted.

The following day, a large elevated stage was erected in the center of Anuradhapura. Mahendra arrived there with Bhaddasala, Sambala, Ittiya, Uttiya, Bhanduka, and Samanera Sumana. Thousands of people came to attend the event. Raja Tissa arrived with his ministers and royal family members. Mahendra started a discourse about Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, monastic life of an ideal monk, and emphasized the value of discriminative examination of facts and intelligent inquiry. All the people who came to attend the lecture were silent and listened with devotion. While the lecture was going on, many people from other localities and places thronged to the meeting place. People were impressed and convinced of Mahendra's teachings. Soon the news spread throughout Sinhala and many people from different regions started to come to Anuradhapura to see and listen to Mahendra.

The full moon day of Poson is a national festival day in Sinhala. About 240 years back, Vijaya, the first king, arrived at Sinhala on the same day and gave recognition to the island. Again on

⁵⁹ A great Buddha Bhikku

⁶⁰ From the texts of "Buddhism in Sri Lanka"

the same Posen full moon day, Raja Tissa met Mahendra on the Missaka hill. After that, Mahendra, the Arhat Theras, founded the order of Sangha and established the Sansana⁶¹ in the country. Raja Tissa and his family embraced Buddhism along with all his relatives. Raja Tissa built Thuparamaya Dagoba and kept the relics obtained from Samrat Ashoka brought by Mahendra. Later, Raja Tissa offered Meghavana Park to the Sangha, and a leading monastery, Mahavihara, was built there.

Many Arhats and Bhikkus from the neighboring countries started to come to Sinhala. After Mahendra constantly conducted lectures and discourses, establishing the faith and constituting *Bhikkusāsana*⁶², many people from other religions showed interest in converting to Buddhism and started to become Buddhists. As many men became Bhikkus, there was an urge from the women to become Bhikshunis.

Meanwhile, Mahendra continued to discourse his inspiring lectures, enlightening and lighting the spark in every common man about Buddha and Dharma.

Mahanaga was an Uparaja⁶³ in Raja Devanampriyatissa's kingdom, he was relative of Raja Devanampriyatissa. Mahanaga's wife, Rani Anula, came to know about Mahendra and his teachings. She had 500 lady attendants who all listened to Mahendra's discourses and lectures. They all approached Mahendra and expressed their interest in becoming Bhikshunis. There was no *Bhikkhunisāsana*⁶⁴ available, and Mahendra was not eligible to give ordination to ladies to become Bhikshunis, which can be done only by a Bhikshuni or a Theri.

Mahendra wanted Rani Anula to wait for the appropriate time for a Bhikshuni or a Theri to arrive to ordinate them into Bhikshunis and he continued with his teachings.

Raja Tissa has made arrangements for building an Upasika-Vihara⁶⁵ to accommodate all the 500 attendants and Rani Anula. They all started to practice Ekasanikanga⁶⁶.



⁶¹ Institutionalized orders and practices

⁶² The institutionalized practices for Buddha Bhikkus

⁶³ Sub-King

⁶⁴ The institutionalized practices for Buddha Bhikkshunis

⁶⁵ A nunnery in Anuradhapura

⁶⁶ To have only one meal served and fed only once in a day

Chapter 17 (Transformation and Travel)

Pataliputra has become the center of attraction for all Buddhists, Bhikkus, and Bhikshunis. The word of Samrat Ashoka encouraging Buddhism was spreading rapidly. While Upagupta was in Pataliputra, many followers of Buddha wanted to visit him. Ayupala was a contemporary of Upagupta who had many Arhats, Bhikkus, and Bhikshunis as his followers, students, and disciples. He visited Pataliputra and joined the ongoing convention. Sanghamitra was trying her best to convince herself to come out of the sorrow she was facing with Sumana becoming a Samanera. Agnibrahma was equally disturbed by the incident, but he was trying to overcome it and wanted to be strong enough to support Sanghamitra. All the happiness that was there in Agnibrahma and Sanghamitra has vanished now.

One day, Ayupala arrived at the palace, and Sanghamitra was asked to take care of receiving and hospitality. Sanghamitra was not ready to be attentive to receive and provide hospitality to Ayupala but forced herself and went to receive him. Ayupala, with his disciples, was greeted and welcomed by Sanghamitra into the palace. Ayupala could understand Sanghamitra's situation and the reason for her lack of concentration. He knew about Sanghamitra's grandparents, parents, birth, and her family. He decided to be a guest there and wanted to console Sanghamitra from her grief.

