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VICTORY CITY

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PART ONE

Birth

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CHAPTER ONE

On the last day of her life, when she was two hundred and forty-seven years old, the blind poet, miracle worker and prophetess Pampa Kampana completed her immense narrative poem about Bisnaga and buried it in a clay pot sealed with wax in the heart of the ruined Royal Enclosure, as a message to the future. Four and a half centuries later we found that pot and read for the first time the immortal masterpiece named the *Jayaparajaya*, meaning 'Victory and Defeat', written in the Sanskrit language, as long as the *Ramayana*, made up of twenty-four thousand verses, and we learned the secrets of the empire she had concealed from history for more than one hundred and sixty thousand days. We knew only the ruins that remained, and our memory of its history was ruined as well, by the passage of time, the imperfections of memory, and the falsehoods of those who came after. As we read Pampa Kampana's book the past was regained, the Bisnaga Empire was reborn as it truly had been, its women warriors, its mountains of gold, its generosity of spirit and its times of mean-spiritedness, its weaknesses and its

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strengths. We heard for the first time the full account of the kingdom that began and ended with a burning and a severed head. This is that story, retold in plainer language by the present author, who is neither a scholar nor a poet but merely a spinner of yarns, and who offers this version for the simple entertainment and possible edification of today's readers, the old and the young, the educated and the not so educated, those in search of wisdom and those amused by folly, northerners and southerners, followers of different gods and of no gods, the broad-minded and the narrow-minded, men and women and members of the genders beyond and in between, scions of the nobility and rank commoners, good people and rogues, charlatans and foreigners, humble sages, and egotistical fools.

The story of Bisnaga began in the fourteenth century of the Common Era, in the south of what we now call India, Bharat, Hindustan. The old king whose rolling head got everything going wasn't much of a monarch, just the type of ersatz ruler who crops up between the decline of one great kingdom and the rise of another. His name was Kampila of the tiny principality of Kampili, 'Kampila Raya', *raya* being the regional version of *raja*, king. This second-rate *raya* had just about enough time on his third-rate throne to build a fourth-rate fortress on the banks of the Pampa river, to put a fifth-rate temple inside it, and to carve a few grandiose inscriptions into the side of a rocky hill, but then the army of the north came south to deal with him. The battle that followed was a one-sided affair, so unimportant that nobody bothered to give it a name. After the people from the north had routed Kampila Raya's forces and killed most of his army they grabbed hold of the phoney king and chopped off his crownless head. Then they filled it with straw and sent it north for the pleasure of the Delhi sultan. There was nothing particularly special about the battle without a name, or about the head.

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In those days battles were commonplace affairs and naming them was a thing a lot of people didn't bother with; and severed heads were travelling across our great land all the time for the pleasure of this prince or that one. The sultan in his northern capital city had built up quite a collection.

After the insignificant battle, surprisingly, there was an event of the kind that changes history. The story goes that the women of the tiny, defeated kingdom, most of them recently widowed as a result of the no-name battle, left the fourth-rate fortress, after making final offerings at the fifth-rate temple, crossed the river in small boats, improbably defying the turbulence of the water, walked some distance to the west along the southern bank, and then lit a great bonfire and committed mass suicide in the flames. Gravely, without making any complaint, they said farewell to one another and walked forward without flinching. Nor were there any screams when their flesh caught fire and the stink of death filled the air. They burned in silence; only the crackling of the fire itself could be heard. Pampa Kampana saw it all happen. It was as if the universe itself was sending her a message, saying, open your ears, breathe in, and learn. She was nine years old and stood watching with tears in her eyes, holding her dry-eyed mother's hand as tightly as she could, while all the women she knew entered the fire and sat or stood or lay in the heart of the furnace spouting flames from their ears and mouths: the old woman who had seen everything and the young woman just starting out in life and the girl who hated her father the dead soldier and the wife who was ashamed of her husband because he hadn't given up his life on the battlefield and the woman with the beautiful singing voice and the woman with the frightening laugh and the woman as skinny as a stick and the woman as fat as a melon. Into the fire they marched and the stench of their death made Pampa feel like retching and then to her horror her own mother Radha Kampana gently detached her hand and very slowly but with absolute

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conviction walked forward to join the bonfire of the dead, without even saying goodbye.

For the rest of her life Pampa Kampana, who shared a name with the river on whose banks all this happened, would carry the scent of her mother's burning flesh in her nostrils. The pyre was made of perfumed sandalwood and an abundance of cloves and garlic and cumin seeds and sticks of cinnamon had been added to it as if the burning ladies were being prepared as a well-spiced dish to set before the sultan's victorious generals for their gastronomic delight, but those fragrances – the turmeric, the big cardamoms, and the little cardamoms too – failed to mask the unique, cannibal pungency of women being cooked alive, and made their odour, if anything, even harder to bear. Pampa Kampana never ate meat again, and could not bring herself to remain in any kitchen in which it was being prepared. All such dishes exuded the memory of her mother and when other people ate dead animals Pampa Kampana had to avert her gaze.

Pampa's own father had died young, long before the nameless battle, so her mother was not one of the newly widowed. Arjuna Kampana had died so long ago that Pampa had no memory of his face. All she knew about him was what Radha Kampana had told her, that he had been a kind man, the well-loved potter of the town of Kampili, and that he had encouraged his wife to learn the potter's art as well, so after he died she took over his trade and proved to be more than his equal. Radha, in turn, had guided little Pampa's hands at the potter's wheel and the child was already a skilled thrower of pots and bowls and had learned an important lesson, which was that there was no such thing as men's work. Pampa Kampana had believed that this would be her life, making beautiful things with her mother, side by side at the wheel. But that dream was over now. Her mother had let go of her hand and abandoned her to her fate.

For a long moment Pampa tried to convince herself that her mother

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was just being sociable and going along with the crowd, because she had always been a woman for whom the friendship of women was of paramount importance. She told herself that the undulating wall of fire was a curtain behind which the ladies had gathered to gossip, and soon they would all walk out of the flames, unharmed, maybe a little scorched, smelling a little of kitchen perfumes, perhaps, but that would pass soon enough. And then Pampa and her mother would go home.

Only when she saw the last slabs of roasted flesh fall away from Radha Kampana's bones to reveal the naked skull did she understand that her childhood was over and from now on she must conduct herself as an adult and never commit her mother's last mistake. She would laugh at death and turn her face towards life. She would not sacrifice her body merely to follow dead men into the afterworld. She would refuse to die young and live, instead, to be impossibly, defiantly old. It was at this point that she received the celestial blessing that would change everything, because this was the moment when the goddess Pampa's voice, as old as Time, started coming out of her nine-year-old mouth.

It was an enormous voice, like the thunder of a high waterfall booming in a valley of sweet echoes. It possessed a music she had never heard before, a melody to which she later gave the name of *kindness*. She was terrified, of course, but also reassured. This was not a possession by a demon. There was goodness in the voice, and majesty. Radha Kampana had once told her that two of the highest deities of the pantheon had spent the earliest days of their courtship near here, by the angry waters of the rushing river. Perhaps this was the queen of the gods herself, returning in a time of death to the place where her own love had been born. Like the river, Pampa Kampana had been named after the deity – 'Pampa' was one of the goddess Parvati's local names, and her lover Shiva, the mighty Lord of the Dance himself, had appeared to her here in his local, three-eyed incarnation – so it all began to make sense.

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With a feeling of serene detachment Pampa, the human being, began to listen to the words of Pampa, the goddess, coming out of her mouth. She had no more control over them than a member of the audience has over the monologue of the star, and her career as a prophet and miracle worker began.

Physically, she didn't feel any different. There were no unpleasant side effects. She didn't tremble, or feel faint, or experience a hot flush, or a cold sweat. She didn't froth at the mouth or fall down in an epileptic fit, as she had been led to believe could happen, and had happened to other people, in such cases. If anything, there was a great calm surrounding her like a soft cloak, reassuring her that the world was still a good place and things would work out well.

'From blood and fire,' the goddess said, 'life and power will be born. In this exact place a great city will rise, the wonder of the world, and its empire will last for more than two centuries. And you,' the goddess addressed Pampa Kampana directly, giving the young girl the unique experience of being personally spoken to by a supernatural stranger speaking through her own mouth, 'you will fight to make sure that no more women are ever burned in this fashion, and that men start considering women in new ways, and you will live just long enough to witness both your success and your failure, to see it all and tell its story, even though once you have finished telling it you will die immediately and nobody will remember you for four hundred and fifty years.' In this way Pampa Kampana learned that a deity's bounty was always a two-edged sword.

She began to walk without knowing where she was going. If she had lived in our time she might have said that the landscape looked like the surface of the moon, the pockmarked plains, the valleys of dirt, the rock piles, the emptiness, the sense of a melancholy void where burgeoning life should have been. But she had no sense of the moon as a place. To her it was just a shining god in the sky. On and on she walked until she

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began to see miracles. She saw a cobra using its hood to shield a pregnant frog from the heat of the sun. She saw a rabbit turn and face a dog that was hunting it, and bite the dog on its nose and make it run away. These wonders made her feel that something marvellous was at hand. Soon after these visions, which might have been sent as signs by the gods, she arrived at the little *mutt* at Mandana.

A *mutt* could also be called a *peetham* but to avoid confusion let us simply say: it was a monk's dwelling. Later, as the empire grew, the Mandana *mutt* became a grand place extending all the way to the banks of the rushing river, an enormous complex employing thousands of priests, servitors, tradesmen, craftsmen, janitors, elephant keepers, monkey handlers, stable hands, and workers in the *mutt*'s extensive paddy fields, and it was revered as the sacred place where emperors came for advice, but in this early time before the beginning began it was humble, little more than an ascetic's cave and a vegetable patch, and the resident ascetic, still a young man at that time, a twenty-five-year-old scholar with long curly locks flowing down his back all the way to his waist, went by the name of Vidyasagar, which meant that there was a knowledge-ocean, a *vidya-sagara*, inside his large head. When he saw the girl approaching with hunger on her tongue and madness in her eyes he understood at once that she had witnessed terrible things and gave her water to drink and what little food he had.

After that, at least in Vidyasagar's version of events, they lived together easily enough, sleeping on opposite corners of the floor of the cave, and they got along fine, in part because the monk had sworn a solemn vow of abstinence from the things of the flesh, so that even when Pampa Kampana blossomed into the grandeur of her beauty he never laid a finger on her although the cave wasn't very big and they were alone in the dark. For the rest of his life that was what he said to anyone who asked – and there were people who asked, because the

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world is a cynical and suspicious place and, being full of liars, thinks of everything as a lie. Which is what Vidyasagar's story was.

Pampa Kampana, when asked, did not reply. From an early age she acquired the ability of shutting away from her consciousness many of the evils that life handed out. She had not yet understood or harnessed the power of the goddess within her, so she had not been able to protect herself when the supposedly abstinent scholar crossed the invisible line between them and did what he did. He did not do it often, because scholarship usually left him too tired to do much about his lusts, but he did it often enough, and every time he did it she erased his deed from her memory by an act of will. She also erased her mother, whose self-sacrifice had sacrificed her daughter upon the altar of the ascetic's desires, and for a long time she tried to tell herself that what happened in the cave was an illusion, and that she had never had a mother at all.

In this way she was able to accept her fate in silence; but an angry power began to grow in her, a force from which the future would be born. In time. All in good time.

She did not say a single word for the next nine years, which meant that Vidyasagar, who knew many things, didn't even know her name. He decided to call her Gangadevi, and she accepted the name without complaint, and helped him gather berries and roots to eat, to sweep out their poor residence, and to haul water from the well. Her silence suited him perfectly, because on most days he was lost in meditation, considering the meanings of the sacred texts which he had learned by heart, and seeking answers to two great questions: whether wisdom existed, or if there was only folly, and the related question of whether there was such a thing as *vidya*, true knowledge, or if there were only many different kinds of ignorance, and true knowledge, after which he was named, was possessed only by the gods. In addition, he thought about peace, and asked himself how to ensure the triumph of non-violence in a violent age.

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This was how men were, Pampa Kampana thought. A man philosophized about peace but in his treatment of the helpless girl sleeping in his cave his deeds were not in alignment with his philosophy.

Although the girl was silent as she grew into a young woman, she wrote copiously in a strong flowing hand, which astonished the sage, who had expected her to be illiterate. After she began to speak she admitted that she didn't know she could write either, and put the miracle of her literacy down to the benevolent intervention of the goddess. She wrote almost every day, and allowed Vidyasagar to read her scribblings, so that during those nine years the awestruck sage became the first witness of the flowering of her poetic genius. This was the period in which she composed what became the Prelude to her *Victory and Defeat*. The subject of the main part of the poem would be the history of Bisnaga from its creation to its destruction, but those things still lay in the future. The Prelude dealt with antiquity, telling the story of the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha which had flourished in that region long ago in the Time of Fable, and it contained a vivid account of the life and deeds of Lord Hanuman the monkey king who could grow as big as a mountain and leap across the sea. It is generally agreed by scholars and ordinary readers alike that the quality of Pampa Kampana's verse rivals, and perhaps even improves upon, the language of the *Ramayana* itself.

