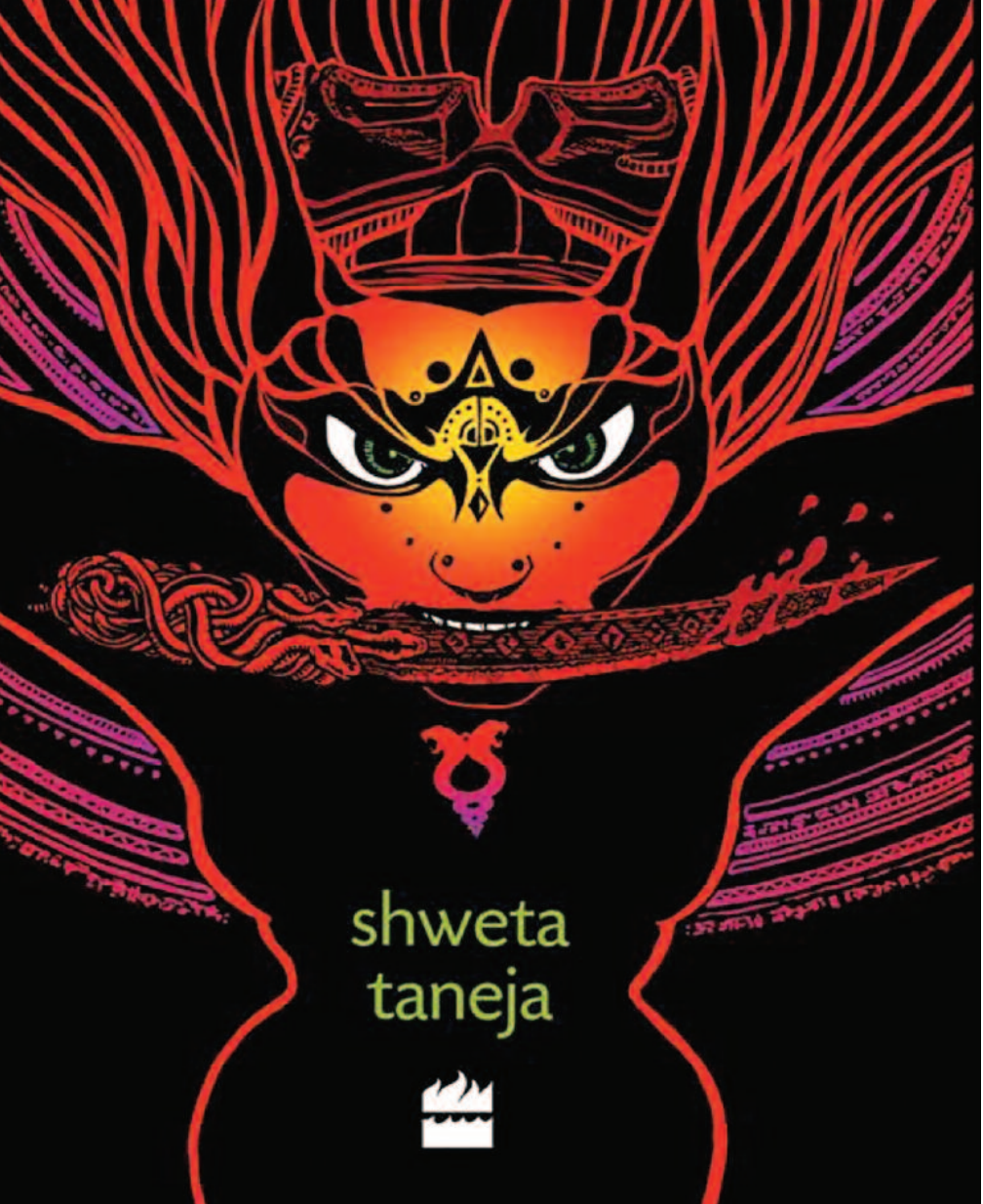


CULT OF CHAOS

AN ANANTYA TANTRIST MYSTERY



shweta
taneja



An excerpt from
Cult of Chaos:
An Anantya Tantrist Mystery

Shweta Taneja

‘Ah, you practise tantrism, do you?’ he said, looking at the cuts and abrasions on my fingers. ‘A beautiful lady and a tantrik?’ An electrical charge passed up my arm. I clenched my teeth together. There was more to Vajrin than met the eye. The power he exuded wasn’t human. ‘I should probably stay away. Tantriks seem to have a temper.’

‘Well, you sure chose the wrong one for the stage,’ I replied.

He chuckled. It sounded like a spring breeze. ‘I wonder if you are the right one. Wait for a while and see the next act of the evening. It might feel like, how should I put it ... a revelation or a reunion? It was nice to meet you, Anantya ... Tantrist. I hope we meet again when there’s more time to chat.’

He winked, threw a kiss in Dakini’s direction and left. Dakini sighed.

‘Isn’t he a dish? If you hadn’t become so pally with Nikhil, I could have fixed you up with him. He definitely has more class.’

She dragged me to the bar, where we ordered a Patiala peg of scotch each and I listened in to Luv-Kush. There was no conversation there. Vajrin was back on stage. I stared at him and wondered if I should put on my septifocals, and see what he turned out to be in the second or seventh vision planes. He moved with the grace of a tiger; sexual magnetism at every turn.