Sanghamitra, while serving, started to attend the discourses given by Ayupala to the royal family and others. His discourses were about Dharma, Sangha, the essence of life, attainment of happiness, and the meaning of unselfish service. Sanghamitra was attracted to the teachings of Ayupala, and she could find a transformation within her. She remembered her childhood teachings from her mother, Rani Devi. She started to feel inner happiness and was slowly getting detached from the external attachments and emotions.

Sanghamitra discussed with Agnibrahma that she wanted to become a Bhikshuni and be in the Buddha Sangha. Agnibrahma, who has observed her transformation in the past few days, made his heart and mind strong and accepted Sanghamitra to become a Bhikshuni. He also expressed that he too wanted to become a Bhikku and wanted clarification on ruling and his responsibilities as a subordinate to the Samrat. Sanghamitra was delighted by Agnibrahma's decision.

Sanghamitra and Agnibrahma went to Ayupala and expressed their wishes. Ayupala was delighted by their decisions and decided upon an auspicious day for them to become Bhikku and Bhikshuni. He explained to Agnibrahma that becoming a Bhikku does not mean that he should be away from his duties and responsibilities, but he should adopt a few principles and continue to perform his duties and responsibilities. Ayupala explained to Agnibrahma that being a Bhikku, he should not eat meat or consume alcohol, he should practice ahimsa, he should always speak only the truth, and he cannot criticize anyone or talk ill about anyone. A Bhikku always should have only one meal a day to keep him surviving and always help all living beings, including birds, animals, insects, and other creatures. He also explained other things that he should practice as a Bhikku and can continue to be subordinate to Samrat in helping him rule the kingdom. Agnibrahma was satisfied with the details and accepted to become a Bhikku.

On the decided auspicious day, Ayupala gave Sanghamitra and Agnibrahma the Bhikshuni and Bhikku status by taking an oath to live the life of a Buddhist monk, sacrificing the normal life, and spread the teachings of Buddha, giving service to all. Now Sanghamitra is a Bhikshuni; she has shaved her head, is not wearing any ornaments, wearing only saffron linen robes, and no more silks. She started to live a life of Bhikshuni and spent all her time in meditation, she slowly started to detach from the relations and emotions and attended the teachings of Ayupala. Ayupala was delighted about the devotion that Sanghamitra has shown to be a Bhikshuni and living the life of an Upasika⁶⁷.

Days passed by, and Agnibrahma was also living the life of a Bhikku, taking care of his duties and supporting the ruling of the country.

Amatya Arittha has arrived at Pataliputra from Sinhala, carrying a message from Mahendra. He was sent by Raja Tissa to Pataliputra. He was taken to Mahamatya Radhagupth. Radhagupth made all the arrangements for the Amatya's stay and food. Later, he was taken to Samrat Ashoka. Amatya Arittha bowed to Samrat Ashoka and praised him for the support he had provided to rescue Sinhala from their communal riots. Arittha gave the message scroll to Samrat Ashoka sent by Thera Mahendra. He opened the scroll, read the contents, and handed the scroll to Upagupta. Upagupta read the contents and asked Radhagupta to take Amatya to

⁶⁷ A female practicing and following Buddhism as a nun

Ayupala. Amatya Arittha was not able to understand what was going on in front of him. Radhagupth helped in taking the Amatya Arittha to Ayupala.

Radhagupth entered the hall where Ayupala was with his disciples preaching on Dharma. After some time, Ayupala concluded his preaching session and looked at Radhagupth and Amatya Arittha. They both walked to Ayupala, and Radhagupth explained why he was there with Amatya Arittha. Ayupala had a mild smile and told Radhagupth that he would take it from there. Radhagupth left after bowing to Ayupala.

Amatya Arittha bowed to Ayupala and introduced himself, “Oh! Mahathera, my name is Arittha, I am an Amatya in the court of Raja Devanampriyatissa. I was sent by Raja Tissa to Pataliputra with a request. I am coming from Sinhala carrying the message from the noble Mahendra,” and handed the message scroll. Ayupala read the scroll message: “Respected great elder, Sinhala has now attained peace. Raja Tissa has taken refuge in Buddha along with his family members. Many people from different parts of Sinhala are coming to Anuradhapura to attend my preachings and discourses about Dharma, Buddha, Sangha, and happiness in life. They are attracted to the principles, philosophy, and way of Buddhist life and are embracing Buddhism. Many boys have already joined as Samaneras, and many other men are becoming Bhikkus. Rani Anula, the wife of Uparaja Mahanaga, wants to become a Bhikshuni along with her five hundred female attendants. I arrived at Sinhala with all Bhikkus and a few Arhats, but there were no Bhikunis to guide Rani Anula or her attendants. I request you to identify a Bhikkuni or a Theri and send her to Sinhala who can be instrumental in establishing the order of Bhikshunis and can establish Bhikkhunisasana. *Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dharmamam Saranam Gacchami, Sangam Saranam Gacchami.*”

Ayupala asked Amatya Arittha to be part of the prayers, meditation, and other activities along with others, and he could leave to Sinhala with a proper solution to the request that Mahendra had raised. Arittha accepted, bowed to Ayupala, and joined with others for the meditation.

