



The Vulture King

by Aditya Thakur

Copyright © 2017 Aditya Thakur

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author/publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Published in August 2017 by Aditya Thakur



www.adityathakur.com

Cover art by [Antoinette Stoll](#)

Table of Contents

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[The Mighty King](#)

[The Oasis](#)

[The Hermit's Cave](#)

[The Vulture King](#)

[Castillo](#)

[The Great Snake](#)

[Bravados](#)

[The New King](#)

[Authot's Letter](#)

The Mighty King

Lost. That was the only word that came to the mind of the mighty King Suriya as he maundered through the golden desert. The hot sand gave way underneath his huge stature as he clambered to the top of a sand dune. A gust of hot air made his white turban flutter, the long black hair flowing down to his shoulders from underneath the turban. He shaded his eyes to scan the terrain. An ocean of sand, with waves of dunes, stared back at him.

A few days ago, he wasn't sure how many anymore, he was in a canyon with walls as high as watchtowers. His enemies, and his men, lay dead in the sand; a score of men and then more, ripped apart by cold steel swords, limbs lying about them, blood seeping out of the gaping wounds. He was the only man left alive and unwounded, and that gave him hope as he searched for the way out of the canyon.

He began strong but the desert drew out all the hope from within him in a few days and now he was sure that he was utterly lost.

He had to go east to get back to his kingdom, Brava, but with the sun right above his head, he had no bearing. The sun bounced off the shiny sand and glared into his eyes until he was defeated into lowering his gaze. He thrust his broadsword in the sand and knelt to rest a while but the blistering sand burned his knees through his white cotton salwars and he got up reluctantly, using the sword for support.

What a fate! he thought, *To come so far to defeat your enemies, only to get lost in the desert and die a lonely, prolonged death!*

"That is awful luck, dreadful, even rotten!" a sharp voice behind him said.

The King spun around and there stood the biggest, ugliest vulture he had ever seen. It had a bald red head and a black beak that curved sharply at the end. Its huge body was covered in black feathers and as it stood, with its long neck tucked in, it still was as tall as a man. It had white feathers on its strong legs that ended in sharp black talons. Even from a distance, the vulture reeked of blood and death. The King was so stunned to see such a gigantic, nasty bird up close that for a moment he forgot that it had spoken.

"But only if you believe in luck," the vulture continued as if the extended pause between its sentences did not exist. Its voice felt like someone using nails to scratch the words into his brain.

The brave King took a step back, the vulture's voice gnawing under his skull, his hand ready at the hilt of his sword.

Am I hallucinating? he thought, *Or is this some kind of black magic?*

"Oh, I'm absolutely real," the vulture said, "As real as you, and the sand, and the sun. Don't worry, oh mighty King, I'm neither a figment of your imagination nor a projection conjured up by a toothless, wrinkled witch."

"Then who are you?" His voice was still strong and commanding as ever, despite the weakness and despair within.

"I am the King of vultures."

"And how is it that you can speak?"

"The same way you can; I learned," the vulture said and raised its bent neck proudly, adding another foot to its height. "A hermit used to live in the caves not far from here. I found him interesting and watched him everyday. One day he spoke to me, out of loneliness I assume. Everyday he would speak to me and listening to him, I learned to speak your tongue."

“Where is this hermit? Can you take me to him?”

“He's dead. I ate him.”

“You killed the man who taught you to speak?”

“I did not kill him. Vultures don't like to kill the living. He died of old age. I just ate his dead body.”

“That's not an honorable thing to do to your teacher.”

“Why not?”

The king couldn't think of a good answer. He considered the vulture closely, trying to size him up. He could do that with men in a single look but it wasn't working with the vulture. He couldn't be sure whether it could be trusted.

“Death,” the vulture continued with its own thought, “Is the end of the journey. At least of this one. Who knows what happens after death? But one thing is for sure; you don't need your body once you are dead. So if your body can feed a hungry beast, what's wrong with that? I'm sure the hermit would have been perfectly fine with me feasting on his body. He understood life better than most men.”

“I guess you are right.”

“You guess? Aren't you sure about life and death?”

Thinking about death is weakness, the King thought.

“Well, you should have thought about it. It would have been better to be prepared. Especially, since you are so close to death right now.”

No one had ever dared to threaten the mighty King. He had maintained a strong countenance, not even showing signs of pain or discomfort. Now, this vulture was telling him that he was about to die. It stoked the fire within him. He drew his sword and swung at the vulture. The vulture flapped its massive black wings and hopped to one side with ease.

“And who is going to kill me?” the King snapped, “You?”

“No. I'm not going to kill you. I could if I wanted to, but I don't want to.”

The King, filled with rage and pride, jumped on the vulture with all the explosive speed he had in him but the vulture was too quick and took off into the air.

“You coward! Come down and fight like a man!”

“I'm not a man,” the vulture said, rising higher in the air, “I'm a vulture. This is how vultures fight.”

The King couldn't stare at the bright sky for long. He lowered his eyes but could still hear the vulture. The higher it went, the sharper its voice got.

“I'll just circle above you and wait for you to die. Then I'll eat you.”

The King could hear it no more. He looked up and saw a black dot in the sky. He dropped his sword and fell to his knees.

I can't defeat an enemy that refuses to engage. How weak have I become? It's a good thing that I'll die out here. I don't want anyone to see me like this. No one can defeat the desert. No one can cheat death.

“Sometimes you can,” the vulture said, landing softly on a dune nearby, “But only for a little while.”

“You came back.”

“Of course. But if you'll attack me again, I'll fly away and will only come back after you are dead.”

“Why did you come back?”

“To help you.”

“Why?”

“Consider it a royal gift to one brave king from another.”

“How do you know I'm a brave king?”

“I was there when you fought those men. I saw everything. You only had four men with you against more than a dozen, but you still won. You were the only man left standing. I knew then that you were a king among men. And a mighty one at that.

“When you walked away, we had a feast. As the king, I always take the first bite but after that I left the wake to follow you. At first, all I wanted to do was to wait for you to die so I could feast on your royal flesh. But you have surprised me by staying alive for three days.

“You have a strong will to live and you've put up a good fight against the desert. But you are truly lost. You are headed in the wrong direction, back into the heart of the desert, while your kingdom is not too far from here. At a man's pace it wouldn't take more than two days to get there.”

“Can you show me the way?”

“Of course. I can take you all the way.”

“But you must want something in return.”

“You are as smart as you are brave, king.”

“If you can get me back to my kingdom, I can give you everything you could ever want.”

“Like what?”

“Like thousands of precious stones and tons of gold and silver.”

“They are only precious to you, King. For us they are merely stones.”

“I can give you land and servants and animals.”

“I already have more land than your entire kingdom. This whole desert is my kingdom.”

“I can give you fresh carrion everyday; a horse sacrificed to you everyday.”

“That is tempting, but I don't eat more than I need. The desert provides for me and the rest of my race.”

“Then what do you want? It seems like you don't need anything.”

“That's right. I already have everything I need; strong wings, sharp beak and talons, and great vision.”

“Then what can I give you, oh mighty Vulture King, that you will help me?”

“I did say I wanted to taste the flesh of a king,” the vulture said, its voice growing sharper than ever with voracity. “Why don't you cut a little piece off your leg and let me eat it?”

The King jerked his head back. He had been suspicious but had not anticipated such a foul request. The vulture was exactly like it looked: cunning and evil. It had him cornered. If he didn't accede, the vulture wouldn't help him and he would die within a few days. Then the vulture would eat him anyways. Having wandered in the aimless desert for so long, he knew he wouldn't get out without the vulture's help.

So, without saying a word, the King hacked a piece out of his left leg with his sword. A large

chunk of flesh, covered in a piece of his white salwars, fell to the ground and blood gushed out of the wound. The strong King bit his lip, picked up the piece of flesh and offered it to the Vulture King with both hands.

“Please accept this gift, oh Vulture King.”

The vulture raised its neck and spread its wings so wide that a horse could have rested in its shade. Its white eyes gleamed and it hopped gleefully towards the king. It stretched its neck and snatched the piece of flesh from the King's hands.

The vulture dug into the royal flesh in ecstasy. The King dropped on to his side and used his blue silk cummerbund to tie up his wound. Now that the vulture was busy feasting on the flesh, the King allowed himself a grimace and tended to his self-inflicted wound.

There on the sand dune, the two kings were; one, king of men, moaning in agony, the other, king of vultures, moaning in delight, as the sand below them turned red.

The Oasis

“Thank you for your generosity,” the vulture said. “Just as I had expected, your flesh was more delicious than any flesh I've ever feasted upon. You are truly a great and noble king. Now, as promised, I will help you get back to your kingdom where you can rule for many years to come. And I hope that during those years, you'll find your way to the desert sometimes, to extend our friendship.”

The King struggled up silently, using his sword for support. The vulture took off with a screech and landed on a dune a little way ahead.

“This way, brave King.”

The King hobbled after the vulture as it flew from one dune to the next. It was easy for the vulture but the King found it hard going with his injured leg. He had lost a lot of blood. His head felt light and his body empty. The sun glared down on him and the sand glared up into his eyes. His right leg grew tired of bearing all his weight. He had never felt so weak and helpless. But he knew that if he survived this ordeal, he would regain his strength and he would be a better man for it.

The vulture led patiently and grew more talkative as the sun receded.

“Who were those men you slew?”

“Bandits. They had been robbing the merchants on the outskirts of Brava. We ran them out of the kingdom. My General thought that was enough. When I insisted on hunting them down, he wanted to go after them but I wanted to do it myself, so I gave chase with a small group of soldiers. It was important to kill them.”

“Why?”

“If I had let them live, they would have eventually returned. Time washes away fear. And even if they had stopped, someone else would have started. I wanted to kill them myself. I wanted to set an example that no one would forget as long as I was alive.”

“But you might not be alive very long. Even with my help, you might die before we reach Brava. By going after them, you put your own life in danger. You lost all your men. What's the point of setting an example if you are no longer alive to reap its benefits?”

“Yes. In hindsight it seems like a foolish decision but at the moment it seemed the right thing to do.”

“If given another chance, would you do things differently?”

“Maybe. I'm not sure anymore. I feel weak.”

“It's all the blood you've lost. Isn't it fascinating? You can have all the muscles of a bull but if you drain the blood out, the muscles are useless.”

The King remained silent. The vulture continued its morbid thoughts.

“You see, it's the blood that has the real strength, not the muscles. That's why vultures treasure blood more than anything. And of course, the marrow in the bones which makes the blood.”

“Could you not talk about blood and bones?”

“Are you scared, King?”

“I'm nauseated.”

The vulture stopped asking questions and continued to hop from one dune to the next. The King limped on behind it in a daze.

They came to an oasis after what seemed like a long time, but the sun wasn't much lower than before. The King had been walking with his head down and his eyes all but closed. Every time he looked up there was nothing but sand all around. Then suddenly, there was a crop of thorny shrubs and a palm tree on the edge of a little shining pond of water. The vulture hopped on to the top of the tree.

The King gathered all his strength and scuttled to the water. He dropped to the ground at the edge of the pond and dipped his head in the muddy water. It wasn't clean but it was cool. The tattered shade of the sparse tree reduced the heat by a little but significant amount. The King raised his head and felt the cool drops run down his back. He scooped water in his hands and drank till his stomach was bloated like a waterskin. The water soothed his cracked lips, soaked his parched mouth and tasted like morning dew. Then he removed his turban and washed his head, tying the wet turban back to keep his head cool.

The vulture hopped down and took a drink as well.

"I was hoping you would recover some of your lost strength here. You need water to make blood."

"Thank you," the King said.

He leaned back against the tree with his closed to rest for a while, but almost immediately, opened his eyes, as if he had remembered something important, and sat up.

"It's a little paradise here in the desert but we must move on."

"Wouldn't you like to stay here for a while? Maybe sleep away the hottest hours of the day? We can travel in the evening," the vulture said.

"No. We must move on. We must keep moving if we are to reach our destination in time."

"Think it over, King. Don't make anymore hasty decisions. Maybe it would be better to gather your strength before moving on."

"All the strength that this water could provide, it has already given. I cannot survive long in this desert and so the best choice is to keep moving."

"Alright," the vulture said, "It's your choice. But I must tell you that water doesn't have the same effect on vultures as on humans. I am also tired and not much refreshed from the drink. I need a different kind of drink to be truly refreshed."

"What drink?" the King asked, dreading the answer he knew was coming.

"Blood," the vulture said.

The King did not reply.

"I need to drink some of your blood," the vulture clarified. "Cut open your wrist and let me drink from it a while."

The King struggled up and limped backwards, away from the shade and the vulture.

"No," he said.

"Don't be afraid, King. I just need a little bit of blood. I've promised to take you to your kingdom and I will."

"What kind of games are you playing, Vulture King? You want to kill me. But you won't do it quickly!"

"I don't want to kill you, oh mighty King. You are brave and strong and a man of honor. I'm only trying to help you. It's just that you want to move on and I'm not refreshed. If you don't want to give me your blood, then we must rest here for a few hours till I feel refreshed. It's your choice."

The King struggled with indecision. Usually, he was quick to make judgments but now he couldn't think straight. Doubt and confusion clouded his brain and he could not ascertain whether the vulture was telling the truth or just tricking him. He had no idea about the moral code of vultures but it was hard to think of such a nasty beast as having strong ethical standards.

"Don't forget," the vulture said, "I'm not just a vulture but also a king. And as a king, I have higher standards than most vultures. I would never lie to anyone, especially a fellow king."

The King was fed up of his confusion so he raised his sword and slashed his wrist with a frustrated grunt. Dark, velvety blood sprang out of his wrist in short bursts, in time with his heart. The vulture leaped forward, squawking in a horrible voice. It spread its wings, stretched its long neck and thrust its beak towards the blood stream. The vulture drank the blood in gulps, not letting even a single drop fall to the ground.

"That's enough, oh generous King," the vulture said after a few beak-fulls of blood. "My thirst has evaporated and I'm full of energy. I feel like a new bird. Your blood is most definitely royal!"

The King took off his turban and wrapped it tightly around his left wrist and hand. The blood soaked the entire cloth before the bleeding stopped. The King slumped back in the shade of the palm tree.

"Come on, come on!" the vulture said, "We have no time to waste. Your kingdom is very near."

The King cursed under his breath and crawled forward to have another drink from the muddy pool, hoping to drink enough water for his body to turn into all the blood that he had lost. He knew that if he was to survive this ordeal, he would need to regain all his strength and use all his cunning. But despite the drink, he felt weaker than before.

The Hermit's Cave

The two Kings, man and vulture, continued their journey through the golden desert. With the King's left side rendered useless, the going was slow and the vulture started to ask questions again. The King never answered but the vulture didn't take this as a sign to stop.

“What do you think happens after death, King? Is there another world after this one? If I'm a vulture in this world, will I still be a vulture in the afterworld?”

“Of course, I wouldn't want to be anything other than a vulture. Vultures have a close relation with death. Maybe, scavengers hold high status in the afterworld. In a way we are the gatekeepers of the afterworld, aren't we?”

“Do you think we remember our past life after death, King? I hope so. I wouldn't want to lose the lessons I've learned in this life after I die.”

Eventually the sun grew merciful and decided to recede behind the horizon. The air was happy to cool down but the sand remained stubbornly hot. Night approached fast and the vulture led the King to a shallow cave among some rocks that jutted out of the sand.

“This is where the hermit used to live,” the vulture said. “It will get cold in the night so you better light a fire. I'll be right back.”

The vulture took off into the darkening sky. The King hobbled around the rocks and gathered twigs and dried branches of thorny shrubs that were abundant in the area around the cave. He relished the opportunity to think without the vulture reading his thoughts.

I'm sure the vulture is only playing games with me. It's toying with me. It wants to make me last as long as possible. It's slowly eating me alive and I don't feel strong enough to defeat it! Every time I think of killing it, the cunning vulture reads my thoughts and flies away before I can make even the slightest movement. I'll just have to be patient and seize the first opportunity I get to kill that nasty bird.

The King rubbed his sword against a stone to draw sparks and soon got a fire going. The vulture returned with a dead snake in its claws. The King's stomach rumbled when he saw the snake.

“I know what you are thinking,” the vulture said, “But I caught this snake for myself.”

“I didn't know vultures could hunt?” the King changed the subject.

“Most vultures can't. But I am the Vulture King. I can do many things other vultures can't.”

“I'm sure you can.”

“Anyways, coming back to the question at hand, you are hungry and weak and can sure use a meal. If I had found another snake, I would have caught it for you but I could only find one. And now it's too dark to hunt.”

“I don't want your snake. Have at it.”

“Are you sure King? You sure could use a plump snake like this one. Maybe I can exchange it with you.”

The King did not like where the conversation was headed. It made him angry.

“Exchange with what?” he said with clenched teeth.

“Your hand, of course. Now don't get angry. I've had a good taste of royal flesh and I've had a mouthful of royal blood and my curiosity is satiated. My hunger though remains, but I can easily dine on this snake if you don't want to cut off your hand. But if you'll take off the cloth on your

hand, you'll see that it is already dead. I can smell it. You cut your wrist too deep. That hand is lost. In fact, if you don't cut it off right now, you might lose your entire arm."

"Don't try to fool me with your words vulture. I've seen how clever you are with your words. But I won't have it anymore!" the King growled.

"I'm not trying to fool you, mighty King. If you don't believe me, just remove the cloth and see for yourself. You've already lost the hand and you have to cut it off to save your arm. Why wait till morning? Do it right now and exchange it with this snake and feed yourself. You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

The King knew the vulture was playing games with him but it was also making a lot of sense. He unwrapped the improvised dressing and just as the vulture had foreboded, the hand was all rotted out. The skin had turned black and was beginning to fall off. The rancid smell left a sour taste in his mouth that made him retch. The King had never seen human flesh rot so fast. He was certain that the vulture was using black magic.

Maybe the vulture isn't a vulture at all but a sorcerer. Maybe I'm already dead and gone to hell, dealing with the devil!

If the vulture read his thoughts, it did not care to comment. It just stared at the King with his beady eyes. The King had no doubt that he needed to cut off his hand to save the arm. Not one to hesitate on such decisions, he flashed his sword and cut off the hand with one swift strike.

The vulture flapped its wings, squawked loudly and backed off on seeing the speed with which the King yielded the sword. But when it saw the hand fall to the ground and blood oozing out of the wrist, it rushed forward, wings spread out to the sides. It pecked at the hand and carried it off into the distance, swaying on its legs from side to side, like a fat man who can no longer bend his arthritic knees.

The King tied the turban back on his stump.

"You might want to burn that thing in the fire before you tie that cloth," the vulture said, as it tore the rotting flesh off the hand.

"What?" the King sneered.

"Your rotten hand is gone but if you tie that cloth to your arm, it will rot again. You need to burn it in the fire to close the wound."

"Enough with your rotten games, vulture!"

"Fine by me. I'll have a hearty breakfast tomorrow morning!"

The King spewed such curses at the vulture that would have made even the whores of Brava blush. Then he unwrapped his arm and thrust the stump into the fire with an agonized growl, which quickly morphed into a scream. Nevertheless, he held his arm in the fire long enough to cauterize the wound. Then he wrapped the turban around his arm and lay on his back, breathing heavy. After a while, he put the snake on a stick and placed it over the fire to cook.

"Do you notice something, King?" the vulture said, ripping a finger off the hand and swallowing it whole, "The burning snake smells exactly the same as your arm did."

The King grimaced but didn't say anything. The vulture was right. Maybe all flesh smelled the same, tasted the same.

"It's an interesting thought, don't you think?"

The vulture talked in between beak-fulls of the King's flesh.

"I don't get why humans cook their meat before eating. It tastes much better raw, especially if it's beginning to rot! You drain away all the energy by cooking it. You are feeding the fire, not

yourself.”

The King remained silent and turned the snake on the stick. Despite everything, it was only hunger that was on his mind now. The hot snake flesh burned his tongue but it still tasted better than the most sumptuous meal he had ever had in his life. He felt the warmth going down into his stomach and energizing his body. The warmth of the fire was reassuring in the desert air, which had turned cold in the night.

Once he had eaten, the King asked the vulture, “How long before we get to Brava tomorrow?”

“Not much long at all. Depending on how fast you can walk. I'd say we'd be there by evening. Early afternoon even. Enough time for me to fly back.”

The King slept fitfully through the night. Whenever he opened his eyes, he saw the vulture staring at him with unwavering white eyes and its head tilted to one side. It seemed that the vulture was waiting for him to die.

The Vulture King

In the morning, the King woke up with a severe headache. He could barely open his eyes. He remembered chastising the queen for complaining about headaches.

“Women are so weak that they can't even bear a simple headache,” he had said.

Now he realized how paralyzing a headache could really be. But there was no time to lose so he sat up and forced his eyes open. The bright light bouncing off the sand outside the mouth of the cave stung needles into his eyes but he kept them open till tears ran down his cheeks. He had never cried in his life before. It was a shock to him. He couldn't believe how weak he had become and felt angry at himself.

In his rage, he dug out his left eye with the point of his sword. The soft round ball fell towards the ground but the vulture sitting nearby was too quick to let it fall to the ground. It caught the eyeball in mid air and swallowed it whole.

“Thank you for the breakfast, King. How did you know I was going to ask for it?”

The King dropped his sword and held the bleeding eye socket with his hand. “I didn't,” he cursed.

“Then why did you gorge out your eye?”

“It betrayed me.”

“How?”

“By shedding tears. I don't cry. I've never cried in my life.”

“You weren't crying King. It was just the sun. You've got to stop being so hard on yourself.”

“Weakness is as good as death.”

“And death is everyone's fate.”

The King did not reply. He just sat there on the ground, holding his hand over his empty eye socket, feeling foolish for what he had done in rage. A throbbing pain entered his brain through the empty socket, as if someone was stabbing him repeatedly with a knife. He tore off a piece from his salwars and dressed his wound.

“Come on King, let's get you back to your kingdom.”

The vulture egged the King on. By mid morning, the king was in a daze, following the vulture without much thought. In fact, he had completely stopped thinking. For the first time in his life, there was not a single thought in his head. His focus remained unwavering on the next step. Always the next step. One step at a time. No thought, just the next step. And then, the next step, and the next, and the next.

He did not worry about the vulture playing games with him. He did not curse himself for chasing those men into the desert. He did not wonder how long before he died. He did not complain about the heat. He just suffered the sun blistering his back and the hot sand burning his soles. His eye-less head and his hand-less arm and his thigh-less leg, all throbbed as if someone was beating a great drum made out of his skin. But he did not judge these stimuli as bad. He simply observed them and kept his focus on the next step. He took a step, felt the pain, breathed deep and repeated. The pommel of the sword burned his hand and his remaining eye shed a tear now and then, but he didn't think about these things.

Every piece of information; the pain, the heat, the sun, the sand, the vulture; everything was just there. It all existed in the moment and so did the King. There was no past and no future, only the present moment. And without a past and future, the King had no opinions about weakness and

strength and justice and cheating and cowardice and royalty. These concepts simply didn't exist. There was just life and death. He was alive in this moment. When there would be death, he would simply be dead in that moment and for all the moments beyond that. This was just the truth. It did not make him sad because he made no judgments. He was simply, walking in the desert.

The vulture did not speak to the King because it couldn't read his thoughts anymore. Since there were no thoughts, the vulture too remained in the moment; its natural state.

The two Kings moved on in silence. The vulture would fly ahead and then wait for the limping King. The desert was changing. The rolling sand dunes had given way to a dry, hard surface, baked hard by the sun. Sharp stones and shallow cracks punctuated the smooth surface. Here and there, a few cacti appeared. They were nearing the edge of the desert but the King did not think about it.

The vulture hopped on to a cactus and waited for the King to catch up. The King limped forward, towards the vulture. He got close to the vulture and suddenly, instinctively, jumped on it, finding a reserve of strength from deep within. The vulture was looking away and did not see the King jump. The King fell on the cactus and grabbed on to the vulture's neck with his hand. Hundreds of needles pierced his entire body but he did not let go.

"Hey! What are you doing?" the vulture spoke in panicked bursts, flapping hard as it tried to free itself from the King's hold. "Let go! What are you doing, oh mighty King?"

"Mighty!" the King roared, coming out of his thoughtless reverie, "You dare mock me? You turn me into a cripple, and call me mighty?"

The King stood up and stepped back from the crushed cactus, holding on to the vulture's neck while it desperately flapped its wings.

"Real strength lies within, King."

"Shut up! Foul creature! Do not confuse me with your words anymore. I've had enough of you and your words."

"Please King, this is dishonorable. Don't do it."

"Dishonorable? You are calling me dishonorable? You are the dishonorable one. You've turned me into a cripple, amusing yourself as you take me around in circles in this godforsaken desert."

"I'm not taking you around in circles, King. You are very close to your kingdom now. Let me go, and I'll show you."

"I'm not listening to you anymore. I don't care what happens to me now. I'm worse than dead already! But I'll kill you before I die, you evil creature from hell!"

The King squeezed the vulture's neck harder. The vulture flapped its wings and pierced its talons into the King's belly but the King did not release the pressure. He used all his strength to choke the vulture.

The vulture shrieked fiercely as the last breath left its lungs. Its body went limp and the wings drooped but the King did not let go for fear of it being another trick. He squeezed till his face turned red. He let go only when he felt the vulture's neck crush inside his grip.

He dropped the dead vulture and fell to his knees besides it. The vulture lay unmoving in a black mound, the neck broken and bent backwards, a sharp tongue sticking out of its crooked beak, the white eyes still opened wide.

The thoughts came back inside his head. He had done it. He had outwitted his opponent. He had won. But he didn't feel the same rush he used to feel when he killed his enemies before.

The battle wasn't over yet. His older wounds only hurt like hell but his new wounds both

hurt and leaked precious blood. He needed to make it back to his kingdom soon. He couldn't survive another night in the desert.

For the first time, he became aware of his surroundings. The desert had changed and felt familiar.

Was the vulture telling the truth? Did it really bring me close to my kingdom?

The wind was cooler than before and had picked up speed. The King got up and looked around in every direction to get a bearing. The wind grew stronger and blew sand into his eye so he had to squint. He saw what looked like mountains in the direction from where the wind was blowing in. He didn't remember there being any mountains near Brava. All hope left him when he realized that those were not mountains. The wind was bringing in a tsunami of sand with it.

He turned about and tried to trot away as fast as he could but the storm was upon him in a heartbeat. He tried to keep moving but he couldn't keep his good eye open. He could feel the cold sand swirling all around him. It blew up into his wounds and settled among the wrinkles of his bandages. The wind pushed and pulled him as if he was in the midst of a great, angry mob.

Defeated, he fell to the ground and curled up into a ball. He covered his head with his arms and waited for the storm to pass. The temperature had dropped considerably and he was shivering. He felt weak and tired. The whooshing sound of the sand blowing above him lulled him into a peaceful sleep.

Castillo

Castillo was a small town on the edge where the kingdom of Brava met the golden desert. The people of Castillo were used to sandstorms but the storm that came out of nowhere was the worst in the shared memory of the town. It blew away merchant stalls and uprooted date trees. It blew sand into every crevice of the buildings, painting them a dull brown.

The guards went out into the desert to look for any merchants that might have been returning from Turkstan and had been caught unawares by the sudden storm. Instead, they found the mighty King Suriya, curled up like a baby, bleeding into the sand.

When the King woke up, he found himself in a large, comfortable bed in a small but opulent room. He tried to sit up but felt weak. A man rushed in on hearing him groan.

“Don't move my King. Stay still,” the man said.

He wore a blue turban and a long bluish gray coat decorated with embroidered golden flowers. His kind green eyes were of the same color as the emerald on his golden ring.

“You are badly injured and weak, my King. Take rest and gather your strength. You are going to need it.”

“Where am I?” The King's voice was feeble and small.

“You are in Castillo, my King. I'm Ahmur Shah, a small trader. I hope my modest accommodations have not offended you, my King. They aren't fit for a King but we haven't got any better place in this town.”

“How did I get here?”

“You were spied lying unconscious in the desert, my King.”

“There was a storm...”

“Yes, my King. The sandstorm came out of nowhere.”

“The vulture wasn't lying,” the King mumbled.

“You are very brave, my King,” Ahmur Shah said, ignoring the mumblings, “Everybody thought you were dead but you've made it back!”

“Dead? How long has it been?”

“You chased those bandits out of the kingdom a month ago, my King.”

“A month? How long have I been unconscious?”

“A week. The local healer washed and bandaged your wounds. He gave you poppy-milk to help you sleep. You'll recover completely very soon.”

“Recover completely?” the King's voice held anger but it was soon replaced with defeat, “I'll never be complete again.”

“Don't say that, my King. For us, you'll always be the mighty King who maintained peace in the kingdom and killed any robbers who tried to steal from us traders.”

“I'm not mighty anymore. Look at me!”

“Your strength comes from within.”

“I'm not a mighty anymore,” the King shook his head, “I'm not even fit to be a King.”

Ahmur Shah lowered his eyes but failed to hide the shame and guilt on his face.

“What is it?” the King asked.

"You are not the King anymore. Your Chief Minister, Lord Tuglak is the new King. He married Queen Rania," Ahmur Shah said it as if he was to blame for all of it. "But for me and my people, you will always be the true king."

"What are you talking about? How can Mehmood Tuglak be king? He's a weakling, just a lowly politician."

"You are right, my King, he is a politician. He's clever. When you did not return for a week, he sent search parties to look for you. They came back with your shield and crown and reported that everyone died in that battle, including you. The Queen even carried out a funeral for you. Only a few days later she announced that she was marrying Chief Minister Tuglak. He became the new king."

"That is ridiculous! He isn't even of royal blood!"

"The people tried to stop him but those who raised their voice were punished severely by the new King. He has the support of most of the ministers in court. We still haven't accepted him as our king. And now you have returned! Surely, if you go back, you will have the support of all your people and you will become the king again."

The King struggled with the doubt that had found a home in his mind.

"I'm not fit to be a King," he said.

Ahmur Shah saw defeat in the King's face and felt pity for him. He let the King be.

Over the next few weeks, the King recovered enough to walk but he never went out of his room. Every day he sat near the window in the morning and looked out towards the desert beyond the brown wall of the city until nightfall.

One day, Ahmur Shah told him that he had a visitor. A tall muscular man with broad shoulders walked in. He wore a black robe that covered his entire body and a black turban on his head with the tail covering his face.

"General Zander!" The King recognized him despite the disguise.

The General removed the cloth hiding his face and revealed a curt smile.

"You recognized me, my King."

"Tall men have the disadvantage of not having a good disguise."

"But the advantage of strength!"

The King got up from his seat near the window and limped towards the General.

"How are you old friend!" he said with a smile and grabbed his shoulder.

"Much better, now that I have confirmed the rumor that you were still alive, my King."

"I'm not your King anymore."

"But you are! That sly dog of a minister is no king of mine!"

"Yet he sits on the throne, and I sit in this chair and contemplate my destiny."

"He won't sit on that throne for long, now that you are back."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"There is still hope. Come with me to the capital. Challenge his claim to the throne."

"You know the court will never support my claim. They never had any love for me. They'll support one of their own. And the Queen... She never had any love for me either."

"You don't need the court. Challenge him to a judgment by combat. Let the Gods decide

who deserves the throne."

"I'm a cripple! I can't defeat anyone in battle."

"He's no warrior, my King. He's got no experience at all. You just have to win this one battle. After that you'll sit on the throne and let me fight your battles for you, like you should have done all the while."

"I'm cursed General. I was lost in the desert and the King of the vultures helped me find my way back. In return, it asked for parts of my body to eat. I thought the vulture was playing games with me but now I know it was just its nature. I killed the vulture General. I killed my savior! And for that I'm cursed. I can't be king anymore."

The General stood silent and turned his head away from the tear that rolled down from the King's remaining eye.

"What will you do?" The General asked.

The King turned away from the General and walked up to the window. He stared at the desert beyond the wall.

"I have to go back," he said.

"Back?" The General was confused at first but then saw what the King was looking at. "You barely made it out the first time!" the General said walking towards the King.

"Maybe I shouldn't have," the King said softly, turning away from the window with his head lowered.

The General saw a defeated man in front of him.

"You don't have to claim the throne. You can live a comfortable life here. I'll see to it that you are safe and comfortable. You don't have to do this."

"I must do this."

"You've become weak but you are as stubborn as ever!"

The King laughed and limped to the bed. He picked up his trusty sword from the table next to the bed and walked towards the General.

"This is for you," the King said. "It's a mighty sword that must be yielded by a mighty man. I can't think of anymore more worthy of it than you."

"My King..." the General began but the King interrupted him.

"Don't say anything anymore. I must do this. Take this sword and do what's best for Brava."

The General reluctantly took the sword from the King's hand. He held it in both hands and felt the impressive weight.

He bowed to the King and said, "May you find peace, my friend."

The Great Snake

Ahmur Shah stood at the westward gate of Castillo and watched the King walk back into the desert. He had pleaded and protested but the King did not change his mind. The King was walking towards a certain death with head held high. Even though he didn't believe it himself, the King was still the bravest man Ahmur Shah had ever known.

The King walked in what he thought was a straight line, but as he knew, it was hard to keep true in the desert. The heat of the sun, the glare of the sand, the dry slap of the hot wind, it all came back to him. He missed the companionship of the Vulture King. He looked up at the sky and smiled. There in the blinding sunlight, he could see black dots; vultures circling overhead, waiting for him to die so they could have their feast.

At least at first, that was the King's plan; he wanted to sacrifice himself to the vultures; a king for a king. But as he went deeper, and the desert began chipping at his life-force, the old fighting spirit returned.

He came across a dotted field of cactuses and recognized the one he had jumped on to capture the Vulture King. It lay dead on the ground, broken near the base, turning brown, but a new shoot was growing out of the stump left in the ground. There was no sign of the Vulture King's body. It had been scavenged down to the bone.

He found hope of being on the right track, even though he couldn't differentiate one direction from the other. He wasn't paying attention towards this part of the journey when he was with the Vulture King. All he could do now, was pick a direction and hope that it took him to the Hermit's cave. He knew he could find food, shelter and kindling there. And the oasis was only a day's walk from the cave.

He had no idea why he was trying to survive when he had come back to sacrifice himself, but something deep within him wanted to keep on living.

He struggled on through the desert, unable to raise his head long enough to get a bearing, but since he didn't know which way to go anyway, he didn't mind it. He just kept his head down and kept walking.

The sun retreated towards the horizon and gave some respite, and a bearing to follow, to the King. He walked towards the setting sun, still bright enough to persuade the King to keep his eye lowered. The dying light of the sun brought hope for the King as he spied the little rocky mount of the Hermit's cave in the distance.

Exhausted and weak, the King slowly limped towards the cave, collecting whatever dead wood he could find to light a fire. Before entering the cave, he looked up in the sky and clearly saw the flock of vultures still circling overhead.

I wonder if their new king will come down to watch me, he thought. Maybe I could teach it to talk.

He lit a fire as the cold night swept in and fell asleep, tired and hungry.

He dreamt of a giant snake, its black scaly body curled up underneath it like a throne on top of which its mighty head sat patiently. The snake's green eyes stared unflinching at the King and its forked tongue stuck out, tasting his scent.

When he woke up the next day, he remembered the dream vividly and wondered what it meant.

I'm just hungry, he thought. What I wouldn't give for a snake right now!

He went out at first light, in what he thought was the direction of the oasis, hoping to find

water or at least something to eat, but soon the sun came up strong and he decided to return to the soothing shade of the cave.

When he got to the cave, for as long as he could, he sat in the rising heat of the day outside the cave and waited for the vultures but the sky had no black dots that day.

He went back into the cave and realized the futility of his hope that he would meet the new Vulture King and teach it to talk, and repent for his sin that way. There was only one way to repent for his sin and that was by sacrificing himself.

He slept fitfully during the day and saw the same snake in his dreams. In the evening, he lit a fire and sat thoughtlessly in the cave. The more the light outside faded, the stronger the light of the fire got in the cave. When it was dark outside, the fire became hypnotizing. The red and yellow flames danced untiringly, drowning his body in a warm glow, creating an eerie world of orange and black.

"Death waits for all of us," a sharp voice said.

The King recognized the voice even before he looked up and saw the Vulture King sitting beyond the fire, at the mouth of the cave.

"We don't have to wait for it," the vulture finished its thought.

"You're alive!" the King said.

"No. I'm dead. You killed me."

"I apologize, but I thought..."

"You thought I was cheating you, leading you deeper into the desert. So you did what anyone would do. An apology is not required. Every living being does whatever it can to survive."

"You are not angry?"

"Angry? Why would I be angry? If you try to catch a snake and it bites you, would you be angry?"

"You were much wiser than me. I failed to see that."

"The Hermit was wise and he taught me."

The King smiled longingly at his strange friend. The vulture sat unmoving, unfazed by silences of any length.

"How are you here? In the world of the living?"

"I'm not. You are in the world of the dying. I've come to help you."

"This isn't the real world?"

"This is a strange place. It's the desert between the two kingdoms of the living and the dead. Why did you come here willingly?"

"I wanted to sacrifice myself. To repent for my sin. For killing you when you were trying to help me."

"Self preservation is not a sin. You should go back to the living world."

"There's nothing for me in that world. I'm a weak cripple. Not fit to be king. Not even fit to live."

"Every creature that's alive is fit to live."

"Even a cripple like me?"

"There was a vulture once, long before my time, who tore his wing during a fight with

another vulture. He could not fly anymore. So he walked along the desert floor for days till he came upon a little pond. He lived there for the rest of his life, eating nothing but insects at first. Later his legs became strong and he could hop on to lizards and snakes from a great distance."

The King stared at the fire silently.

"I called you mighty once," the Vulture King said, "But I was wrong. You had always been strong. But one can't be called truly mighty unless one has been weak and overcome it."

"You are right," the King said, "I am not mighty. I never was."

"You are at your weakest now. The question is, can you overcome it?"

"I don't know how."

"I can tell you. Will you trust me now?"

"I will. Tell me how I can be whole again?"

"You need to seek the giant black snake, the one that has been visiting you in your dreams. Follow the crescent moon. When you find the snake, you have to let it eat you."

The King looked at the Vulture King and wondered once again about whether or not to trust it.

"I'll do it," the King said, brushing aside all doubts. Even if the Vulture King was just trying to fool him into getting his revenge, it was what he had to do.

"Go now into the night and follow the crescent moon," the Vulture King said and then took off, merging with the blackness of the night.

The King stepped out of the cave and looked at the sky but he couldn't see the Vulture King anywhere. He did see the crescent moon in the distance and began walking in that direction.

As the King walked, doubts attacked his mind. The life spirit that never quits, wanted him to stay back but he knew that whether he lives or dies, it was the right thing to do.

To keep himself from turning back, he tried to calm his mind. He focused on each step and each breath. The night was cold but the sand was still warm. The stars shone brightly in the sky and the moon had a bright glow. He couldn't see them but he heard snakes and rats and scorpions scurrying across the sand from time to time. Soon, he became completely thoughtless.

The rough sun baked desert floor turned into soft sand and the horizon was full of crests and troughs of sand shimmering in the moonlight.

The moon began dropping towards the dunes and he followed it. He was about to climb yet another dune but when he stepped on it, it moved.

The King looked up and saw that it wasn't a dune but the giant black snake from his dreams. The snake's head was as big as a hut. Its eyes were as big as a chariot's wheels, the green irises slit by the black swords of the pupils.

The snake slowly raised its head and flicked its tongue. The King felt enraptured by its eyes as it slowly began slithering around him.

The King was frozen, still thoughtlessly observing the moment. The snake's black scales shone in the faint moonlight as it uncurled its body and began spiraling around him. It never took its eyes from the King and its tongue flicked in and out of its mouth.

The thoughts began knocking on the King's mind. The urge to fight arose from within. Instead, he fought the thoughts by focusing on the snake's eyes. The decision had been made and there was no room for doubts anymore.

As the spiral grew taller, it also got tighter. The leathery cold skin was soft and as tough as a

rock at the same time.

The King didn't even flinch till the snake's body got so tight that he found it hard to breathe. He was trapped up to his neck in the vice grip of the snake. He looked up and grimaced as he felt the bones in his body crushing under the immense pressure. The snake looked at him and silently opened its jaws to reveal two long teeth, bigger than his broadsword.

The snake was as silent as the night and only the King's muffled grunts filled the air. It brought its head down and swallowed the King's head whole with ease. It released its grip on the King's body turn by turn as its head went down. Its body bulged as the King's limp body entered it headfirst. The bulge stopped moving down when it reached the snake's belly.

The giant snake lay on the ground motionless, like a black river of death, meandering lazily, as the moon hid behind the horizon.

The bulging belly of the snake began shivering and then undulating before it burst open. The snake did not move at all as the King, covered in blood and bile, staggered to his feet. He was whole again; his hand and eye were back and his leg was fully healed. He was more than whole, with two huge black wings rising out of his back.

The King flapped his wings timidly but before he could fly, the sun came up from behind the horizon and filled the desert with bright light. He was blinded by the piercing light and had to shut his eyes tight.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on the floor of his cave. Outside the sun was out. He sat up and looked at his left hand that wasn't there. His leg still had the huge scar and he only had one eye. He turned behind to see that he didn't have wings and realized it was all just a dream.

He walked outside and sat in the heat of the rising sun. A single thought arose in his mind: *it wasn't a dream*. The sun got higher in the sky and then another thought arose: *I was in the place between the living world and the afterworld*.

The sun burnt his shoulders but the King did not notice it. *I became one with the Vulture King*, he thought, *I am the Vulture King*.

Bravadios

Queen Rania stood on a pedestal in front of the mirror, framed in gold, while her handmaiden helped her with her jewelry. Her beautiful face was contorted in anger and had been so ever since she heard that King Suriya was back in Brava and coming to get his throne back.

Two weeks ago, she had heard rumors that he was hiding in Castillo but her spies told her that he had returned to the desert before they could find and kill him. Now, he was back again. She wondered how many times that man could survive the desert. It was hard enough living with him but even now, he was making her life hell.

She was angry but not worried, as she knew he was a cripple now. There was no way the court would let such a weak man be king. She made her way to the court, determined to end him, once and for all.

The white marble court hall was overflowing with people. Eight cylindrical marble pillars raised the court roof high above the courtiers below, standing on either side of the pillars, the central nave empty and awaiting the old King. Everyone who was of any consequence in the kingdom; ministers, priests, generals, and the richest traders of the city, had come to see if the old King could get his throne back. Their wives and concubines peered excitedly from the arched balcony windows above.

The new King sat on the golden throne, looking down at the court from the raised royal platform. The Queen came and took her place next to him on her smaller throne. The empty space between the royal dais and the tall gates at the mouth of the hall, reverberated with excited frequencies. The court was as loud as a fish market, everyone selling their thoughts, freshly caught from the shallow ponds of their mind.

As soon as the guard announced the arrival of the old King, the court fell silent. The guard had been instructed to call out 'Lord Suriya' instead of 'King Suriya' by the Queen. Nonetheless, the courtiers quit all their jabbering and turned towards the entrance.

The old King appeared at the court gates and heard a spontaneous gasp uttered by most of the courtiers. The trader, whom he had visited first on his return, had found the best clothes in Castillo for him. He wore sky blue silk salwars and a sky blue turban with his black hair flowing from underneath. On his bare chest he wore a dark blue linen vest, the back of which he had had embroidered in the pattern of the wings of a vulture in golden thread. A brown leather belt held a brand new sword hanging from the side and leather sandals completed the ensemble. Despite the lack of any ornaments, which was the royal custom, he looked as much a king as ever.

The courtiers gave another gasp, completely spontaneous and yet completely synchronized, when the King limped forward. Only then did they notice his left hand missing and the black eye patch over his left eye.

The court hall was divided into two groups. On one side were the loyalists, who hoped for the return of the old King, and on the other side were the supplanters, who were afraid of his return. He knew each and everyone on both sides. None of them had dared to raise their head in his presence before, but as he limped into the court, for the first time ever, they stared at him and whispered to their neighbors. Some of them covered their mouth with their hand, in shock.

He avoided their gaze and looked ahead at Mehmood Tuglak, his treacherous Chief Minister, sitting on his throne. Tuglak wore a golden attire and as many ornaments as he could find. The one that bothered the King the most was his crown. It was a sin that the crown was on the head of a man who didn't deserve it.

To Tuglak's side, his former queen, sat proudly, looking as stunning as ever in one of her red dresses. They both stared at him with faces of stone. His own face was calm and expressionless.

The King limped to the center of the court. He looked straight at Tuglak, who returned his gaze. He turned to the Queen and she looked away. The whispering in the court stopped in anticipation. The silence grew as no one made the first move. The King stood tall and from certain angles, despite having lost a lot of his musculature, still looked like the mighty king of old.

"You don't bow in front of your king?" Tuglak said.

"You are no king," the King said simply.

"I'm the one sitting on the throne," Tuglak smiled.

"Not for long."

"How dare you! I can have you hanged for that!"

"You have falsely claimed this throne. I am still alive and this throne belongs to me. I would suggest you vacate it immediately, unless you want to die a horrible death."

Tuglak turned red and looked at his courtiers. They were all waiting to see how it turned out, before they chose sides.

"What proof do you have that you are who you say you are?" the Queen interjected.

"I am here in flesh. What more proof do you need?"

"How do we know that you are the old King, and not an impostor? Or some kind of magical trick by our enemies? The last we checked, you were dead. So how is it that you've returned from death?"

"I was never dead. I just got lost in the desert."

"And how did you find your way back home after so long? How did you survive the desert?"

"The King of vultures helped me."

"The King of vultures?" the Queen jeered and some of the courtiers joined her in a short laugh.

"Yes."

"That sounds ridiculous! But let's believe your ridiculous story for a while. We'll believe that the vultures have a king and he helped you find your way back home. But my ex-husband was a mighty king whereas you are a cripple. What happened to your leg? Where's your hand? And why is there only one eye looking at me?" the Queen said contended.

"I had to cut out pieces of my flesh to feed the Vulture King," the King said.

"Very generous of you," the Queen said, "And where is this Vulture King?"

"I killed him."

"You killed the vulture that helped you get back? Why? Did it show signs of weakness?"

"I killed the Vulture King because I didn't trust him. I thought he was trying to fool me."

"What a ridiculous story! This man is neither my husband nor your king! Neither was our old King a debilitated cripple, nor mad. This man is both!"

"The only madman here is the one sitting next to you who thought he could become king through trickery and deceit."

"Guards! Seize this man!" Tuglak spat, but the guards did not move, unsure whose orders to follow.

The King turned to the crowd of courtiers, "For centuries, the mightiest warrior in the land

has ruled Brava. Even royal blood doesn't guarantee kingship for the coward. Mehmood Tuglak has neither royal blood nor the strength to be king."

"I am stronger than you!"

"Then face me in combat. The victor shall be king for the rest of his life," the King said quietly.

The court burst into noise once again. Tuglak looked nervous. He turned to the Queen and pleaded with his eyes, not to allow this.

"What's the matter? Are you afraid to fight a cripple?"

"On the contrary," Tuglak said, gathering his wits, "I feel it would be beneath me to fight a weakling like you. It would be dishonorable to kill you."

"If it's dishonorable, you won't have much trouble doing it. If you want to be king, defeat me and rightfully claim the throne."

"I am already king," Tuglak said but was interrupted by the Queen.

"You are the rightful king, of course," she said, "But many of your people haven't accepted you as their king. I can see many of them present here today, waiting to see which way the tide turns."

"Surely, my Queen, you are not suggesting I fight this cripple?"

