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*Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the
columns of history,
Their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses
and the like,
The name of Ashoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star.
~The Outline History of the World, HG Wells*

A Gift of Dust

As a flaming sun ascended a cloudless sky some six hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha walked barefoot down a dusty village road in northern India, accompanied by softly chanting orange-robed disciples carrying begging bowls. Children played by the side of the road, fashioning a mud palace complete with turrets and moat. A gawky lad, eyes bright with mischief, turned to watch the advancing procession. At the sight of the Buddha, his breath stopped—approaching him was a living god, resplendent as a million suns! Bedazzled, he stumbled forward and dropped a fistful of dust into the Buddha’s outstretched bowl.

The monk Ananda took the soiled bowl from his teacher’s hand and wiped it clean. He turned to reprimand the lad, now standing rapt before the Buddha. “Do not scold him, Ananda,” the Buddha said gently. “Can’t you see that his offering comes straight from the heart?” The sage’s smile deepened until the boy feared his skull would shatter with the onslaught of brilliance. “One day,” he prophesied, placing a hand on the lad’s sun-warmed head in blessing, “you shall be reborn as a great king who will spread my teachings across the world.” And, as Buddhist myth goes, this village boy was much later reborn as Ashoka

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of the Mauryas, perhaps the greatest monarch our world has ever known.

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THE MAURYAS

In 321 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya overthrew the corrupt Nandas and founded the Mauryan Empire. He was aided in this formidable task by Kautilya, author of the *Arthashastra*, a crafty treatise in realpolitik which establishes the ideal of an impetuous warrior-king being guided by a pragmatic scholar.

Chandragupta was barely twenty when he established himself as Emperor at his capital Pataliputra, a sophisticated northern Indian city commanding the southern bank of the River Ganga. Later he became a devout Jain, abdicated his throne, and bequeathed to his son Bindusara territory extending approximately from modern Afghanistan to Mysore, including the four Satrapies of Aria, Arochosia, Gedrosia and Paropanisadai, wrested from Alexander the Great's Macedonian successors. Donning the robe of a monk, he then retired to the deep south of India, where, in a purification ritual peculiar to Jaina saints, he slowly starved himself to death.

Bindusara ruled for the next thirty-two years, expanding the limits of Mauryan power south of the Vindhyas while continuing to maintain diplomatic relations with his Greek neighbors to the west—and it was this vast empire that his son Ashoka seized from his half-brothers after his death.

The Mauryan Empire lasted for one hundred and thirty-seven years and thrived largely due to the creation of a monolithic and superbly administered system of finance, administration and security. Liberal in their approach, both Chandragupta and Bindusara encouraged social harmony, religious transformation and scientific

exploration. Indeed, Chandragupta's embrace of Jainism ignited social and religious reform, while Ashoka's later embrace of Buddhism laid a solid basis for social and political peace to flower across the sprawling Empire.

Ashoka was neither a happy nor a popular prince. Perhaps the roots of his alienation lay in the bizarre circumstances of his birth: His mother Dharma, a minor concubine installed in the Harem due to her father's staunch belief in an astrologer's prediction that she would give birth to a great monarch, was prevented from mating with her royal spouse due to Harem politics. Undeterred, she is said to have stolen into Bindusara's bed when he was inebriated and conceived the first of two sons, the elder being Ashoka. Pregnant Dharma dreamed she trampled the moon and sun, played with the stars and ate up entire forests. Interpreted by an ascetic, this dream confirmed the astrologer's prediction: that the fruit of her womb would one day rule the Empire and devote himself to the spread of Buddhism.

Wounded by the harsh rejection of his father and stepbrothers, Ashoka's only friend was his uterine brother Vitashoka; he consoled himself by focusing his sharp intelligence on the study of subjects critical to kingship. Then the Buddha's prediction bore its first fruit: Pingalavatsa, an Ajivika seer, informed Bindusara that, of all his sons, only Ashoka was fit to rule the far-flung empire. To test this prediction, Bindusara sent Ashoka to crush a riot in a distant region that Prince Suseema, Ashoka's elder half-brother and Bindusara's favorite, had been unable to quell. Ashoka proved to be a shrewd military commander: stamping out revolts in both Ujjain and Taxila, he earned Bindusara's admiration, though never his love. Fortunately for him, his

political and military genius impressed Radhagupta, Bindusara's influential Chief Minister; it was Radhagupta who helped Ashoka seize the throne after Bindusara's death, and who supported him through the ensuing gory four-year war of succession.

Ashoka is considered the greatest of the Mauryan rulers; ascending the throne at thirty, he ruled for thirty-seven years, during which time he re-asserted the Mauryan grip over southern and western India. He died at the age of sixty-seven. The first half of his career was bloody, the second made true the Buddha's prediction. By the end of his reign, Maurya received revenue from lush Kashmir to the rich southern region of Mysore and from modern Bangladesh to the heart of Afghanistan. Only a few southern kingdoms clung to their independence by maintaining an attitude of humble reverence for the Mauryas.

Many claim it was his brutal annexation of Kalinga eight years after his coronation that caused Ashoka to rethink his tyrannical ways; whatever the complex truth of the matter, it was soon after the devastation of Kalinga that he embraced the teachings of the Buddha. Via extant stone edicts, he publicly apologized for his past inhumanity and vowed to make amends. Volumes have been written about his outstanding gift of four decades of harmony and prosperity to the heterogenous multitudes who came under his imperial sway; indeed, this monarch who transmuted his cruelty into a luminous compassion still shines today as a model of royal benevolence.

The Empire limped on after Ashoka's death. It collapsed half-a-century later during a coup d'etat and gradually dwindled to a region confined more or less to the province of Magadha. *How could such*

magnificence so easily disintegrate? Scholars cite the succession of inept kings who followed Ashoka, the partition of the Empire which destroyed its centralized political and administrative organization, and internal conflict: Ashoka's policy of *Dhamma* and his insistence on a common law had alienated the elite: the Brahmins particularly resented his ban on lucrative animal sacrifice, while both Brahmins and Kshatriyas resented his implementation of a uniform code of law that denied them special privileges. Moreover, his commitment to non-violence resulted in a militarily effete nation unable to later withstand Greek invasions. It was thus that India's grandest dynasty faded to a gray and dismal end.

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*The mind is difficult to control;
Swiftly and lightly, it moves and lands wherever it pleases.
It is good to tame the mind, for a well-tamed mind brings happiness.
~The Buddha*

Chapter 1: Kahotep, Grand Eunuch of the Mauryas (261 BCE)

“Is that you, Qeb?” Kahotep growled from his inner sanctum, located in the east wing of the great Palace of Pataliputra. “Did I not just inform you I’ve a monstrous migraine coming on? Perhaps a clout to your pretty head might set your ears right again, eh?” The Grand Eunuch of the Court of Pataliputra and Master of the Harem since Ashoka’s formal accession to the throne eight years ago had come to jealously guard his rare moments of solitude. Right now, only Qeb knew he was hiding here for a stolen hour or two before yet another crisis erupted. It was when the pain beast attacked with such ferocity, he admitted, that his tongue got noticeably sharper. Vexed, he clapped a giant hand over his eyes to shield his fragile orbs from the sun streaming in through mullioned windows.

Qeb slipped in and stood silently beside his master’s prone bulk; although he was a quarter of a century younger, he felt great empathy for his striking supervisor—had they both not been victims of the same inhuman crime of castration? His master’s anger did not hurt him, for Qeb knew that when the pain of the past is activated by the tremors of the moment, even the best of men lose their composure. Moreover, everyone was aware that Kahotep’s bark was worse than his bite. Some even went so far as to claim that, despite the influence he wielded as a

long-standing favorite of the Emperor, Kahotep *had* no bite. Every morning Qeb burned frankincense to thank the old gods for blessing him with this kindest of supervisors; the lingering fragrance helped him to forget momentarily that, barely three years ago, these same inscrutable gods had watched as his brutal captors turned him into an eunuch.

It was Kahotep who had taught Qeb to consciously cultivate gratitude, pointing out that, of the nine Egyptian boys fully castrated along with him that nightmarish afternoon, Qeb alone still breathed—yes, these were the abysmal odds of surviving a fine bamboo rod shoved into the bleeding hole left by a hacked-off penis, and of then being plunged waist-deep into burning desert sand in order to cauterize the wound; what still baffled Qeb was that these mutilations had been performed by a bizarre sect of priests!

The Grand Eunuch's eyes flickered open and Qeb, his darkly angelic face betraying excitement, bent low to whisper into his ear. "It's General Sakshum, sire. You said I was to always let him in. Now he's stamping his feet with impatience in your guest chamber..."

"I'm too sick to see him right now," Kahotep muttered. "Ask him to return in a couple of hours. Oh, and let him know that Radhagupta wishes to speak to him. Tell him to go directly to his chambers, before that blubbing envoy from Cyrene monopolizes him for the rest of the day."

Qeb slipped away and Kahotep sighed heavily; ordinarily, he'd have leapt up to welcome the hardy mountain-born general known to inspire awe in his troops both by his valor and physical size. Besides, he could never forget that Sakshum was directly responsible for his own

rise in status: decades earlier, when he was new to Pataliputra and the intrigues that had mushroomed in the aftermath of Bindusara's death, it was Sakshum who'd pressured him into revealing a heinous plot to assassinate Ashoka. As a result, both of them had won the Mauryan royal's enduring devotion.

Sakshum probably wished to discuss the Emperor's disquieting reaction to the recent devastation of Kalinga, he thought wearily. Rumors of Ashoka's breakdown were already flying around Pataliputra like destructive hail. *What would happen if Ashoka's emotional chaos disintegrated into insanity?* Kunala, Ashoka's son and heir apparent, was still a child, while Chief Minister Radhagupta was too power-hungry to be trusted to serve Maurya solely as regent until the Crown Prince could take over the reins. As if in a dream, he heard Qeb's fluting voice followed by Sakshum's distinctive rumble. A door banged shut and once again there was quiet. For all his delicacy, Kahotep mused, Qeb could be firm with those who intimidated him. Thoughts continued to whirl like dervishes inside his tortured head. He dabbed angrily at his forehead with a rosewater-drenched kerchief—yes indeed, the Buddha had spoken true when he'd claimed that the undisciplined mind was as destructive as a drunken wild elephant in rut.

Early this morning, he'd come bolt upright in bed, infused with a palpable sense of dread. Outside, in the dew-drenched gardens surrounding the luxurious home gifted to him by the Emperor, peacocks had shrieked raucously, eager for the parched grain his housekeeper Tahira scattered for them. He'd wandered outside in a sleepy daze and found Tahira seated with her husband Bennu on a garden bench, both gazing in admiration at these outrageously beautiful birds. Tahira had

been rapt as a peacock spread his tail feathers into a magnificent fan; adorned with eye-like markings hued in iridescent blue and gold, the fabulous fan had reached right across the bird's back to touch the brown earth on either side.

Kahotep too had been mesmerized by the awesome spectacle: its tail gloriously spread, the peacock had begun a slow and hypnotic dance—a ritual intended to entice the plainer peahen into the act of mating. The bird was named *moriya* in Pali, and the Mauryas had derived their name from this exotic creature that thrived in their native home; in fact, a graybeard who'd visited Court last spring had mentioned that the peacock was the clan's earliest totem. Bennu had said that the peahen selected her mate based on the splendor of his fan, and Kahotep had burst into crazy laughter—so not just humans were won over by extraordinary beauty! And yet how could creatures so spectacularly designed also emit such plaintive cries? The cosmic artist must surely possess a weird sense of humor!

He suspected the Emperor would soon call for him, and the thought of facing his tormented master had intensified his depression. For all his own royal plumage, Ashoka too tended to emit horrific cries when he was hurting. If the gods had not rendered him constitutionally incapable of shirking responsibility, he'd thought morosely as Tahira and Bennu conversed softly beside him, he'd have run back to his spacious bedroom and hidden under the covers for the rest of the day. Not even Tahira's pistachio-and-raisin pastry accompanied by a bowl of Egyptian coffee had managed to lighten his mood. He'd even skipped his morning visit with his young nephew Bakari, whom he'd adopted two years ago. This dread had clotted like cream left overnight in a

gloomy kitchen when a royal messenger had cantered up the drive to his secluded home, located a mere three *kos* from the Palace, to inform him that the Emperor wished to see him at once.

Kahotep had bolted his last pastry and strode outside. Sensing that his affable master was not in the mood for speech, Benu had wordlessly helped him into his coach. The horses had been well-rested, gleaming with Benu's ministrations, eager for their exhilarating gallop to the Palace. It was Kahotep who had been oblivious to the fresh beauty of Pataliputra's most exclusive residential area as he'd raced his steeds along the broad tree-shaded road that led to the Palace. He'd charged directly into the Emperor's private chambers, only to find that the great man had nothing to say to him—it seemed that all Ashoka wished was the reassuring sight of his favorite eunuch.

Ashoka had done this many times before, as if the mere vision of the handsome eunuch he considered most devoted to him was enough to revive his ailing spirits. This royal quirk had first manifested decades ago, shortly after the crucial incident that had lifted Kahotep out of the ordinary ranks of eunuchs gifted to the Mauryas by foreign allies and marked him as one of Ashoka's favorites. In truth, Ashoka had seemed incapable of lucid speech this morning. Yes, the Emperor had peered up at him from his vast bed, canopied with purple and gold drapes, his small eyes red-streaked, skin puffy and inflamed, mutely begging for comfort. The Mauryan lion had been weeping, his expression bringing to mind a spoilt child dissatisfied with his costly toys.

As for the Empress, Kahotep suspected that her regal façade was on the verge of cracking. What a strain to constantly care for so temperamental a spouse! Asandhimitra had smiled sadly up at Kahotep

even as she continued to massage rose oil into her husband's forehead with long tapering fingers; she had murmured endearments to Ashoka as if he were a distraught infant. As the sweet aroma of roses had mingled with the rancid smell of vomit from the Emperor's bed covers, Kahotep had fought the urge to turn tail and flee. Instead, he'd summoned up the expression of profound empathy that never failed to calm his royal master; it was his ability to emote, combined with his demonstration of steadfast loyalty, he'd come to believe, that Ashoka most appreciated in him.

Ever since he'd been abducted from his birthplace by the Nile two decades ago, he'd learned to express silent compassion. Words were dangerous in Ashoka's personal domain—a slip of the tongue, the faintest hint of mockery against his person, as even Ashoka's four Queens had discovered, was enough to set the Emperor off on an explosive rant. And often a rant was the least of the damage that followed his unpredictable tantrums. As Radhagupta often boasted, their lord was gifted with the memory of an elephant, the deviousness of a snake, and the courage of a lion. The Chief Minister was right: in the twenty years he'd served Ashoka, he had never known his master to forget either a slight or a favor—and when the Emperor decided to strike, he was just as accurate and deadly as a king cobra.

By the time he managed to slip away from the royal chambers, his own headache had worsened into a nauseating throb. Incapable of making his morning rounds of the Harem, he'd sent his assistant Gabri there to handle matters. Then he'd found Qeb in the Eunuch's Hall and let the boy know he was heading for his private quarters to rest. There'd been little point in trying to find peace in his Harem quarters—the rape

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of Kalinga had sent ripples of shock right through the women's clans and the concubines were scared. War and its troubling aftermath was never a good time, particularly for those born of aristocratic stock. *What power, he wondered despairingly, could design a world that permitted one man's vaulting ambition to negatively impact so many?*

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*Ardently do today what must be done.
Who knows? Tomorrow, death comes.
~The Buddha*

Chapter 2: Sakshum's Gift

As if to distract him from his throbbing head, Kahotep's unruly mind vaulted backward by twenty years. Once again he saw himself as a nervous teenager arriving in Pataliputra, escorted by kindly Ambassador Dionysius, soon to be presented to Prince Ashoka as a gift from King Ptolemy of Egypt. Then, Ashoka was just one among many Mauryan Princes, and Sakshum just another senior officer in Maurya's multi-pronged army. The passage of two decades had wrought amazing transformations: Ashoka was now the world's premier monarch, Radhagupta had further consolidated his power, Sakshum had risen to the rank of senior general, and Kahotep, anxious adolescent eunuch slave that he'd then been, was now an influential Court official, although forever bound in service to the Mauryas.

Memories of the event that had radically changed his destiny deluged him. Emperor Bindusara's body had been interred in state and Crown Prince Suseema, along with Ashoka and the other Mauryan Princes, had each been assigned space in the rambling Palace. The Palace had crackled with a thousand tensions, stemming mainly from the fact that, while Bindusara had continued to favor Suseema as his successor, it was Ashoka whom Maurya's cabal of senior ministers considered most capable.

Kahotep had been mesmerized by the flash and curve of plump red-gold carp beneath the surface of a lotus pool in the courtyard when the eunuch Philokale had walked briskly out of Ashoka's private chambers. Elegant Philokale was famed at Court for his bold escape from a sadistic administrator at Sardinia's Temple of Artemis; as rumor had it, he'd wasted no time boarding a ship bound for Pataliputra and soon weaseled his way into Ashoka's service. It surprised Kahotep that, despite Ashoka's sharp mood swings and general air of petulance, so many capable men were drawn to him, flickering moths before an ominous fire. Philokale had caught sight of Kahotep and beckoned to him. "Find Suseema immediately," he'd ordered softly. "Tell him Prince Ashoka wishes to meet with the leader of the mercenaries this afternoon in his chambers." Dashing away, Kahotep had soon found himself well and truly lost within the Palace—assuming he'd been looking for Crown Prince Suseema instead of one of Ashoka's senior aides who carried the same name, a guardsman had sent him off in the wrong direction. Racing through endless corridors, Kahotep had passed many doors until he'd located the suite described by the guard. About to announce his presence with a knock on the partially open door, he'd held back at the sound of voices.

"It is done, Prince Suseema," he heard a man say. "The wine Ashoka favors has been poisoned, re-corked and delivered to his cellar, mind you, ha ha ha, by his very own merchant."

"Excellent," the Crown Prince had drawled. "Did I not assure you that slimy Greek could be bought with a couple of diamonds?" Although it was well before noon, the Crown Prince had sounded tipsy to Kahotep's ultra-sensitive ears. "What else?" Suseema had inquired.

“The Sardinian eunuch will serve Ashoka the wine this very night.” The man sniggered. “As you said, sire, a costly fellow, but well worth his price.”

Kahotep had frozen— he’d often seen Philokale selecting Ashoka’s wine, which meant the eunuch referred to just *had* to be Philokale!

“You’re quite sure our plan will work?” Suseema had inquired.

“Absolutely sure, sire. I sought out the best herbalist in Pataliputra. The poison is a tincture of mushrooms so deadly that a minute dose, undetectable by smell or taste, can fell a massive beast in minutes. Ashoka can look forward to a painless end, and not a shadow of suspicion will fall upon *you*.”

“Even if it does,” Suseema had chuckled, “I cannot imagine anyone but his plebian wife and boring children bemoaning the death of my ugly half-brother.”

Kahotep’s heart had hammered wildly against his ribs.

“Ironic, sire, is it not?” the official had said. “Doddering Radhagupta esteems Ashoka for his brilliance, and yet your half-brother is stupid enough to eschew having his food and wine tasted.”

“You can blame his silly mother for *that*,” the Crown Prince had retorted. “Also that so-called sage Pingalavatsa, whose shriveled head shall soon be displayed outside the Palace gates for all the trouble he’s caused me. It’s both these fools who’ve convinced Ashoka he will rule Magadha.”

“Too much meditation must fry the brain,” the official tittered. “Surely Pingalavatsa was hallucinating when he made that ridiculous prediction? Why your noble father revered so decrepit a stick remains a

mystery to me. In any event, Ashoka will die tonight and no god can save him. It is *your* destiny, my Prince,” he’d added unctuously, “to rule Maurya.”

Someone must have noticed that the door had swung half open. At the sound of footsteps striding his way, Kahotep had scarpered off to hide behind the sculpture of a voluptuous goddess fashioned in the Greek style. A man had stuck his head out seconds later but had fortunately missed Kahotep, who had crouched, struggling not to soil his green silk pantaloons, behind the goddess’s stone buttocks. The official had stepped back inside and pulled the door shut, and Kahotep had fled in the opposite direction, the damning conversation roiling through his head.

The men had spoken in Prakrit, the common language of the people adopted by the Mauryas. Kahotep had understood every word only because Ptolemy Philadelphus, appointed by Alexander of Macedonia to rule Egypt, had insisted that the new eunuch he’d purchased as a special gift for Ashoka be taught its rudiments by his own court linguist. For all his rationality, Ptolemy was an ardent believer in the predictions of holy men, and it was the Indian sage’s prophecy regarding Ashoka’s dazzling future that had caused him to select the Mauryan Prince as a worthy ally. As a result, over the eighteen moonspans Kahotep had spent learning how to serve royalty at the splendid palace in Egypt, he’d also diligently studied Prakrit. Indeed, his teacher had praised his extraordinary linguistic facility, even hinting that Kahotep had lived many past lives in the region made fecund by the rich waters of the River Ganges.

The flood of memory continued. Kahotep saw himself sneaking away from Suseema's chambers, no sliver of doubt in his mind that Ashoka would soon be history *if* he did not warn him in time. But how was a gauche foreign eunuch to offer such incendiary news to a Prince known to hurl heavy objects at those who displeased him? He'd slunk fearfully along other unfamiliar corridors until he found himself back at Ashoka's private chambers. Just then Sakshum had strode up to the door from the opposite side; sensing Kahotep's disquiet, he'd expertly wrung the alarming story out of him; then, with Kahotep in tow, he had marched inside to inform Ashoka what his step-brother had in store for him. What Kahotep had never revealed to another soul was that Philokale had been sitting on a low stone seat right outside the window of Ashoka's suite and within earshot of their conversation; the eunuch had risen moments later, his thin face pale as ivory, and walked rapidly towards the main Palace gates.

Ashoka had reacted with the lightning speed that had soon won him the Mauryan throne. That same afternoon, a mere twenty-seven days after Bindusara's passing, even as Suseema sported with a courtesan in the outskirts of the city, he'd concocted a scheme far more diabolical than that of his brother. In this he had been aided by Radhagupta, Sakshum, and other senior officials, each keen to prevent the haughty and cruel Suseema from realizing his royal ambitions. A mock elephant, startlingly life-like, had been rapidly fashioned by Palace artisans. The beast had been placed in full view just inside the eastern Palace gates and an equally life-like effigy of Ashoka had been placed astride it. Five hundred strong workers had been engaged to rapidly dig a deep ditch all around the fake beast.

