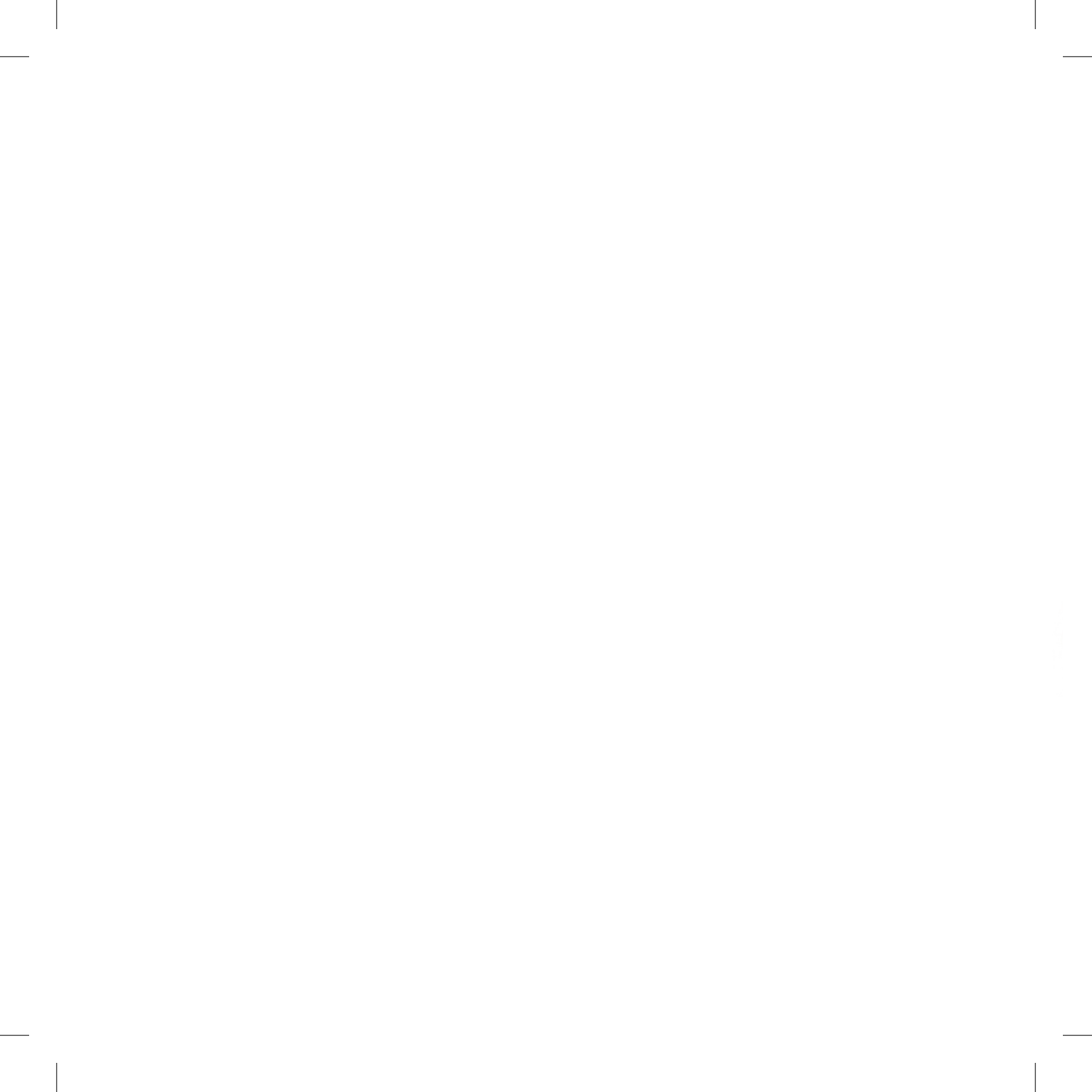


Favourite Stories from Hindu Myths



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 Juggernaut

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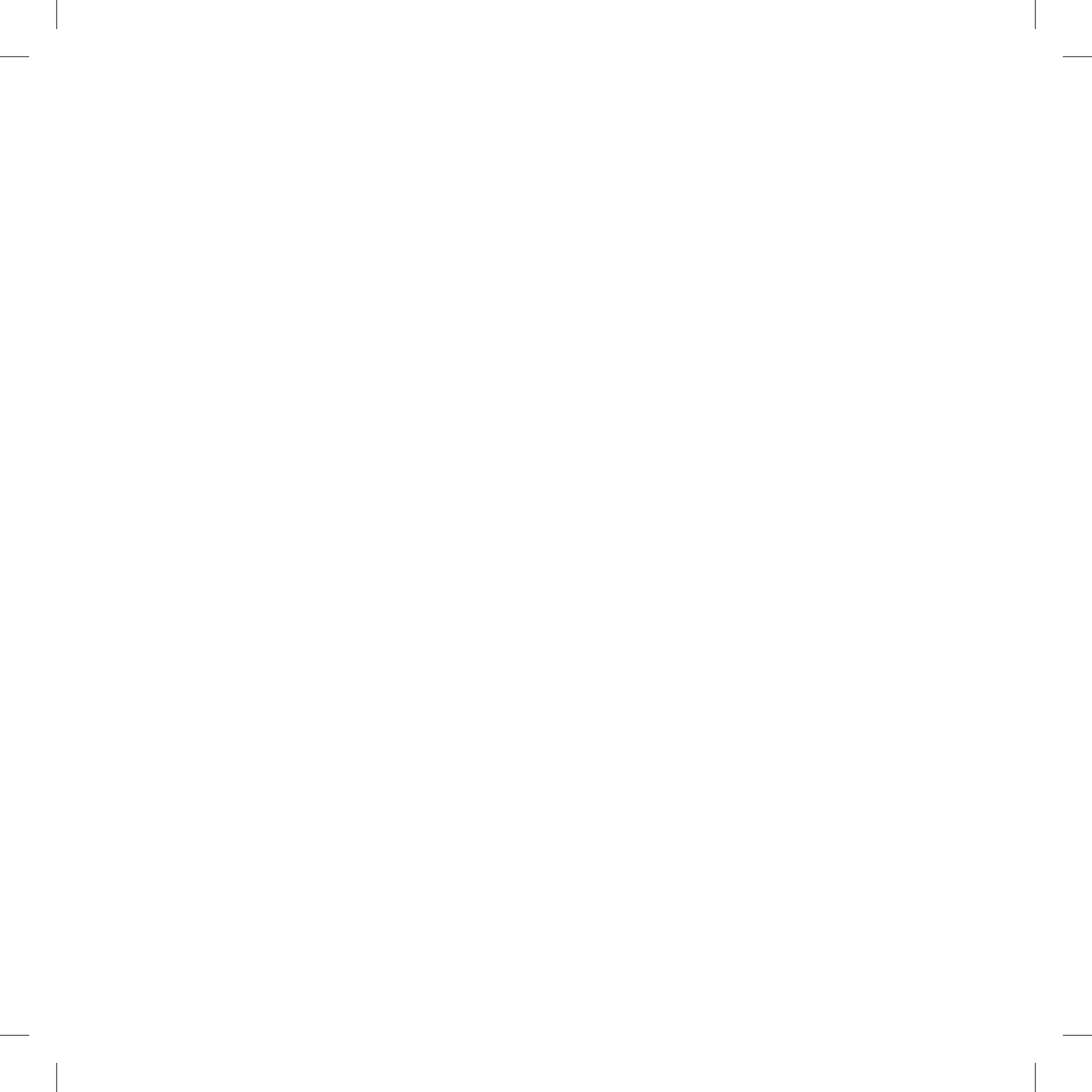
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The Churning of the Ocean

One day the sage Durvasa, who is known for his bad temper, saw Indra, king of the gods, going by on an elephant. As it happened, Durvasa was in a mellow mood and he gave Indra a garland of beautiful flowers. Indra did not think much of it and hung the garland around the neck of the elephant he was riding. The elephant was uncomfortable. He pulled off the garland with his trunk and tossed it to the ground. Then, he stepped on it, trampling it into the dust. Durvasa was enraged – he could not believe that Indra had shown so little respect for the gift he had been given. He cursed the

king of the gods to lose all his physical strength, his power, his glory, even his kingdom.

Indra realized his mistake and tried to make amends. But Durvasa was not to be pacified and went off in a great huff.