After the nine years were over, the two Sangama brothers came to call: the tall, grey-haired, good-looking one who stood very still and looked deep into your eyes as if he could see your thoughts, and his much younger sibling, the small rotund one who buzzed around him, and everyone else, like a bee. They were cowherds from the hill town of Gooty who had gone to war, war being one of the growth industries of the time; they had joined up with a local princeling's army, and because they were amateurs in the arts of killing they had been captured by the Delhi sultan's forces and sent into the north, where to save their skins

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they pretended to be converted to the religion of their captors and then escaped soon afterwards, shedding their adopted faith like an unwanted shawl, getting away before they could be circumcised according to the requirements of the religion in which they didn't really believe. They were local boys, they now explained, and they had heard of the wisdom of the sage Vidyasagar and, to be honest, they had also heard of the beauty of the mute young woman who lived with him, and so here they were in search of some good advice.

They did not come empty-handed. They brought baskets of fresh fruits and a sack of nuts and an urn filled with milk from their favourite cow, and also a sack of seeds, which turned out to be the thing that changed their lives. Their names, they said, were Hukka and Bukka Sangama – Hukka the handsome oldster and Bukka the young bee – and after their escape from the North they were looking for a new direction in life. The care of cows had ceased to be enough for them after their military escapade, they said, their horizons were wider now and their ambitions were greater, so they would appreciate any guidance, any ripples flowing from the amplitude of the Ocean of Knowledge, any whispers from the deeps of wisdom that the sage might be willing to offer, anything at all that might show them the way. 'We know of you as the great apostle of peace,' Hukka Sangama said. 'We're not so keen on soldiering ourselves, after our recent experiences. Show us the fruits that non-violence can grow.'

To everyone's surprise it was not the monk but his eighteen-year-old companion who replied, in an ordinary, conversational voice, strong and low, a voice that gave no hint that it hadn't been used for nine years. It was a voice by which both brothers were instantly seduced. 'Suppose you had a sackful of seeds,' she said. 'Then suppose you could plant them and grow a city, and grow its inhabitants too, as if people were plants, budding and flowering in the spring, only to wither in the autumn. Suppose now that these seeds could grow generations, and

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bring forth a history, a new reality, an empire. Suppose they could make you kings, and your children too, and your children's children.'

'Sounds good,' said young Bukka, the more outspoken of the brothers, 'but where are we supposed to find seeds like that? We are only cowherds, but we know better than to believe in fairy tales.'

'Your name Sangama is a sign,' she said. 'A *sangam* is a confluence, such as the creation of the river Pampa by the joining of the Tunga and Bhadra rivers, which were created by the sweat pouring down the two sides of the head of Lord Vishnu, and so it also means the flowing together of different parts to make a new kind of whole. This is your destiny. Go to the place of the women's sacrifice, the sacred place where my mother died, which is also the place where in ancient times Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman joined forces with the mighty Lord Hanuman of Kishkindha and went forth to battle many-headed Ravana of Lanka, who had abducted the lady Sita. You two are brothers just as Ram and Lakshman were. Build your city there.'

Now the sage spoke up. 'It's not such a bad start, being cowherds,' he said. 'The sultanate of Golconda was started by shepherds, you know – in fact its name means "the shepherds' hill" – but those shepherds lucked out because they discovered that the place was rich in diamonds, and now they are diamond princes, owners of the Twenty-Three Mines, discoverers of most of the world's pink diamonds, and possessors of the Great Table Diamond, which they keep in the deepest dungeon of their mountaintop fortress, the most impregnable castle in the land, even harder to take than Mehrangarh, up in Jodhpur, or Udayagiri, right down the road.'

'And your seeds are better than diamonds,' the young woman said, handing back the sack that the brothers had brought with them.

'What, these seeds?' Bukka asked, very surprised. 'But these are just an ordinary assortment we brought along as a gift for your vegetable patch – they are for okra, beans and snake gourds, all mixed up together.'

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The prophetess shook her head. 'Not any more,' she said. 'Now these are the seeds of the future. Your city will grow from them.'

The two brothers realized at that moment that they were both truly, deeply, and forever in love with this strange beauty who was clearly a great sorceress, or at the very least a person touched by a god and granted exceptional powers. 'They say Vidyasagar gave you the name of Gangadevi,' Hukka said. 'But what is your real name? I would very much like to know that, so that I can remember you in the manner your parents intended.'

'Go and make your city,' she said. 'Come back and ask me my name again when it has sprouted up out of rocks and dust. Maybe I'll tell you then.'

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CHAPTER TWO

After they had come to the designated place and scattered the seeds, their hearts filled with great perplexity and just a little hope, the two Sangama brothers climbed to the top of a hill of large boulders and thorn bushes that tore at their peasant clothes, and sat down in the late afternoon to wait and watch. After no more than an hour, they saw the air began to shimmer as it does during the hottest hours of the hottest days, and then the miracle city started growing before their astonished eyes, the stone edifices of the central zone pushing up from the rocky ground, and the majesty of the royal palace, and the first great temple too. (This was forever afterwards known as the Underground Temple, because it had emerged from a place beneath the earth's surface, and also as the Monkey Temple, because from the moment of its rising it swarmed with long-tailed grey temple monkeys of the breed known as Hanuman langurs, chattering among themselves and ringing the temple's many bells, and because of the gigantic sculpture of Lord Hanuman himself that rose up with it, to stand by its gates.) All these and more

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arose in old-fashioned splendour and stared down towards the palace and the Royal Enclosure spreading out at the far end of the long market street. The mud, wood and cowshit hovels of the common people also made their humble way into the air at the city's periphery.

(A note on monkeys. It may be useful to observe here that monkeys will play a significant role in Pampa Kampana's narrative. In these early verses the benevolent shadow of mighty Lord Hanuman falls across her pages, and his power and courage become characteristics of Bisnaga, the real-life successor to his mythical Kishkindha. Later, however, there will be other, malevolent monkeys to confront. There is no need to anticipate those events any further. We merely point out the dualist, binary nature of the monkey motif in the work.)

In those first moments the city was not yet fully alive. Spreading out from the shadow of the barren bouldered hills, it looked like a shining cosmopolis whose inhabitants had all abandoned it. The villas of the rich stood unoccupied, villas with stone foundations upon which stood graceful, pillared structures of brick and wood; the canopied market stalls were empty, awaiting the arrival of florists, butchers, tailors, wine merchants, and dentists; in the red-light district there were brothels, but, as yet, no whores. The river rushed along and the banks where washerwomen and washermen would do their work seemed to wait expectantly for some action, some movement that would give meaning to the place. In the Royal Enclosure the great Elephant House with its eleven arches anticipated the coming of the tuskers and their dung.

Then life began, and hundreds – no, thousands – of men and women were born full-grown from the brown earth, shaking the dirt off their garments, and thronging the streets in the evening breeze. Stray dogs

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and bony cows walked in the streets, trees burst into blossom and leaf, and the sky swarmed with parrots, yes, and crows. There was laundry upon the riverbank, and royal elephants trumpeting in their mansion, and armed guards – women! – at the Royal Enclosure's gates. An army camp could be seen beyond the city's boundary, a substantial cantonment in which stood an awesome force of thousands more newborn human beings, equipped with clattering armour and weapons, as well as ranks of elephants, camels, and horses, and siege weaponry – battering rams, trebuchets and the like.

'This is what it must feel like to be a god,' Bukka Sangama said to his brother in a trembling voice. 'To perform the act of creation, a thing only the gods can do.'

'We must become gods now,' Hukka said, 'to make sure the people worship us.' He looked up into the sky. 'There, you see,' he pointed. 'There is our father, the Moon.'

'No,' Bukka shook his head. 'We'll never get away with that.'

'The great Moon God, our ancestor,' said Hukka, making it up as he went along, 'he had a son, whose name was Budha. And then after a number of generations the family line arrived at the Moon King of the mythological era. Pururavas. That was his name. He had two sons, Yadu and Turvasu. Some say there were five, but I say two is plenty. And we are the sons of the sons of Yadu. Thus we are a part of the illustrious Lunar Lineage, like the great warrior Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*, and even Lord Krishna himself.'

'There are five of us too,' Bukka said. 'Five Sangamas, like the five sons of the Moon King. Hukka, Bukka, Pukka, Chukka, and Dev.'

'That may be so,' Hukka said. 'But I say two is plenty. Our brothers are not noble characters. They are disreputable. They are unworthy. But yes, we will have to work out what to do with them.'

'Let's go down and take a look at the palace,' Bukka suggested. 'I hope there are plenty of servants and cooks and not just a bunch of

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empty chambers of state. I hope there are beds as soft as clouds and maybe a women's wing of ready-made wives of unimaginable beauty as well. We should celebrate, right? We aren't cowherds any more.'

'But cows will remain important to us,' Hukka proposed.

'Metaphorically, you mean,' Bukka asked, 'I'm not planning to do any more milking.'

'Yes,' Hukka Sangama said. 'Metaphorically, of course.'

They were both silent for a while, awed by what they had brought into being. 'If something can come out of nothing like this,' Bukka finally said, 'maybe anything is possible in this world, and we can really be great men, although we will need to have great thoughts as well, and we don't have any seeds for those.'

Hukka was thinking along different lines. 'If we can grow people like tapioca plants,' he mused, 'then it doesn't matter how many soldiers we lose in battle, because there will be plenty more where they came from, and therefore we will be invincible and will be able to conquer the world. These thousands are just a beginning. We will grow hundreds of thousands of citizens, maybe a million, and a million soldiers as well. There are plenty of seeds left. We barely used half the sack.'

Bukka was thinking about Pampa Kampana. 'She talked a lot about peace but if that's what she wants why did she grow us this army?' he wondered. 'Is it peace she really wants, or revenge? For her mother's death, I mean.'

'It's up to us now,' Hukka told him. 'An army can be a force for peace as well as war.'

'And another thing I'm wondering,' Bukka said. 'Those people down there, our new citizens – the men, I mean – do you think they are circumcised or not circumcised?'

Hukka pondered this question. 'What do you want to do?' he asked finally. 'Do you want to go down there and ask them all to open their

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lungis, pull down their pyjamas, unwrap their sarongs? You think that's a good way to begin?'

'The truth is,' Bukka replied, 'I don't really care. It's probably a mixture, and so what.'

'Exactly,' Hukka said. 'So what.'

'So I don't care if you don't care,' Bukka said.

'I don't care,' Hukka replied.

'Then so what,' Bukka confirmed.

They were silent again, staring down at the miracle, trying to accept its incomprehensibility, its beauty, its consequences. 'We should go and introduce ourselves,' Bukka said after a while. 'They need to know who's in charge.'

'There's no rush,' Hukka replied. 'I think we're both a little crazy right now, because we are in the middle of a great craziness, and we both need a minute to absorb it, and to get a grip on our sanity again. And in the second place . . .' And here he paused.

'Yes?' Bukka urged him on. 'What's in the second place?'

'In the second place,' Hukka said slowly, 'we have to decide which one of the two of us is going to be king first, and who will be in the second place.'

'Well,' Bukka said, hopefully, 'I'm the smartest.'

'That's debatable,' Hukka said. 'However, I'm the oldest.'

'And I'm the most likeable.'

'Again, debatable. But I repeat: I'm the oldest.'

'Yes, you're old. But I'm the most dynamic.'

'Dynamic isn't the same thing as regal,' Hukka said. 'And I'm still the oldest.'

'You say that as if it's some sort of commandment,' Bukka protested. 'Oldest goes first. Where does it say that? Where's that written down?'

Hukka's hand moved to the hilt of his sword. 'Here,' he said.

A bird flew across the sun. The earth itself took a deep breath. The

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gods, if there were any gods, stopped doing what they were doing and paid attention.

Bukka gave in. 'Okay, okay,' he said, raising his hands in surrender. 'You're my older brother and I love you and you go first.'

'Thank you,' said Hukka. 'I love you too.'

'But,' Bukka added, 'I get to decide the next thing.'

'Agreed,' said Hukka Sangama, who was now King Hukka – Hukka Raya I. 'You get first pick of bedrooms in the palace.'

'And concubines,' Bukka insisted.

'Yes, yes,' Hukka Raya I said, waving an irritated hand. 'And concubines as well.'

After another moment's silence, Bukka attempted a great thought. 'What is a human being?' he wondered. 'I mean, what makes us what we are? Did we all start out as seeds, are all our ancestors vegetables, if we go back far enough? Or did we grow out of fishes, are we fishes who learned to breathe air? Or maybe we are cows who lost our udders and two of our legs. Somehow I'm finding the vegetable possibility the most upsetting. I don't want to discover that my great-grandfather was a brinjal, or a pea.'

'And yet it is from seeds that our subjects have been born,' Hukka said, shaking his head. 'So the vegetable possibility is the most probable.'

'Things are simpler for vegetables,' mused Bukka. 'You have your roots, so you know your place. You grow, and you serve your purpose by propagating and then being consumed. But we are rootless and we don't want to be eaten. So how are we supposed to live? What is a human life? What's a good life and what isn't? Who and what are these thousands we have just brought into being?'

'The question of origins,' Hukka said gravely, 'we must leave to the gods. The question we must answer is this one: now that we find ourselves here – and they, our seed people, are down there – how shall we live?'

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'If we were philosophers,' Bukka said, 'we could answer such questions philosophically. But we are poor cowherds only, who became unsuccessful soldiers, and have suddenly somehow risen above our station, so we had better just get down there and begin, and find out the answers by being there and seeing how things work out. An army is a question, and the answer to the question of the army is to fight. A cow is a question too, and the answer to the question of the cow is to milk it. Down there is a city that appeared out of nowhere, and that's a bigger question than we have ever been asked. And so maybe the answer to the question of the city is to live in it.'

'Also,' Hukka said, 'we should get on with that before our brothers arrive and try to steal a march on us.'

But still, as if dazed, the two brothers remained on the hill, immobile, watching the movement of the new people in the streets of the new city below them, and often shaking their heads in disbelief. It was as if they feared going down into those streets, afraid that the whole thing was some sort of hallucination, and that if they entered it the deception would be revealed, the vision would dissolve, and they would return to the previous nothingness of their lives. Perhaps their stunned condition explained why they did not notice that the people in the new streets, and in the army camp beyond, were behaving peculiarly, as if they, too, had been driven a little crazy by their incomprehension of their own sudden existence, and were incapable of dealing with the fact of having been brought into being out of nowhere. There was a good deal of shouting, and of crying, and some of the people were rolling on the ground and kicking their legs in the air, punching the air as if to say, where am I, let me out of here. In the fruit and vegetable market people were throwing produce at one another, and it was unclear if they were playing or expressing their inarticulate rage. In fact they seemed incapable of expressing what they truly wanted, food, or shelter, or someone to explain the world to them and make

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them feel safe in it, someone whose soft words could grant them the happy illusion of understanding what they could not understand. The fights in the army camp, where the new people carried weapons, were more dangerous, and there were injuries.

The sun was already diving towards the horizon when Hukka and Bukka finally made their way down the rocky hill. As evening shadows crawled across the many enigmatic boulders that crowded around their path it seemed to them both that the stones were acquiring human faces, with hollow eyes which were examining them closely, as if to ask, *what, are these unimpressive individuals the ones who brought a whole city to life?* Hukka, who was already putting on royal airs like a boy trying on the new birthday clothes his parents had left at the foot of his bed while he slept, chose to ignore the staring stones, but Bukka grew afraid, because the stones didn't seem to be their friends, and could easily start an avalanche that would bury the two brothers forever before they were able to step into their glorious future. The new city was surrounded by rocky hillsides of this sort, except along the riverbank, and all the boulders on all the hills now seemed to have become giant heads, whose faces wore hostile frowns, and whose mouths were on the verge of speech. They never spoke, but Bukka made a note. 'We are surrounded by enemies,' he told himself, 'and if we are not quick to defend ourselves against them they will thunder down upon us and crush us to bits.' Aloud he said to his brother the king, 'You know what this city doesn't have, and needs as soon as possible? Walls. High, thick walls, strong enough to withstand any attack.'

Hukka nodded his assent. 'Build them,' he said.

Then they entered the city and, as night fell, found themselves at the dawn of time, and in the midst of the chaos which is the first condition of all new universes. By now many of their new progeny had fallen asleep, in the street, on the doorstep of the palace, in the shadow of the

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temple, everywhere. There was also a rank odour in the air, because hundreds of the citizens had fouled their garments. Those who were not asleep were like sleepwalkers, empty people with empty eyes, walking the streets like automata, buying fruit at the fruit stalls without knowing what they were putting in their baskets, or selling the fruits without knowing what they were called, or, at the stalls offering religious paraphernalia, buying and selling enamel eyes, pink and white with black irises, selling and buying these and many other trinkets to be used in the temple's daily devotions, without knowing which deities liked to receive what offerings, or why. It was night now, but even in the darkness the sleepwalkers continued buying, selling, roaming the confused streets, and their glazed presences were even more alarming than the stinking sleepers.

The new king, Hukka, was dismayed at the condition of his subjects. 'It looks like that witch has given us a kingdom of subhumans,' he cried. 'These people are as brainless as cows, and they don't even have udders to give us milk.'

Bukka, the more imaginative of the two brothers, put a consoling hand on Hukka's shoulder. 'Calm down,' he said. 'Even human babies take some time to emerge from their mothers and start breathing air. And when they emerge they have no idea what to do, and so they cry, they laugh, they piss and shit, and they wait for their parents to take care of everything. I think what's happening here is that our city is still in the process of being born, and all these people, including all the grown-ups, are babies right now, and we just have to hope that they grow up fast, because we don't have mothers to care for them.'

'And if you're right, what are we supposed to do with this half-born crowd?' Hukka wanted to know.