Radhagupta had sent a messenger to Suseema: *Vanquish Ashoka in hand-to-hand combat today, his note had read, and I will see you enthroned as Emperor of Magadha.* Fuzzy with Laodicean wine, frenzied love-making, and visions of imminent coronation, too arrogant to suspect that Radhagupta would dare to deceive Bindusara's favorite, and certain he could easily slaughter the physically inept Ashoka, Suseema had taken the bait. He'd ordered the messenger to inform Radhagupta that he was on his way. On receiving his message, the Chief Minister had immediately instructed workers to quickly fill the pit with live coals and camouflage its surface with highly flammable dry river reeds. Suseema had galloped furiously back to the Palace and Kahotep had watched dumbstruck from an upper Palace window as, with a howl of rage, his sword flashing silver, he'd charged through the open gates and toward the effigy of his hated half-brother mounted on the fake elephant. Kahotep had covered his eyes when the Crown Prince had crashed into the smoldering pit; unable to climb out, he'd soon burnt to death; in nightmares, Kahotep could still hear his outraged screams of agony rending the hazy noon air.

Perhaps the Buddha was right in claiming that one never escapes the consequences of one's actions. Suseema had not mourned the death of the father who'd so loved him, nor cared to renounce the pleasures of the senses for the prescribed grieving period. *Would the heir to a great empire weep over the passing of a moldering old father?* he'd been overheard saying. Worse still, Suseema had scorned even the most senior of his father's ministers. But now the Crown Prince had been burnt to ashes and the throne was open to a fresh claimant. Make

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grandiose plans, as Ambassador Dionysius used to say to Kahotep with wry amusement, and the gods laugh.

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*There is no fire like passion;
There is no grip like hatred;
There is no net like delusion;
There is no river like craving.
~The Buddha*

Chapter 3: The Invisible Worm

Over the next four years, Kahotep had watched aghast as Ashoka had zealously sniffed out and executed every official who had conspired with Suseema—everyone, that is, but Philokale, who had simply vanished. Other Mauryan contenders to the throne had gone into hiding after Suseema’s ghastly end; pooling their resources, they had conspired to kill Ashoka before he could finish them too, but aided by Radhagupta’s cabal and his own army of spies, Ashoka had killed each of them in remorseless succession. Finally only he and Vitashoka, his uterine brother, remained of Bindusara’s many heirs, whereupon he had triumphantly crowned himself Emperor of Magadha.

Despite his most stringent efforts to find Philokale, however, the eunuch had truly disappeared. Soon after Suseema’s death, Kahotep had a strange dream: Philokale had blown him a kiss from the deck of a merchant vessel bobbing on the high seas, and, although he despised traitors, Kahotep had been oddly relieved to believe that the crafty eunuch had gotten away.

Ashoka’s coronation abruptly signaled the end of his days of menial service. Attributing the Egyptian eunuch’s presence in his life to the beneficence of the same mysterious power that had lifted *him* out of gray obscurity, the Emperor had elevated him to Philokales’ open

position and entrusted him with the coveted task of supervising the band of foreign eunuchs who served the royal family. There were many other benefits, but the one Kahotep most cherished was Ashoka's public announcement that from hereon *he* was to be considered a free and respected member of court.

Six years after the coronation, the Harem Master Ibn-Ali passed away and Ashoka had appointed Kahotep as his successor. It was a prestigious post, the attainment of which many a senior courtier would likely have sacrificed a limb. Fortunately for Kahotep, Ibn-Ali had taken a great liking to him, and when he knew he was dying, had personally recommended him for the post. His rapid rise had not excited undue envy mainly because he treated all other eunuchs, whether Egyptian like himself, Persian, Assyrian or Ethiopian, as his own kin. As a result of his proximity to Ashoka, Kahotep had come into contact with the cabal that ruled the Empire and quickly realized how much clout a favorite of the Emperor could wield. Now that others regularly bowed and scraped at his own approach, he too sensed the omnipotent hand of a higher power. His inner conviction that this force had been with him right through the bloody events that had wrested him from his roots and emasculated him, in order to preserve his good looks and render his seed sterile, had grown stronger with the passing years.

Qeb slipped back into the inner chamber and Kahotep returned to the present. Despite intermittent waves of pain, he felt better; he'd come to believe it was these remembrances of astounding coincidence, which he now viewed as divine intervention, that kept him going forward in uncertain times.

“Is Sakshum back already?” he asked.

