



SECTION SIX

THE CIRCLE OF INITIATION

Chapter 46

THE THREADS THEY LEFT BEHIND

The Journal Left Behind

Location: *Vansvasa Resort, Simlipal*

Time: *Two days after the children's disappearance*

The dining table was a scene of abandonment — cold chai cups, untouched breakfast, and the silent weight of missing voices.

Parag Jain sat with elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands. Priya stood near the window, arms folded tightly across her chest, her eyes red but dry. The kind of dryness that comes after too many tears — when exhaustion replaces panic.

“They’ve been gone forty-eight hours,” Parag said finally, his voice cracked and dry. “We need to file a report.”

“And tell them what?” Priya turned slowly. “That our children vanished into a forest chasing symbols from a disc and dreams?”

He didn’t reply.

She placed the journal on the table and unwrapped it. The pages had browned at the edges, but the ink held firm.

She read aloud, her voice steady but tight:

“Navya’s presence alters the energy field. During the Simlipal monsoon, we recorded time-lapse footage of vines shifting in response to her touch. Once, wild turmeric bloomed two days early around her.”

She flipped further.

“Manas doesn’t decode systems. He tunes into them. His brain runs on logic frequencies. During the Haora workshop, he corrected an AI loop we couldn’t fix for a week — without touching the code.”

Parag leaned forward, listening now with clenched breath.

Then came a line in a different ink — perhaps added later:

“We weren’t the only ones watching. Pukit and Anusuya observed similar phenomena during their assignment at Saraswati Valley Academy. But it wasn’t just Navya and Manas. They noticed two others...”

Priya’s voice softened.

“...Prisha, who once calmed a feral monkey by humming to it during the wildlife rescue camp. She was barely fourteen. No training. Just... stillness.”

Parag looked up sharply. “That was Bakshi’s note, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. “He called it a frequency beyond language.”

She turned the page again, hand trembling.

“And Raghav — the one who dances with the wind. There’s video footage from the same camp. No music playing, yet birds altered their calls to his rhythm. I watched it five times. It wasn’t a coincidence.”

Parag slumped back. “So all four...”

“They were already resonating,” she whispered. “We just didn’t listen.”

Parag reached for his tablet, where a single notification blinked red at the top:
“Echo HQ — Priority Alert: Operation Deep Echo”

He tapped it open. The words leapt out at him:

Operation Deep Echo: Status Update

Children untraceable.

Last signal — Eastern Simlipal, 04:12 hours, two days ago.
Forest-wide scans deployed. Awaiting further response.
Situation escalated to Tier Amber.
Remain stationed at Vansvasa.

He didn't realize Priya had come up behind him until he felt her fingers gripping his wrist. Her eyes scanned the lines once, then again, as if hoping they would rearrange into better news.

“They've... lost them,” she said, voice low.

Parag didn't answer.

Priya shut the journal gently. The forest beyond the window seemed to lean in closer.

“We wait,” she said. “But not in fear. In readiness.”

Roots Beneath the Silence

Location: Flashback — 18 years ago | Jaipur & Simlipal

The scent of *raat ki rani* always made Priya pause. Even in the chill of memory.

She was seventeen when she first met Parag — not at a dance, or a wedding, but at a plant exhibition in Jaipur's City Palace gardens. She was sketching the veined petals of a wild turmeric bloom. He was arguing with the judge about why *Cordia dichotoma* deserved first prize.

She had rolled her eyes. He had noticed.

And that's how it began.

Not love at first sight. But *recognition*.

Two children from powerful Rajasthani families — he from the Jains of Bani Park, she from a lineage of temple architects in Amer — both obsessed with forests, not fortunes.

Their friendship grew like banyan roots — slow, stubborn, impossible to kill. When most of their peers chased MBAs or Europe, they chased monsoons and migration trails. By twenty-five, they had pooled family inheritance and bought a neglected patch of land in Simlipal.

There were no walls. Just streams, silence, and a dream.

They built Vansvasa not as a resort, but as a sanctuary — for wanderers, for endangered thoughts, for forgotten birds.

And when Prisha was born, the forest changed again.

Parag remembered the first sign — a red-vented bulbul that refused to leave her crib railing. Stayed for days. Left only when Prisha hummed to it. She was two.

Then came Raghav — a whirlwind in human form. Rain followed him. Butterflies circled him like a crown. Once, during a guest's birthday celebration, the wind knocked out power. Raghav clapped twice — and every diya in the garden reigned.

They laughed it off. Called it magic. Childhood sparkle.

But inside, they began to wonder.

Was the forest *speaking back* to their children?

They asked no one. Spoke only to each other. But they watched. And they waited.

Until the day Meera and Ayan arrived with Navya and Manas...

...and everything that was hidden began to stir again.

Where Silence Listens

Location: Deep Simlipal | Day 5

The path had narrowed to a trail barely wide enough for their steps. Giant ferns brushed their arms, and fallen sal leaves whispered beneath their feet. The air felt thicker now — not oppressive, but ancient, like the forest had seen too much and preferred silence over speech.

They had walked in near-quiet for the last two hours.

A sudden rustle in the underbrush froze their steps.

From behind a dense patch of lantana, a **young leopard** padded into view — lean, golden, speckled with black rosettes. Not a full-grown predator, but not a cub either. Its gaze was sharp. Curious. And unafraid.

Navya gasped and instinctively pulled Raghav back by his wrist. Manas stepped slightly forward, protective, calculating distance and terrain.

But Prisha didn't move.

She met the leopard's eyes. Calm. Unblinking.

And then... she knelt.

The others stood frozen. Manas whispered, "Prisha, what are you—"

But the leopard took a step forward.

Then another.

It stopped just a few feet from her, tilted its head, and let out a soft chuff — not a growl, not a snarl. Something gentler.

Prisha reached out slowly. Her fingers brushed against its forehead.

The creature closed its eyes.

A hush fell.

Even the forest seemed to pause.

Navya's breath caught. "It's not possible..."

Raghav whispered, "She's not calming it. She's... connecting."

Manas, unable to explain, only nodded.

After a moment, the leopard stepped back — not in fear, but in grace — and disappeared into the undergrowth, vanishing as silently as it came.

The silence that followed wasn't of fear, but reverence.

Prisha stood, brushing the dirt from her knees, her voice quiet.

"I learned this at Major Bakshi's wildlife camp... how to slow your breath, soften your gaze. Animals can feel intention. You just have to listen without needing to speak."

The group began walking again, slower now, the weight of that moment trailing behind them like a shadow.

Then Navya said, "We've been searching for five days. No signal from Ma and Papa. The disc hasn't done anything since we left the resort. And this forest... it just goes on forever."

Manas added, "And we're still just trusting a hand-drawn map made by Gaurav, based on symbols we barely understood."

There was no bitterness in his voice — just frustration. The kind that settles in after hope has quietly packed its bags.

Raghav closed his eyes.

Then opened them.

"Time to activate GDP mode."

Navya rolled her eyes. "If you say 'Golgappe, Dhokla, Pakora' again, I will leave you here—"

But he grinned, more serious this time.

“Grit. Dedication. Perseverance.

That's GDP now. And that's how we walk forward.”

And so they walked.

Not faster.

Not lighter.

But deeper — into the forest, into the unknown, into the story that waited.

Loose Threads and Fraying Maps

Location: Vansvasa Resort, Simlipal – Evening | Echo HQ, New Delhi – Simultaneous

The rain had slowed into a whisper. Outside the wooden cabin at Vansvasa, the jungle settled into its night rhythm — crickets humming, branches shifting, something larger moving through the grass at a distance. But inside the dimly lit lounge, the atmosphere was still. Too still.

A screen blinked to life on the central table.

Pulkit Roy's face appeared calm, composed, but shadowed with concern. Behind him, the glow of Echo HQ's war room pulsed faintly, threads of data dancing across transparent monitors. Just behind him, **Anusuya** stood slightly to the side, half-shadowed, arms crossed, her expression unreadable — listening, not speaking.

Parag leaned forward first. Priya stayed still, her hands locked tightly around the carved armrests of her chair.

“We ran another thermal scan of the forest range this morning,” Pulkit began, voice low but steady. “Still no active signals from any of their gadgets. No proximity alerts. But... the forest grid is behaving strangely.”

“Strangely, how?” Parag asked.

Pulkit glanced sideways at Anusuya, who gave a small, almost imperceptible nod — a silent agreement before he continued.

“Some of the anomalies resemble data packets from the Ananta_001 trail. Not the code itself — but the rhythm. Like something pulsing beneath the forest's network. Too organized for chance. Too organic for malware.”

Priya spoke now, her voice thinner than usual.

“But Ananta_001 was a cyber construct. What does it have to do with trees?”

Anusuya stepped slightly forward. Her voice, when it came, was soft — but laced with authority.

“If knowledge was once embedded in roots, in stone, in silence... why do we assume code can’t echo it? Maybe we’re not reading the wrong data. Maybe we’re reading it wrong.”

A beat.

Pulkit picked it up again.

“We’ve contacted teams in Haifa and Kyoto — people who’ve studied vibrational linguistics, deep-frequency resonance. Japan’s archive flagged a frequency match with a pre-digital glyph... And it was shaped like which we have here...”

Parag leaned back slowly. “So we’re not just chasing the kids anymore. We’re chasing something bigger.”

Pulkit nodded.

“We believe the same forces that led to Meera and Ayan’s disappearance... are now pulling the children into something deeper. Maybe they were chosen. Or maybe they simply chose to walk forward when no one else could.”

Silence fell.

Then Priya, quietly, “We’re not asking you for a miracle, Pulkit. But tell me — as a father, as someone who’s watched them grow in that school... are they safe?”

Pulkit’s eyes didn’t flinch.

“I believe they’re more than safe. I believe they’re walking into what they were born for. But yes — we will bring them home. One way or another.”

Anusuya, still quiet, added a final line — not for comfort, but truth.

“Every path has fire. But they’re not walking alone.”

Parag’s jaw clenched, but he gave a nod. “What’s next?”

Pulkit exhaled slowly.

“We’re not chasing clues anymore. We’re chasing connections. And they’re everywhere.”

The call ended. The screen dimmed. But the air remained heavy — not with fear, but with knowing.

Priya looked at Parag.

“They’re going where we can’t follow.”

Parag reached for her hand.

“But maybe... where we once belonged.”

The Break in the Trail

Location: Deep inside Simlipal Forest | Day 10

The path was gone.

What began as moss-lined trails and whispering trees had grown into thickets that seemed to **close behind them**. The air hung heavier. Even the forest songs had dulled — no birdcalls, no rustle, just the sound of **four sets of tired feet**, stepping on mud and uncertainty.

It was their tenth day in Simlipal.

And for the first time, doubt had taken root.

Manas slapped a mosquito off his neck, his face flushed. “This is ridiculous. We’ve gone in circles. Gaurav’s map doesn’t make sense anymore!”

Navya spun around. “It *did* make sense — until you decided to override it with your ‘*tech logic*.’”

“Yeah? My tech logic saved us when your ‘plant senses’ led us straight into a patch of poison ivy!” he snapped.

Navya’s eyes flashed. “That’s rich — coming from someone whose drone crashed into a tree like a lost bird.”

Raghav raised his hands between them, “Okay, GDP alarm—Guys Don’t Panic!”

But no one laughed.

Prisha, usually quiet, cut in. “We’re not getting anywhere like this. Let’s take a break.”

Manas threw his bag down. “I’m done with breaks. I say we split. You all follow your mystical forest energy — I’ll follow signals and logic.”

Navya stepped forward, fists clenched. “Fine! Maybe if you actually *listened* instead of calculating, we wouldn’t be stuck in this mess.”

“I *am* listening to reason!” Manas shouted.

Navya's voice cracked. "Then go be reasonable — *somewhere else!*"

Raghav looked between them, heart sinking. "Guys... come on... we're all we have."

"No," Prisha said softly, hurt flashing across her face. "Not right now."

There was silence. And then movement.

Manas picked up his cracked drone, slung his bag, and **walked away** — not a word, not a glance back.

"Wait!" Raghav called, then paused. "Forget it," he muttered, running after him.

Navya wiped her cheek roughly and turned the other direction, walking fast.

Prisha hesitated. Her hand rested on her satchel, the disc still warm inside. She looked once towards Manas's trail, once towards Navya's.

Then she followed Navya.

No farewells.

No plans to meet.

Just four friends — now two pairs — walking away from each other.

And the forest...

The forest did not interfere.

It simply listened.

Bhagavatam Parallel | Bharata and the Deer

Centuries ago, there lived a great king named **Bharata** — a noble soul who renounced his throne and all attachments in search of liberation. He withdrew into the forest, living in solitude, immersed in tapasya. For years, his heart remained steady.

But one day, a fawn appeared — trembling, lost, motherless. Bharata took it in. Fed it. Played with it. Watched it sleep. Slowly, the line between care and craving blurred.

He began to fear for the deer's safety more than his own soul's journey. He forgot to meditate. He stopped reciting mantras. When death finally came for him, his last thought was not of Vishnu — but of the deer. And so, in his next birth, **he was reborn as a deer**.

Not as punishment — but as a lesson. Even the wisest seekers may falter when love becomes clinging, and duty is clouded by distraction.

Yet even as a deer, Bharata remembered. And in his next human birth, he lived as a jada — silent, detached, unmoved — until he was finally free.

Modern Day Parallel

In the forest, as Manas and Raghav go one way, and Prisha and Navya another — there's more than just confusion. There's a moment of **emotional derailment**, just like Bharata's. The mission, the bond, the inner clarity — all seem to fray.

And yet, deep inside them, the pull of purpose still stirs — even if they don't see it now.

संयतात्मा विजानाति, स्त्रेहं बन्धनम् एव च।
दत्तं न हि त्यजेत प्राज्ञो, यावज्जीवम् अनुग्रहम्॥

Meaning:

“The one with a controlled mind knows — affection can become bondage. But a wise soul does not abandon what is given in care; it transforms it, carrying it as grace till the end.”

(Bhagwatam: Canto 10, Chapter 60, Shloka 45)