'We wait,' Bukka told him, having no better idea to offer. 'This is the first lesson of your new kingship: patience. We must allow our new citizens – our new subjects – to become real, to grow into their newly

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created selves. Do they even know their names? Where do they think they came from? It's a problem. Maybe they will change quickly. Maybe by the morning they will have become men and women, and we can talk about everything. Until then, there's nothing to be done.'

The full moon burst out of the sky like a descending angel and bathed the new world in milky light. And on that moon-blessed night at the beginning of the beginning the Sangama brothers understood that the act of creation was only the first of many necessary acts, that even the powerful magic of the seeds could not provide everything that was needed. They themselves were exhausted, worn out by everything they had wrought, and so they made their way into the palace.

Here different rules seemed to apply. As they approached the arched gate into the first courtyard they saw a full complement of servitors standing before them like statues, equerries and grooms frozen beside their immobile horses, musicians on a stage leaning into their silent instruments, and any number of household servants and aides, dressed in such finery as was appropriate for those who served a king – cockaded turbans, brocaded coats, shoes that curled up at their pointed toes, necklaces, and rings. No sooner had Hukka and Bukka passed through the gate than the scene sprang to life, and all was bustle and hum. Courtiers rushed forward to escort them, and these were not the big babies of the city streets, but grown men and women, well spoken and knowledgeable, and fully competent to carry out their duties. A flunkey approached Hukka carrying a crown on a red velvet cushion, and Hukka set it happily on his head, noting that it was a perfect fit. He received the service of the palace staff as if it was his right and his due, but Bukka, walking a step or two behind him, had other thoughts. 'Looks like even the magic seeds have one rule for the rulers and another for the ruled,' he reflected. 'But if the ruled continue to be unruly it won't be easy to rule them.'

The bedroom suites were so lavishly appointed that the question of

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who slept where was resolved without much discussion, and there were lords of the bedchamber to bring them their nightgowns and show them the wardrobes filled with royal garments appropriate to their stature. But they were too tired to take in much about their new home, or to be interested in concubines, and within moments they were both fast asleep.

In the morning things were different. 'How is the city today?' Hukka asked the courtier who came into his bedroom to draw back the curtains. This individual turned and bowed deeply. 'Perfect, as always, sire,' he replied. 'The city thrives under Your Majesty's rule, today and every day.'

Hukka and Bukka summoned horses and rode out to see the state of things for themselves. They were astonished to find a metropolis bustling about its business, thronged with adults behaving like grown-ups and children running around their feet as children should. It was as if everyone had lived here for years, as if the adults had had been children there, and grown to adulthood, and married, and raised children of their own; as if they possessed memories and histories, and formed a long-established community, a city of love and death, tears and laughter, loyalty and betrayal, and everything else that human nature contains, everything that, when added together, adds up to the meaning of life, all conjured up out of nothing by the magic seeds. The noises of the city, street vendors, horses' hooves, the clatter of carts, songs and arguments, filled the air. In the military cantonment a formidable army stood at the ready, awaiting its lords' commands.

'How did this happen?' Hukka asked his brother in wonderment.

'There's your answer,' said Bukka, pointing.

Coming towards them through the crowd, dressed in an ascetic's simple saffron wrap, and carrying a wooden staff, was Pampa Kampana, with whom they were both in love. There was a fire blazing in her eyes, which would not be extinguished for more than two hundred years.

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'We built the city,' Hukka said to her. 'You said when we had done that we could ask you for your real name.'

So Pampa Kampana told them her name, and congratulated them as well. 'You've done well,' she said. 'They just needed someone to whisper their dreams into their ears.'

'The people needed a mother,' Bukka said. 'Now they have one, and everything works.'

'The city needs a queen,' said Hukka Raya I. 'Pampa is a good name for a queen.'

'I can't be the queen of a town without a name,' said Pampa Kampana. 'What's it called, this city of yours?'

'I'll name it Pampanagar,' Hukka said. 'Because you built it, not us.'

'That would be vanity,' said Pampa Kampana. 'Choose another name.'

'Vidyanagar, then,' said Hukka. 'After the great sage. The city of wisdom.'

'He would refuse that too,' Pampa Kampana said. 'I refuse it for him.'

'Then I don't know,' said Hukka Raya I. 'Maybe Vijaya.'

'Victory,' Pampa Kampana said. 'The city is a victory, that's true. But I don't know if such boastfulness is wise.'

The question of the name would remain unresolved until the stammering foreigner came to town.

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