

## PROLOGUE

While the Pandava brothers were living in exile in the Kamyaka forest along the banks of the Saraswati river, on the western boundary of the Kuru kingdom, the revered sage Vrihadaswa honoured them with a visit. Beholding the illustrious Rishi, Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, accorded him great respect and a gracious welcome by presenting the *Madhuparka* – a refreshing offering made of honey, curd and ghee. He then bewailed his lament to the sage:

‘O holy one, invited by the cunning Kauravas to a game of dice, I have been stripped of all my wealth and kingdom through a rigged game. Though myself an adept at dice, I did not suspect they would resort to any trickery or deceit. Thus having lost all in the gamble, including my wife Draupadi, we have all been sent into exile for 13 years.’

Vrihadaswa clucked his tongue sympathetically.

Yudhishtira continued his lament. ‘Recollecting that fateful day, I am extremely distressed that due to my addiction to gambling, I have brought misfortune to my family. I wonder if there has ever been any other king on this earth who has suffered greater misfortune than me. I doubt if there has been any man more wretched than I am.’

Vrihadaswa sighed and consoled him by saying, ‘Take heart, noble son of Pandu. I will relate the story of one such King who suffered even greater misfortune than you. There was the celebrated King Nal of the Nishadhas who was similarly defeated by his younger brother in a game of dice and banished, along with his wife and two children, from his kingdom. You on the other hand, have your four heroic brothers, and your wife, to support you in this most grievous hour. Therefore, it does not suit you to grieve and lament the fate you have brought upon yourself.’

Yudhishtira, with an air of dejection, pleaded with the sage, ‘I am most anxious to hear in detail, the story of King Nal, and how he overcame his predicament.’

Vrihadaswa then said, ‘Gather your brothers and your wife around you, so you can all listen to the inspiring tale of Nal and Damayanti...’



Map of  
Central India  
in the time of  
Mahabharata –  
around 3500 BCE.

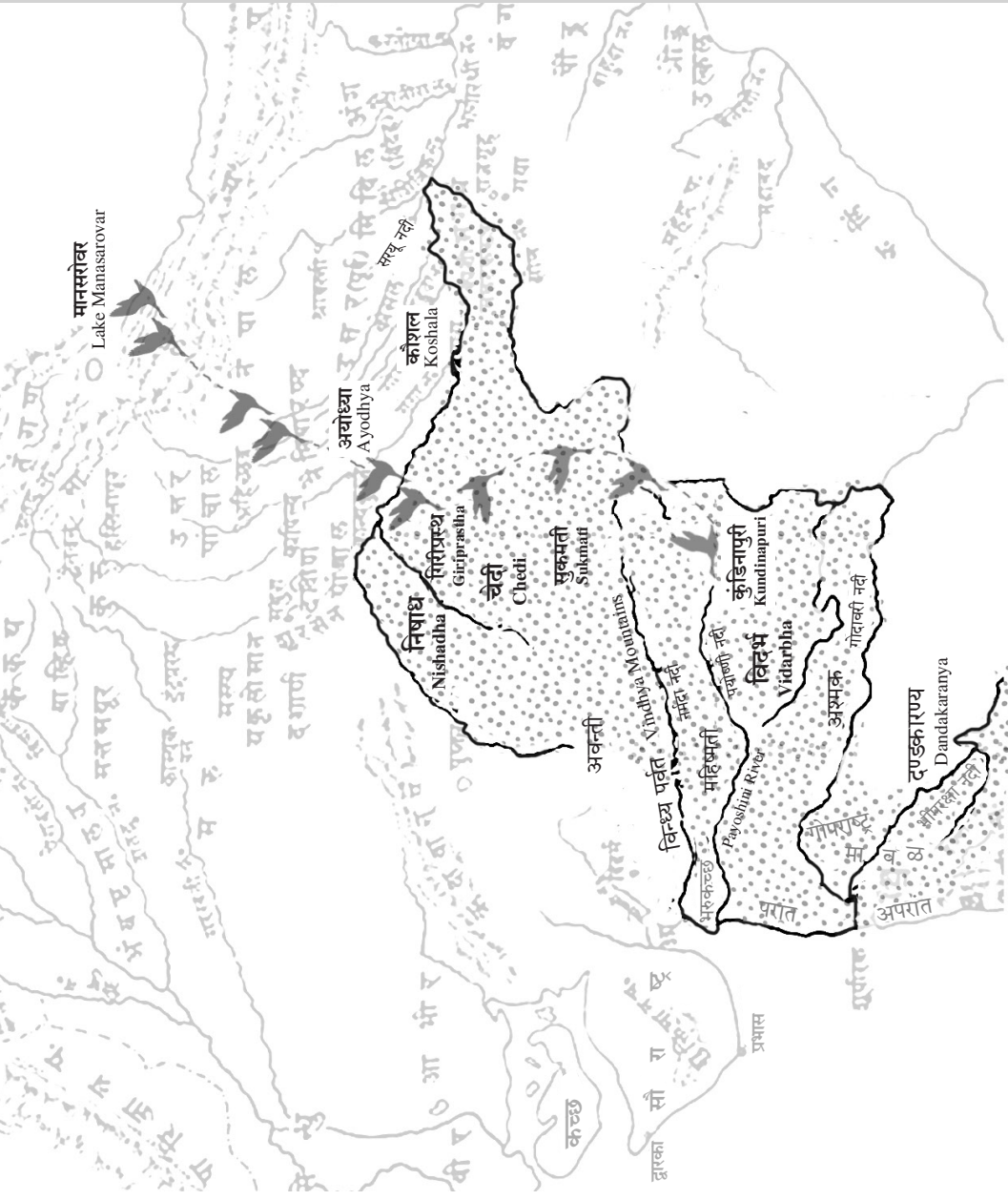


The Flight of the Swans  
Manasarovar – Giriprastha –  
Kundinapuri

Depicted in this map  
are the regions of  
Vidarbha, Nishadha,  
Ayodhya (Mithila),  
Sukmati (Chedi)  
in which the story of  
Nal and Damayanti  
takes place.



Map not to scale





PART 1



MESSENGERS  
OF LOVE





## THE MORTAL WHO RIVALLED THE GODS

*'Brilliant as Surya... fair as Chandra...  
handsome as the Ashvins... desirable as Kama...  
glorious as Indra'*

Rishis and sages praised his noble character, learning and valour...

Chitrakars and shilpakars competed to capture his godlike appearance...

Sutradhars and bards outdid one another in praise of his skills as a charioteer...

He was the envy of princes and warriors in kingdoms far and wide...

And, he was the fantasy and the dream of every woman.  
He was Nal.

The extraordinarily handsome and valiant prince of Nishadha.

The heir apparent of King Virasena.

With its capital city at Giriprastha<sup>1</sup>, the prosperous Nishadha kingdom of Virasena lay north of the Vindhya mountain range that separated it from the kingdom of Vidarbha. Linked by busy trade routes that connected it to the kingdoms of nearby Chedi, Dasarna, Kosala, Matsya, Magadha, as well as with that of Vidarbha – it thrived on its rich mineral wealth of semi-

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Mahabharata (Book 3 – 324, 12), the capital of the Nishadhas was Giriprastha, which most likely is the present-day Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh.

precious stones, such as lapis lazuli that were mined from the Nila mountain, and the opals from the Sweta mountain, while the metals were mined from the Sringavat mountains nearby. The land owed its fertile soil and greening to the largesse of the Pyoshini River. Teeming with fish and marine life, it flowed from the Vindhya through the Nishadha kingdom and then, upon entering from the northern point of the wild, dense and dreaded Dandaka forest, it ran to flow into the ocean.

Walking along the riverbank with his childhood friend Rudra, the young prince was idly casting stones when a palace guard rode up to them. Saluting briskly, he stuttered, ‘Ra-Ra-Rajkumar... Her Highness, your mother, requires your presence in the Lotus Hall.’

‘Catch your breath, Purshottam... what’s the rush? I hope it’s not another painter who has come to paint my portrait!’ sighed Nal.

‘Well, that’s the price you have to pay for your good looks!’ ribbed Rudra. ‘By the way, how many portraits are there adorning the hallways of the palace? At last count, there were twenty-two I think. Oh-oh... I get it. You will be turning a year older in a few days from now, so I think your mother wants to commemorate your birthday by having a new portrait painted.’

‘What on earth is she going to do with this collection, I can’t fathom!’ said Nal, throwing up his hands.

‘Probably get a few copies made of the latest one to send out to fathers of prospective young girls of marriageable age,’ chortled Rudra.

‘Ha-ha, you are always thinking of girls!’

‘Well... I wish they would start thinking of me for a change, instead of mooning and swooning over you! I don’t look half-bad you know, Nal!’

‘Oh, not at all! You just remind me of the backside of a bull!’ teased Nal. ‘Hey-hey... stop, stop...’ he laughed as Rudra playfully pounded him with his balled-up fists. ‘Okay, okay. I take that back... your face looks like the dark night of amavasya!’



‘Come on... race you back to the palace,’ shouted Rudra as he sprinted away gaining a headstart over Nal and laughing at his own cleverness.

‘You rascal,’ Nal shook his fist and ran after him. Kicking out his left foot, he tackled Rudra who tripped and stumbled on the path while Nal jeered and raced ahead.

Huffing and puffing, the two friends arrived at the palace and ran down the corridors towards the Lotus Hall.

‘Ah-ha, there you are! Son, come and look at the portrait of this lovely princess which Chitrakar Visheshwara has brought,’ the Queen Mother gestured towards a painting that rested on a stand and was draped over with fine muslin.

‘Oh, Mother... you called me just for this!’ moaned Nal clutching his hair. *She will be just another pretty face of some kingdom or the other.* Rudra clapped a hand to his mouth and tried to smother the snigger that was rising in him.

‘At least take a look, Nal,’ the Queen Mother said gently. Pushkar, her younger son added his plea to hers: ‘Yes, brother... please do! If you don’t get married first, my turn will never come!’

‘Besides, Visheshwara is famous for his art of capturing the very likeness of his subjects and has travelled many miles from Madra to bring her portrait to us,’ said his mother. Then she added the clincher, ‘and as you well know, the princesses of Madra are famed for their beauty!’

Rudra made sounds of clearing his throat, ‘Your Highness... if I may say something...’

‘Of course, son... you are as dear to me as Nal,’ Queen Vasumati encouraged him.

‘Nal has been raving, quite madly if I may say so, about a damsel who has been appearing in his dreams...’

‘What utter rubbish!’ exclaimed a flustered, blushing Nal. ‘Mother, no such thing... don’t listen to this mad fellow, he is lying...’

Visheshwara came forward and bowing low, suggested, ‘Your Highness, if the young Prince can describe the fair maiden

of his dreams, perhaps I could paint a picture of her likeness...'

The Queen Mother clapped her hands, delighted with this. 'Yes, of course... what a brilliant idea! Our Nal is quite the poet and I am sure he will wax lyrical over this dream girl,' she laughed.

'Mother!' Nal blushed several shades deeper. 'Honestly... you people are just too much!'

'I will hear no more of it, Nal!'

Then turning to Visheshwara, she said: 'Will you please paint a portrait of this girl while my son describes her to you?'

The painter stroked his beard thoughtfully and mused, 'It may take a while but I shall do all that is within my talents to capture her likeness, Your Highness.'

'You are a traitor, Rudra!' groaned Nal when they were alone. 'You blabbered what I told you in confidence about my dreams.'

'Rubbish, I just proved what a good friend I am! At least now we will see who has been haunting you in your dreams these past nights, and soon we will know if she is just a figment of your imagination or whether such a maiden really exists!'





## THE PAINTER OF DREAMS

Nal entered his private chambers together with Rudra to see Visheshwara arranging the tools of his craft, his pens, brushes, dyes and paints, alongside an easel on which stood a cured square of the finest bark of the eucalyptus tree. A fragrant, bluish haze arose from copper incense burners placed on wrought iron tripods. Screened by a gauzy veil of curtains, musicians struck the soft, opening notes of a raga as nubile handmaidens offered goblets of scented and watered wine.

Raising his goblet in a toast, Rudra declared, 'Here's to the weaver of dreams... may success be bestowed on this experiment.'

'Hear, hear... I raise my toast to that,' echoed Visheshwara. 'Come, Prince, drink to that... and may the vision of beauty part the veils of mist of your subconscious mind and reappear. My art will strive to interpret and capture the image of the face and form whose every feature you will describe.'

'Come recline on your couch. Close your eyes and allow the musical strains of the *veena* lull you into a dream-like trance,' intoned Visheshwara who had earlier administered a mild opiate in the drink to the young man. 'She who haunts your dreams will reveal herself. As you call out to her from the depths of your heart, she is bound come...'

As Nal drifted into a slumber, his breathing slowed down and became deeper. His eyelids felt heavy as he gradually began to murmur ...

*'Deep in the inner recesses of my slumbering mind  
She flashes like a brilliant bolt of lightning  
Her raven locks framing a face lovely as the moon  
That with its dazzling beauty would a mortal blind...'*

Visheshwara first picked up his sharp-nibbed pen made of bamboo reed and dipped it in the indigo dye. With deft strokes he drew the outlines of a face, around which he sketched a flash of lightning in a midnight blue sky that he quickly painted on a cloth. 'Go on Prince, tell me more,' he cajoled.

*'Like two new moons rising above long-lashed eyes  
Are brows as smoothly curved as Kamadev's bow  
A diamond sparkles on her pert, parrot-beaked nose  
Two dimples appear in rounded cheeks as she smiles...'*

'A vision of ethereal beauty... perhaps she is some beauteous apsara from Indra's swargalok,' sighed Visheshwara. Tell me more...'

*'Her chin is finely chiselled and resolutely set  
She has a graceful arch to her swan-like neck  
Her gaze penetrates the depths of my soul  
An inner calm and confident poise she reflects.'*

Visheshwara's hand deftly mixed a colour palette of pastel and vivid hues and with the rapid strokes of his squirrel-hair brushes, he began colouring the face that was taking shape on the cured, smoothened and thin sheet of bark.

*'That tiny mole auspiciously dotting the ajna chakra at its centre  
Would drive a god, leave alone any man, insane with desire  
Her bosom in its full blossom of youth heaves with every breath  
As her slender, girdled waist sways from side to side on curved hips.'*

Adding a few finishing strokes to the painting, Visheshwara put aside his pens and brushes and wiped his hands on a piece

of cloth. More or less satisfied with the painting, he walked towards the reclining form of Nal and putting a gentle hand on his shoulder shook him out of his reverie.

‘Wake up Prince and tell me, if this is the face that appears in your dreams? Is this the face that has you mesmerised and that you long to see?’

Nal’s eyes fluttered open and rising languorously from the couch, he walked slowly towards the face that was drawing him hypnotically towards itself. He heard Rudra exclaim, ‘By Rudra! She appears to be an apsara, and the most beautiful one at that, of Indra’s court!’

It was a fair likeness. *Yes*, Nal thought to himself, rubbing his eyes to clear his vision. The tiny mole was in the right place... the two dark pools of her eyes, by some trick of the painter’s art, seem to follow his gaze no matter from which angle he viewed the painting.

‘Raj Mata Vasumati Devi padhaar rahi hain...’ announced the guard posted outside Nal’s chambers as his staff thumped the floor to signal her arrival.

‘So, Visheshwaraji, has the dream girl materialised from my son’s dreams?’ she asked with a smile. ‘Ah-h... so this is her!’ she added, going up to the painting. ‘By any chance, do you know who she is?’

Visheshwara bowed in greeting. ‘I could hazard a guess Rajmata, although my painting does not do her full justice. I have not seen her myself but from all the descriptions that I have heard from poets, bards and other chitrakars in the course of my travels... she could be the Princess of Vidarbha.’

‘Damayanti?’ the Queen Mother said with a note of mild surprise. ‘The daughter of King Bhima?’





## SHE WHO WALKS IN BEAUTY

*A pearl among maidens... without rival or peer...*

*In the heavens above, or the earth below...*

*Her incandescent beauty dazzles immortals and mortals...*

*Like lightning flashing in the midst of dark clouds.*

Sounds of laughter rippled through the hallways of the palace as a group of giggly girls played *lukka-chhuppi*, their favourite game of hide-n-seek. Videhi, who was the one to be blind-folded this time, ran this way and that whenever her ears pricked up to the tinkling of anklets, or hushed whispers behind the columns. Damayanti sneaked up behind Videhi and gave her a playful pinch.

The princess of Vidarbha, Damayanti, in her sixteenth summer, was blossoming into a beautiful maiden. Along with her three brothers Dama, Danta and Damana, she had been born as the result of a boon given by the Rishi Damana to King Bhima and his Queen who, for long, had been childless. Apart from lavishing their love on her, they had seen to every facet of her education and learning and in the process of raising a confident, caring and conscious child, had the wisest of sages attend to moulding her character and personality. Always surrounded by the prettiest of handmaidens, but none that matched her beauty, Damayanti bloomed like a rose in the fabled gardens of the royal palace at Kundina<sup>1</sup>.

Most people who had the occasion to be in her presence

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<sup>1</sup>

Kundinapuri, which was its full name, was shortened to Kundina by its citizens.

could not see beyond her beauty. They seemed blinded to what lay behind her lovely face and graceful form. Outwardly compliant, she was an intelligent girl with a mind of her own; one who had the courage of her convictions. A truly romantic heart beat in her young bosom, but beneath all that softness lurked a firm, resolute and fearless will. If she set her mind on a course of action, she left no stone unturned to see it to its successful conclusion. This aspect of her personality, of which she herself was perhaps quite oblivious, had been keenly observed by Chitra, her closest companion and confidante.

Videhi let out a delighted scream as she grabbed the arm of one of the girls who had passed within an inch of her. Ripping off her blindfold, she shrieked, 'Caught one of you at last! Now you will see what it is like to run blindly into pillars and flower beds once I tie this piece of cloth across your eyes!'

Chitra ran up to them. 'Girls! Enough of running around! Let's take a break and rest a while. Come, the maids have laid out delightful refreshments for us under the awning of Sakhiyon ki Baithak.'

'Yes, let's all gather there,' said Rukmini, a plump young girl, who was delicately mopping the sweat of her brow with the edge of her dupatta. 'I am famished after all the running around. Why on earth Damayanti chooses this hour in the afternoon to play hide and seek is beyond me!'

'It's all for your own good, Rukmini,' answered Damayanti coming up to them. 'Isn't she looking much trimmer than when she first joined our inner circle?'

'Dushyant, that young palace guard, certainly thinks so,' teased Malini. 'I have seen him making eyes at her for some time now. Isn't that so, Rukmini?' she asked, which made the young girl blush to the roots of her hair.

'Ah-hhh... when will some handsome young Prince come my way...' sighed Damayanti.

'The princes of this land are probably scared to come anywhere near you, because of your three strapping brothers!' mocked Chitra. 'Especially Danta, that middle brother of yours!'

His looks and bearing are so stern that they would scare the living daylights out of any mortal!’

‘Huh!’ scoffed Damayanti. ‘I don’t want just any mortal man. I want the handsomest one in all this land.’

‘What about Prince Debadatta of Vanga?’ piped up Videhi.

‘Ha! Him?’ exclaimed Rukmini. ‘I hear he is already going bald and is also pretty short!’

‘Okay, not him then! How about Prince Kaushal of Magadha?’ asked another of the girls.

‘Well... I hear he is tall and good-looking,... and very skilled with the sword, but...’ ventured Kumudini.

‘But what?’ queried Chitra.

‘Hmmm... I hear he sta-ta-stammers... takes forever to string a few words together!’

At this, all of them let out peals of laughter.

‘What about Matsya? That’s nearby and I have heard they have a couple of eligible princes.’

‘Oh, no! Forget that stretch of desert. Everyone wilts there... especially the youth of pretty maidens like us,’ lamented another.

A gust of cool breeze floated in the air and ruffled the curls that were cascading down Damayanti’s head. It swept aside a curl from her ear and whispered the words, *Nal... Nal... Prince of Nishadha.*

She turned to see who had whispered that name into her ear but all her friends were busy talking among themselves. A smile hovered on her lips. *Am I hallucinating... who whispered that name in my ear?* she wondered, twirling the curl around her finger.

Suddenly, the high-pitched voice of Videhi broke from the girls gathered around her. ‘I know... I know... how could we forget! Girls... how about Prince Nal? I have heard there is none more handsome ... they even say the gods are jealous of him!’

Damayanti was jolted out of her reverie. *Was this sheer coincidence?* Flustered, she asked, ‘But has anyone of you seen Prince Nal? Rumours often turn out to be highly coloured and exaggerated, especially when they are praising the beauty or some virtue of a person.’



The girls looked askance at each other. Few of them had ever stepped beyond the walls of the palace gardens.

Chitra snapped her fingers. 'I know what... let's call that new palace maid... Bharati, who has just joined the royal kitchens as junior cook. I heard someone say that she is from Nishadha. Let's ask her and hear what she has to say, shall we?'

'Good idea!' agreed Videhi.

'I am not staying. What will my mother say if she hears I have been gossiping with the kitchen maid?' exclaimed Damayanti.

'Oh, don't be so scared Damayanti!' protested Chitra. 'All right, you can hide behind that pillar and listen to what she has to tell us.'

Bharati, the kitchen maid, came wiping her hands nervously on the sides of her long skirt.

'Come, come... don't feel shy,' Chitra said gently. 'We hear you are from the land of Nishadha?'

'Yy-e-ss... I am, my lady...'

'In what capacity were you working there?'

'I was a handmaiden to the Queen Mother, my lady.'

'Ah-ha... then you must have had many an opportunity to see Prince Nal! Tell us how he looks! Is he all that handsome as they say he is?'

Bharati blushed and lowered her head.

'Come, come... don't feel shy,' prodded Videhi.

Head still lowered, Bharati giggled. 'He is handsome, very handsome... not very tall, but very strong.'

'Tell us more about him,' Chitra persisted.

'I have only heard that he is very fond of playing the game of dice. But I have seen him drive a chariot and this I can say... no one can steer the horses the way he does. I think he whispers magic words into the ears of those horses! Oh, and there is another secret not many know about and I am not going to tell...'

'Come on, you can tell us... we promise we won't tell anyone.'

'I will lose my job if it gets out that I told you...' protested Bharati.

‘We promise not to tell anyone. Now, what is that secret? Do tell!’

‘Sometimes, he comes to the kitchen and observes us cooking. He asks the maharaj who is the head cook all sorts of questions... what spices he is using, how much salt he is putting, whether to use red or green chillies in a particular dish... why, at times, he even picks up the ladle to stir the broth or slices off a piece of meat to taste how well it has been done!’

‘Really, is that true? Well, anyway... tell us more about his looks!’ Rukmini piped up.

‘Once, I had gone to fill the water in his bath... His skin is pale as moonbeams... it has a silver-like whiteness and sheen. His body is tough and muscular... oh-ohh... I almost dropped the vessel in which I was carrying the water!’ blushed Bharati.

The girls guffawed with delight at this revelation of Bharati.

‘Run off now, you naughty girl!’ laughed Chitra, as Bharati gathered up her long skirt and ran away giggling to herself.

‘You can come out now Damayanti,’ said Chitra as she drew her out from behind the pillar. ‘So there you have it from someone who has actually seen Prince Nal with her very own eyes. What a lucky girl to have feasted her eyes on him in the bath,’ she sniggered.

‘Oh, hush Chitra! Stop saying such things before these innocent girls!’ Damayanti said in mock alarm. ‘Some of them are far too young to hear talk of half-naked men!’

‘How do you know he was half-naked, may I ask, Damayanti? Bharati never said any such thing. You, girl, are already letting your imagination run a wee bit wild,’ Chitra teased.

That night, alone in her bedchamber, Damayanti tossed and turned through the night unable to get a wink of sleep. Her mind kept conjuring up imaginary images of Nal. *Is he really so good looking?* she wondered, because nothing of what she had heard so far helped create a mental picture of him.



## Chapter 4



# A BEVY OF SWANS

The day had dawned bright and sunny. Stepping down from the chariot after having given a good workout to the horses for the annual championship that was drawing near, Nal handed over the reins to the groom and instructed him to lead them to drink water from the trough. His high brow and broad chest were dripping sweat. On the spur of the moment, he impulsively jumped into the canal that ran through the palace grounds and irrigated its splendid gardens abloom in a riot of colour. After having splashed around in the cool waters, Nal was languidly floating on his back with his eyes closed when he heard a rhythmic flutter of wings and their high-pitched, quavering call as they drew close. He opened his eyes and looked up to see a bevy of swans gliding towards the canal. *But what was that glint that was causing his eyes to screw up tight as it bounced off their outstretched wings?* he wondered. Raising a hand to shield his eyes from the glinting beam, he saw the swans land gracefully on the water. Silently, so that his movement would not frighten them away, he floated towards them and was amazed to see that two of the swans among the bevy had golden wings.

*Where have these golden-winged swans come from? They have never been sighted before! I must somehow capture this golden pair;* Nal vowed as he tugged at the tender stems and roots

of a few lotus leaves and, clutching them, swam quietly ashore. He crawled along the bank towards this golden pair and held out the leaves, tempting the swans to come closer. The golden-winged pen, the female swan, glided towards Nal's outstretched hand and stretched out its neck to peck at the leaf. As soon as it did that, Nal trapped its neck in the crook of his arm and lifted the bird onto the shore. Its male partner ruffled and flapped its wings, waddled on to the lawn and began pecking angrily at Nal's shoulder in an attempt to rescue its mate. His younger brother Pushkar, who had seen this scene from a distance, ran forward and grabbed the cob by the neck and pulled it away from Nal. Upon hearing all this commotion and the plaintive hoots of the golden swans, the startled bevy of swans flew away in their wedge formation in the sky.