Soon enough, the gods began to lose their battles with the asuras and

before long Bali, the asura king,

was sitting on the throne

of heaven. The gods

turned to Indra and

blamed him for what

had happened, but the

king of the gods could

not think of a way to

win his kingdom back.

Indra went to Vishnu and



begged him for help. 'I must have my kingdom back. The gods cannot live anywhere but in heaven. Help us, Vishnu!' he cried.





Vishnu understood that the only way the gods would once again be superior to the asuras was by drinking amrita, the nectar of immortality. And to get that, they would have to churn the mighty ocean. Mount Mandara would be the churning pole and Vasuki, the divine serpent who was wrapped around the throat of Shiva, would be the churning rope. But the rope would have to be pulled from both ends for the waters to be properly stirred. Vishnu explained to Indra that the asuras would have to be part of this enterprise: that they would pull one end of the rope and the gods would pull the other. Between them, the ocean would be churned and it would throw up all kinds of marvellous things, including the nectar of immortality.

Indra was not at all pleased about making a partnership with the asuras, but if he wanted his kingdom back, he would have to acquire the precious nectar. And he could not do that without including the asuras in his plan. Indra went to Bali and said, 'Bali, lord of the asuras, we are going to churn the ocean. All kinds of wonderful things will emerge from the waters

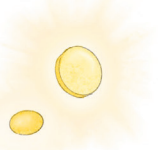






when we do this. But we need the asuras to help pull one end of the churning rope. Will you join us?' Bali eagerly agreed, confident that the asuras would have an equal share in whatever gifts the bounteous ocean produced.









The gods and the asuras assembled on a bright and beautiful day. They were all excited and they shouted and laughed and clapped each other on the back. Mount Mandara was brought in as the pole. Smooth as silk, Vasuki slithered off Shiva's neck and wound himself around the mountain, his head on one side and his tail on the other. The asuras rushed to the side of his head and before the gods could even react they shouted, 'We are taking this side! You hold his tail!' The asuras and the gods grabbed Vasuki's head and tail and started to pull. Mount Mandara began to turn, slowly, slowly, slowly. But equally slowly, it began to sink.



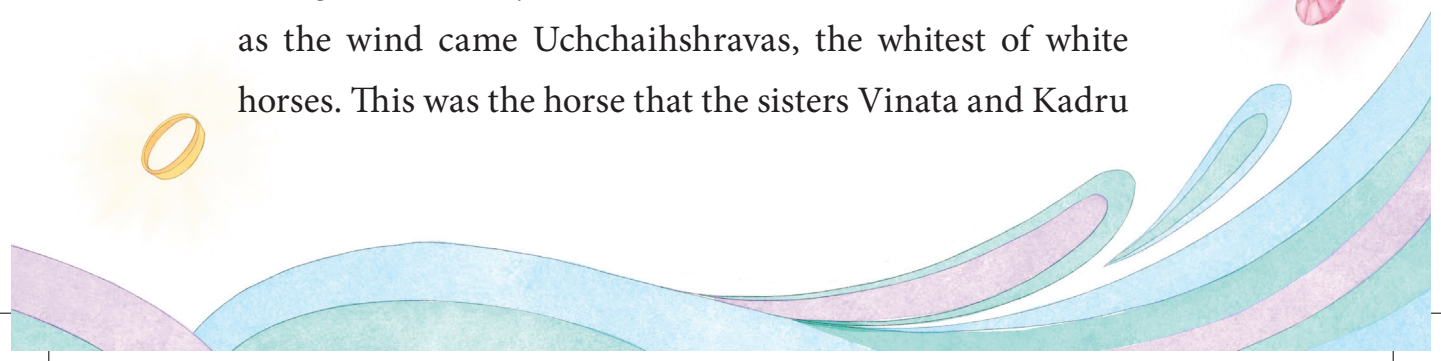
Again, the gods appealed to Vishnu for help. 'How can we churn the ocean if our churning pole is sinking?' they shouted. 'Vishnu, do something!' In a trice, Vishnu turned himself into a giant turtle. He swam to the bottom of the ocean and slipped under the mountain, holding it firmly on

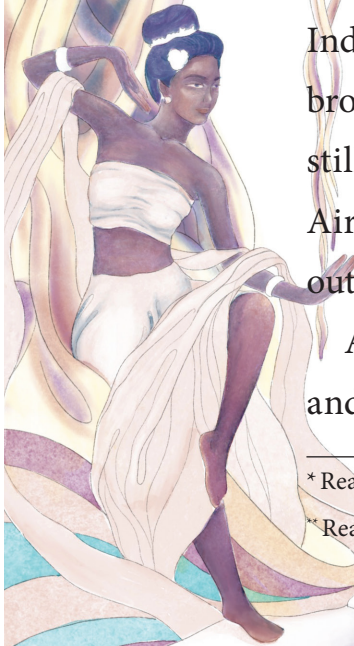


his back. The churning pole steadied and again the gods and the asuras pulled this way and that. They agitated the ocean whose waves rose higher and higher until they seemed to touch the sky. The waters roared and thundered and the gods and the asuras were drenched in salty spray. But they didn't care.



At last, the ocean began to throw up its treasures. Fourteen jewels, bigger and brighter than you have ever seen, spilled forth. Among them was the spectacular Kaustubha, a gem so magnificent that it could only be worn by Vishnu. As the asuras coughed and sputtered and reeled under the hot breath and poisonous fumes that came out of Vasuki's mouth, the ocean continued to produce wonder after wonder. Along with ninety-nine other horses that were as swift as the wind came Uchchaihshravas, the whitest of white horses. This was the horse that the sisters Vinata and Kadru



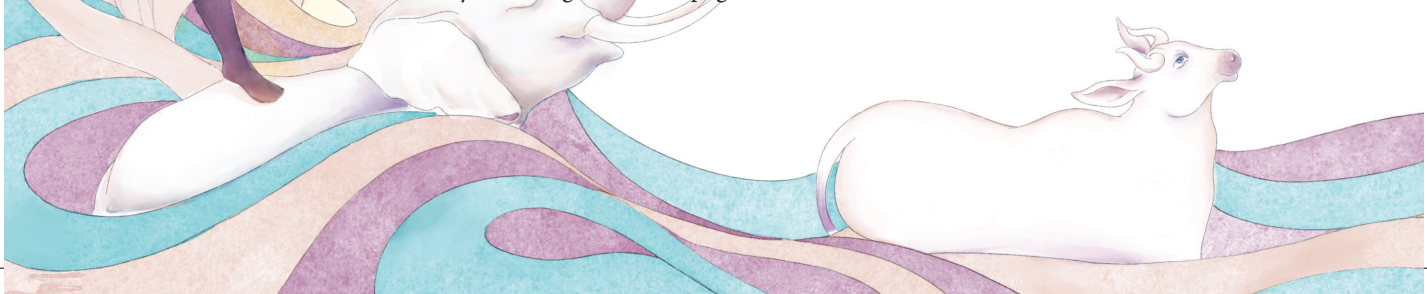
A woman with dark skin and hair in a bun, wearing a white sari, is sitting on a large, gnarled tree trunk. She is looking towards the right. The tree has thick, twisted branches and a dense canopy of green leaves. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with rolling hills in shades of blue and purple.

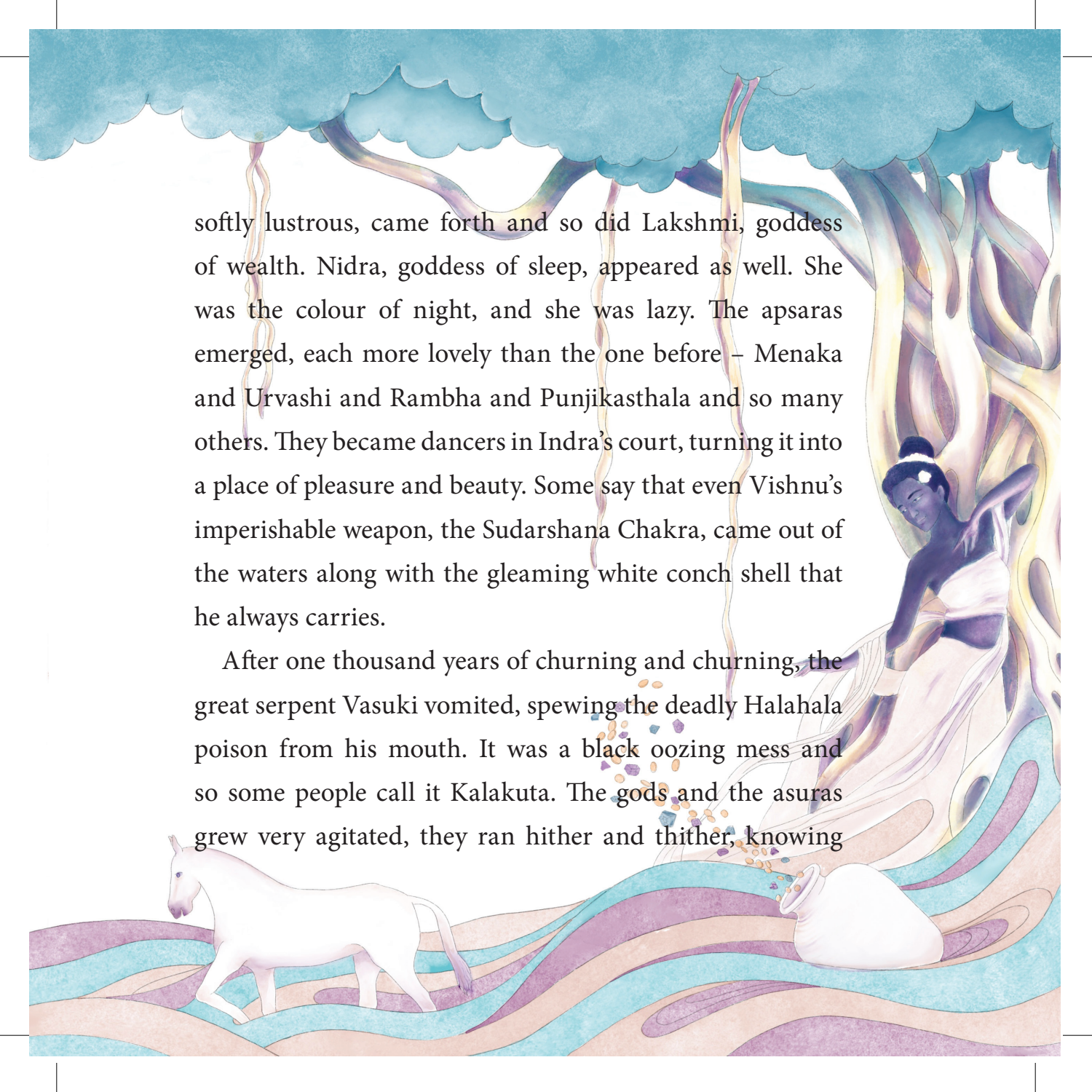
would argue over many years later.* Kamadhenu, the cow who could grant every wish, also came out of the ocean,** as did Kalpavriksha, the wishing tree. Another divine tree, the sweet-smelling Parijata, emerged and went to Nandana, Indra's garden. A long time later, Krishna stole the tree and brought it to earth to make his wives happy. But there was still more in store for Indra, king of the gods. The mighty Airavata, best of all the elephants in the three worlds, came out of the roaring waters and became Indra's mount.

A sweetly curved crescent moon rose from the waves and settled in Shiva's hair. Pearls of immeasurable beauty,

* Read the story 'Fine-Feathered Garuda' on page 46.