Ayupala, along with Sanghamitra, Agnibrahma, and a few other Arhats, went to Upagupta, where Samarat Ashok was also present. He explained the details of Mahendra’s request, which is also known to Samrat Ashoka and Upagupta. Ayupala requested Samrat Ashoka and Upagupta to send Sanghamitra to Sinhala to establish the Bhikkhunisasana and the order of Bhikshunis.

Samrat Ashoka embraced Buddhism and followed Buddha’s preachings and attended meditation for peace under Upagupta’s guidance, but he didn’t become a Bhikku or Arhat; he

still had all emotions and attachments in life. He was grieving now as his son Mahendra had already become an Arhat and left him, and now his loving daughter Sanghamitra also became a Bhikkushuni and wanted to leave him to go to Sinhala.

Sanghamitra consoled Samrat Ashoka, stating that the request had come from his noble brother Mahendra, which was a rare and great opportunity for her to establish the Bhikkhunisasana and help the Sinhala females to become Bhikshunis. Samrat Ashoka was convinced and agreed for Sanghamitra to travel to Sinhala. He suggested that she take with her a sapling of the Mahabodhi Tree⁶⁸, under whose shelter Gautama Buddha gained enlightenment. Sanghamitra, Upagupta, and Ayupala were very happy about the suggestion they all agreed in unity to take the sapling to Sinhala.

Samrat Ashoka ordered for making the required travel arrangements for the travel. Radhagupth has taken the order to get the arrangements done. Agnibrahma has sent a few Bhikkus and others to bring the Mahabodhi tree sapling.



⁶⁸ The fig tree in Buddha Gaya under which Gautama Buddha got his enlightenment

Chapter 18 (The Arrival of Sanghamitra)

The arrangements for Sanghamitra's travel to Sinhala were underway. A sapling from the southern side of the Mahabodhi tree was obtained, and Samrat Ashoka made all arrangements for Sanghamitra to take it to Sinhala. In the company of eleven Arhat Bhikshunis, members of the Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Vaishyas, Ministers, and noblemen in Ashoka's court, Sanghamitra embarked on this journey along with the Mahabodhi tree sapling.

A grand ceremony was organized to mark the arrival of the Mahabodhi sapling. Samrat Ashoka was pleased to fulfill his commitment to procure the sapling and send Sanghamitra to Sinhala. Samrat Ashoka, Agnibrahma, Upagupta, and Ayupala traveled with Sanghamitra and her team to the Kalinga Sagara⁶⁹ seashore, heading towards the Tamralipta⁷⁰ port in the Tamruk⁷¹ town.

The Tamralipta port was renowned as a trade center for all types of trade ships, with Tamra⁷² being the primary commodity shipped along with cotton, pulses, and other spices. The port was well-connected with roads and facilities from Pataliputra. Samrat Ashoka and others arrived at Tamralipta, where a beautifully decorated ship awaited to carry Sanghamitra and the Mahabodhi sapling to Sinhala.

Sanghamitra was carrying the Mahabodhi sapling which was securely planted in a golden vase with her, along with the team of eleven Arhat Bhikshunis, members of the royal Kshatriya families, Brahmins, ministers, and noblemen, boarded the ship. Amatya Ariththa also joined them. The ship set sail towards Sinhala, and the journey was expected to take seven days.

While the ship sailed, Samrat Ashoka stood at the shore, watching it depart. He was emotionally hurt as both his son and daughter had now left him. He waited until the ship disappeared from his sight before returning to Pataliputra.

⁶⁹ Present Bay of Bengal

⁷⁰ In present day West Bengal

⁷¹ In present day West Bengal

⁷² Copper/Copper ore

Radhagupth sent a message to Raja Tissa through Vayuvega, stating that Theri⁷³ Sanghamitra was traveling to Sinhala along with the Mahabodhi sapling. The following day, Raja Tissa received the message through Vayuvega. Delighted, he announced the details of Sanghamitra and Mahabodhi's arrival to Thera⁷⁴ Mahendra, who shared in his joy.

On the seventh day, Raja Tissa arrived at the Jambukola⁷⁵ port, making all the necessary arrangements to receive Theri Sanghamitra, her team, and the Mahabodhi sapling. The port was bustling with people, Samaneras, Bhikkus, Arhats, and other civilians eagerly awaiting the ship's arrival.

As the ship approached, the crowd cheered with happiness. Raja Tissa waded into the waters, and Theri Sanghamitra descended from the ship, holding the golden vase containing the Mahabodhi sapling. Raja Tissa received the Mahabodhi sapling with great honor, respect, and devotion. A grand pavilion was erected on the shore, where various ceremonies and rituals were performed for the sapling.

On the tenth day of its arrival, the sapling was transported from Jambukola to Anuradhapura in a magnificent procession, carried on a chariot amidst spectacular performances and rituals. The Mahabodhi sapling arrived at Anuradhapura with a splendid ceremony and was planted by Raja Tissa in the Mahamevnawa⁷⁶ Garden, built by Raja Mutasiva⁷⁷ to beautify Anuradhapura.

After some time, in the garden, the sapling grew into a plant and then into a tree. Many people wanted to meditate under the tree or its shadow, feeling blessed by Gautama Buddha who attained enlightenment under the Mahabodhi tree.

Theri Sanghamitra established Upasikha Vihara, a nunnery, and spent most of her time there. She ordained Rani Anula and her 500 attendants. Under Theri Sanghamitra's leadership and guidance, Rani Anula established the Bhikkhunisasana, which thrived and spread throughout Sinhala and later to other countries. Theri Sanghamitra formalized the Bhikkuni order, creating a three-step process for women to become Bhikkunis: Sramanerika (Beginner), Siksamana (Trial), and Bhikkhuni (Nun). Any woman aspiring to become a Bhikkhuni had to pass through these three phases.

⁷³ A Buddhist nun who has attained liberation by following the path of Buddha

⁷⁴ A Buddhist monk who has attained liberation by following the path of Buddha

⁷⁵ Present day North-west Sri Lanka

⁷⁶ At present known as Maha Megha Garden in Anuradhapura – Sri Lanka

⁷⁷ Father of Raja Devanampriyatissa

The societal status of the women in different parts of Sinhala and its neighboring countries was poor. Many women wanted to be liberated from the male-dominated society. Many women started to come from the neighboring countries of Sinhala (*Present-day Java, Indonesia, Thailand, and China*) to join Theri Sanghamitra to embrace Buddhism and become Bhikkhunis.

News of Theri Sanghamitra establishing a nunnery in Anuradhapura spread across Sinhala, attracting women from various backgrounds to come and become Bhikkhunis. Regardless of their religion, caste, or social status, Theri Sanghamitra gave ordination to many women. She worked tirelessly for the moral, intellectual, and spiritual upliftment of the women of Sinhala.

As the number of Bhikkunis grew, twelve monasteries were built to accommodate them, providing facilities for a comfortable stay and uninterrupted meditation. Raja Tissa later constructed a separate residence for Theri Sanghamitra named Hathalakha Vihara, fulfilling the nuns' request for a secluded place for focused religious pursuits.

A festival named Uduvapa Poya was celebrated every year on the last full moon day of the year to commemorate the arrival of the Mahabodhi sapling in Anuradhapura. This annual celebration became a national holiday in Sinhala.



Chapter 19 (Legacy and Succession)

Samrat Ashoka was not satisfied with merely sending his son and daughter to Sinhala to propagate Buddhism. Internally, he harbored a sense of guilt for his actions in the Kalinga War and sought remorse. He desired to spread peace and the teachings of Gautama Buddha worldwide. Consequently, he initiated the establishment of numerous edicts promoting Buddhism and the message of peace. Thera Agnibrahma, leveraging his influence, disseminated Samrat Ashoka's edicts to Gandahar and other regions, ensuring their establishment.

As Samrat Ashoka spread the message of peace and Gautama Buddha's teachings, he began to experience a gradual sense of satisfaction and happiness. He went further by ordering the construction of rest houses, wells, and hospitals for both humans and animals. Samrat Ashoka summoned Mahamatya Radhagupth, instructing him to abolish animal hunting, issue orders against bonded labor, and prohibit violence against laborers. He also provided a list of animals and birds exempt from meat production. Amending prevailing laws, he abolished the death penalty and erected numerous stupas and pillars to propagate the religion and respect all living beings, inscribing them with Gautama Buddha's teachings. Samrat Ashoka was now praised as Dharama Ashoka.

Twelve years elapsed.

Mahathera Mahendra dedicated most of his time to meditation on the Missaka hill, assisted by Samanera Sumana. Raja Tissa and the people of Sinhala held Mahathera Mahendra in the highest regard for his lifelong dedication to preaching and ensuring the welfare and happiness of the Sinhala people. Meanwhile, Theri Sanghamitra spent extended periods meditating in front of the Mahabodhi tree in the Mahamevnawa garden, nurturing the small plant she had brought into a substantial tree. During these twelve years, Buddhism rapidly gained followers in Sinhala, with many Arhats obtaining permission to spread the message of peace and ahimsa in other countries.

Emulating Samrat Ashoka, Raja Tissa initiated the construction of stupas, pillars, and edicts with Gautama Buddha's relics and other details in the Pali language. Numerous Buddhist monasteries and schools were established, and the prominent Thuparama Dagoba was built under Raja Devanampriyatissa's guidance.

After forty years of ruling Sinhala, Raja Devanampriyissa, feeling the weight of old age, desired solitude and meditation. Raja Tissa had no sons to become kings of Sinhala, so he appointed his younger brother, Uttiya, as the new king, seeking Mahathera Mahendra's counsel and consent. After a year, Raja Tissa passed away.

Raja Uttiya assumed the responsibility of maintaining the monasteries, and schools and protecting Dharma and peace.

In Pataliputra, Samrat Ashoka, growing old, delegated responsibilities to his grandson, Rajakumar Dasharatha Maurya, son of Rajakumar Kunala, who proved himself capable and knowledgeable. Crowned as the successor to the Magadha empire, Rajakumar Dasharatha Maurya efficiently managed internal and external affairs. Eight months after Dasharatha ascended the throne, Samrat Ashoka passed away due to old age.



Chapter 20 (The Death)

Uttiya ruled Sinhala proficiently. The country embraced various religions alongside Buddhism, fostering a harmonious and contented coexistence among the people. Neighboring nations maintained friendly relations, and the threat of war was nonexistent. Following Mahathera Mahendra's teachings, a culture of honesty prevailed, resulting in a crime-free society and the eradication of bribery. While economic disparities persisted in living standards, mutual respect bridged the gap between the rich and poor. Festivals were celebrated with enthusiasm, and there was a collective reverence for the customs of every religion.

The people of Sinhala held Mahathera Mahendra and Theri Sanghamitra in high esteem for their selfless dedication to the country. Uttiya frequently sought advice from and spent time with Mahathera Mahendra.

Eight years transpired since Uttiya ascended the throne.

Mahathera Mahendra, at the age of eighty, desired to visit the stupas, pillars, and Viharas erected by Raja Devanampriyatissa. Accompanied by Uttiya, he assessed their maintenance, facilities, and the relics inscribed on them. Upon the onset of the rainy season, he returned to his hermitage in the Cetiya mountain.

On the eighth day of the Assayuja⁷⁸ month, (*a significant day in Theravada traditions marking the Buddha's descent from the second heaven, where he had preached the Dharma to his mother*), Mahathera Mahendra fell ill and passed away. His body accorded utmost respect, was processioned to the Mahavihara, and placed in the Panhambamlaka, where homage was paid for a week. Subsequently, it was cremated on a fragrant wood pyre east of the Theranambandhamalaka. A pillar was erected on the spot, and the remains were distributed in stupas on Cetiya giri and elsewhere, with the cremation site named Isibhumangana.

King Uttiya conducted the final rituals with great honor, and stupas were built over the remaining relics. One was constructed at Missaka Hill, where Mahathera Mahendra spent most of his time.

A year after Mahathera Mahendra's passing, Theri Sanghamitra limited herself to the Hattalahakka nunnery, she meditated there at the age of seventy-nine. She occasionally seemed

⁷⁸ Between September and October months

detached from the physical world, appearing to reside in a celestial realm. Theri Sanghamitra expressed her desire to Raja Uttiya for cremation east of the Thuparama near the Cittasala, in front of the Bodhi Tree she brought from Pataliputra. In the ninth year of Raja Uttiya's rule, Theri Sanghamitra peacefully passed away. Raja Uttiya performed her last rites, and a stupa was erected on her ashes as per her wish.

Sinhala, Raja Uttiya, and the Sangha mourned the death of Theri Sanghamitra.

-oOo-

A brother and sister, once a prince and princess of the great Magadha dynasty, devoted their lives to bringing peace and spreading Buddhism in Sinhala. They are remembered and respected for centuries, attracting millions of people each year to Sri Lanka to offer prayers near their stupas. Mahathera Mahendra and Theri Sanghamitra will be remembered as long as Buddhism exists on this planet.

Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Sangam Saranam Gacchami, Dharmam Saranam Gacchami.