'Whatever are you going to do with this pair, Nal?' asked Pushkar still grappling with the swan he had captured.

'Aren't they unbelievably beautiful, Pushkar... have you, or anyone else, ever seen a pair of golden-winged swans before in your life? They will add to the fame and glory of Nishadha and be the envy of all our neighbouring princes and kings!' remarked an evidently thrilled and delighted Nal. 'I can just imagine the look on my mother's face when she sees these rare swans! She will be overjoyed!'

'I wonder how they are to taste,' said Pushkar stroking the bird's neck. 'Let's kill one and roast it!'

Hearing this, the female swan let out a wild shriek and wailed, 'What have we poor creatures ever done for you to kill one of us?'

'Don't you know it would be a sin to kill a swan!' exclaimed the male swan. 'Haven't you studied your scriptures, Pushkar? We represent the Supreme Spirit – the Brahman-atma. We are the vehicle of the goddess of music and learning – Sri Saraswati!'

Shocked out of his wits at hearing the swans speak in a human tongue, Nal's grip slackened and the swan straightened and then gracefully withdrew its neck from his hold. Tears rolled down its eyes as it looked pleadingly at Nal. 'Please, do

not kill my mate. We are heavenly messengers and gifted with the power of speech. Let us fly back to our home in the skies.'

'Why should I let such a rare and beautiful pair of golden swans go? You will be the showpiece of our kingdom and the envy of every other King,' said Nal.

'If you release us, in return we will lift the burden that for many days now has been weighing your heart down,' said her mate.

'What burden are you talking about, my golden beauty?' asked Rudra. 'What is weighing heavily on my dear friend's heart?'

'Only a woman can divine what is in a man's heart,' said the pen.

'And only a man can gaze deep into a woman's to see what is her heart's desire,' answered her mate.

'If you spare my mate's life and let us go, Prince... I will fly above the Vindhya to Kundina, the opulent capital of Vidarbha. That is where your heart longs to fly, isn't that so? I will find my way to Damayanti's chambers and apprise her of your godlike form and handsome good looks, of your many qualities... of how your eyes keep searching for her everywhere... how your heart beats only for her. I will fill her heart with love and longing for you, O Prince!'

'Will you really be able to accomplish that?' asked Nal.

'Trust me... I am gifted with the power of eloquent and persuasive speech,' answered the swan confidently.

'So fly away now, my handsome golden-winged swan,' Nal said. On the spur of the moment, he unclasped the precious pearl necklace he was wearing and looped it around the swan's neck. 'Give this as my gift to the beautiful lady. Meanwhile your mate will stay with me until you return with glad tidings. Fear not for her, she will be our royal guest and be well looked after. Upon your return, both of you will be free to go wherever you wish.'

The male swan lovingly pecked his mate and spreading his golden wings flew southwards. They all stood watching until it was just a golden speck in the sky and then finally disappeared

over the Vindhya mountains, on its way to the kingdom of Vidarbha.

A deep sigh escaped from the swan who had stayed back and she looked crestfallen. Seeing her look so forlorn, Nal's heart melted, 'Come, come... don't be sad. He will soon be back after fulfilling his mission. Come, meet the Queen Mother, she will be thrilled to meet you and shall feed you the most precious pearls.'

Rudra added his two bits to that. 'We have heard that swans love to feed on pearls.'

The swan bowed her neck. 'That is most gracious of you Prince,' she said with a hint of a smile. 'But if we were to swallow pearls... surely they would get stuck somewhere in our long necks... we would choke on them and die!'

Rudra roared with laughter at the swan's response. Nal smiled at the bird, 'You combine both beauty and wit, my lovely bird of paradise!'

'However, I am willing to give crushed and powdered pearls in a goblet of wine a try,' replied the swan. 'For I, on the other hand, have heard that young maidens of your tribe drink that to preserve their youth and glowing beauty... well into old age.'

'Come, let us get confirmation on that from my beautiful mother,' laughed Nal. 'And, if she says she also partakes of that concoction occasionally, then you can drink as many goblets as you wish.'