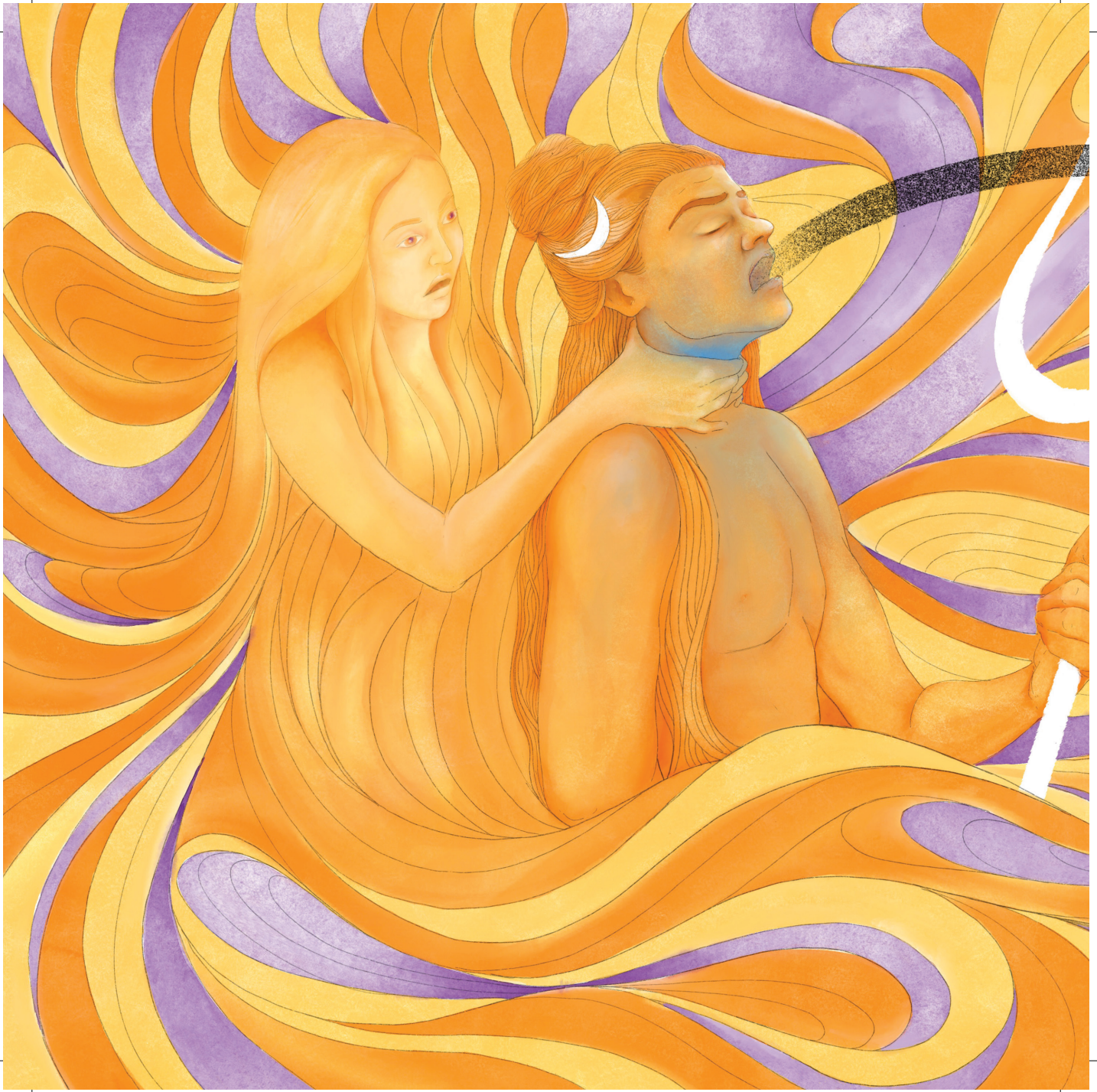
** Read the story 'The Magic Cow' on page 91.





softly lustrous, came forth and so did Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. Nidra, goddess of sleep, appeared as well. She was the colour of night, and she was lazy. The apsaras emerged, each more lovely than the one before – Menaka and Urvashi and Rambha and Punjikasthala and so many others. They became dancers in Indra’s court, turning it into a place of pleasure and beauty. Some say that even Vishnu’s imperishable weapon, the Sudarshana Chakra, came out of the waters along with the gleaming white conch shell that he always carries.

After one thousand years of churning and churning, the great serpent Vasuki vomited, spewing the deadly Halahala poison from his mouth. It was a black oozing mess and so some people call it Kalakuta. The gods and the asuras grew very agitated, they ran hither and thither, knowing



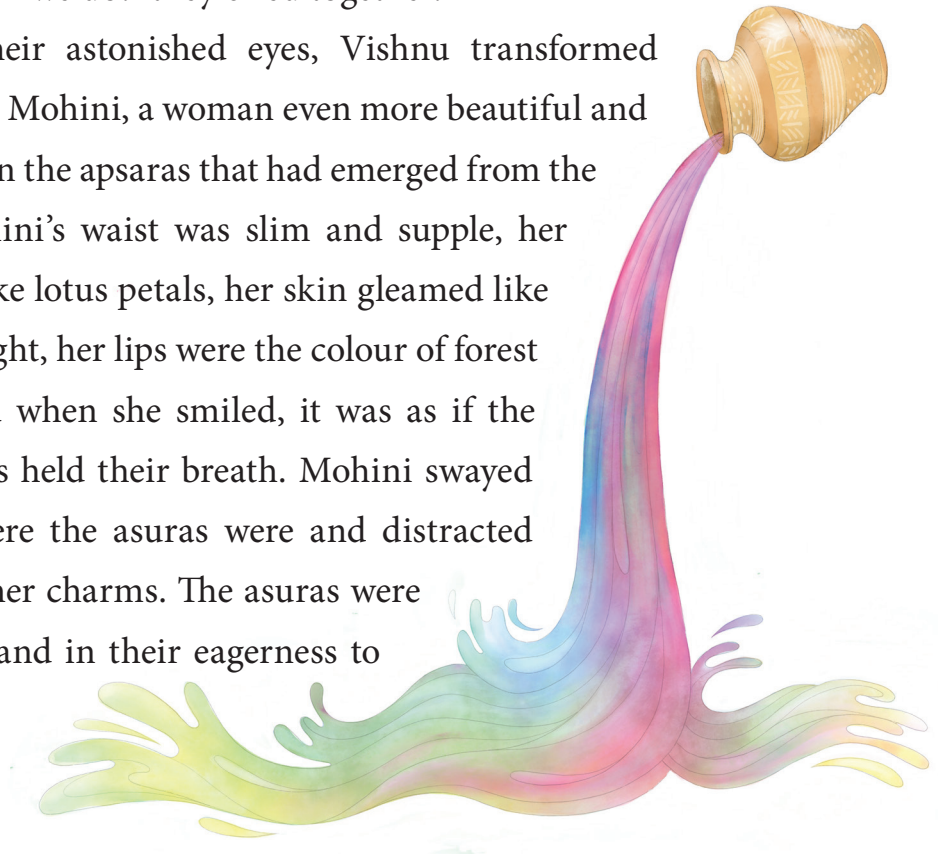


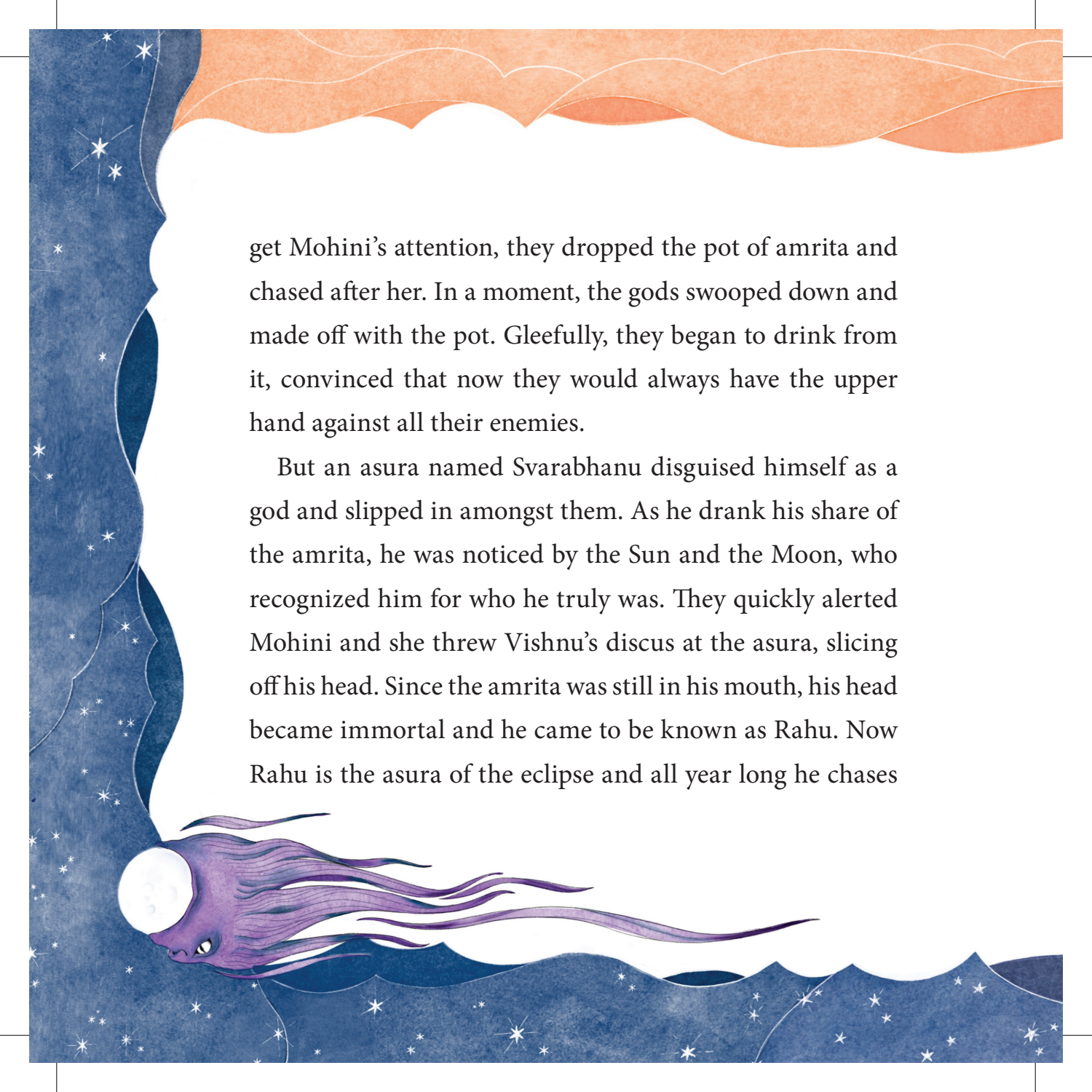
that nothing in the world could counter Halahala. Shiva was watching the commotion from far away and he knew that only he could help. He came down from his mountain and offered to swallow the poison. He drank it quickly – his eyes turned red, his cheeks bulged, sweat poured from his forehead, his head snapped backwards. Shiva's wife, Parvati, feared for her husband's life and she clasped her hands around his throat, stopping the poison from entering the rest of his body. Shiva recovered but the power of the poison had stained his throat forever blue.

At long last, Dhanvantari (who was to become the gods' physician), stepped out of the waters, holding a pot. In it was amrita, the nectar of immortality, the miraculous potion that could defeat death, the drink that everyone had been waiting for. The gods and the asuras dropped Vasuki and ran towards Dhanvantari and the pot. The asuras got there first

and made off with the precious liquid. The gods wailed and beat their breasts. As usual, they went running to Vishnu and threw themselves at his feet. ‘The nectar of immortality, that amrita, was supposed to be for us. Now the asuras have it! What shall we do?’ they cried together.

Before their astonished eyes, Vishnu transformed himself into Mohini, a woman even more beautiful and alluring than the apsaras that had emerged from the ocean. Mohini’s waist was slim and supple, her eyes were like lotus petals, her skin gleamed like soft moonlight, her lips were the colour of forest berries, and when she smiled, it was as if the three worlds held their breath. Mohini swayed over to where the asuras were and distracted them with her charms. The asuras were enchanted, and in their eagerness to





get Mohini's attention, they dropped the pot of amrita and chased after her. In a moment, the gods swooped down and made off with the pot. Gleefully, they began to drink from it, convinced that now they would always have the upper hand against all their enemies.

But an asura named Svarabhanu disguised himself as a god and slipped in amongst them. As he drank his share of the amrita, he was noticed by the Sun and the Moon, who recognized him for who he truly was. They quickly alerted Mohini and she threw Vishnu's discus at the asura, slicing off his head. Since the amrita was still in his mouth, his head became immortal and he came to be known as Rahu. Now Rahu is the asura of the eclipse and all year long he chases



the Sun and the Moon across the skies seeking revenge for what they did to him. Every now and then, Rahu catches up with them. He swallows them and holds them in his mouth, but just for a little while, for the Sun and the Moon are protected by the gods.