‘Now for the last act of our magical evening, friends. Some of you have been questioning the idea of tantrism. Some of you might even think of it as superstition. I understand. If you haven’t seen something, it doesn’t exist, right? Now I am going to show you something that you might think belongs in the movies, not real life. How many of you have heard of vampires?’

Most hands shot up. Not mine. Vampires had become part of the popular culture recently with books and films dedicated to them. There had been a case recently when a boy had reported a vampire sighting and I had gone to investigate, only to discover that it was just a little ghoul.

‘What you are about to see could be scary and dangerous,’ Vajrin whispered. The lights dimmed and silence engulfed the hall. You could only see his eyes staring out from the smoky darkness. ‘But I am ready to show you this so that you believe. You believe that the power of iMagic, the power of tantrism, is the power to control the universe, especially evil powers that might affect all our lives. May I request older people to step back a little? Heart patients and pregnant ladies, please stay away.’

There was pin-drop silence in the hall. Everyone looked around, excitement shining in their eyes, all waiting for a glimpse of the danger that the creature would bring. The sophisticated, diamond-wearing, designer-clothed party-goers had become a predatory gang of wolves on the hunt together. Vajrin Mahendra sure knew how to entertain Delhiites.

'... I have to confess, Antz,' said Dakini.

'Huh?'

'I have been a really bad girl, you know. I should ... but I'd hoped it would work out ... I so want it to.'

I looked at her, perplexed. She was standing in front of me (I was seated on a high bar stool), her large manicured hands were tightly wrapped around my smaller grubby ones. I noticed her nails were painted purple. Her eyes were ... worried, looking deep black in the blue frozen lights. 'There's someone I want you to meet. I hope ... I hope you won't think of me as being too much of a bad gal.'

She moved to one side. My heart skipped a beat. Riju stood in front of me, smiling his sappy smile. The smile that used to make me laugh. I used to call him a rabbit because of the way his teeth protruded when he smiled. I froze as he moved towards me, hands extended for a hug.

'Anu!'

My hands curled into fists in my lap. Riju. The joker. Yogi Riju, I corrected myself. He had moved up the ladder since I had last seen him. He looked ... different, too. Grown up. He wore a black dhoti with a patka as was required of anyone at the level of Yogi or higher. Somehow, the garb made him more serious, more ... official, although he was only a few years older to me. Even the way he used to carry himself, like his head was too heavy for him, had changed. He stood taller and more confident. He used to be skinnier, but now he looked fleshed out. A gold medallion of the triangular Kaula signet sat on his hairy chest. His hair had turned prematurely grey; he used to wear it in short brown spikes.

'What the hell are you doing here?' I asked, my voice harsh, as memories poured in. Us smoking pot together. Our first. Riju had been like a brother, an elder brother. The only one I could call my brother. Who had been there with me always. I had shared everything with him, my fears, disgusts, experiences. Then it had all changed, when I had left the ashram. When he had turned his back on me. NO! I didn't want to remember. Not that. I got off the bar stool with a jerk.

'Anu, please! Listen, please!' he said, trying to stall me.

'Stay away from me!' I shrugged him off.

His hands dropped, his eyes moist. Too much had happened in our past. Besides, he wasn't Riju, I reminded myself. He was an official of Kaula Ashram. He was not my friend. No one from the ashram was. I looked at Dakini in anger. She had a sympathetic expression in her eyes.

'And we are done too,' I whispered. 'This so wasn't --'

There was a lump in my throat suddenly. I couldn't think of anything more to say. I picked up my bag and started to move towards the exit, something threatening to crash inside me. Riju, who had smiled and let go of me, in favour of the ashram. No, I couldn't ever forget or forgive that. That chapter of my life was closed. It didn't matter. Bloody Kaulas, they never leave you alone.

'Antz!'

I didn't look back, heading towards the main door, my head down. I wanted to get away from here as soon as possible.

'ANTZ! STOP!'

I banged into something cold, colder than the frigid place I was in. Someone exclaimed behind me. I looked up to see a beautiful, god-like creature. His cold but delicate hands held my shoulders through my fur coat. I could feel a tingling through my coat, on my skin. He smiled, his eyes staring deep into my eyes. A numbness began to flood through me. His eyes were pools of desire. I smiled. I was happy. Here was someone who would take care of me. Finally. It was a good thought. I let myself go and kissed him on the mouth, wanting, desiring this god-like creature from the bottom of my heart. Someone tugged at me. I clung on. I didn't want to let go of this blissful, beautiful feeling. But the pull was strong and I was pried loose from the heavenly creature. Then someone slapped me.

'Antz, Antz! Stop it!' Slap! Something above me was glittering. My eyes were glazed. Another slap. My head lolled, moving from side to side.

'What ... happened?'

'You just kissed a bloody vampire, that's what happened,' replied Dakini as her concerned face solidified in front of me. 'What the hell were you thinking? Clinging to him like a leech?'

I shook my heavy head. The spell had shattered, leaving what felt like a hangover. As I was saying, I had never met a vampire before. Well, obviously I didn't know everything in the world.

'... as you can see, it's really easy for them to control your emotions and enthrall, especially the female of any species. But even males will not escape their spell. I will show you just how in a minute. Stand back, everybody.'

I stood up, precariously steadying myself with Dakini's help. That blood-creature had been strong. I looked back at him. There he stood, smirking. He licked his lips with a long tongue. I touched my lips, which were still numb from the kiss. People were giggling at us. