

IVAN

ECHOES OF ETHERION

BY: V. K. ASHBORN

Ivaan: Echoes of Etherion

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**To Every Dreamer, Every Storyteller, and Every Soul
who dares to imagine worlds beyond reality.**

May your imagination never fade, and may your stories
continue to inspire generations to come.

This book is dedicated to you.

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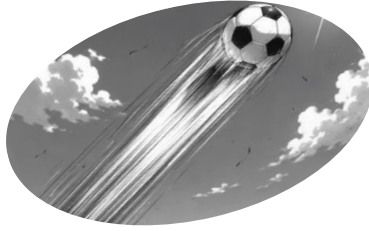
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Chapter-1



The Boy Named Ivaan

The evening wind swept across the quiet town of Viratnagar with surprising force, rustling the towering trees that lined its streets. Leaves broke free from their branches and danced through the air, carried wherever the breeze desired. Above, the sky glowed in brilliant shades of orange and crimson as the sun slowly sank beyond the horizon, bathing the town in warm golden light.

At a small football ground on the edge of the neighbourhood, the peaceful evening had given way to excitement.

The cheers of children echoed across the field as two teams fought fiercely for victory. One team wore striking red-and-black jerseys, while the other stood proudly in yellow and white. Every player was giving everything they had, determined to score the winning goal before the match ended.

The crowd's attention was fixed on one player.

Number 7.

With remarkable speed and flawless control, he dribbled the ball through the midfield, weaving effortlessly past one defender after another. Every tackle aimed at him failed as he slipped through the gaps with astonishing agility.

"Stop him!"

"Don't let him shoot!"

The defenders closed in from every direction, but Number 7 remained calm. His movements were smooth, almost instinctive, as though the ball obeyed his every command.

Then came the final obstacle.

A slightly chubby defender charged straight towards him, hoping to steal the ball before he reached the penalty area.

Instead of slowing down, Number 7 feinted to the left before pushing the ball forward with perfect timing. In one swift motion, he planted his foot and unleashed a powerful strike.

The ball sliced through the air like a bullet.

The goalkeeper reacted instantly, diving full stretch to his right.

But he was too late.

THUD!

The ball crashed into the back of the net.

For a heartbeat, the entire ground fell silent.

Then it erupted.

"GOAL!"

The players in red sprinted across the pitch, laughing and shouting with excitement. They surrounded Number 7, lifting him onto their shoulders as the spectators chanted a single name over and over again.

"Ivaan!"

"Ivaan!"

"Ivaan!"

The final whistle echoed moments later.

Red Team 1 – 0 Yellow Team.

The victorious player finally turned towards the cheering crowd.

He was a sixteen-year-old boy with striking blue eyes and untidy black hair that swayed in the evening breeze. A bright smile spread across his face as his teammates celebrated around him. Despite the excitement, there was a quiet confidence in his expression—as though moments like this were perfectly ordinary for him.

The defeated team slowly walked over.

Their captain, a round-faced boy named Vishal, folded his arms and frowned.

"Enjoy your victory while you can, Ivaan," he said. "You'll be singing a different tune at the school's Sports Festival."

Ivaan chuckled.

"We'll see about that," he replied with a grin. "Let's find out who really wins, shall we... Dev?"

Standing beside him was his closest friend, Dev.

With stylish dark brown hair and a mischievous smile, Dev stepped forward confidently.

"Absolutely," he said. "Besides, Section B hasn't lost a single match to Section A in the last five years."

"I'm right, Fatsol!"

Vishal's face immediately turned red.

"Don't call me fat!"

Dev folded his arms.

"Or what?"

"You want to find out?"

Before the argument could grow any worse, Ivaan quickly stepped between them.

"That's enough," he said firmly. "Both of you, calm down. Whatever happens, we'll settle it on the football field during the Sports Festival."

Vishal clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Fine."

He turned away, leading his teammates off the ground. Even as he left, he shot one last glare towards Ivaan and Dev.

The two friends exchanged amused smiles before walking home with the rest of their team.

Darkness gradually settled over Viratnagar.

Flocks of crows filled the evening sky, returning to their nests as the last traces of sunlight disappeared behind the distant hills. A pale moon slowly emerged above the rooftops, replacing the fading glow of sunset.

Ivaan looked up.

"We played longer than I thought."

Dev glanced at the watch on his wrist.

His expression changed instantly.

"Oh no..."

"What is it?"

"It's already quarter past six!" Dev exclaimed. "The hostel gates close in fifteen minutes!"

Without wasting another second, he slung his bag over his shoulder.

"See you tomorrow!"

"See you."

Dev hurried down another road, disappearing into the evening crowd.

Ivaan continued towards home alone.

The familiar wooden gate creaked open as he stepped into the courtyard.

"Granny, I'm home!"

After taking off his shoes, he followed the delicious aroma drifting from the kitchen.

Standing by the stove was an elderly woman with gentle eyes and neatly tied white hair.

His grandmother.

She turned with a warm smile.

"There you are," she said kindly. "Go and have your bath first. I've your favourite mangoes."

Ivaan's eyes lit up.

Without hesitation, he walked over and wrapped his arms around her from behind.

"Thank you, Granny."

"I love you."

She laughed softly and patted his hand.

"I love you too, Dear."

A short while later, freshly bathed, Ivaan hurried to the refrigerator and eagerly picked up one of the chilled mangoes.

The moment he took his first bite, his eyes widened.

"Wow!"

"These are incredible!"

His grandmother smiled knowingly.

"I thought you'd say that."

"Your uncle sent them."

"Really?"

Ivaan laughed.

"I knew it! The mangoes from Uncle's orchard are always the sweetest."

The two shared dinner together, chatting about ordinary things before the day finally came to an end.

Ivaan's bedroom was simple but comfortable.

A large bed stood beside a wooden study desk covered with textbooks, notebooks and neatly arranged stationery.

He opened the drawer, took out his mobile phone and flopped onto the bed.

After switching off the room light, he opened his messages.

Ivaan: *Thanks, Uncle. The mangoes were amazing.*

A reply appeared almost immediately.

Uncle: *You're welcome, dear. Next time they'll be even sweeter.*

A smile spread across Ivaan's face.

Ivaan: *Then next time, bring them yourself instead of sending them by courier.*

Uncle: *Deal. I'll come in person.*

Good night. Now get some sleep.

Ivaan: *Good night! Sweet dreams.*

Satisfied, Ivaan placed the phone beside his pillow.

Within minutes, the room fell silent.

Outside, the wind whispered gently through the trees while the moon watched peacefully over the sleeping town of Viratnagar.

Morning arrived gently over the town of Viratnagar.

Golden sunlight spilled across rooftops as the first rays of dawn chased away the darkness. Streets slowly came to life with the familiar rhythm of another school day. Children hurried along the pavements in neatly pressed uniforms, shopkeepers rolled open their shutters, and bicycles filled the quiet roads as students made their way towards school.

In Sector 11, House No. 10, the peaceful melody of temple bells floated through the air.

Inside the small prayer room, Ivaan's grandmother stood before a beautifully decorated altar dedicated to Lord Ganesha and other Hindu deities. Holding a polished brass plate adorned with fresh flowers and a glowing oil lamp, she softly sang the morning prayer. In her other hand, a small brass bell rang gently with every verse, filling the house with warmth and devotion.

Upstairs, however, the atmosphere was rather different.

Sunlight slipped through the curtains of Ivaan's bedroom, stretching across the wooden floor before finally reaching his bed.

He was still asleep.

The alarm on his mobile phone had been ringing for several minutes, but he hadn't even stirred.

Downstairs, his grandmother paused for a moment.

"Oh, dear..." she sighed. "He's overslept again."

She stepped to the foot of the staircase and called out as loudly as she could.

"Ivaan!"

No reply.

"Ivaan!"

Still nothing.

Drawing in a deep breath, she shouted one final time.

"IVAAAAAN!"

Silence.

Shaking her head, she climbed the stairs and quietly entered his room.

The alarm was still blaring.

She switched it off before walking over to the bed and gently shook his shoulder.

"Ivaan, wake up, Dear. You'll be late for school."

The sixteen-year-old boy slowly opened one eye before stretching lazily beneath the blanket.

"Hmm... Granny?"

"What are you doing here?"

His grandmother folded her arms.

"What am I doing here?" she repeated. "You should be asking what time it is."

Still half asleep, Ivaan reached for his phone.

The moment the screen lit up, all traces of drowsiness vanished.

8:10 a.m.

His heart nearly stopped.

Five missed calls.

All from Dev.

“Oh no!”

He shot upright.

“Granny! Why didn’t you wake me earlier?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve been calling your name for ages. You simply refused to leave your dream world.”

Ivaan froze for a brief moment.

His dream.

It was the same dream he had seen countless times before.

A world unlike anything he had ever known.

Dark forests stretching endlessly beneath crimson skies.

Ancient ruins swallowed by shadows.

Strange creatures with glowing eyes watching him from the darkness.

Every dream revealed something new, yet each one felt strangely familiar—as though he had somehow been there before.

Whenever he tried asking his grandmother about those mysterious dreams, she would simply smile and change the subject.

It had always left him wondering...

Why?

But this was hardly the time to think about dreams.

He jumped out of bed in panic.

“Fine! Fine! It’s my fault.”

“I’ll be ready in five minutes!”

Before his grandmother could reply, he disappeared into the bathroom.

She couldn’t help smiling.

“That boy...”

Still chuckling softly, she returned downstairs to prepare his breakfast and pack his lunch.

A few minutes later, Ivaan came downstairs wearing his neatly pressed school uniform.

His shirt was only half tucked in, and he was still trying to straighten his tie as he hurried towards the kitchen.

“Ivaan,” his grandmother called warmly, “come and have your breakfast.”

“I’m coming!”

He glanced at the clock mounted on the wall.

8:30 a.m.

His expression froze.

Classes at Viratnagar International School began at 9:00 a.m., but the morning assembly started ten minutes earlier.

Under normal traffic conditions, cycling to school took at least twenty-five minutes.

He wasn’t just late.

He was very late.

Without another thought, he grabbed his lunchbox from the table, snatched a slice of bread and took a huge bite while heading for the front door.

“Bye, Granny!”

His grandmother hurried out of the kitchen.

“But your breakfast—”

“No time!” he called back through a mouthful of bread.

“I’ll eat properly later!”

Before she could stop him, the front door slammed shut.

A second later, the sound of bicycle tyres racing down the street echoed through the neighbourhood.

His grandmother stood quietly at the doorway, watching him disappear into the distance.

Then she smiled to herself.

“I just hope he reaches school before assembly.”

Little did either of them realise...

The ordinary morning ahead was about to take an unexpected turn.



Chapter-2



The Day Began

The morning air rushed past Ivaan as he pedalled furiously through the streets of Viratnagar. His school bag bounced against his back with every turn of the wheels, while the slice of bread he had grabbed in haste was now little more than a hurried breakfast.

“Come on... come on...” he muttered beneath his breath.

“If I keep this pace, I might still make it.”

His optimism lasted less than a minute.

As he turned onto the main road, his bicycle slowed to an abrupt halt.

A long line of vehicles stretched as far as he could see.

Cars, buses, auto-rickshaws and delivery vans were packed tightly together, their impatient horns blending into one deafening chorus.

Traffic had come to a complete standstill.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me...”

Ivaan looked from side to side, searching desperately for another route.

There wasn’t one.

Not from where he stood.

He sighed in frustration and glanced at his watch.

Every passing second felt heavier than the last.

Meanwhile, several kilometres away, life at Viratnagar International School carried on as usual.

Unlike Ivaan, Dev had no long journey to worry about.

Since his parents were constantly travelling for work, he lived in the school's hostel throughout the academic year.

After putting on his uniform, he picked up his mobile phone and dialled Ivaan's number once again.

The phone rang.

And rang.

No answer.

Dev lowered the phone with an irritated sigh.

"You've got to be asleep... there's no other explanation."

Just then, the hostel room door opened.

A tall boy with thick black hair and round spectacles stepped inside.

It was Aarav, Dev's roommate.

"No luck?" Aarav asked.

Dev shook his head.

"I've been trying since early morning. Five... maybe six calls already."

Aarav thought for a moment.

"Try his house instead."

"The landline?"

“Exactly. His phone could be on silent.”

Dev immediately dialled the number.

After several rings, someone finally answered.

“Hello?”

It was Ivaan’s grandmother.

“Good morning, Granny,” Dev said politely. “It’s Dev.”

“Oh, hello, Dear.”

“I was just wondering... has Ivaan left for school?”

“Yes,” she replied warmly. “He left a few minutes ago on his bicycle. He should reach school soon.”

Dev smiled with relief.

“Thank you, Granny.”

After ending the call, he looked towards Aarav.

“She’s certain he left home.”

Aarav adjusted his glasses.

“Then he’ll probably make it before assembly.”

“I hope so.”

The two boys left the hostel together and headed towards the school grounds.

Back on the road, Ivaan’s patience had finally run out.

His eyes suddenly caught sight of a narrow side street branching away from the traffic.

“The shortcut!”

Without wasting another second, he climbed off his bicycle and carefully pushed it along the edge of the congested road before slipping into the narrow lane.

The shortcut twisted between rows of old houses before opening onto another road several minutes later.

Finally free from the traffic, Ivaan climbed back onto his bicycle.

He checked his wristwatch.

8:50 a.m.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Assembly has already started...”

He gripped the handlebars tightly and pedalled harder than ever before.

The cool morning wind roared past his ears as the bicycle shot down the empty road.

At that exact moment...

Tan... Tan... Tan...

The school bell echoed across the vast campus.

Students poured from every corridor towards the assembly ground.

Near the school gate, Dev and Aarav stood waiting anxiously.

Every passing cyclist made them look up with hope.

Every time, it was someone else.

A familiar voice suddenly interrupted them.

“So...”

Vishal folded his arms with a smug grin.

“Looks like your star player isn’t coming after all.”

Dev rolled his eyes.

“He’ll be here.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

Before either of them could argue further, the school security guard approached with a stern expression.

“What are you three doing here?”

“The assembly has already begun.”

“If your PT teacher catches you loitering at the gate, none of you will enjoy the consequences.”

The colour drained from all three boys’ faces.

Without another word, they sprinted towards the assembly ground.

The morning assembly concluded with an important announcement.

The school’s Head of Physical Education stepped forward onto the stage, microphone in hand.

“Students,” he began, his voice carrying clearly across the ground, “as you already know, our Annual Sports Championship will begin next Monday.”

Excited whispers immediately spread through the crowd.

The teacher raised a hand for silence.

“However, today’s second period has been reserved for the official team trials.”

The murmuring stopped.

“Attendance at today’s trials is compulsory.”

His voice became noticeably firmer.

“Any student absent from school today will automatically lose their place in every sports team—even if they represented the school last year.”

The announcement sent waves of excitement through the assembly.

Football.

Basketball.

Cricket.

Athletics.

Students eagerly discussed the competitions awaiting them next week.

Everyone seemed thrilled.

Everyone...

Except Dev and Aarav.

Both exchanged worried glances.

If Ivaan failed to arrive in time...

He would lose his place on the football team.

Exactly the opportunity Vishal had been waiting for.

As the assembly ended and students began walking back towards their classrooms, Vishal deliberately slowed his pace until he was beside them.

A satisfied smile spread across his face.

“Looks like Ivaan’s championship ended before it even began.”

Neither Dev nor Aarav replied.

There was nothing they could say.

With growing concern, they quietly walked back to Class 10-B, hoping against hope that their friend would somehow appear before it was too late.

By the time the assembly ended, the corridors of Viratnagar International School buzzed with excitement.

Every conversation revolved around one topic—the upcoming Sports Championship.

Students eagerly debated which teams they would join, who would make the final squad, and which section would emerge victorious. The anticipation was almost tangible.

Not everyone, however, shared their enthusiasm.

Walking briskly towards Class 10-B was Mrs Suman Chawla, the class teacher and Mathematics instructor. Dressed elegantly in a royal blue sari, she carried a stack of textbooks against one arm. Her long black hair was neatly tied back, and a pair of rectangular spectacles rested on her nose. Pinned to her sari was a name badge that read:

SUMAN CHAWLA

She had already heard enough discussions about football and championships to last a lifetime.

“Sports, sports and more sports...” she thought with a sigh. “Do these children ever think about their studies?”

As she approached the classroom, the noise grew louder.

The students inside were so absorbed in their conversations that none of them noticed her standing outside the door.

Mrs Chawla slowly reached for the handle.

The classroom door swung open with a sharp bang.

Silence.

Every student instantly froze.

Within seconds, the lively classroom transformed into one as quiet as a library.

The students hurriedly stood beside their desks.

“Good morning, Ma’am!”

Mrs Chawla allowed the silence to linger for a moment before walking calmly to her desk.

“Good morning.”

“Please sit down.”

The class obeyed immediately.

Not a single whisper remained.

Mrs Chawla placed her books neatly on the desk before picking up the attendance register.

She adjusted her spectacles.

“Roll Number One.”

“Present, Ma’am.”

“Roll Number Two.”

“Present, Ma’am.”

One after another, students answered as their names were called.

At that very moment...

Outside the school building, Ivaan raced through the main gate on his bicycle.

He skidded to a halt beside the cycle stand, barely slowing down before abandoning the bicycle altogether.

It toppled sideways with a loud metallic clang.

Ignoring everything else, he sprinted towards the academic block.

“Hey!”

The security guard’s voice echoed behind him.

“Stop! Young man!”

“You can’t leave your bicycle there!”

But Ivaan didn’t even look back.

His only thought was reaching the classroom before attendance ended.

The security guard groaned before chasing after him.

Inside Class 10-B...

“Roll Number Six.”

Aarav stood.

“Present, Ma’am.”

Mrs Chawla nodded before looking back at the register.

“Roll Number Seven.”

Silence.

She looked up.

No response.

Her eyebrows knitted together.

“Roll Number Seven.”

Still nothing.

She glanced down at the register once more.

Ivaan Sharma.

Mrs Chawla took a deep breath.

“Ivaaaaan...”

The classroom door suddenly burst open.

“Present!”

Every head turned at once.

Standing at the doorway was Ivaan.

His uniform was slightly untidy, beads of sweat rolled down his forehead, and he struggled to catch his breath after his frantic ride across town.

Despite looking completely exhausted, he somehow managed a sheepish grin.

“You called my name, Ma’am...”

“So... here I am.”

A few students couldn’t help smiling.

Mrs Chawla, however, was far from amused.

She slowly rose from her chair.

“Ivaan.”

Her calm voice was far more frightening than shouting.

“You arrive late...”

“And then you make jokes?”

The smile disappeared from Ivaan’s face almost instantly.

“Sorry, Ma’am.”

“There was an enormous traffic jam this morning. I tried my best to get here.”

Mrs Chawla folded her arms.

“Oh, I’m well aware of your talent for arriving late.”

The classroom erupted with quiet laughter.

Ivaan scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

As he cautiously stepped inside, Mrs Chawla stopped him.

“And where exactly do you think you’re going?”

He froze.

“Stand outside.”

His shoulders slumped.

“You’ve been late for assembly many times before,” she continued. “But today you’ve broken every record.”

“I really am sorry, Ma’am,” Ivaan pleaded. “It won’t happen again.”

Mrs Chawla shook her head.

“No, Ivaan.”

“I think it’s finally time you received a proper punishment.”

Before she could say another word, footsteps approached from the corridor.

The security guard appeared at the classroom entrance.

Standing beside him was the school principal.

Principal Mrs Meera Kapoor, a dignified woman in her early fifties, wore a deep red sari and carried herself with quiet authority. She listened patiently as the guard explained what had happened.

“Ma’am,” he said, pointing towards Ivaan, “he threw his bicycle beside the stand and ran straight here.”

The Principal gave a small nod.

“Thank you.”

“Please place the bicycle properly in the stand. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The guard immediately left.

Mrs Chawla looked towards the Principal.

“Ma’am, he arrived after attendance had already begun.”

“I was just about to punish him.”

The Principal turned her attention to Ivaan.

“So...”

“What happened today?”

Ivaan lowered his head respectfully.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am.”

“There was a terrible traffic jam, and I got stuck on the way.”

The Principal studied him quietly for a few moments.

She knew both Ivaan and his grandmother well.

Although he had a habit of arriving late for assembly, he was not a dishonest student.

Finally, she smiled gently.

“I’ll let you off this once.”

Relief instantly spread across Ivaan’s face.

“But...”

Her expression became serious.

“If this ever happens again, I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I promise.”

Mrs Chawla sighed.

“If you insist, Ma’am.”

The Principal gave a reassuring nod before leaving the classroom.

Only after she disappeared into the corridor did Mrs Chawla look back at Ivaan.

“You may come in.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

Ivaan quietly entered the classroom and immediately searched for Dev and Aarav.

He spotted them near the back.

Both boys discreetly waved him over with relieved smiles.

Just as he started walking towards them—

“Ivaan.”

Mrs Chawla’s voice stopped him once again.

“I know exactly what you’re planning.”

The classroom erupted into soft laughter.

“You’re going to spend the entire lesson discussing the Sports Championship with Dev.”

Ivaan smiled innocently.

“No, Ma’am...”

“I wasn’t—”

She raised a hand.

“Enough.”

Mrs Chawla glanced around the classroom.

Every seat was occupied.

Almost every student had attended school today because of the championship trials.

Then she noticed a single empty chair.

“There.”

She pointed towards the front row.

“You’ll sit beside Siya.”

The entire classroom suddenly became unusually interested.

Several students exchanged knowing smiles.

Ivaan blinked.

“...Beside Siya?”

His ears turned bright red.

Sitting quietly by the window was Siya.

She possessed long, silky black hair that fell gracefully over her shoulders, while her beautiful violet eyes remained focused on the book resting in front of her. Unlike most students, she had shown little interest in the Sports Championship.

Academics were her world.

Year after year, she ranked first in the final examinations and dominated every quiz competition the school organised.

She was admired by many.

Approached by many.

Yet she always kept a polite distance from the boys who tried to befriend her.

Trying his best to remain calm, Ivaan slowly walked over and took the empty seat.

The moment he sat down, Siya quietly placed her school bag between them without saying a single word.

A silent boundary.

Ivaan stared straight ahead as though he hadn't noticed.

For the rest of the lesson, neither of them spoke.

He pretended she wasn't there.

She pretended he didn't exist.

Neither of them realised...

That this awkward beginning was the first step towards a friendship that would one day change both of their lives forever.



Chapter-3



An Unheard Scream

The shrill ring of the bell echoed through the corridors, signalling the end of the first lesson. Almost instantly, the classroom that had remained unusually quiet under Mrs Suman Chawla's watchful eyes came alive with chatter.

As she gathered her books from the desk, she paused at the doorway and turned towards the class one last time.

Her gaze settled on a familiar student.

"Ivaan," she said firmly, "remember what I told you this morning. If you're late again, don't expect me to be so forgiving."

Ivaan smiled sheepishly and gave a respectful nod.

"Yes, Ma'am. I understand."

Mrs Chawla adjusted the stack of books in her arms before leaving the classroom.

The moment she disappeared into the corridor, Dev and Aarav practically leapt from their seats.

"Come on!" Dev called excitedly, hurrying over to Ivaan's desk. "The trials are about to begin!"

Ivaan looked at him in confusion.

“Trials? I thought we were already part of the football team.”

“We were,” Aarav replied, slinging his bag over one shoulder. “But the PT teacher announced during assembly that everyone has to qualify again. No exceptions.”

Ivaan nodded thoughtfully.

“I see.”

“Then you two go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Don’t be late again,” Dev laughed. “You’ve had enough adventures for one day already.”

The two boys headed out of the classroom, disappearing into the crowded corridor as students rushed downstairs towards the sports ground.

Ivaan was about to follow them when a soft voice stopped him.

“Good luck.”

He turned around.

It was Siya.

She stood beside her desk with a gentle smile, her violet eyes meeting his for the first time that day.

For a brief moment, Ivaan completely forgot where he was.

A faint warmth spread across his cheeks.

“T-Thank you,” he replied, trying not to sound nervous.

There was an awkward silence before he gathered the courage to continue.

“Aren’t you taking part in any of the competitions?”

Siya gave a small shake of her head.

“Not really.”

“What about chess?” Ivaan suggested. “You’re one of the smartest students in school. I’m sure you’d do brilliantly.”

A slight blush coloured Siya’s cheeks.

“I only know the basics,” she admitted with a shy laugh. “I’m not nearly as good as everyone thinks.”

“I can teach you.”

The words escaped before Ivaan had time to think.

“If you’d like... you could come to my house this evening. We could practise together.”

For a second, Siya looked genuinely surprised.

Then she smiled politely.

“Thank you.”

“But... I don’t think I can come today.”

She paused for a moment before adding,

“Perhaps tomorrow?”

Ivaan’s face lit up.

“Of course!”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Before either of them could say anything else, a familiar voice echoed from the classroom door.

“There you are!”

Dev stood with his hands on his hips, pretending to look offended.

“Aarav and I have been waiting downstairs while you’re up here having a nice little chat.”

Ivaan immediately waved his hands in protest.

“No! It’s not like that.”

“Siya was just wishing me good luck.”

Dev raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced.

“Right...”

Without another word, he grabbed Ivaan by the wrist.

“Come on, Romeo.”

“The football pitch is this way.”

“Dev!” Ivaan protested, his face turning even redder.

Behind them, Siya couldn’t help smiling as the two friends disappeared into the corridor.

The morning sun shone brightly over the vast sports ground of Viratnagar International School.

The second period had only just begun, yet hundreds of students had already gathered around the different playing fields.

The atmosphere buzzed with excitement.

Some students stretched in preparation for their events, while others enthusiastically discussed who would make the final school teams. Laughter, cheers and friendly rivalries filled the crisp morning air.

By the time Ivaan and Dev reached the football ground, Aarav was already waiting for them.

“There you are,” Aarav said with a grin.

“The sports teachers were here a moment ago.”

“What did they say?” Dev asked.

“Our first trial match is against Section A.”

Both Ivaan and Dev exchanged delighted smiles.

“Perfect,” Dev laughed.

“I’ve been looking forward to beating Vishal again.”

Aarav blinked.

“Again?”

Ivaan chuckled.

“We played them yesterday at the local ground.”

“And won one-nil.”

“So that’s why he looked ready to explode this morning,” Aarav said, laughing.

Their conversation ended as a young man walked confidently onto the field.

He appeared to be around twenty-five years old and was instantly recognisable by his completely shaved head.

He was the school's Physical Education teacher.

Several assistant coaches followed close behind, each responsible for supervising a different sport.

The conversations around the ground gradually faded into silence.

The PE teacher stepped forward.

“Listen carefully, everyone.”

His voice carried clearly across the field.

“Today, every outdoor sport will hold its official selection trials.”

He looked around at the sea of eager faces before continuing.

“Over the next few days, you’ll continue training with your respective teams.”

“Once I’ve assessed everyone’s performance, I’ll announce the final squads.”

He paused deliberately.

“Those selected will go on to represent Viratnagar International School at the District Championship.”

A wave of excitement swept across the crowd.

The chance to represent the school was every athlete’s dream.

“Is that understood?”

The students answered together, their voices echoing across the entire ground.

“YES, SIR!”

The football players made their way towards the changing rooms.

Inside, the atmosphere was filled with anticipation.

Boots thudded against the floor.

Lockers opened and closed.

The sound of jerseys being pulled over heads mixed with animated conversations about tactics and rival teams.

By the time Ivaan had finished changing, someone was already waiting for him.

Vishal.

Dressed in Section A’s football kit, he walked over wearing a smug smile.

“So...”

“You’ve finally made it.”

He folded his arms confidently.

“I hope you’re ready.”

“Because today...”

“I’m going to beat you.”

Before Ivaan could reply, Dev stepped forward angrily.

“Oh, really?”

“Why don’t we see about—”

Aarav quickly caught hold of Dev’s arm.

“So did Ivaan.

“Leave it,” Ivaan said calmly.

“We’ll settle everything on the pitch.”

Vishal smirked.

“Exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Without another glance, he turned and walked away to join his teammates.

Dev watched him leave before letting out an annoyed sigh.

“One day...”

“I swear he’s going to test my patience.”

Ivaan laughed quietly.

“Save your energy.”

“We’re going to need it.”

A few minutes later, both teams emerged from the tunnel and stepped onto the football pitch.

Around them, hundreds of students had gathered to watch.

Some sat on the grass beneath the shade of the trees.

Others leaned against the railings surrounding the field.

Among the spectators sat Siya.

Unlike the others, she wasn't shouting or cheering.

She simply watched quietly from the sidelines.

On the field, the two captains walked towards the centre circle.

Ivaan.

Vishal.

Once again...

The rivalry was about to begin.

A cool breeze drifted across the football pitch as both teams took their positions.

The spectators settled into eager silence.

Some students perched on the concrete steps surrounding the ground, while others stood behind the touchline, excitedly discussing the match ahead. The bright morning sun bathed the field in golden light, and an atmosphere of anticipation hung over the entire campus.

Standing at the centre circle, Ivaan and Vishal exchanged determined glances.

Neither captain intended to lose.

One of the assistant PE teachers, acting as the referee, stepped forward with a whistle in his hand.

“Captains, are you ready?”

Both boys nodded.

The referee raised the whistle to his lips.

Peeeeep!

The match was underway.

Aarav wasted no time, collecting the opening pass before driving confidently through the midfield. He avoided one defender and quickly slipped the ball towards Ivaan.

“On your left!”

Ivaan controlled the pass effortlessly.

His boots seemed to dance across the grass as he accelerated towards Section A’s penalty area. Two defenders rushed to stop him, but with a clever turn he slipped between them.

The crowd erupted.

“Go, Ivaan!”

“Come on, Section B!”

Just as he prepared to shoot, another defender slid in from the side.

The tackle was perfectly timed.

The ball was stolen cleanly.

Section A immediately launched a counterattack.

Within seconds, the ball reached Vishal.

A confident grin spread across his face as he sprinted towards the opposite goal.

“Don’t let him through!” Dev shouted from the goalmouth.

Vishal ignored the defenders closing in around him.

Instead, he struck the ball from outside the penalty area.

It flew towards the top corner.

Dev reacted instantly.

Leaping high into the air, he stretched every muscle in his body.

His fingertips brushed the ball before pushing it safely over the crossbar.

The crowd burst into applause.

“What a save!”

“Brilliant, Dev!”

The corner came to nothing, and the game continued at a relentless pace.

For the next twenty minutes, neither side managed to break the deadlock.

Every attack was answered by an equally determined defence.

Every opportunity disappeared just as quickly as it appeared.

When the referee finally blew for half-time, the scoreboard remained unchanged.

Section A – 0

Section B – 0

The players gathered near their benches, drinking water and catching their breath.

“Keep pressing them,” Aarav said between heavy breaths.

“They’re starting to leave gaps on the wings.”

Dev nodded.

“If we score first, they’ll panic.”

Ivaan remained unusually quiet.

His breathing was steady, but for reasons he couldn’t explain, an uncomfortable feeling had begun creeping into the back of his mind.

Almost as though...

Someone was watching him.

He looked around the crowded ground.

Nothing seemed unusual.

Students laughed.

Teachers chatted near the touchline.

Everything appeared perfectly normal.

Yet the strange feeling refused to disappear.

The referee's whistle sounded once again.

The second half began.

This time, Vishal played with renewed determination.

He charged through midfield with remarkable speed, leaving one defender behind before another.

"I've got him!" Ivaan called.

He moved to intercept.

The two captains met head-on.

Then...

Something changed.

Without warning, an intense pressure exploded inside Ivaan's head.

He staggered.

His vision blurred.

The cheers of the crowd faded into an eerie silence.

The football pitch disappeared.

Darkness swallowed everything.

A freezing wind howled through endless black forests.

Ancient stone ruins stretched across a lifeless landscape beneath a blood-red sky.

Towering trees twisted into unnatural shapes, their branches reaching like skeletal hands.

Between the ruins...

Shapes moved.

Creatures.

Some walked on four legs.

Others stood upright.

None of them looked human.

Pairs of glowing eyes slowly turned towards him.

Watching.

Waiting.

Ivaan's breathing became uneven.

"No..."

He clutched his head tightly.

The vision grew stronger.

A distant scream suddenly echoed through the darkness.

A woman's voice.

Filled with unbearable pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!"

The cry pierced straight through his mind.

Everything around him spun violently.

Back on the football pitch...

Ivaan suddenly dropped to his knees.

Then collapsed onto the grass, both hands gripping his head.

“Ivaan!”

Dev shouted from the goal.

Players from both teams froze in confusion.

But Vishal didn't.

Seeing the opening, he dribbled past the stunned defenders.

Only the goalkeeper remained.

He struck the ball low into the corner.

GOAL!

The referee's whistle echoed across the ground.

Peeeeep!

The scoreboard changed.

Section A – 1

Section B – 0

The sound of the whistle snapped Ivaan back to reality.

The football ground reappeared.

The bright sunshine.

The crowd.

His teammates.

The terrifying vision vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Dev and Aarav were already kneeling beside him.

“What happened?” Dev asked anxiously.

“Why did you stop?”

“You were standing one second...”

“...and the next you were on the ground.”

Ivaan stared blankly at the scoreboard.

One goal down.

His breathing remained uneven.

“I...”

He couldn’t find the words.

How could he possibly explain what he had just seen?

The referee checked whether he was fit enough to continue.

“I can play,” Ivaan replied automatically.

But even as he stood up, something felt terribly wrong.

His legs were steady.

His body wasn’t injured.

Yet his mind remained trapped inside those haunting ruins.

The match resumed.

Ivaan tried to focus.

He really did.

But every touch of the ball felt unfamiliar.

Every movement felt delayed.

His thoughts were somewhere else.

After only a few minutes, he finally shook his head.

“I’m coming off.”

The substitute immediately replaced him.

Sitting alone on the bench, Ivaan buried his face in his hands.

That scream...

It still echoed inside his mind.

Meanwhile, Section A continued attacking relentlessly.

Without their captain controlling the midfield, Section B gradually lost control of the game.

Late in the second half, Vishal broke through the defence once again.

His shot found the back of the net for a second time.

Section A – 2

Section B – 0

The final whistle blew shortly afterwards.

The match was over.

Section A erupted into celebration.

Students rushed onto the edge of the pitch, cheering loudly as Vishal’s teammates lifted him into the air.

On the opposite side of the field...

Silence.

The players of Section B stood motionless.

For the first time in years...

They had been defeated.

Vishal walked confidently towards Dev, unable to hide the satisfaction on his face.

“So much for your winning streak.”

He smirked.

“I told you today would be different.”

Dev clenched his fists but said nothing.

There was no point arguing.

The scoreboard had already spoken.

As Section A celebrated beneath the morning sun, Ivaan remained seated on the bench.

He wasn't thinking about the defeat.

He wasn't thinking about football at all.

His mind had returned to that impossible place...

The dark forest.

The ruined city.

The strange creatures.

And the terrified scream of a woman he had never met...

Or perhaps...

Someone he was destined to meet.



Chapter-4



The Terrible News

The celebrations on one side of the football pitch continued long after the final whistle had blown. Laughter, cheers, and triumphant chants echoed across the ground as Section A celebrated their hard-earned victory. Vishal stood at the centre of the jubilant crowd, proudly accepting congratulations from his teammates.

On the opposite side of the field, however, silence hung heavily in the air.

The players of Section B slowly walked towards the changing rooms with their heads lowered. No one spoke. The disappointment of defeat weighed upon every member of the team.

Yet none of them looked more defeated than Ivaan.

He walked at the very back of the group, his thoughts far removed from football.

The match.

The scoreboard.

The defeat.

None of it mattered.

His mind was still trapped inside that terrifying vision.

The endless darkness...

The ancient ruins...

Those strange creatures...

And above all...

That desperate scream.

The changing room was unusually quiet.

The cheerful conversations that normally filled the room after every match had completely disappeared.

Players silently changed back into their school uniforms, avoiding one another's eyes.

Now and then, someone glanced towards Ivaan.

Some looked disappointed.

Others looked frustrated.

After all, he was their captain.

His sudden collapse had changed the entire match.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Dev stepped forward.

“Enough.”

Everyone looked at him.

“Why are you all staring at him?”

His voice was firm.

“Did only Ivaan lose today's match?”

“No.”

“We all lost.”

“If you’re going to blame someone, then blame every one of us.”

The room fell silent once again.

No one argued.

Deep down, they knew Dev was right.

One by one, the players picked up their bags and quietly left the changing room.

Only Dev, Aarav and Ivaan remained behind.

Aarav walked over cautiously.

“Ivaan...”

“What really happened out there?”

“You suddenly froze.”

“You looked as though you were seeing something that wasn’t even there.”

For a long moment, Ivaan remained silent.

He wanted to answer.

He wanted to tell them everything.

But how could he explain something he barely understood himself?

Finally, he lowered his eyes.

“I... don’t know.”

It was the only answer he could give.

Without another word, he picked up his school bag and slowly walked out of the changing room.

Dev and Aarav exchanged worried glances before following him.

Outside, the excitement surrounding the Sports Championship continued.

Students hurried from one playing field to another, eager to watch the next round of matches.

Among the crowd stood Siya.

She had been waiting quietly near the academic block ever since the football match had ended.

The moment she noticed Ivaan, she stepped towards him.

“Ivaan...”

Her voice was gentle.

He stopped walking but didn't look up.

“I'm sorry, Siya,” he said softly.

“I don't really feel like talking right now.”

She could immediately hear the pain in his voice.

For a brief moment, she remembered their conversation only an hour earlier.

“Perhaps tomorrow.”

She had smiled when she said those words.

Neither of them could have imagined how quickly the day would change.

Siya hesitated before speaking again.

“The Principal would like to see you.”

Ivaan looked up, confused.

“The Principal?”

She nodded quietly.

“She asked me to bring you to her office.”

Without asking any more questions, Ivaan silently followed her.

The corridor leading to the Principal's office felt unusually quiet.

Every step seemed heavier than the last.

Neither of them spoke.

When they finally reached the office, Siya stopped outside.

"You should go in."

Ivaan gave a small nod before gently knocking on the door.

"May I come in, Ma'am?"

A calm voice answered from inside.

"Come in."

He slowly opened the door.

Principal Mrs Meera Kapoor sat behind her desk.

For the first time since Ivaan had known her, she didn't wear her usual warm smile.

Instead, her head remained lowered, her expression filled with quiet sorrow.

The moment Ivaan saw her face, an uneasy feeling settled deep inside his chest.

"Sit down, Ivaan."

Her voice was soft.

Almost fragile.

He obeyed without a word.

For several seconds, the room remained completely silent.

The Principal seemed to be searching for the right words.

Finally, she looked into his eyes.

“Ivaan...”

“A little while ago, we received a telephone call from your home.”

His heartbeat quickened.

“What happened?”

Mrs Kapoor took a slow breath.

“Your grandmother...”

“...met with an accident this afternoon.”

The colour drained from Ivaan’s face.

He leaned forward instinctively.

“Is... is she alright?”

The Principal closed her eyes for a brief moment.

“I’m so sorry, Ivaan.”

“She fell down the staircase while doing the housework.”

“The doctors tried...”

“...but they couldn’t save her.”

For a moment...

The entire world fell silent.

No sound.

No movement.

No thoughts.

Only those final words echoed endlessly inside his mind.

They couldn’t save her...

His lips trembled.

“No...”

A single tear rolled down his cheek.

“No...”

“This... this can’t be true.”

He slowly shook his head.

“No...”

“My Granny...”

The tears came all at once.

His body gave way beneath him as he collapsed to his knees, overcome by grief.

A heartbreaking cry escaped his lips.

“Gran... Granny...”

“I can’t...”

“I can’t lose you...”

Principal Kapoor immediately rushed to his side.

She gently placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, allowing him to cry without interruption.

There were no words capable of easing such pain.

Sometimes...

Silence was the greatest comfort anyone could offer.

Outside the office...

Siya stood frozen.

She hadn't meant to overhear the conversation.

But the broken cries echoing through the room had told her everything.

Her own eyes slowly filled with tears.

Only that morning...

Ivaan had been smiling.

Talking about football.

Inviting her to learn chess.

Now...

His world had fallen apart.

Taking a deep breath, Siya hurried across the corridor.

She soon found Dev and Aarav waiting anxiously outside the sports block.

The moment they saw her expression, both boys knew something was terribly wrong.

"What happened?"

Dev asked immediately.

Siya struggled to speak.

Finally, she whispered,

"Ivaan's grandmother..."

"...passed away this afternoon."

Neither boy spoke.

The words struck them like lightning.

Dev stared silently into the distance.

Aarav slowly removed his glasses, unable to believe what he had just heard.

Only a few hours earlier...

Everything had seemed perfectly normal.

Now...

Nothing would ever be the same again.

A short while later, Principal Kapoor led Ivaan gently towards her car.

His eyes remained fixed on the ground.

He hadn't spoken another word.

As the car slowly pulled away from the school gates and disappeared into the afternoon sunlight, Dev, Aarav and Siya stood watching in complete silence.

None of them realised...

The journey ahead would mark the end of Ivaan's childhood...

The journey back to Viratnagar felt endless.

Outside the car window, the bustling streets carried on with their ordinary rhythm. Shops remained open, children laughed as they cycled home from school, and the afternoon sun continued to shine as though nothing had happened.

Yet inside the car, time itself seemed to have stopped.

Ivaan sat motionless in the passenger seat.

His eyes were fixed on the passing road, but he wasn't truly seeing it.

Every memory of his grandmother flooded his mind.

Her gentle smile.

Her warm embrace.

The way she would call him downstairs every morning.

The mangoes she had saved especially for him.

Only yesterday...

She had laughed with him.

Now...

She was gone.

Not once during the journey did he utter a single word.

Principal Kapoor glanced at him several times, wishing she could say something—anything—that might ease his pain.

But she knew there were wounds that words could never heal.

Silently, she continued driving.

As the car turned into Sector 11, an uneasy silence settled over the neighbourhood.

The road outside Ivaan's house was crowded with people.

Neighbours stood quietly outside the gate, speaking only in hushed voices.

The moment they noticed the Principal's car, every conversation came to an end.

The vehicle came to a gentle stop.

Before the engine had even switched off, Ivaan pushed open the door and ran inside.

“Granny!”

His trembling voice echoed through the house.

No one answered.

He rushed up the stairs two at a time before reaching her bedroom.

The door stood half open.

Inside, several doctors, nurses and neighbours remained gathered around the bed.

In the centre of the room...

A body lay beneath a spotless white sheet.

Everything around it was heartbreakingly still.

Ivaan slowly stepped forward.

His legs felt impossibly heavy.

“No...”

His voice cracked.

“No...”

“I’m here, Granny...”

“I’m home...”

Just as he reached out towards the bed, a gentle hand caught his shoulder.

One of the elderly neighbours stepped in front of him.

“It’s alright, son...”

The man spoke softly, his own eyes glistening with tears.

“You don’t have to see this.”

But Ivaan shook his head desperately.

“Please...”

“I just want to see her.”

The neighbour gently embraced him instead.

Unable to hold back his grief any longer, Ivaan broke down completely.

“GRANNYIIIIII!”

The cry echoed through the entire house.

Every person present lowered their head.

Some quietly wiped tears from their eyes.

There was nothing more painful than watching a child call out for someone who would never answer again.

A few minutes later, Dev and Aarav arrived after receiving permission to leave school.

The moment they entered the house, they found Ivaan sitting on the floor outside his grandmother's room.

His shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Neither of them knew what to say.

Dev quietly sat beside him.

Aarav did the same.

No words.

No advice.

No attempts to comfort him with empty promises.

Sometimes, true friendship meant simply being there.

Together, the three boys remained seated outside the room until evening.

The once lively house had fallen completely silent.

Relatives continued arriving from different parts of the city.

Neighbours prepared everything necessary for the final rites.

Yet despite the number of people filling the house...

It had never felt so empty.

After some time, one of the elderly neighbours stepped out of the room.

He looked gently towards Ivaan.

“It’s time.”

“You should come and say your final goodbye.”

Those words pierced deeper than any wound.

Slowly...

Very slowly...

Ivaan stood up.

By sunset, the funeral procession had reached the sacred banks of the River Ganga.

The western sky burned with brilliant shades of orange and crimson, while flocks of crows flew silently towards their nests.

The evening breeze carried the soothing sound of flowing water across the riverbank.

Family members, neighbours and friends stood together in mournful silence.

At the centre of the gathering rested the funeral pyre.

Wrapped in white cloth and adorned with fresh marigold flowers...

Lay the woman who had raised Ivaan with nothing but love.

Standing at the front was a tall man dressed in a simple white kurta.

His long black hair moved gently in the evening wind, while his neatly kept beard framed a face marked by grief.

This was...

Ivaan’s uncle.

The same uncle who had sent the sweet mangoes only the day before.

The same uncle who had promised...

“Next time, I’ll bring them myself.”

Now he stood before the funeral pyre, carrying a promise he had never imagined he would have to keep.

With trembling hands, he performed the final rites.

Moments later...

The sacred fire was lit.

Golden flames slowly rose into the evening sky.

The crackling of burning wood echoed softly beside the flowing Ganga.

Ivaan stood frozen.

His tear-filled eyes never left the flames.

It felt impossible to believe that the woman who had loved him, protected him and filled his life with warmth was slowly disappearing before his eyes.

A single tear rolled silently down his cheek.

Then another.

And another.

The evening wind carried the smoke high above the river, where it disappeared into the darkening sky.

As though gently carrying a beautiful soul towards eternity.

Beside him, Dev quietly placed a hand on his shoulder.

No words were spoken.

None were needed.

As darkness slowly descended over Viratnagar, the final flames continued to dance beneath the evening sky.

For the world...

It was simply another sunset.

For Ivaan...

Far beyond the reach of human eyes...

Hidden within ancient forests and forgotten ruins...

Something stirred.



Chapter-5



A Gift From My Parents

Night had fallen over Viratnagar. A cool breeze drifted gently through the quiet streets, rustling the leaves of the old trees that lined the neighbourhood. Above, the heavens sparkled with countless stars, illuminating the dark sky like delicate lanterns hung in celebration. It was a breathtaking sight, yet the beauty of the night brought little comfort to the house that had lost its heart.

Only hours had passed since the funeral.

The cheerful home that had once echoed with laughter now stood wrapped in silence. Every room reminded Ivaan of his grandmother—her gentle smile, her warm voice, and the unconditional love with which she had raised him.

Unable to sleep, Ivaan quietly made his way to the rooftop terrace.

He sat alone on the low parapet wall, gazing silently at the endless sky.

The cool wind brushed through his untidy black hair.

For a fleeting moment, he closed his eyes.

It felt as though gentle fingers were running through his hair once again.

Just like his grandmother used to do whenever he was upset.

A faint smile appeared on his lips before slowly fading away.

Behind him, he heard the sound of footsteps.

He turned around.

Standing near the staircase was his uncle.

Tall and handsome, with long black hair that swayed gently in the night breeze and striking green eyes that reflected the moonlight, he looked calm on the outside. Yet behind that calm expression, there was a worry he could no longer hide.

His uncle walked over and quietly sat beside him.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Sometimes, silence expressed far more than words ever could.

Finally, his uncle broke the silence.

“What are you doing up here all by yourself?”

Ivaan kept his eyes fixed on the stars.

“Nothing... I’m just sitting here.”

His uncle followed his gaze.

“You’ve been thinking about your grandmother, haven’t you?”

Ivaan nodded slowly.

“When I was little, Granny and I used to sit here for hours.”

“She would tell me stories about magical kingdoms, brave heroes, and strange creatures.”

A small, nostalgic smile crossed his face.

“When I sit here now... it almost feels as though she’s still beside me.”

His voice trembled slightly.

“I keep thinking she’ll call my name from downstairs again.”

His uncle gently placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I know.”

The two of them sat together beneath the starlit sky, saying nothing as the cool breeze drifted past.

After several minutes, Ivaan finally spoke again.

“Uncle...”

“I wanted to ask you something.”

His uncle turned towards him.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

Ivaan hesitated for a moment.

“I’ve been having the same strange dream for years.”

His uncle’s expression immediately became serious.

“What sort of dream?”

“I always find myself in places I’ve never seen before.”

“Dark forests...”

“Ancient ruins...”

“And creatures that don’t seem to belong to this world.”

“They used to appear only once in a while.”

“But recently...”

“They’ve become much more frequent.”

The moment those words left Ivaan’s mouth, his uncle abruptly stood up.

“What did you just say?”

His voice was no longer calm.

It carried an urgency that caught Ivaan completely off guard.

“Tell me.”

“When did these dreams begin?”

Ivaan looked at him in confusion.

“I... I’m not sure.”

“I’ve been seeing them for several years.”

“But these past few weeks they’ve become stronger.”

“They even appear while I’m awake sometimes.”

For a brief moment, his uncle remained completely still.

His face had gone pale.

Without another word, he reached out, gently took hold of Ivaan’s wrist and said,

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“Now.”

Still confused, Ivaan followed him downstairs.

The house was silent.

Moonlight streamed through the windows as his uncle hurried towards the travel bag he had placed in the guest room.

“What happened?” Ivaan asked.

“Why are we down here?”

His uncle didn’t reply immediately.

Instead, he knelt beside the bag and began searching through it.

Books.

Old documents.

Wrapped parcels.

Several notebooks.

His movements became increasingly hurried.

“There...”

He finally pulled out an old leather-bound diary.

Its brown cover had faded with age, while its worn edges suggested that it had been opened countless times over the years.

His uncle held it carefully before looking at Ivaan.

“I think...”

“...the time has finally come.”

Ivaan frowned.

“The time for what?”

Without answering, his uncle searched through the bag once again.

A few moments later, he let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“I’ve found it.”

This time, he removed a small round silver locket.

It was old, beautifully crafted, and engraved with a mysterious symbol unlike anything Ivaan had ever seen.

The strange design seemed ancient...

Almost as though it belonged to another age.

His uncle placed both the diary and the locket into Ivaan’s hands.

His voice softened.

“Ivaan...”

“These belonged to your parents.”

For a moment, Ivaan simply stared at them.

His parents.

The only belongings he had ever received from the people he could barely remember.

A mixture of curiosity, happiness and sadness filled his heart.

He gently ran his fingers across the worn leather cover of the diary.

Before he could open it, however, his uncle suddenly picked up his bag again.

“I have to leave.”

Ivaan looked up in surprise.

“Leave?”

“So suddenly?”

His uncle nodded.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Then his expression became unusually serious.

“Until I return...”

“Hide the diary.”

“And hide the locket as well.”

“No one must find them.”

“Whatever happens...”

“Do not leave this house.”

Ivaan looked at him in complete confusion.

“But... why?”

His uncle walked towards the front door.

Without looking back, he replied quietly,

“Everything you need to know...”

“...is written inside that diary.”

The front door closed behind him.

Silence filled the house once again.

Standing alone in the middle of the hall, Ivaan looked down at the diary and the mysterious silver locket resting in his hands.

Questions raced through his mind.

Why had his uncle looked so frightened?

Why had he left without explaining anything?

And what secret could possibly be hidden inside the diary that had once belonged to his parents?

Taking a slow, steady breath...

Ivaan looked down at the worn leather cover.

Then, with trembling hands...

He reached for the first page.

The old diary felt strangely heavy in Ivaan's hands.

Its worn leather cover bore the marks of time, while the faded pages carried the faint scent of aged paper. He gently traced his fingers across the surface, wondering how many secrets it had guarded over the years.

His uncle's words echoed relentlessly in his mind.

“Everything you need to know... is written inside that diary.”

Ivaan took a slow breath.

With a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, he carefully opened the cover.

At that very instant—

The silver locket slipped from his fingers.

Clink...

It struck the wooden floor.

A sharp metallic sound echoed through the silent house.

Before Ivaan could bend down to pick it up, an unbearable pain exploded inside his head.

“Argh...”

He staggered backwards, clutching his temples.

The diary slipped from his hands and crashed onto the floor beside the locket.

His breathing became ragged.

The room around him began to spin.

The walls twisted unnaturally.

The furniture blurred before his eyes.

Then...

Every sound vanished.

The ticking clock.

The whispering wind.

Even his own heartbeat.

Everything dissolved into absolute silence.

“N-No...”

He collapsed onto one knee, gripping his head with both hands as waves of agony surged through him.

“I... what’s happening to me?”

His vision darkened.

The familiar walls of his home faded away as though they had never existed.

Darkness swallowed everything.

When Ivaan opened his eyes once more, he was no longer standing inside his house.

He was somewhere else.

A cold, lifeless forest stretched endlessly in every direction.

Towering black trees clawed towards the sky, their twisted branches blotting out almost every trace of moonlight.

A thick mist drifted silently between the ancient trunks.

The air itself felt unnaturally cold.

Not a single bird sang.

Not a single insect stirred.

The silence was overwhelming.

Ivaan slowly turned around.

“This place...”

“I’ve seen it before.”

It was the same forest.

The same terrifying place that had haunted his dreams for years.

Only this time...

Everything felt frighteningly real.

He cautiously took a few steps forward.

The damp ground crunched beneath his feet.

Somewhere deep within the darkness came a distant growl.

Low.

Heavy.

Inhuman.

Ivaan froze.

His heart pounded violently inside his chest.

The mist ahead slowly parted.

Beyond the trees stood the crumbling remains of an ancient civilisation.

Broken stone pillars leaned at impossible angles.

Collapsed walls disappeared beneath tangled vines.

Massive statues, worn away by centuries, stood like silent guardians watching over the forgotten ruins.

Everything looked abandoned...

Yet somehow...

It felt as though unseen eyes were watching his every movement.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

“What is this place...?”

His whisper disappeared into the silence.

Without warning—

A shadow darted between the ruined pillars.

Then another.

And another.

Strange creatures emerged from the darkness.

Some were barely human in shape.

Others resembled enormous beasts with glowing eyes that pierced the darkness.

Their silhouettes shifted within the mist, impossible to make out clearly.

Ivaan instinctively stepped backwards.

His breathing became faster.

“I have to get out of here...”

Suddenly—

A piercing scream shattered the silence.

“AAAAAAAAAAH!”

It was the scream of a woman.

Filled with terror.

Filled with desperation.

The sound echoed across the forest, bouncing from one ruined wall to another.

Ivaan’s entire body froze.

It was the same scream.

The one he had heard during the football match.

But this time...

It sounded closer.

Much closer.

He covered his ears.

“No...”

“Stop...”

The scream echoed again.

Louder.

More painful than before.

An unbearable pressure surged through his head.

He cried out in agony.

The forest began to tremble.

The ancient ruins blurred before his eyes.

The creatures vanished into the darkness.

Everything started collapsing into a swirling abyss.

“No!”

Back in the real world...

The diary lay open on the floor.

The silver locket rested beside it, its mysterious symbol glowing with a faint blue light.

Only for a moment.

Then...

The glow disappeared.

Ivaan's body collapsed heavily onto the wooden floor.

His eyes slowly closed.

The house fell silent once again.

Outside, the cool night breeze continued to drift through the open windows, as though nothing unusual had happened.

Inside...

The heir to a forgotten legacy lay unconscious beside the only two objects capable of revealing the truth about his past.

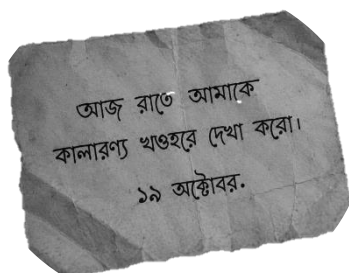
And somewhere far beyond the world he knew...

Someone—or something—

Had awakened.



Chapter-6



The Hidden Letter

Morning arrived beneath a sky still heavy with rain clouds. The storm that had raged throughout the night had finally passed, leaving the whole of Viratnagar washed clean. Rainwater dripped steadily from rooftops, puddles shimmered along the roads, and the cool morning breeze carried the fresh scent of wet earth through the quiet streets.

For the first time in years, the town seemed unusually subdued.

Perhaps it was only because one home had fallen silent forever.

Neither Dev nor Aarav had gone to school that morning.

After everything that had happened the previous day, neither of them could bring themselves to sit through lessons as though life had returned to normal.

Instead, they made their way towards Ivaan's house.

The roads were still damp beneath their feet.

As they walked, Dev suddenly slowed down.

"Hang on..."

A short distance ahead, he spotted a familiar figure.

"Isn't that Siya?"

Aarav looked up.

Sure enough, Siya was walking along the pavement.

But she wasn't alone.

A boy of about their age walked beside her.

He had short blonde hair, bright, expressive eyes and an innocent-looking face. Dressed simply in a T-shirt and trousers, he didn't seem familiar to either of them.

Dev immediately lowered his voice.

"Who's that?"

"I've never seen him before."

Without thinking twice, the two boys quietly began following them from a distance.

Aarav frowned.

"They're heading towards Ivaan's house."

Just then, the blonde-haired boy glanced over his shoulder.

His eyes landed directly on Dev and Aarav.

He leaned closer to Siya.

"I think those two are following us."

Siya looked behind her.

The moment she recognised them, she couldn't help smiling.

"Oh..."

"They're our classmates."

She waved enthusiastically.

"Dev!"

"Aarav!"

The two boys immediately stopped pretending to examine a nearby shop window.

They exchanged an awkward glance before walking over.

“Oh...”

“Hello, Siya.”

She smiled warmly.

“What a coincidence.”

“I was actually on my way to see Ivaan.”

Dev scratched the back of his head.

“Really?”

“Well...”

“So are we.”

Siya turned towards the blonde-haired boy.

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

“This is my cousin, Samar.”

“He arrived from West Bengal last night.”

“Cousin?”

Dev and Aarav repeated almost simultaneously.

The two exchanged another quick glance before quietly nodding to themselves.

For some reason...

That answer made far more sense than the conclusion Dev had jumped to earlier.

Samar smiled politely.

“It’s nice to meet you both.”

“You too,” Aarav replied with a friendly smile.

With the introductions complete, the four of them continued walking together.

After another few minutes, Dev pointed towards a familiar house at the end of the lane.

“There it is.”

“Ivaan’s house.”

The gate stood exactly where it always had.

Only...

Everything else felt different.

The cheerful atmosphere that had once surrounded the house had vanished.

The garden remained untouched after the previous day’s rain.

The front porch was empty.

Even the wind seemed quieter here.

Dev stepped towards the front door and shouted,

“IVAAAN!”

“IVAAAN!”

His voice echoed through the house.

No reply came.

Aarav pressed the doorbell.

Once.

Twice.

Still nothing.

Siya looked towards the silent windows.

“Perhaps he’s gone somewhere.”

Dev frowned.

“I doubt it.”

He gently pushed against the front door.

To everyone’s surprise...

It slowly swung open.

“The door’s already open.”

The four exchanged uneasy glances.

Something didn’t feel right.

Slowly, they stepped inside.

“Ivaan?”

Dev called again.

No answer.

The house was completely silent.

They cautiously walked through the hallway towards the sitting room.

The moment they entered—

Everyone froze.

Lying motionless on the floor was Ivaan.

The old diary rested nearby.

Dev’s heart skipped a beat.

“Ivaan!”

He rushed over and knelt beside him, gently shaking his shoulder.

“Wake up!”

“Come on, mate!”

“How long are you planning to sleep?”

But Ivaan didn’t respond.

Siya immediately stepped forward.

“No...”

“He’s not asleep.”

Her expression grew serious as she knelt beside him.

“He’s unconscious.”

Without wasting another second, she hurried into the kitchen.

A moment later she returned carrying a glass of water.

Dev sprinkled a few drops across Ivaan’s face.

“Ivaan...”

“Wake up.”

“Can you hear me?”

For a few tense seconds...

Nothing happened.

Then...

Ivaan’s fingers twitched.

His eyelids slowly fluttered open.

His blurred vision gradually focused until he found four worried faces staring down at him.

“Dev...?”

“Aarav...?”

“Siya...?”

“And...”

His gaze shifted towards the unfamiliar boy.

“...who are you?”

Before anyone could answer, Ivaan suddenly remembered the previous night.

His eyes widened.

The diary.

The locket.

He immediately scrambled to his feet, searching frantically around the room.

“Where is it?”

“Where’s the locket?”

His eyes finally landed on the blonde-haired boy.

Samar was standing beside the diary.

The silver locket rested in his hand.

Ivaan hurried over and instinctively took it back.

“Who are you?”

“And why are you holding this?”

The room fell silent.

Aarav quickly stepped between them.

“Relax, Ivaan.”

“He’s with us.”

“This is Samar.”

“Siya’s cousin.”

Realising his mistake, Ivaan took a slow breath.

“I’m... sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to sound rude.”

Samar smiled reassuringly.

“It’s alright.”

“I’d probably have reacted the same way.”

The tension in the room eased.

Dev looked at Ivaan with concern.

“So...”

“What exactly happened?”

“You don’t just collapse unconscious for no reason.”

“And judging by your reaction...”

“Whatever happened has something to do with that diary.”

Ivaan looked down at the diary still lying on the floor.

Then back at his friends.

His expression grew serious.

“There are things you all need to know.”

He carefully picked up both the diary and the silver locket before looking towards Aarav.

“Could you take everyone upstairs to my room?”

“I’ll lock the front door and bring something to eat.”

Aarav nodded.

“Come on.”

The others quietly followed him upstairs.

Left alone in the hall, Ivaan locked the front door before making his way into the kitchen.

As he gathered a few biscuits, crisps and cold drinks onto a tray, his eyes drifted once more towards the diary resting in his hands.

Taking a deep breath, he whispered to himself,

“I suppose... it’s time I told them everything.”

A few minutes later, everyone had gathered in Ivaan’s bedroom.

The atmosphere was unusually quiet.

Rain continued to patter softly against the window while the cool morning breeze drifted through the half-open curtains.

Ivaan placed the tray of snacks on the wooden desk before sitting opposite his friends.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Finally, Ivaan took a deep breath.

“Everything I’m about to tell you happened last night.”

He began from the very beginning.

He told them about sitting on the terrace after the funeral...

His conversation with his uncle...

The strange questions about the recurring dreams...

The old diary...

The mysterious silver locket...

And finally, how he had lost consciousness the moment he opened the diary.

When he finished, the room fell silent once again.

Dev folded his arms.

“So, you opened the diary...”

“...and then you blacked out?”

Ivaan nodded.

“I don’t remember anything after that.”

Dev stretched out his hand.

“Alright.”

“Give it to me.”

“I’ll open it.”

For the first time, a flicker of fear crossed Samar’s face.

“Wait...”

“Shouldn’t we be careful?”

But Dev had already taken the diary from Ivaan.

Everyone instinctively held their breath.

Even Ivaan closed his eyes.

Slowly...

Dev lifted the cover.

Nothing happened.

The room remained perfectly still.

A sigh of relief escaped everyone.

“Looks like it only wanted to scare you,” Dev joked.

Ivaan cautiously opened his eyes.

The first page contained a carefully preserved photograph.

A young man stood beside a beautiful woman dressed in an elegant sari.

The man looked astonishingly similar to Ivaan’s uncle.

The only obvious difference was his bright blue eyes.

Dev studied the picture carefully.

“So...”

“That’s your uncle, isn’t it?”

Ivaan smiled faintly.

“No.”

“That’s my father.”

“My father and Uncle were identical twins.”

For the first time since his grandmother’s funeral, a gentle warmth appeared in his eyes.

“And the woman beside him...”

“...is my mother.”

Everyone looked quietly at the photograph.

There was something comforting about it.

The smiles on their faces seemed so genuine...

So full of life.

Dev carefully turned the next page.

The diary began like any ordinary journal.

Family memories.

Travels.

Daily routines.

Small handwritten thoughts.

Nothing unusual.

He continued turning the pages one after another.

Then...

He stopped.

“The entries suddenly end here.”

At the top of the final written page was a date.

19 October.

Every page after that...

Was completely blank.

Dev looked towards Ivaan.

“Why would someone leave the rest of the diary empty?”

Ivaan lowered his eyes.

His voice became almost a whisper.

“Because...”

“That’s the day my parents died.”

Silence settled over the room.

“My grandmother told me they were driving home late that night.”

“A lorry crashed into their car on the highway.”

“They both died at the scene.”

No one knew what to say.

Even Dev, who always had a joke ready, remained silent.

Aarav gently took the diary from him.

“There has to be something we’ve missed.”

He carefully examined the diary from every angle.

As he turned it upside down—

A folded, yellowed piece of paper slipped out and fluttered onto the floor.

Everyone stared at it.

Aarav picked it up.

“Ivaan...”

“This was hidden inside.”

He unfolded the fragile paper.

After staring at it for several seconds, he frowned.

“I can’t read this.”

“It isn’t Hindi.”

“It isn’t English either.”

He looked at Ivaan.

“Did your father know Bengali?”

“I’m... not sure.”

“But why?”

“Because this letter is written in Bengali.”

Samar immediately looked up.

“May I see it?”

Dev raised an eyebrow.

“You can read Bengali?”

Before Samar could answer, Siya smiled.

“My grandparents live in West Bengal.”

“And Samar grew up there.”

“He reads Bengali fluently.”

Samar accepted the letter with great care.

He silently read each line.

His expression gradually became more serious.

Finally, he looked at everyone.

“It says...”

“Meet me this evening at the Kalaranya Ruins.”

He paused briefly.

“There’s also a date.”

Again...

Everyone looked towards Ivaan.

“19 October.”

The room became deathly quiet.

Dev slowly stood up.

“Ivaan...”

“That can’t be a coincidence.”

“The letter and your parents’ so-called accident happened on exactly the same day.”

“There has to be a connection.”

Ivaan nodded.

“I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

He looked down at the old letter once more.

“If my parents really went to those ruins that evening...”

“...then perhaps what happened afterwards wasn’t an accident at all.”

No one argued.

Because deep down...

They were all beginning to think the same thing.

Siya broke the silence.

“There’s just one problem.”

“We don’t even know where these ruins are.”

“How are we supposed to find them?”

Samar looked slightly uneasy.

“You... you’re actually planning to go there?”

Siya looked at him confidently.

“Of course.”

“If everyone else is going, I’m coming too.”

Ivaan smiled gratefully.

“Thank you.”

Just then—

“I’ve found it!”

Everyone turned towards Aarav.

He was holding up his mobile phone excitedly.

“I remember reading an article about Kalaranya a few days ago.”

He quickly opened the saved news page.

“There.”

He pointed at the screen.

“The Kalaranya Ruins are located near the border between Viratnagar and West Bengal.”

Everyone gathered around the phone.

The mysterious ruins really did exist.

Ivaan slowly folded the letter and carefully placed it back inside the diary.

Then he looked at each of his friends in turn.

Determination replaced the uncertainty in his eyes.

“If we leave now...”

“...we should reach Kalaranya by this evening.”

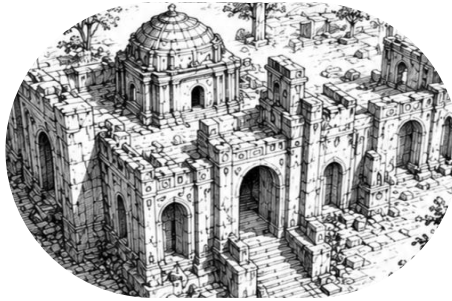
No one objected.

Without realising it...

The five friends had just taken the first step towards a mystery that would change every one of their lives forever.



Chapter-7



The Dark Ruins

The following morning, the five friends set out for the mysterious Kalaranya Ruins. The previous night's rain had transformed the landscape. Roads still glistened beneath the pale afternoon sunlight, while droplets continued to fall from rooftops and tree branches. The air was cool and fresh, carrying the earthy scent that always followed a heavy storm.

No one spoke much.

Each of them was occupied by their own thoughts.

After leaving the town centre, they hired two auto-rickshaws for the journey.

Ivaan, Siya and Samar climbed into the first one.

Dev and Aarav took the second.

As soon as the vehicles pulled away, Dev leaned forward and grinned at the driver—a middle-aged man wearing a faded khaki uniform with an impressive moustache.

“Could you go a little faster, Uncle?”

The driver chuckled, glanced at him through the rear-view mirror and pressed harder on the accelerator.

The auto surged forward with a loud roar.

For the next few hours, the countryside rolled past them.

Fields stretched endlessly on either side of the road, while small villages gradually gave way to dense woodland.

Inside the first auto-rickshaw, Ivaan remained unusually quiet.

His fingers rested on the old diary lying in his lap.

Again and again, his thoughts returned to the mysterious letter.

Who wrote it?

Why had his father been summoned to the Kalaranya Ruins on the very day he died?

And was his parents' accident truly an accident... or something far more sinister?

Every question only led to another.

Beside him, Samar appeared far less interested in solving mysteries.

Instead, every roadside temple they passed seemed to capture his full attention.

Each time he spotted one, he quietly folded his hands in prayer.

Please don't let there be ghosts...

Or monsters...

Or anything that wants to eat us...

His nervous expression became more obvious with every passing mile.

Deep down, he had begun questioning the decision that had brought him here in the first place.

"Why did I go with Siya to Ivaan's house yesterday?" he wondered miserably.

"I should have stayed at home..."

Siya noticed his anxious face and couldn't help smiling.

“You know...”

“It’s only an old ruin.”

Samar forced a weak smile.

“I really hope you’re right.”

Hours passed.

The afternoon slowly melted into evening.

The western sky glowed with brilliant shades of orange and crimson as the sun began sinking beyond the distant hills.

Night would soon be upon them.

The auto-rickshaws continued along the lonely road.

Finally, Ivaan leaned towards the driver.

“Uncle, how much farther?”

The driver pointed ahead.

“Not long now.”

“You’ll be there soon.”

Relieved, everyone settled back into their seats.

But barely thirty minutes later—

SCREEECH!

Both auto-rickshaws came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the deserted road.

“What happened?” Dev asked impatiently.

The drivers climbed out and inspected their vehicles.

Everything appeared normal.

Yet neither engine would restart.

One of the drivers sighed.

“I’m sorry, children.”

“It looks like something’s gone wrong with the engine.”

“It won’t start.”

The five friends climbed out.

The surrounding road was completely deserted.

Only the whisper of the wind disturbed the silence.

Ivaan walked over to one of the drivers.

“Can you tell us how much farther the ruins are?”

The driver pointed towards a narrow road branching off to the right.

“Follow that road.”

“After about half a kilometre, you’ll see some old ruins.”

“If that’s the place you’re looking for...”

“It should be there.”

Very few people knew anything about the Kalaranya Ruins.

Fewer still ever visited them.

Dev looked towards Ivaan.

“I suppose we’re walking from here.”

Ivaan nodded.

After paying both drivers, the five friends continued on foot.

As they walked, the weather began changing once again.

Dark clouds gathered silently overhead.

The cool breeze strengthened.

The air felt heavy.

It looked as though another violent storm was approaching.

Just as the driver had said...

After walking for nearly half a kilometre, they finally saw it.

Everyone stopped.

Before them stood an enormous ancient ruin.

Time itself seemed to have forgotten it.

Its towering stone walls were cracked and broken.

Massive sections had collapsed long ago, leaving jagged ruins swallowed by nature.

The trees surrounding the structure stood bare and lifeless, their branches twisted like skeletal fingers reaching towards the darkening sky.

Not a single bird could be heard.

Not even the wind dared disturb the silence for long.

Ivaan stared at the ruin without blinking.

His heartbeat quickened.

“This place...”

“It feels even darker than the ruins in my dreams.”

Samar swallowed nervously.

“Oh... my goodness...”

“This place is absolutely terrifying.”

Behind him, Dev quietly muttered under his breath,

“Honestly... bringing him here was probably a mistake.”

Before anyone could reply, a powerful gust of wind swept across the clearing.

Dry leaves and dust spiralled violently into the air.

The dark clouds overhead swallowed the last traces of sunlight.

Everyone instinctively shielded their eyes.

Ivaan raised his voice above the howling wind.

“We need to get inside before the rain starts!”

Without wasting another second, the five friends ran towards the enormous entrance.

The temple gate towered nearly twenty feet above them.

Despite its age, it still stood firm.

Ivaan placed both hands against the ancient wooden doors.

He pushed.

To his surprise—

The doors slowly creaked open.

“They’re already open,” he whispered.

He looked back at the others and nodded.

“Let’s go.”

One by one...

The five friends stepped into the darkness of the Kalaranya Ruins.

The adventure had truly begun.

The enormous stone doors groaned shut behind them.

A deep silence settled over the ancient temple.

The darkness inside was almost absolute.

Only a few thin rays of fading evening light filtered through cracks in the broken walls, disappearing long before they reached the floor.

For several moments, none of them moved.

“I... I can’t see anything,” Samar whispered nervously.

Aarav immediately took out his mobile phone and switched on its torch.

A narrow beam of white light cut through the darkness.

Dev did the same.

Slowly, the interior of the temple began to reveal itself.

The hall was far larger than any of them had expected.

Towering stone pillars supported a cracked ceiling covered in creeping vines. Broken statues lay scattered across the floor, many missing their heads or arms, while enormous stone slabs covered in strange symbols leaned against the walls. The ancient script carved into them belonged to no language any of them recognised.

Dust floated lazily through the cold air.

It felt as though no one had entered this place for centuries.

As the group carefully explored the hall, Dev suddenly pointed ahead.

“Look.”

A broad stone staircase disappeared into the darkness above.

“We should search upstairs first.”

Before anyone could agree, Aarav raised his torch towards another passage.

“Wait.”

“What about that?”

A faint glow seeped from a narrow corridor on the opposite side of the temple.

It was weak...

Barely noticeable...

Yet it was unmistakably there.

“I think we should investigate that first,” Aarav said quietly.

Ivaan looked between the staircase and the glowing passage before making a quick decision.

“Let’s split up.”

“I’ll go upstairs with Dev and Siya.”

“Aarav, you and Samar check that corridor.”

“If either group finds anything, call the others immediately.”

Everyone nodded.

Without another word, the group separated.

Ivaan, Dev and Siya climbed the ancient staircase.

Every step echoed loudly through the deserted temple.

The higher they climbed, the colder the air became.

At the top, they found a long stone corridor stretching into darkness.

Old wooden doors lined both sides of the passage.

Every one of them looked identical.

The silence was unsettling.

Dev tried forcing a smile.

“This place gives me the creeps.”

Ivaan nodded quietly.

“It feels... familiar.”

As though he had walked these corridors before.

Only...

Not in real life.

His dreams.

The thought sent a chill through him.

They continued walking.

Suddenly—

Siya stopped.

The other two took several more steps before realising she was no longer beside them.

“Ivaan!”

“Dev!”

Her voice echoed through the corridor.

Both boys immediately turned around.

“What happened?” Ivaan asked.

“Why did you stop?”

Siya frowned.

“Can’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?” Dev replied.

She listened carefully.

“There...”

“That strange sound.”

Ivaan concentrated.

Nothing.

He shook his head.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Neither do I,” Dev added.

For a few seconds...

Everything remained silent.

Then—

A faint sound drifted through the corridor.

Almost like a distant vibration.

Ivaan froze.

“You heard that?”

Dev slowly nodded.

The sound grew louder.

And louder.

Within seconds, it transformed into a piercing, high-pitched frequency that echoed through every corner of the ancient temple.

The unbearable noise stabbed into their ears.

All three of them instinctively covered their heads.

“Argh!”

“It hurts!”

The sound became almost impossible to endure.

Then Siya screamed.

“AAAAAAAH!”

“Make it stop!”

The moment her voice echoed through the corridor—

The sound vanished.

Instantly.

Complete silence returned.

The three of them stared at one another.

None of them understood what had just happened.

Breathing heavily, Ivaan looked towards one of the nearby doors.

“I’m certain it came from in there.”

They hurried towards it.

Ivaan grabbed the old wooden handle and pulled.

Nothing.

He pushed harder.

Still nothing.

“It’s jammed.”

Dev rolled up his sleeves.

“Move.”

“I’ll handle this.”

He stepped back before charging forward and slamming his shoulder into the door.

THUD!

The impact echoed through the corridor.

The door didn’t move an inch.

Dev stumbled backwards, rubbing his shoulder.

“Ouch...”

“That’s definitely not opening.”

Ivaan helped him back to his feet.

As the boys examined the hinges, Siya quietly stepped closer to the doorway.

Something had caught her attention.

Ancient words had been carved into the stone arch above the entrance.

She carefully brushed away centuries of dust with her fingers.

The letters became visible.

Although the script was unfamiliar...

She somehow understood it.

She slowly read the inscription aloud.

“Dvāram Udghāṭayatām.”

She looked towards the others.

“I think...”

“It means...”

‘Let the door open.’

The instant the final word left her lips—

A deep rumbling echoed through the corridor.

Rrrrrrrr...

The ancient door slowly began to move on its own.

Its rusted hinges groaned loudly as it creaked open.

None of them touched it.

For several seconds...

The three friends simply stood there in stunned silence.

Finally, the doorway was fully open.

Inside the room...

There was almost nothing.

Only a large broken window overlooking the forest outside.

A cold wind drifted through the opening.

Then...

Something moved.

Just for a second.

Near the edge of the window...

A tiny tail disappeared out of sight.

Dev blinked.

“Did... did you see that?”

Ivaan didn’t answer.

Driven by instinct rather than reason, he dashed straight into the room.

“Wait, Ivaan!”

Siya and Dev shouted together as they rushed in after him.



Chapter-8



The Little Guardian

Without wasting a second, Ivaan rushed into the room. Dev and Siya followed close behind. The ancient chamber was almost completely empty.

Broken stone walls surrounded the room, and centuries of dust lay undisturbed across the floor. Apart from a single enormous window overlooking the forest outside, there was nothing that seemed unusual.

For a moment...

All three of them simply stood there in silence.

Had they imagined everything?

Then Siya pointed towards the open window.

"Ivaan..."

"Look."

Both boys turned.

Just outside the window, a large branch stretched across the crumbling wall.

Something small was hanging upside down from it.

Only a tiny white tail was visible.

Dev folded his arms.

"So..."

"That's the little nuisance making all those horrible noises."

Without another word, Ivaan climbed onto the windowsill and leaned outside.

What he saw made him blink in surprise.

A tiny white creature sat comfortably on the tree branch, happily whistling to itself as though it hadn't a single care in the world.

It was barely taller than a small child.

Its enormous ears resembled those of an elephant, while its bright, oversized eyes sparkled with curiosity. A long, flexible nose gave it an unusual appearance, and it wore an ancient pointed hat along with faded clothes that looked hundreds of years old.

Completely unaware of the visitors...

The little creature continued humming cheerfully.

Ivaan reached out.

Before the creature could react—

He grabbed one of its legs.

"Wha—?"

The tiny creature was yanked through the window and tumbled into the room.

"AAAAAAAH!"

Its piercing scream echoed through the ruins.

The sound was so painfully shrill that all three instinctively covered their ears.

"Oh, not again!" Dev groaned.

Thinking quickly, Ivaan snapped a thin branch from the nearby window frame and gently—but firmly—placed it across the creature's mouth.

The scream stopped instantly.

"Mmph! Mmph!"

The little creature squirmed furiously.

Not wanting it to escape, Ivaan quickly untied one of his shoelaces and used it to bind the creature's tiny hands and feet.

Only then did he crouch beside it.

"Now..."

He looked directly into its oversized eyes.

"Tell us who you are."

"And what you're doing here."

"Mmph! Mmph!"

The creature glared back angrily.

Siya couldn't help smiling.

"Ivaan..."

"I think you should remove the stick first."

Ivaan scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"Oh..."

"Right."

He carefully pulled the branch away.

The little creature immediately burst into a fit of coughing.

"Cough! Cough!"

Before anyone could ask another question—

It opened its mouth again.

"AAAAAA—"

Ivaan instantly covered its mouth with both hands.

"No!"

"Whatever you have to say..."

"Say it quietly."

"Or I'll throw you out of that window."

The creature's enormous eyes widened.

It nodded rapidly.

"Good."

Ivaan slowly removed his hands.

The tiny creature glanced nervously at the open window before speaking in a tiny voice.

"Okay..."

"No shouting."

"That's better," Ivaan said.

"So..."

"What exactly are you?"

The creature suddenly puffed out its chest with great pride.

Then, instead of answering normally...

It began to sing.

***"I am Truffle, brave and small,
Guardian of a treasure beyond them all!
Tiny I may seem to be,
Yet its secret rests with me!"***

The room fell silent.

Dev blinked.

"...Did it just answer us with a song?"

Truffle folded his arms proudly.

"Of course I did."

"Songs are much more entertaining."

Ivaan sighed.

"Fine."

"What treasure are you guarding?"

"Tell us."

Truffle stuck out his tongue.

Then he sang once more.

***"Why should I tell? Why should I share?
First tell me why you're standing there!
Secrets aren't for every face—
Earn my trust before my grace!"***

Dev quietly leaned towards Ivaan.

"I think this thing enjoys annoying people."

"I heard that!" Truffle protested.

"I have excellent ears."

Ivaan ignored the comment.

Instead, he studied the little creature carefully.

An elf...

It certainly looked like one.

Small.

Strange.

And unbelievably talkative.

Before Ivaan could ask another question, Siya gently stepped forward.

Her voice was soft and calm.

"Please, Truffle."

"We're not here to hurt you."

"We only want answers."

Truffle looked up at her.

His angry expression slowly melted away.

His ears twitched.

His cheeks turned an unmistakable shade of pink.

For several seconds...

He simply stared at Siya.

Then, with both hands clasped dramatically over his chest, he sang in an unusually shy voice.

***"Kind as sunshine, soft and bright,
You've filled this gloomy place with light.
Never thought I'd live to see
Someone quite as sweet as thee!"***

Dev immediately leaned closer to Ivaan and whispered,

"Looks like you've got competition."

"I think he likes Siya too."

Ivaan elbowed him lightly in the stomach.

"Oh, be quiet."

Trying not to laugh, Siya smiled warmly at Truffle.

"Thank you."

"But please..."

"Can you tell us what this special treasure is?"

Truffle looked around nervously before lowering his voice.

This time...

His answer came as another rhyme.

***"Small it seems, yet great its might,
Hidden far from mortal sight.
Whoever claims its ancient power...
Could rule the world from that very hour."***

The smiles disappeared from everyone's faces.

A heavy silence settled over the room.

Whatever this mysterious object was...

It was far more important than they had imagined.

Ivaan glanced towards Siya.

"Ask him where it is."

She nodded before looking back at the little elf.

"Please, Truffle."

"Can you tell us where it's hidden?"

The moment the question left her lips...

The colour drained from Truffle's face.

His confident smile vanished.

He had said too much.

Much too much.

He swallowed nervously before whispering another trembling rhyme.

***"I cannot tell... I cannot show...
I made a promise long ago.
An old man's trust I must defend...
Until my watch comes to an end..."***

The fear in his eyes was unmistakable.

Whatever promise he had made...

He had no intention of breaking it.

For a few moments, nobody spoke.

Truffle's frightened expression lingered as he glanced anxiously from one face to another.

Then...

Almost without warning...

A mischievous grin slowly spread across his tiny face.

"Oh no..." Dev muttered.

"I don't like that smile."

With a sharp snap of his fingers—

Snap!

The shoelace wrapped around Truffle's wrists instantly loosened and fell to the floor.

"Huh?" Ivaan gasped.

"Magic?"

Before anyone could react, the tiny elf sprang into the air with astonishing agility.

He somersaulted gracefully and landed upside down on the ancient ceiling, clinging to the cracked stone as effortlessly as a gecko.

He waved cheerfully at the three stunned teenagers.

Then, with his usual sing-song voice, he declared,

***"Forgive me now, I have to flee,
No more questions asked of me!
Farewell, friends—don't follow through...
Or dreadful trouble waits for you!"***

The moment he finished—

He took a deep breath.

"Oh, no..." Dev whispered.

"Not again."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Truffle's earsplitting scream echoed throughout the ancient temple.

The sound was even louder than before.

It was unbearable.

Ivaan clamped both hands over his ears.

"Make it stop!"

Siya winced in pain, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Please, Truffle!"

"Stop!"

Dev gritted his teeth.

"You little idiot!"

"Will you just be quiet?"

Instead of stopping...

Truffle screamed even louder.

The entire chamber began to tremble.

Rumble... Tremble...

Dust drifted from the ceiling.

Small pebbles bounced across the cracked floor.

Everyone froze.

"What was that?" Siya whispered.

Another violent tremor shook the room.

CRACK!

A long fracture suddenly raced across the stone floor beneath their feet.

Ivaan stared in horror.

"The floor..."

"It's breaking!"

The crack spread rapidly through the chamber like a bolt of lightning.

Another followed.

Then another.

Within seconds, the entire floor was covered with deep fractures.

"I think we should run!" Dev shouted.

"No kidding!" Ivaan replied.

But it was already too late.

With a deafening roar—

CRAAASH!

The ancient floor collapsed beneath them.

"Ivaaaaan!"

"Dev!"

"Siya!"

The three teenagers plunged into darkness together.

The world seemed to disappear beneath their feet.

They weren't simply falling through a hole.

It felt as though they had been swallowed by an impossibly deep stone tunnel—a gigantic vertical shaft hidden beneath the ruins.

The rushing wind howled past them.

Their terrified screams echoed endlessly through the darkness.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Ivaan!"

"Dev!"

No one could see anything.

Only darkness surrounded them.

The tunnel twisted like the inside of a colossal pipe, carrying them further and further below the forgotten temple.

Far above them...

The shattered floor slowly disappeared from sight.

And somewhere in the distance...

Truffle's voice echoed faintly through the ruins one last time.

***"Down you go, where secrets sleep,
Buried silent, dark and deep...
Should fate decide to let you see...
Perhaps you'll learn your destiny..."***

His laughter gradually faded away. Then... Everything was swallowed by darkness.



Chapter-9



A Narrow Escape

The ancient ruins fell eerily silent. While Ivaan, Dev and Siya had vanished beneath the collapsing floor, Aarav and Samar continued exploring the lower passage they had been assigned.

The underground corridor was cold, damp and unsettling.

Water dripped steadily from the cracked stone ceiling, each droplet echoing through the darkness.

Samar clung tightly to Aarav's arm as they walked.

"I... I don't think we should be here," he whispered nervously.

Aarav sighed.

"If you keep holding onto me like this, we'll both fall over."

"I'd rather fall than be left alone," Samar replied without hesitation.

Before Aarav could answer—

A terrified scream echoed through the ruins.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!"

Both boys froze.

Aarav's eyes widened.

"That was Ivaan!"

"And Dev... and Siya!"

Without wasting another second, he turned and sprinted back towards the staircase.

"Hurry, Samar!"

But Samar remained rooted to the spot, his face completely pale.

He stared into the darkness ahead like a statue.

Aarav looked back impatiently.

"Samar!"

"What are you doing?"

"Move!"

The frightened boy finally snapped out of his trance and hurried after him.

The two raced up the ancient staircase as fast as they could.

When they reached the upper corridor, dozens of identical wooden doors stretched before them.

Every room looked exactly the same.

"They've got to be in one of these," Aarav muttered.

He grabbed the nearest door handle.

Locked.

He rushed to the next.

It refused to budge.

Then another.

And another.

Nothing opened.

His breathing grew heavier with every failed attempt.

"There has to be a way in..."

Suddenly, Samar pointed further down the corridor.

"Aarav..."

"Look!"

"That door's already open!"

Without hesitation, both boys ran towards it.

The moment they stepped inside...

They stopped dead.

The entire stone floor had collapsed.

A massive shaft plunged deep into the darkness below.

Cold air drifted upwards from the endless tunnel.

Aarav hurried to the edge.

"Ivaan!"

"Dev!"

"Siya!"

Only echoes answered him.

He quickly pulled out his phone and dialled Dev's number.

The screen flashed briefly.

Not Reachable.

"No..."

He tried again.

The same message appeared.

Frustrated, Aarav lowered the phone.

"They've completely lost signal..."

Far below...

Three figures crashed onto something wet and unpleasant.

"Ugh!"

"What is this?" Siya grimaced, quickly wiping her hands on her trousers.

"It smells horrible."

The air was thick with dampness.

The ground beneath them felt strangely soft and sticky, covered in layers of moss and slimy roots.

Dev groaned as he pushed himself upright.

"My phone..."

"Where's my phone?"

"It was in your hand," Ivaan replied.

All three switched on their own phone torches and began searching the gloomy cavern.

The narrow beams of light barely pierced the darkness.

After a few moments, Siya spotted something lying several metres away.

"There!"

Dev hurried over and picked it up.

The screen was still intact.

He glanced at it.

"Two missed calls..."

"From Aarav."

He immediately pressed the call button.

Nothing.

"No signal," he muttered.

"Oh, come on..."

He took several steps forward, holding the phone high above his head.

Still nothing.

Another step.

Then another.

Suddenly...

One tiny signal bar appeared.

Dev's face lit up.

"Yes!"

"I've got network!"

"What?" Ivaan asked.

"You found a way out already?"

"No."

Dev grinned.

"I found a signal."

Without wasting another second, he called Aarav again.

The phone connected.

Almost instantly, Aarav answered.

"DEV!"

"Can you hear me?"

"Are you three down there?"

The voice crackled through the speaker, constantly breaking apart.

"Y-yeah..." Dev replied.

"We're underground."

"What happened?"

"The floor collapsed."

"There was this stupid little elf..."

"He tricked us."

Above ground, Aarav frowned.

"Wait..."

"An elf?"

"What are you talking about?"

The signal grew weaker.

Dev turned towards Ivaan.

"Aarav says he and Samar are thinking of coming down."

Ivaan immediately shook his head.

"No."

"Tell them not to."

"They need to stay up there."

"If there's another way into this place, they're more likely to find it from above."

Dev nodded and spoke into the phone.

"Ivaan says you should stay where you are."

"Look for another entrance."

"We'll keep searching from—"

The line suddenly dissolved into loud static.

"Krrrrrr..."

Then...

The call ended.

"Aarav?"

"Hello?"

Nothing.

The connection had vanished.

Far above, Aarav stared at the silent screen.

"Hello?"

"Dev?"

"Can you hear me?"

Only silence answered him.

Deep underground...

Dev slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"Signal's gone again."

He sighed.

"I guess we're on our own for now."

Neither Ivaan nor Siya replied.

Instead...

They were staring at something behind him.

Both of their faces had gone completely pale.

Dev frowned.

"What?"

"Why are you two looking at me like that?"

Siya slowly raised a trembling finger.

"Dev..."

"Don't move."

He swallowed.

"...Why?"

"What's behind me?"

Dev's heartbeat quickened.

He slowly turned around, raising the torch on his phone.

The narrow beam sliced through the darkness.

For a brief moment...

There was nothing.

Then—

Two glowing crimson eyes appeared amongst the tangled roots of a twisted tree.

The creature stepped into the light.

It was barely three feet tall, its body covered in slimy green skin that glistened in the damp cavern. Long, razor-sharp claws scraped against the stone floor, while rows of jagged teeth protruded from its snarling mouth. Thick saliva dripped from its fangs as it fixed its blood-red eyes on Dev.

Dev froze.

"...Ivaan."

"I think we've got company."

The creature suddenly leapt forward.

"AAAAH!"

It landed squarely on Dev's face.

"What the—?!"

"Get it off me!"

"Ivaan!"

"Help!"

The creature clawed wildly at him, hissing through its sharp teeth.

Dev stumbled backwards, flailing his arms in panic.

Without hesitating, Ivaan grabbed the creature by the scruff of its neck.

"Oi!"

The creature spun around, snarling at him.

Before it could attack—

Ivaan hurled it across the cavern.

THUD!

The creature crashed into a moss-covered rock before scrambling back onto its feet.

Instead of attacking again...

It simply glared at Ivaan.

Its crimson eyes burned with fury.

Then, letting out a guttural growl, it disappeared into the darkness.

Silence returned.

Only the sound of dripping water echoed through the cavern.

Dev adjusted his shirt and brushed the slime from his face.

"That thing..."

"...was disgusting."

Siya looked around uneasily.

"I don't think it was alone."

The underground forest stretched endlessly around them.

Towering trees with thick, twisted trunks reached into the darkness above, their enormous roots winding across the damp ground like sleeping serpents.

Everything around them was soaked.

The air smelled of wet earth and decay.

Strange vines hung from unseen branches overhead, while patches of glowing moss faintly illuminated the cavern walls.

Nothing about this place felt natural.

Siya broke the silence.

"While Aarav and Samar search for another entrance..."

"We should keep moving."

"There has to be another way out."

Ivaan nodded.

"You're right."

"We can't just stand here and—"

A deep, thunderous growl echoed through the cavern.

GRRRRRRRRAAAAH!

The ground vibrated beneath their feet.

Then came another growl.

And another.

Branches shook violently.

Leaves rustled overhead.

Something...

No.

Many things...

Were moving through the darkness.

The creature Ivaan had thrown suddenly emerged from behind a tree.

Only this time—

It wasn't alone.

Dozens of identical creatures climbed over rocks, clung to tree trunks and swung between branches.

Hundreds of glowing red eyes stared directly at them.

Dev's jaw dropped.

"Oh..."

"...You've got to be kidding me."

Ivaan forced a nervous smile.

"I think..."

"...he's brought the whole town with him."

The creatures roared in unison.

Without another thought, Ivaan grabbed Siya's hand.

"Run!"

The three of them sprinted into the underground forest.

Behind them, the entire horde gave chase.

The creatures bounded across the ground with terrifying speed, while others swung effortlessly from branch to branch above their heads.

Their shrill screeches echoed from every direction.

"They're gaining on us!" Dev shouted.

"I've noticed!" Ivaan called back.

Roots jutted from the earth, forcing them to leap over them as they ran.

The air grew colder.

The sounds behind them became louder.

Closer.

Much closer.

Siya glanced desperately from side to side.

Then her eyes widened.

"There!"

She pointed towards a narrow opening hidden between two enormous rocks.

"A cave!"

Ivaan looked up.

"It's our only chance!"

"Hurry!"

Siya reached it first and squeezed through the narrow entrance.

Ivaan followed immediately behind her.

Dev was only a few steps away.

"Come on, Dev!" Ivaan shouted, extending his hand.

Dev leapt forward.

Just as his fingers reached Ivaan's—

Several creatures grabbed hold of his leg.

"What?!"

"Oh, no you don't!"

Dev twisted his body and delivered a powerful kick.

The creatures were sent flying backwards with startled shrieks.

Taking advantage of the opening, Ivaan grabbed Dev's wrist and pulled with all his strength.

Dev stumbled into the cave.

The moment he was safely inside—

Ivaan shoved the heavy stone slab beside the entrance with all his might.

BOOM!

The entrance slammed shut.

A split second later—

BANG!

THUD!

CRASH!

The pursuing creatures smashed into the sealed entrance one after another, snarling and clawing furiously at the stone from outside.

Their terrifying growls echoed through the cave.

Inside...

The three friends collapsed onto the cold stone floor, gasping for breath.

For several long moments, nobody spoke.

Only the sound of their ragged breathing filled the darkness.

Then Dev suddenly looked around.

His expression froze.

"My phone..."

He patted every pocket.

His eyes widened.

"No..."

"It..."

"It fell outside."

The cave fell silent once again.

The only source of light they had left...

Was Ivaan's and Siya's phones.

Outside...

The creatures continued scratching relentlessly at the sealed entrance.

And somewhere beyond the darkness...

Something much larger let out a deep, echoing roar.



Chapter-10



The Riddle

High above the underground cavern, Aarav and Samar stood at the edge of the collapsed chamber, staring down into the endless shaft. A cold wind drifted upwards from the darkness below.

For several long moments, neither of them spoke.

Finally, Aarav broke the silence.

"It was that elf."

Samar looked at him.

"What about him?"

Aarav clenched his fists.

"He's the one who caused all of this."

"If we want to help Ivaan, Dev and Siya..."

"We have to find Truffle first."

Although he had no idea where the tiny elf had disappeared to, it was the only lead they had.

The two boys immediately began searching every corridor of the ancient ruins.

Meanwhile...

Far beneath the temple, inside the narrow cave...

After resting for several minutes, Ivaan slowly got back onto his feet.

"We can't stay here forever."

"We need to keep moving."

Dev stretched his aching back and groaned.

"I agree."

"If I have to crawl through this tunnel much longer, my spine's going to snap."

The cave was so narrow that none of them could stand upright.

Ivaan led the way while Dev and Siya followed behind in single file, carefully squeezing through the winding passage.

The rough stone walls brushed against their shoulders as they moved.

Water dripped steadily from the ceiling, and the air remained damp and cold.

Nobody spoke.

Only the sound of their footsteps echoed through the tunnel.

After several minutes...

A faint golden light fluttered through the darkness.

A beautiful butterfly, glowing like a tiny lantern, drifted gracefully into the cave.

It circled around the three friends before gently landing on Siya's shoulder.

She smiled in surprise.

"It's beautiful..."

The butterfly's wings shimmered with soft golden light.

It remained still for only a moment before taking flight once more.

Instead of continuing straight ahead...

It disappeared into a narrow passage on the left.

"Wait."

Siya stopped walking.

"I think we should go that way."

Ivaan looked back.

"Why?"

She pointed towards the glowing butterfly.

"It came from that tunnel."

"It feels like it's trying to guide us."

Dev shrugged.

"We don't exactly have a better plan."

Ivaan nodded.

"Fair enough."

"Let's follow it."

The three turned left.

As they continued deeper into the passage, something gradually began to change.

The tunnel widened.

The oppressive darkness slowly faded.

Warm light filtered through the cave ahead.

The air itself seemed fresher.

Dev stretched his back with a relieved groan.

"Finally..."

"I can almost stand up again."

A few moments later, Siya smiled brightly.

"I can see the exit!"

The three hurried forward.

The moment they stepped out of the cave...

They stopped in absolute amazement.

Before them stood an enormous tree unlike anything they had ever imagined.

Its colossal trunk stretched high into the cavern ceiling, glowing with a gentle golden radiance.

Thousands of shimmering leaves sparkled like tiny stars.

Beautiful flowers bloomed beneath its branches, filling the clearing with vibrant colours.

Crystal-clear streams flowed peacefully between carpets of emerald grass.

After everything they had endured beneath the ruins...

The place felt almost heavenly.

For the first time since entering the underground world...

They felt warmth instead of fear.

Hope instead of darkness.

Dev slowly looked around.

"I never imagined somewhere like this could exist beneath those ruins."

Neither had Ivaan.

Drawn by curiosity, he cautiously walked towards the enormous tree.

He gently placed his hand against its ancient bark.

The instant he touched it—

Two enormous golden eyes suddenly opened within the trunk.

The tree smiled.

Its long, thick moustache, woven from twisting roots and hanging moss, swayed gently as it spoke in a deep, cheerful voice.

"Ho... ho... ho..."

"So..."

"You've finally arrived."

All three teenagers leapt backwards in shock.

"The tree..."

"It can talk!" Dev exclaimed.

The ancient guardian chuckled warmly.

"There's no need to be afraid."

Then, to their complete astonishment, it continued,

"Welcome, Ivaan."

"Siya."

"And Dev."

Silence.

The three exchanged bewildered glances.

Ivaan stepped forward cautiously.

"How..."

"How do you know our names?"

The giant tree laughed softly.

"I know many things."

Its glowing eyes slowly wandered around the clearing.

"Hmm..."

"But I don't see Aarav or Samar."

Dev blinked.

"You know them too?"

"Of course I do."

The tree smiled.

Then it tilted its enormous head.

"Tell me..."

"How did you manage to escape the Goblins?"

"Goblins?" Dev repeated.

"So those slimy little monsters were Goblins?"

The tree nodded.

"Indeed."

"They have guarded this underground realm for generations."

"They protect these lands from outsiders."

Ivaan folded his arms thoughtfully.

"So..."

"You're saying they attacked us because they thought we were intruders?"

"Exactly."

The guardian's expression became curious.

"But that raises another question."

"Why have you come here?"

Ivaan hesitated before answering.

"We met an elf."

The tree smiled knowingly.

"Truffle."

Ivaan's eyes widened.

"You know him?"

"Very well."

"He sent you here, didn't he?"

Ivaan nodded.

"He kept talking about some special treasure."

Siya stepped forward politely.

"Do you know what he meant?"

The ancient guardian chuckled.

"Oh, yes."

"I know exactly what he was talking about."

Hope instantly returned to their faces.

Siya smiled.

"Then... could you please tell us what it is?"

"And where we can find it?"

The tree nodded slowly.

"I certainly can."

The three exchanged excited smiles.

At last...

They were finally about to get some answers.

"But..."

The single word echoed heavily through the clearing.

Their smiles disappeared at once.

The guardian looked at them with a mysterious grin.

"Before I reveal anything..."

"You must answer one question."

Ivaan frowned.

"A question?"

"What kind of question?"

The giant tree's glowing eyes narrowed playfully.

"A riddle."

"And be warned..."

"If your answer is wrong..."

"You shall become a tree."

"Just like me."

Dev immediately pulled Ivaan a few steps backwards.

He lowered his voice.

"Forget the treasure."

"We should ask about that letter first."

Ivaan nodded.

Reaching into his pocket, he carefully unfolded the old letter his father had left behind.

He held it up.

"Do you know anything about this?"

The giant tree examined it for a brief moment before smiling.

"Yes."

"I know exactly who wrote it."

Ivaan's heart skipped a beat.

"Please..."

"Tell us."

The guardian let out a deep, rumbling laugh.

"Enough questions."

"My turn."

"You must answer mine first."

Ivaan looked towards Siya and Dev.

The three quietly discussed it for a few moments.

Finally...

He stepped forward again.

"We're ready."

The giant tree burst into delighted laughter.

"Ho... ho... ho!"

Its enormous moustache bounced happily as flowers and glowing leaves danced around its branches.

"Wonderful!"

"It's been many years since anyone accepted my challenge."

"Thank you, children."

Dev folded his arms impatiently.

"Then hurry up and ask it already."

The ancient guardian inhaled deeply.

A powerful breeze swept through the clearing.

Flowers swayed.

Leaves rustled.

The glowing branches trembled gently.

Then, in a voice that echoed throughout the underground forest, the guardian declared,

"Listen carefully, young travellers..."

In the heart of the jungle, I am born each day,

Yet I grow older whenever I fade away.

I have no roots, yet trees depend on me.

I have no body, yet every creature can see me.

Without me, the jungle sleeps in endless night.

Tell me...

What am I?"

The clearing fell silent.

The challenge had begun.

The three of them sat in deep concentration, giving the puzzle their full attention. Siya quietly repeated each word to herself, one by one, as though testing every possibility. It looked as if she had finally figured out the correct answer.

"Ivaan, Dev, come here and listen," she called.

"I think the answer has something to do with the Sun."

Dev's face lit up with excitement. "The answer is **the Sun!**" he exclaimed at the top of his voice.

The Giant Tree's booming voice echoed through the hidden sanctuary.

"No... very close. Very close indeed. But that answer is still incorrect."

Dev frowned.

"Incorrect?" But we haven't even answered yet!"

The Giant Tree tilted its enormous head.

"A moment ago, you declared, 'The answer is *the Sun*.' I took that as your final answer."

Dev waved his hands in protest.

"No, no! I wasn't giving my—"

His words stopped abruptly.

He doubled over, clutching his stomach.

"Agh... Ivaan... Siya... something's happening to me!"

His body trembled violently.

Thin vines suddenly curled around his legs.

Branches burst from his arms.

His skin hardened into rough bark as leaves rapidly sprouted from his shoulders.

Within seconds, Dev's body had completely transformed into a young tree rooted firmly in the ground.

"Ivaan!" his deep, frightened voice cried from within the trunk. **"Do something! Please... turn me back!"**

Ivaan's face drained of colour.

"What have you done?" he shouted, rushing towards the Giant Tree. **"Please!**
You have to change him back!"

The ancient guardian sighed sadly.

"I warned you before the trial began. A wrong answer always carries a price."

"We don't care about the special object anymore!" Ivaan pleaded desperately.
"Please... just save my friend!"

The Giant Tree looked at both Ivaan and Siya with calm, ancient eyes.

"Only the two of you can restore him."

Ivaan looked up.

"How?"

"Give me the complete and correct answer."

Silence settled over the clearing.

Only the soft rustling of leaves and distant birds could be heard.

Ivaan turned quickly towards Siya.

"Siya... think. There has to be another clue."

She closed her eyes for a moment, repeating every line of the riddle in her mind.

"Born every day..."

"Grows older as it fades away..."

"Trees depend on it..."

"Without it, the jungle sleeps in endless night..."

Her eyes slowly opened.

A confident smile appeared on her face.

She stepped forward.

"Ivaan... let me answer."

He studied her expression.

"You sound certain."

She nodded without hesitation.

"I am. I've solved far more difficult puzzles than this—and won plenty of gold medals doing it."

Taking a deep breath, she faced the ancient guardian.

"The correct answer is... **Sunlight.**"

Behind her, Ivaan folded his hands tightly.

Even Dev, trapped inside the tree, silently prayed.

For one long moment...

Nothing happened.

Then the Giant Tree burst into booming laughter.

"EXCELLENT! EXCELLENT!" it roared joyfully.

"That is absolutely the correct answer!"

The entire sanctuary erupted with life.

Golden light poured through the glowing canopy.

Thousands of colourful flowers bloomed all at once.

Leaves swirled through the air like a magical whirlwind, circling both the Giant Tree and Dev.

The bark covering Dev's body cracked apart.

Branches withdrew.

Leaves vanished.

Moments later, he stumbled forward in human form once again.

"YES!" he shouted, looking at his hands in disbelief.

Ivaan ran straight to Siya and pulled her into a joyful embrace.

"Siya... you're incredible!" he said, unable to hide his excitement.

"I knew you'd figure it out."

Caught completely off guard, Siya blushed deeply.

A warm pink spread across her cheeks.

She lowered her eyes shyly but couldn't stop smiling.

Dev hurried over and wrapped both of them in a grateful hug.

"Thank you... seriously! You two just saved my life!"

Before anyone could say another word...

A loud, cheerful voice echoed behind them.

"Ho... ho... ho! Splendid work, Siya!"

The three friends spun around.

The Giant Tree had vanished.

Standing in its place was an enormous, round man dressed in a simple white **dhoti** and **kurta**. His magnificent moustache swept almost to his waist, and his warm eyes held the same ancient wisdom they had seen moments earlier in the Tree.

They stared at him in complete astonishment.

"Who... who are you?" Siya asked. "And where did the Giant Tree go?"

The man laughed heartily.

"Thank you, Siya. I am the Giant Tree."

He smiled warmly.

"By answering the riddle correctly, you have finally broken the ancient curse that bound me to those roots."

Ivaan stepped forward immediately.

"Then... can you finally tell us about the letter? And the special object Truffle mentioned?"

The man's cheerful expression became unexpectedly serious.

"I can."

He glanced anxiously towards the dark forest beyond the sanctuary.

"But not here."

A cold wind swept across the flowers.

His eyes narrowed.

"Now that the curse has been lifted, the Dark Shadows may arrive at any moment. For nearly fifteen years, I have held them back with my roots."

He pointed deeper into the glowing forest.

"Come. We don't have much time."

Without another question, Ivaan, Siya and Dev exchanged determined glances before following the mysterious old guardian into the unknown, unaware that the greatest truth of their journey was finally about to be revealed.



Chapter-11



The Secret Chamber

The ancient ruins had fallen eerily silent. Only the distant whistle of the wind drifted through the cracked corridors, carrying with it the scent of damp stone and forgotten centuries. Shafts of fading evening light slipped through broken arches, casting long shadows across the deserted temple.

Aarav and Samar wandered through the endless maze of crumbling passageways, searching desperately for another route.

Somewhere beneath them, Ivaan, Dev and Siya were trapped.

And they had no intention of leaving without them.

Aarav scanned every corridor as he walked, his expression calm but determined.

"That elf is definitely responsible," he muttered. "If we find Truffle, he'll have to tell us how to bring them back."

Beside him, Samar stayed so close that he was practically walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Aarav. His nervous eyes darted in every direction.

Every broken statue...

Every dark doorway...

Every strange sound made him flinch.

Without warning, something small shot past behind him.

A blur of white.

Samar froze.

His face turned pale.

He slowly reached for Aarav's sleeve.

"Aarav..." he whispered shakily.

"I think... I think a ghost just ran behind me."

Aarav sighed without even turning around.

"Ghosts don't exist, Samar."

He folded his arms.

"Stop imagining things and help me find that elf."

Samar swallowed nervously.

"Easy for you to say..."

They continued deeper into the ruins.

The silence somehow felt even heavier now.

A cold breeze drifted through the corridor.

Suddenly...

Samar's eyes widened.

On the cracked stone wall ahead, an enormous shadow appeared.

It looked like the face of a terrifying monster, complete with huge ears, a long nose and twisted features.

Samar stared for one horrified second.

Then—

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

His scream echoed throughout the temple.

Aarav spun around.

"What now?!"

Samar pointed towards the wall with trembling fingers.

"T-there! Look!"

Even Aarav instinctively stepped backwards.

For a brief moment...

The shadow genuinely looked terrifying.

He slowly followed its outline upwards.

Then he blinked.

Perched comfortably on the branch of a tree growing through the ruined ceiling was a tiny white creature...

Fast asleep.

Its oversized ears drooped over the branch while its long nose twitched every few seconds.

Aarav couldn't help laughing.

"There's your monster."

Samar looked up.

"...Seriously?"

The little creature yawned loudly, completely unaware that it had just terrified someone.

Aarav grinned.

"Looks like we've found Truffle."

He quietly walked beneath the tree before reaching up and lifting the tiny elf off the branch.

Truffle's eyes flew open.

"Huh?!"

For a split second he looked utterly confused.

Then he realised he was being carried.

"HEY!"

With surprising agility, he wriggled free from Aarav's grip.

The tiny elf landed neatly on the ground.

And immediately bolted.

"Come back here!" Aarav shouted.

He and Samar sprinted after him through the ruined corridors.

"Stop running!"

"Tell us why you trapped Ivaan, Dev and Siya underground!"

Without slowing down, Truffle called back in a sing-song voice,

***"THEY ASKED ABOUT THE SECRET THING,
SO DOWN THEY WENT—OH, WHAT A SWING!"***

Aarav frowned.

"What secret thing?"

"Tell us!"

Suddenly...

Truffle stopped running.

He turned around with a mischievous grin spreading across his tiny face.

Then—

"BUUUURRRPPP!!"

The unbelievable belch exploded through the ruins like a shockwave.

A powerful gust of air blasted forwards.

"WHOA!"

Aarav and Samar were hurled several metres backwards before crashing onto the dusty floor.

"Oww..." Aarav groaned.

Samar lay flat on his back, completely stunned.

Truffle skipped over to them, clutching his stomach with laughter.

***"HEE HEE HEE! HO HO HO!
YOU HUMANS ARE SO FUN TO THROW!"***

Samar sat up, glaring at him.

"That's it..."

He clenched his fists.

"You're finished!"

Truffle simply giggled.

"Really?"

He snapped his fingers.

SNAP!

The world around Aarav and Samar suddenly twisted.

The ruined temple vanished.

When they opened their eyes...

They were standing inside an oddly shaped stone room no larger than a cupboard.

"What...?" Aarav frowned.

He pushed open the door.

Beyond it...

Was another room.

Exactly the same.

He frowned harder.

He walked through it and opened the next door.

Another identical room.

Then another.

And another.

Every doorway led only to another identical chamber.

No matter how far they walked...

There seemed to be no exit.

Samar looked around in disbelief.

"We're... trapped."

Outside the endless magical maze, Truffle climbed back onto the branch of a nearby tree.

He stretched lazily.

Covered his face with his oversized hat.

And within seconds...

He was peacefully asleep once again, as though nothing had happened at all.

Far beneath the ancient ruins, the hidden sanctuary grew quieter with every step.

Posamjeet led the way through dense undergrowth, carefully parting tangled vines and thorny bushes that had remained untouched for centuries. Ivaan, Siya and Dev followed closely behind, the glowing forest gradually giving way to a darker, more secluded part of the underground world.

After several minutes, Posamjeet finally stopped.

Towering before them stood an enormous wall of ancient stone, completely sealing the entrance to what appeared to be a hidden chamber.

Thick moss covered its surface, while countless roots had wrapped themselves around the colossal boulders as though they were protecting whatever lay beyond.

Posamjeet slowly raised a hand towards the barrier.

"This..." he said quietly, "...is the place Truffle was talking about."

Ivaan's eyes remained fixed on the blocked entrance, but another question had been weighing on his mind ever since they had met.

He turned towards the old guardian.

"That letter..."

"Who wrote it?"

For a brief moment, silence settled over the forest.

Then Posamjeet answered calmly.

"I did."

All three friends stared at him.

"You?" Ivaan whispered in disbelief.

A dozen questions flooded his mind at once.

His expression hardened.

"Then why?" he asked. "Why did you ask my parents to come here?"

Posamjeet smiled faintly.

"Because your father was one of my closest friends."

He looked at Ivaan with gentle eyes.

"My name is **Posamjeet**. Your father and I studied together at university many years ago."

Recognition suddenly flickered across Ivaan's face.

"Wait..."

He looked more closely at the man standing before him.

"I've seen you before."

"Not in person..."

"In my parents' wedding album."

Posamjeet nodded warmly.

"Yes."

"That was me."

His smile slowly faded.

"But what happened afterwards changed all of our lives."

The atmosphere grew heavy.

Even the forest seemed to fall silent.

"Your father had been seeing strange visions for a long time," Posamjeet continued.

"Dark forests... ancient ruins... creatures unlike anything found in our world."

Ivaan's heart skipped a beat.

Those were exactly the same visions that had haunted him for years.

"The visions disturbed him greatly," Posamjeet said.

"He searched everywhere for an explanation, but no one believed him."

He paused before continuing.

"Then one evening, while your parents were driving home, they found an unconscious man lying beside the road."

Dev and Siya listened without interrupting.

"The man was barely conscious," Posamjeet said softly.

"Yet before disappearing... he handed your mother a mysterious locket."

Without saying a word, Ivaan reached into his pocket.

He slowly removed the old circular locket his uncle had entrusted to him the previous night.

The moment Posamjeet saw it, his eyes widened.

"**That...**" he breathed.

"It's the same locket."

"Where did you get it?"

"My uncle gave it to me yesterday," Ivaan replied.

Posamjeet nodded slowly.

"Keep it safe."

"No matter what happens... never lose it."

"It is far more important than it appears."

Standing slightly behind them, Dev examined the worn locket with puzzled eyes.

It just looks like an ordinary old pendant, he thought.

My aunt owns several that look almost the same.

What's so special about this one?

Posamjeet continued.

"Your father brought the locket to me because I specialised in ancient history and forgotten civilisations."

"While researching it, I discovered references to these ruins."

"I immediately wrote to him and asked him to meet me here."

He lowered his gaze.

"We agreed to meet on the **nineteenth of October.**"

Ivaan's breathing grew slower.

That date...

It was the same date written in the letter.

And the very day his parents had died.

"Your father was returning from an out-of-town trip," Posamjeet continued quietly.

"But he never arrived."

His voice carried a trace of sorrow.

"I assumed he had simply been delayed, so I entered the ruins alone."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"That was my greatest mistake."

He let out a weary sigh.

"Inside... I met Truffle."

Dev folded his arms.

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

Posamjeet chuckled softly.

"He caused me endless trouble."

"Eventually, he tricked me into accepting the responsibility of guarding this sanctuary."

He looked back towards the path they had travelled.

"The curse transformed me into the Giant Tree..."

"And I remained trapped there for fifteen long years."

Silence followed.

Ivaan tightened his grip on the locket.

"So..." he said slowly.

"My father saw the same visions that I do?"

"Yes."

"Not only your father," Posamjeet replied.

"Your uncle experienced them as well."

"The difference was that your uncle chose to avoid them."

Ivaan lowered his eyes thoughtfully.

"Then what's hidden beyond these stones?" he asked.

"Why do these visions affect only my family?"

Posamjeet shook his head.

"I don't know."

"But I do know this..."

His expression grew grave.

"Once your father turned eighteen, the visions became far more frequent."

"His body gradually weakened with each passing year."

The words struck Ivaan like ice.

Posamjeet looked directly at him.

"How old are you now, Ivaan?"

There was a brief pause.

"Sixteen," Ivaan answered quietly.

No one spoke.

The implication hung heavily between them.

Dev finally broke the silence.

"Then we shouldn't waste any more time."

He looked towards the sealed entrance.

"Whatever is hidden beyond those stones... we need to find it before the visions become any worse."

Ivaan nodded firmly.

"You're right."

He turned towards Posamjeet.

"Let's open it."

Together, Ivaan, Siya and Dev stepped towards the enormous stone barrier, ready to move the ancient rocks that had concealed its secret for years.

The three friends approached the enormous stone barrier, preparing to shift the ancient rocks that sealed the hidden chamber.

But Posamjeet did not move.

He remained exactly where he was.

His expression had become unexpectedly solemn.

Ivaan glanced back.

"Aren't you coming?"

"We'll need your help to move these stones."

Posamjeet slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Ivaan."

"From this point onwards... only you and Siya may enter."

Dev frowned immediately.

"Only them?"

He pointed at himself.

"What about me?"

Posamjeet met his eyes.

"Neither of us can go inside."

Dev looked utterly confused.

"Why not?"

The old guardian drew a slow breath.

"Because both of us have already been touched by the curse."

His voice echoed quietly through the underground forest.

"I spent fifteen years imprisoned as the Giant Tree."

"And you yourself were transformed into a tree during the trial."

"Although the curse was broken, its mark still lingers upon us."

Dev's cheerful expression slowly faded.

Posamjeet continued,

"The chamber beyond these stones is sacred."

"If anyone carrying even the slightest trace of that curse crosses its threshold..."

He looked towards the sealed entrance.

"The Dark Creatures will immediately sense its awakening."

A cold silence followed.

Dev sighed dramatically before rubbing the back of his neck.

"Seriously?"

"I finally get this far... and now I'm not even allowed inside."

Posamjeet gave him an apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid not."

Dev let out another disappointed groan.

"That's just unfair."

Ivaan walked over and rested a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Don't worry."

"Siya and I will find whatever is hidden inside..."

"And we'll bring it straight back."

Dev looked at him for a moment before smiling again.

"I know you will."

He raised his fist.

"Good luck."

Ivaan smiled and returned the gesture.

Their fists met with a quiet tap.

"We'll be back before you know it."

Beside them, Siya tightened her grip on the old diary while the mysterious locket rested safely in Ivaan's pocket.

She looked towards the enormous stone barrier.

Despite her calm expression, excitement and nervous anticipation battled inside her.

Whatever waited beyond those ancient rocks...

It had been hidden for decades.

Perhaps even centuries.

Posamjeet stepped aside, allowing the two teenagers to move forward.

"Be careful," he said quietly.

"What lies beyond this entrance has remained untouched for a very long time."

"Some secrets are beautiful..."

He paused.

"Others are dangerous."

A powerful gust of cold wind swept through the underground sanctuary.

The glowing flowers surrounding them suddenly bent low, as though bowing before the ancient chamber.

Even the forest seemed to hold its breath.

Ivaan exchanged one final glance with Dev.

Then he turned towards Siya.

"Ready?"

She nodded confidently.

"Ready."

Together, they placed their hands against the ancient stones.

The rough surface felt strangely warm beneath their palms.

With all their strength, they began pushing.

The massive rocks groaned after centuries of silence.

Dust rained from above.

The tangled roots wrapped around the entrance slowly snapped apart.

A narrow gap appeared between the stones.

From within...

A faint golden light seeped through the opening.

Unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Ivaan and Siya instinctively looked at one another.

Neither of them spoke.

There was no need.

They both understood that the moment they stepped beyond those ancient stones...

Nothing in their lives would ever be the same again.



Chapter-12



The First Etherion

Night had long fallen outside, yet deep beneath the ancient ruins, time itself seemed to stand still. With all their strength, Ivaan and Siya pushed against the enormous boulder sealing the entrance to the hidden chamber. Behind them, Posamjeet and Dev watched anxiously, unable to help.

The stone barely shifted, creating just enough space for two people to squeeze through.

"Quick," Posamjeet urged.

Without hesitation, Ivaan and Siya slipped inside.

The moment they crossed the entrance...

RUMBLE...

The gigantic boulder slid back into place on its own, sealing the chamber once again. Darkness swallowed everything.

Outside, Dev rushed towards the entrance.

"Ivaan! Siya! Are you alright?"

A muffled voice echoed from the other side.

"We're fine!" Ivaan called back. "Stay here with Uncle until we return."

His voice slowly faded into silence.

The hidden chamber was damp, cold, and eerily quiet.

Water trickled continuously from cracks in the ceiling, forming shallow streams that flowed across the uneven stone floor.

Every step echoed through the narrow passage.

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...

The atmosphere felt heavy, as though the place had been forgotten by time itself.

Ivaan led the way while Siya followed closely behind.

Neither of them spoke.

The deeper they ventured, the colder the air became.

Suddenly—

A small rat darted across the passage.

"Eek!"

Startled, Siya instinctively stepped behind Ivaan, gripping the back of his shirt.

The rat disappeared into a crack in the wall.

Realising what she'd done, Siya quickly let go.

"Sorry, Ivaan..."

He smiled gently.

"It's alright."

But before either of them could take another step...

SQUEAK! SQUEAK! SQUEAK!

Hundreds of rats came rushing towards them.

"What on earth—?!"

The ground began trembling violently.

The ancient walls shook as loose stones crashed from above.

Siya lost her footing.

"Ivaan!"

She instinctively grabbed his leg as she slipped.

Unable to keep his balance, Ivaan fell as well.

The floor beneath them suddenly collapsed.

"AAAAAAAH!"

Both of them slid uncontrollably down a steep stone tunnel, water carrying them deeper into the forgotten ruins.

After several terrifying seconds...

THUD!

They crashed against an ancient stone wall before finally coming to a stop.

Breathing heavily, the two slowly got back onto their feet.

They had reached the end of the underground passage.

Silence returned.

Siya brushed the dust from her clothes while Ivaan looked around the mysterious chamber.

His eyes suddenly stopped on something unusual.

"Siya..."

She turned.

"What is it?"

He pointed towards a massive stone tablet standing at the centre of the chamber.

"I think... there's something written on it."

Siya hurried over and knelt before the ancient stone tablet.

Its weathered surface was covered in beautifully carved Sanskrit inscriptions, and at its centre was a perfectly circular indentation.

Carefully brushing away centuries of dust, Siya began reading aloud.

"Kunjikā yatra yojyatu, tathā svakīyam upahāram prāptoti."

She frowned thoughtfully, translating each word in her mind.

"Ivaan... it says something about **a key...** and **receiving one's gift.**"

Ivaan stepped closer, studying the circular engraving.

"A key...?"

The two exchanged puzzled glances.

"But where would we even find one?" Siya wondered. "Could Truffle have it?"

Ivaan remained silent for a moment.

His eyes slowly drifted towards the old locket hanging around his neck.

Then, a thought flashed through his mind.

"No..."

He gently removed the locket.

"I think I've figured it out."

Siya looked at him in surprise.

"You mean..."

"This is the key."

Taking a deep breath, Ivaan carefully placed his mother's locket into the circular slot.

The moment it clicked into place—

RUMMMMMBLE...

The entire stone tablet began rotating.

Ancient symbols carved across its surface lit up one after another.

A brilliant violet light burst from within the tablet, illuminating the chamber that had remained dark for centuries.

The walls shimmered.

The water reflected dazzling purple rays.

Then...

A small, glowing gemstone slowly floated out from the centre of the tablet.

It resembled a perfect violet pearl, radiating a warm, mysterious light that instantly filled the underground chamber.

Neither of them could take their eyes off it.

"Is... this the special treasure?" Siya whispered.

Ivaan cautiously stepped forward.

"I think so."

Just as he reached out—

BOOM!

An invisible force slammed into his chest.

He was hurled backwards across the chamber.

"IVAAN!"

Before Siya could run to him...

Dark shadows began pouring from every corner of the room.

They twisted unnaturally, taking on terrifying forms that seemed neither alive nor dead.

"Ivaan!" Siya cried.

Clutching his chest, he forced himself back to his feet.

"Don't worry about me!"

He pointed towards the floating violet stone.

"Take the stone!"

The shadows ignored Siya completely.

Every one of them rushed straight towards Ivaan.

Desperately, he grabbed loose stones from the floor and threw them.

The rocks passed straight through the shadows as though they were nothing but smoke.

Meanwhile, Siya sprinted towards the glowing gemstone.

The instant she picked it up...

The shadows didn't attack her.

It was as though they couldn't even see her.

But around Ivaan...

The darkness closed in.

One by one, the shadows surrounded him from every direction.

A familiar pain exploded inside his head.

He clutched it tightly.

"No... not again..."

His vision blurred.

The chamber vanished.

Once again, he saw endless darkness...

Ancient ruins...

Gigantic creatures lurking within the shadows...

Only this time...

Everything appeared even darker.

Even larger.

Even more terrifying.

His ears rang violently.

Every sound disappeared.

He couldn't hear Siya calling his name.

He couldn't hear his own breathing.

The shadows stretched towards him...

And one after another...

They entered his body.

His breathing became rapid.

His entire body trembled uncontrollably.

"Ivaaaaaaan!!"

Siya screamed at the top of her lungs, tears filling her eyes as she ran towards him, clutching the glowing violet stone tightly in both hands.

Just as the darkness threatened to consume Ivaan completely...

A brilliant **silver light** suddenly burst through the chamber.

The entire underground vault was flooded with a dazzling radiance.

The shrieking shadows recoiled in terror.

Those caught within the silver glow let out agonising screams before crumbling into black ash.

The remaining shadows scattered in every direction, desperately fleeing from the light.

Ivaan lay on the cold stone floor, his body trembling in unbearable pain.

His breathing had become ragged.

He could barely move.

Siya dropped to her knees beside him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Ivaan... please! Stay with me!"

Then...

A slow, steady sound echoed through the chamber.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

From within the silver radiance emerged an elderly man.

He wore flowing white robes, and his long white beard reached almost to his waist.

In one hand he carried an ancient wooden staff, from whose tip the mysterious silver light continued to shine.

His calm eyes surveyed the chamber before finally resting on Ivaan.

Without saying a word, he walked towards him.

Siya looked up hopefully.

"Oldie sage... please... you've got to help him! Please save Ivaan!"

The old sage remained composed.

"We must leave this chamber first."

With surprising ease, he gently lifted the unconscious Ivaan into his arms.

Holding Siya's hand, he raised his glowing staff.

A circle of silver light appeared beneath their feet.

The next instant—

The three of them vanished.

Outside the hidden chamber, Dev and Posamjeet waited anxiously beside the sealed entrance.

Neither of them had spoken for several minutes.

Dev kept staring at the enormous boulder.

"They're taking too long..."

Before Posamjeet could reply...

A glowing silver circle appeared in front of them.

Both men instinctively stepped backwards.

The light grew brighter.

Slowly, three figures emerged from within it.

The old sage stepped out first, carrying the unconscious Ivaan in his arms.

Siya followed close behind, still clutching the glowing violet gemstone.

The portal disappeared as silently as it had appeared.

"Ivaan!"

Dev rushed towards them in panic.

"What happened? Siya, what happened inside?"

She opened her mouth to answer...

But the old sage gently raised a hand.

"Patience, child."

His deep, peaceful voice instantly silenced everyone.

"His life comes first. Questions can wait until he awakens."

The old sage carefully laid Ivaan on the ground.

Then he turned towards Siya.

"My child..."

"The stone in your hands..."

"Place it over his heart."

Siya immediately knelt beside Ivaan.

The violet gemstone still glowed warmly between her palms.

"Now," the sage continued softly, "close your eyes... and pray for him with all the sincerity in your heart."

Without hesitation, Siya did exactly as she was told.

She gently placed the gemstone against Ivaan's chest.

Closing her eyes, she whispered a heartfelt prayer.

A gentle violet light spread through the stone.

Moments later...

The light grew stronger.

It flowed into Ivaan's body like a stream of pure energy.

Suddenly—

Dark smoke burst from his mouth.

The remaining shadows screamed as they were forced out of his body.

One after another, they dissolved into nothingness beneath the combined glow of the silver and violet light.

Silence returned.

Slowly...

Very slowly...

Ivaan's fingers twitched.

His breathing steadied.

His eyelids fluttered open.

The first thing he saw was Siya, still praying with her eyes tightly closed.

A smile of relief spread across Dev's face.

"Siya!"

He laughed happily.

"Look... he's awake!"

Hearing Dev's voice, Siya slowly opened her eyes.

For a heartbeat, she simply stared at Ivaan.

Then, overwhelmed with relief, she threw her arms around him in a tight embrace.

"Ivaan..."

"I was so scared..."

Ivaan smiled faintly and gently returned the hug, grateful simply to be alive.



Chapter-13



The Chosen Keeper

A gentle silence settled over the ancient ruins. Dev, Posamjeet, Siya and the Old Sage all looked at Ivaan with visible relief. Seeing him awake again felt nothing short of a miracle. Only Ivaan seemed confused.

He slowly sat up, glancing around the ruins before looking down at himself.

His memories of the underground chamber were fragmented.

He remembered the violet gemstone...

The dark shadows...

The unbearable pain...

Then nothing.

Looking at Siya, he asked quietly,

"Siya... how did we get out? And... what happened to those dark shadows?"

A warm smile appeared on her face.

"Everything's alright now, Ivaan."

"You lost consciousness."

"If the Old Sage hadn't arrived at the right moment... I'm not sure either of us would have made it out."

Ivaan slowly turned towards the elderly man.

The sage simply smiled peacefully.

Standing up, Ivaan bowed his head respectfully.

"Thank you... for saving us."

"But... how did you know we were trapped down there?"

"And... what exactly happened to me?"

The Old Sage's gentle smile remained unchanged.

Before he could answer, Siya carefully recounted everything that had happened inside the hidden chamber—the stone tablet, the violet gemstone, the attacking shadows, and how they had entered Ivaan's body.

As she finished, Ivaan looked down thoughtfully.

"So... that's what happened..."

After a brief silence, he raised his head once more.

"Then please tell me..."

"What exactly is that gemstone?"

"And why does it seem to have such a strange connection with my family?"

The Old Sage's expression grew unusually serious.

"I'm afraid..."

"This isn't the right time to discuss such matters."

Ivaan frowned.

"Then... at least tell me who you are."

The sage let out a soft sigh.

"Ivaan..."

"This is not the right place to speak of my past... nor of the true history of that gemstone."

His calm eyes slowly scanned the dark forest surrounding the ruins.

"There are ears listening to us even now."

"We are no longer safe here."

A cold silence followed his words.

Dev scratched his head.

"Danger?"

"From whom this time, Old Sage?"

The old man smiled faintly.

Before he could answer, Dev suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Oh..."

"I get it."

"The Goblins... and Truffle!"

"We should leave before they come back."

The Old Sage chuckled softly.

"Thank you for reminding me, Dev."

He firmly planted the end of his staff against the ground.

THUD!

A ripple of silver light spread across the forest.

Far away, Aarav and Samar were still hopelessly wandering through Truffle's endless maze of identical rooms.

Meanwhile, Truffle himself lay peacefully asleep on a tree branch, snoring without a care in the world.

The silver light reached all three of them.

In the blink of an eye...

They vanished.

The next instant...

Aarav, Samar and Truffle appeared right in front of Ivaan and the others in a flash of silver light.

For a brief moment, everyone stood frozen in surprise.

Then Samar's eyes landed on Truffle.

His expression changed instantly.

"TRUFFLE....!!!"

With an angry shout, Samar charged straight towards the tiny elf.

"You little troublemaker! Do you have any idea what you put us through?"

Truffle squealed in panic and darted behind Ivaan, using him as a shield.

"Heeey! Calm down! It was only a little fun!"

"I'll show you 'fun'!"

Samar lunged again while Truffle scampered away, the two of them running in circles around everyone else.

Dev burst into laughter.

"I've never seen Samar run this fast."

Even Ivaan couldn't help smiling.

The Old Sage, however, calmly raised his staff.

"Enough."

The single word echoed through the forest.

Immediately, Samar and Truffle froze where they stood, unable to move.

They looked like statues.

Aarav, meanwhile, ignored the commotion altogether.

Relieved to see his friends safe, he hurried over to them.

"You guys are alright!"

"We've been trapped in that ridiculous maze for ages because of this little elf."

He pointed accusingly at Truffle before turning back to Ivaan.

"So?"

"Did you discover anything?"

"Was Truffle telling the truth about that special treasure?"

Instead of answering, Siya slowly opened her hand.

The glowing violet gemstone rested quietly in her palm.

Its soft light illuminated everyone's faces.

Aarav stared at it in amazement.

"So... that's it?"

Unable to resist, he instinctively reached out to touch it.

"Stop."

The Old Sage's voice rang out sharply.

Aarav froze mid-motion.

"You do not understand the price of touching that stone."

Startled, he quickly withdrew his hand.

The sage turned towards Siya.

"That gemstone belongs to you alone."

She looked at him in confusion.

"To me?"

"But... why?"

"Because," the Old Sage replied, "only the one who proves worthy before its guardian may claim it."

"You answered Posamjeet's trial correctly."

"From that moment onwards, the gemstone recognised you as its rightful bearer."

He glanced at everyone else.

"No one else may wield its power."

"And if anyone attempts to do so..."

He left the sentence unfinished.

No explanation was necessary.

Everyone remembered exactly what had happened to Dev when he had answered the riddle incorrectly, and also know what happened the moment Ivaan touched the gemstone... and who appeared before him.

Siya gently closed her fingers around the gemstone and nodded.

"I understand."

The Old Sage looked towards the dark forest once more.

His expression became grave.

"We have stayed here long enough."

"They already know..."

"...that the gemstone has left this place."

A chilling silence followed.

"Who knows?" Ivaan asked quietly.

The sage simply tightened his grip on his staff.

"You will learn that soon enough."

"But not here."

Without another word, he struck the ground with his staff.

THUD!

A powerful wind burst through the forest.

Leaves rose into the air, spinning around the group in a great silver whirlwind.

Samar and Truffle were released from the spell at the same moment.

"Quick," the Old Sage ordered.

"Everyone... hold on to my staff."

Without hesitation, Ivaan, Siya, Dev, Aarav, Samar, Posamjeet and even Truffle reached out together.

The silver light grew brighter and brighter.

The wind roared around them.

Then—

Everything disappeared.



Chapter-14

Final Chapter



Under The Moonlight

The moment the blinding silver light faded... Ivaan slowly opened his eyes. For a second, everything felt strangely familiar. The old wooden furniture... The family photographs... The staircase...

The grandfather clock quietly ticking on the wall...

They were back.

All five of them—Ivaan, Siya, Dev, Aarav and Samar—lay sprawled across the floor of Ivaan's living room, drenched, covered in mud and dust after everything they had endured beneath the ancient ruins.

For a few moments, nobody spoke.

Then Samar suddenly sat upright and looked around.

"Huh..."

"We're... we're back!"

A huge smile spread across his face.

"YES! YES!"

Dev let out a tired laugh as he lay flat on the floor.

"I never thought I'd actually miss your house this much."

Even Aarav couldn't stop smiling.

"We actually made it..."

Only one thing immediately caught everyone's attention.

The violet gemstone was still resting safely in Siya's hand.

Its gentle glow had not faded.

Instead, it shimmered quietly, filling the hall with a soft violet light.

Ivaan slowly stood up and looked around.

His smile gradually disappeared.

"Guys..."

"Where are they?"

Everyone turned towards him.

"The Old Sage..."

"Posamjeet Uncle..."

"And Truffle..."

Silence filled the room.

They were gone.

Without wasting another moment, the five friends searched every corner of the house.

Dev and Aarav hurried upstairs.

Samar checked every room on the ground floor.

Siya even looked outside through the front door.

Nothing.

They had disappeared without leaving a single trace.

Disappointed, everyone gathered back in the living room.

As Ivaan looked around absent-mindedly, his eyes stopped on the framed photograph hanging on the wall.

His parents...

Standing beside them was his grandmother, smiling as warmly as ever.

For a long moment...

He simply stared at the photograph.

A quiet smile appeared on his face.

Then, as though remembering something important, he quickly walked towards the table where his father's diary still rested.

He picked it up.

Something slipped out from between its pages.

A folded letter.

His eyes widened.

"Siya..."

She immediately walked over.

"What is it?"

"I found this inside Dad's diary."

Hearing that, Dev, Aarav and Samar also gathered around him.

Before opening the letter, Ivaan instinctively checked the pocket of his shirt.

His expression suddenly changed.

"My mother's locket..."

"It's gone."

His voice was filled with panic.

"I left it inside the underground chamber..."

Before he could say anything else, Siya smiled softly.

"No."

"You didn't."

Everyone looked at her.

She opened her hand.

Resting safely in her palm was the old round locket.

"I picked it up before we left."

For a second, Ivaan simply stared at it.

Relief washed over his face.

He smiled gratefully.

"Thank you, Siya..."

"...Love you."

The words escaped naturally before he even realised it.

Siya froze.

A soft blush slowly coloured her cheeks.

Dev quietly glanced at Aarav.

Aarav looked back at him with a knowing grin.

Neither of them said a word.

Completely unaware of the awkward silence he'd created, Ivaan gently took the locket from Siya's hand.

He held it close for a moment...

Then kissed it softly before placing it back around his neck.

No one could tell...

Whether those words had been meant for the precious keepsake...

Or for the girl who had saved it.

Still holding the diary in his hands, Ivaan carefully unfolded the letter.

The paper looked surprisingly new, as though it had been written only moments ago.

Everyone gathered around him in silence.

Taking a deep breath, Ivaan began to read aloud.

• ————— •
My dear young friends,

I hope all of you have returned safely to Ivaan's home.

I am sorry that I cannot stay with you any longer.
Perhaps, if fate allows our paths to cross again,
I shall finally answer all the questions that still
trouble your hearts.

For now, however, I have an important task to complete,
and I can only take Truffle and Posamjeet with me.

The gemstone now in Siya's possession is your
shared responsibility. Protect it with your lives.

Siya...

Use its power only when absolutely necessary.

One more thing...

No matter what happens, never return to the
Kalaranya Ruins.

And if you truly wish to understand the world
hidden beyond your own...

Visit the Library of Nalanda and read a book
titled:

Drakora Island: The Creatures' Home.

Until we meet again...

Your new friend,
Oldie Sage.

• ————— •

As the final words echoed through the room, an uneasy silence followed.

Every one of them was deep in thought.

"Drakora Island..." Siya murmured.

"I've never heard that name before."

Aarav slowly folded his arms.

"Neither have I."

"It doesn't sound like an ordinary place."

Samar immediately shook his head.

"I don't care where it is."

"I'm definitely **not** going there."

Dev burst into laughter.

"Relax."

"We're not going anywhere today."

He dramatically placed a hand over his stomach.

"After everything we've survived..."

"...I'm starving."

Aarav nodded in complete agreement.

"That's the smartest thing you've said all day."

Everyone laughed.

For the first time since their adventure had begun...

The fear seemed to disappear.

It felt...

Normal.

Warm.

Like home.

Just then, Ivaan quietly turned the letter over.

Something had been written on the back in tiny handwriting.

He narrowed his eyes and read it softly.

Show the diary to the Moon.

Below it...

Only two small words were written.

Bye-bye...

A puzzled expression crossed his face.

"What does that mean?"

Before anyone could answer, Dev stretched his arms lazily.

"Whatever it means..."

"It can wait."

"Come on."

"Let's find something to eat before I faint."

Everyone laughed again.

They began walking towards the kitchen.

A few steps later...

Aarav suddenly realised something.

He looked behind him.

"...Ivaan?"

The others stopped.

"Ivaan?"

There was no reply.

The living room was empty.

Siya frowned.

"He was right behind us."

The five friends hurried through the house.

"Ivaan!"

No answer.

Every room was empty.

Then Dev looked towards the staircase.

"The terrace..."

Without another word, all four of them ran upstairs.

The cool night breeze welcomed them the moment they stepped onto the terrace.

The rain had washed the sky clean.

Thousands of stars sparkled above them.

Standing alone near the edge of the terrace...

Bathed in gentle moonlight...

Was Ivaan.

He stood perfectly still, holding his father's diary in both hands.

Dev smiled.

"There you are."

"Come on, let's eat."

Without turning around...

Ivaan quietly raised one finger to his lips.

"Shhh..."

His eyes never left the diary.

The others exchanged confused glances.

Slowly...

Very slowly...

Ivaan opened the diary beneath the silver light of the full moon.

The instant the moonlight touched its pages—

The diary violently slipped from his hands.

THUD!

It landed on the terrace floor.

Before anyone could react...

Every word written inside its pages began to move.

The ink flowed across the paper as though it had come alive.

Letters twisted...

Merged...

Separated again...

The pages turned by themselves.

A strange humming sound echoed through the silent night.

Then...

A faint **electric-blue glow** emerged from deep within the diary.

The light grew brighter...

And brighter...

Its radiant energy reflected in everyone's astonished eyes.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

They could only stare...

As the mysterious diary continued to awaken beneath the moonlight.



—TO BE CONTINUED—

Next Time

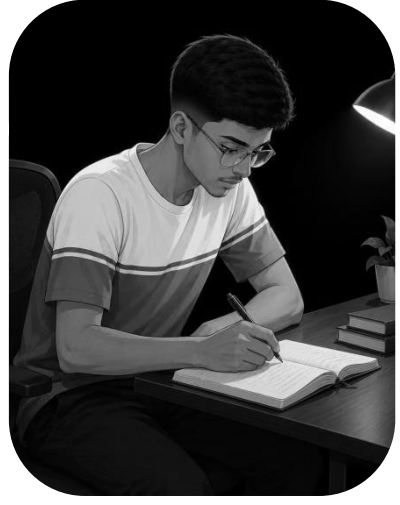
IVAN
AND
SECRETS OF DRAKORA ISLAND



My heartfelt thanks to my family, friends, and everyone who encouraged and supported me throughout this journey. Your belief in me made this story possible.

To every reader, thank you for giving **IVAAN: Echoes of Etherion** a place in your heart. I Hope this adventures stay with you long after you turn the final page.

V. K. Ashborn is a 17-years-old Fantasy writer from India. With a passion for creating immersive fantasy worlds filled with mystery, adventures, and unforgettable characters. Inspired by imagination, friendship, courage, and the unknown, V.K. Ashborn writes stories that invite readers to step beyond reality and into Extraordinary journeys.



V. K. ASHBORN

Ivaan: Echoes of Etherion is the author's debut novel and the beginning of a larger fantasy saga. Through the adventures of Ivaan and his Companions, the series explores the power of hope, loyalty, and the choices that shape destiny.

When not Writing, V. K. Ashborn enjoys developing new worlds, designing unique characters, and bringing imaginative ideas to life. With many more stories planned for the future, this is only the beginning of the journey.

Thank you for reading, and Welcome to the world of Etherions.



Vivek Kumar