"I am. Fight this man, cripple or not, and kill him, and claim your throne. Let it be known from this day forward that you are the one true King of Brava!"

Some of the courtiers cheered and with that, it was decided.

The New King

Despite having a significant advantage, Mehmood Tuglak shifted nervously on the throne. King Suriya was an experienced fighter. The best, in fact. And though he had had some combat training, like every other man of Brava, he had never fought anyone in a real fight before, not the least in a battle unto death. Even with a single hand and single eye, the King had just as good a chance, if not better, as him.

The courtiers finally showed signs of their allegiance. Most of them chose the new King. They felt the old King had made a foolish mistake by challenging him. They just couldn't see him win, mighty as he might have once been.

General Zander was the biggest name on the side of King Suriya.

"Glad to see you back, my King," the General said in a low voice.

"I'm glad to see you too, my friend."

"Here's your sword," the General said, handing the King his old blade.

"I gave that to you. It's yours. It's too heavy for me to use now. This new sword is light enough to use with one hand."

The General nodded and helped the old king remove his vest and called for the King's armor.

"I won't need the armor. I can't move freely with all that weight."

"What about your shield?"

"I can't hold a shield."

"My King, you'll have no protection at all!" the General protested.

"I have no choice. Ease of movement is more important than protection."

"At least put the helm on."

"I won't be able to see anything on my left side with the helm," the King said, "I must go unprotected into this battle."

Meanwhile, Mehmood Tuglak had donned his newly minted armor and held a long sword and a full shield. He had the Queen's coat of arms on his shield. He also wore a full-face helm to protect his head. He smiled when he saw the old King limping forward with nothing but his sword, which he was using as a walking stick.

"Will you use that to move or to strike?" the Queen taunted.

The King did not reply as he was completely focused on his opponent. The Queen was enraged by his silence. She shouted for everyone to take their place and let the combat begin. The General stepped in to do the formalities.

"We all bear witness today to this judgment by combat. The winner of the battle will be our true King. Let all those who witness this combat accept the judgment, or keep their silence unto their grave."

"Enough!" the Queen shouted, "Let it begin."

Tuglak moved cautiously towards the King, who stood leaning on his sword. He looked nonchalant but was completely focused on the movement of his opponent. Tuglak circled him slowly, not showing any eagerness to attack first. The King waited patiently, like a viper that waits for its prey to come to it.

Tuglak circled the King three times without making an advance. The court was getting restless. Inside the helm, Tuglak was sweating. He hadn't worn the armor for this long before. He wasn't used to its weight. The leather under the metal plates was biting into his soft skin. As murmurs grew in the crowd, he heard someone say the word 'coward'. This was not doing his reputation any good so he gathered all his courage and charged at the King from behind. He held his sword high above his head and let out a gruesome cry as he charged.

The King simply stepped to the right and Tuglak's sword clanged on the marble floor as he stumbled forward. Even if the King hadn't kept his eye on Tuglak the whole time, the cry would have given him enough warning to step aside in time.

The King waited patiently for Tuglak to gather himself and turn around. The courtiers were smiling and laughing, on seeing him struggle with his heavy armor. He gave another shout and charged at the King, this time from the front.

The King limped to the left but Tuglak changed direction to stay on course. His sword came down with ferocity and met the King's sword with a loud clang.

The King felt all the force of the blow on his wrist. His sword cut lightly into his own chest and his face contorted with pain but his mind was still thoughtless, completely in the moment.

Tuglak saw the blood dripping out of the horizontal cut and stood straight with confidence. He moved forward, constantly swinging his sword as fast as he could. The King stayed calm and breathed slowly. He could see each swing of the sword coming, as if time had slowed down. He moved out of the way of each swing by turning his body sideways and moving backwards.

The court held on to their breath. It looked to them as if King Suriya was dancing with his opponent's sword. Tuglak eventually got tired and stopped swinging. The King swung his sword and hit the shield so hard that it clanged like a gong. He swung again but Tuglak blocked the blow with his sword and moved back.

The King stood patiently again, choosing not to chase him. Tuglak took a few deep breaths and then charged again. This time the King spun to his right, ducked under Tuglak's swinging blade and slashed at his leg. The sword struck the part between the thigh and calf plates of the armor and cut through the leather and into Tuglak's skin, drawing blood.

Tuglak screamed loudly and limped away from the King. The queen was on the edge of her seat, regretting her decision to let them fight for the throne.

The King stood poised for the next attack but Tuglak was hesitant. He was breathing heavy and began circling the King again, limping heavily, grunting with every step.

The King stood his ground and turned to stay facing his opponent. Tuglak completed a quarter circle and charged. The King, waiting for this moment, dived forward and rolled on his back to meet Tuglak before he anticipated. King Suriya's blade entered through the gap between the chest and groin plates and impaled him through the stomach. The courtiers gasped as the new King dropped his sword and shield. The King slid his sword out of Tuglak's body and as the new King fell, the old king stood up.

Blood oozed out of the gap in his armor as he lay on the white marble floor, struggling to breathe. King Suriya approached him and placed his sword on Tuglak's neck.

"Mercy," Tuglak said moaning.

"This is mercy," the King said and then pierced his throat.

Blood gurgled out of his neck and bubbled out of his mouth, before he died.

Shocked silence reigned over the court for a few moments and then the cheers began. The King had returned. He turned towards the royal dais and saw the Queen leaving in a hurry.

"I'll send the guards to get her," General Zander said, approaching the King.

"No," the King said, "She'll flee the kingdom. Let her go."

The King walked to the throne and slowly climbed the dais steps. He turned to the court and it fell silent. He sat down on his throne and everyone broke out into an even louder cheer.

His bare chest was covered in blood. He took off his turban, letting his long hair down. He used the turban to wipe the blood off his sword and sat back in his throne with the sword across his lap.

He didn't feel any emotion; neither happiness nor relief, but a thought did arise: *I wish the vulture king was here.*

"I am," a sharp voice spoke in his mind.

Author's Letter

Dear Reader,

Thank you for buying and reading The Vulture King.

I am an indie author from India, and on behalf of independent authors everywhere, I thank you for supporting the self publishing revolution. It's because of readers like you, that storytelling, the most ancient human tradition, has been reborn in this new avatar. Please continue to support independent artists by consuming and reviewing their art.

Telling stories is my passion and besides books, I'm also interested in other forms of storytelling such as music and cinema. This passion is so strong, that I quit my career as a sailor to pursue it fulltime. Currently, I support my writing through freelancing and I dream of the day I can support myself completely through storytelling.

I hope you liked The Vulture King. Please leave a review on Amazon as without reviews, a book on Amazon disappears into the depths fairly rapidly.

To know more about me, or to send me a message, criticism, greetings etc. please visit my website: www.adityathakur.com

You can also read my previous book, [Hendrix is Dead](#), a short story about a frustrated loser who goes to great lengths to stay in denial about his dog, and his only friend, Hendrix dying.

Thanks and keep reading books!

Aditya Thakur