Qeb nodded. “It’s been well over two hours.”

“Damnably hot outside,” Kahotep said, hating the sun. He swept up the fragments of his mind and rose with renewed determination. “Give the General a drink—he enjoys Egyptian beer. Serve him from the keg cooled in the fountain and tell him I shall be with him shortly.” He retouched the kohl rimming his dark eyes, straightened his rumpled kaftan, gold-embroidered at border and sleeves with the Mauryan symbol of the peacock, and sluiced his face with cold water at the marble sink. The arresting face staring back at him from the jeweled mirror looked haggard and strained, and no wonder—the past moon in Pataliputra had been particularly awful, one damned crisis after another, ever since Ashoka had announced his intention to vanquish the rebellious frontier tribal kingdom of Kalinga.

Poor Kalinga, who had sealed her appalling fate by daring to thumb her nose at a Maurya! Kahotep had been present at Court when Radhagupta had carried the *Arthashastra* in and read the appropriate words out loud to Ashoka—that any power superior to another should launch into war. It was common knowledge that Ashoka revered the *Arthashastra* more than any holy book simply because it offered a cynical formula to gain and consolidate political power. Authored by Kautilya, the brilliant strategist who had guided his grandfather into overthrowing the Nandas and establishing the Mauryan line, it cited clear ways in which power could be acquired or enhanced: by conciliation, judicious gifts or bribes, by sowing seeds of discord in the camp of the foe, or by the use of superior force; when in doubt, the wily Brahmin advised the monarch to sit quietly on the fence and wait for the perfect opportunity to strike.

While he himself abhorred all forms of violence, including the hurt his own tongue could inflict on others when he was feeling poorly, Kahotep admitted that Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga made sound political and economic sense; by annexing Kalinga, Ashoka now controlled both land and sea routes to the south, not to forget that its destruction served as a dire warning to other nations foolish enough to scorn Mauryan supremacy. And yet, knowing Ashoka as intimately as he did, he suspected it was the venomous worm wriggling in the heart of the Emperor—a serpent temporarily appeased by the terror unleashed during his bloody four-year war of succession—that had urged him to pounce on Kalinga.

It was this invisible worm of discontent that secretly ruled Maurya, he thought blasphemously, a sinister worm that planted ideas into the Emperor's mind that no human could easily dislodge, nagging and wheedling him into making monstrous decisions he could not easily retreat from without damage to his royal dignity. And this worm could only work its poison, he mused, because it knew that, no matter his rank, wealth or power, Ashoka continued to be emotionally insecure. He hoped fervently that the conquest of Kalinga was not the beginning of a new reign of terror; unable to stomach senseless brutality, he was immensely grateful that *he* would not be called upon to bloody his own hands to defend Magadha.

Once the Emperor had dispatched his forces with instructions to crush Kalinga's standing army of sixty thousand infantry, a thousand cavalry and seven hundred war elephants, he'd closeted himself in his private chambers, and not even Radhagupta, Asandhimitra or Kahotep had been allowed access. Gabri whispered that the Emperor had used

his solitude to pore over the *Arthashastra*; although Ashoka was neither a heavy drinker nor a nail-biter when relatively calm, Gabri claimed he'd quaffed copious draughts of beer and wine and bitten his nails down to the quick.

Kahotep counted the days in his head: had just four passed since General Ranak had ridden hard from Kalinga to give Ashoka the news he'd been so eagerly awaiting? As he'd absorbed Ranak's detailed reportage of a stunning victory, Ashoka's mood had shot from a jittery anxiety to wild jubilation. At dawn the next morning, accompanied by ten thousand guardsmen, the Emperor had ridden to Kalinga with Ranak to gloat over its destruction with his own beady eyes; but, instead of returning to Pataliputra blazing with triumph, he'd slunk back like a bedraggled hunting dog, whipped by the morning's sport. Kahotep had caught a glimpse of the bitterness leaking out of those cunning eyes and the dragon of his own ancient fear had awakened with a triumphant roar.

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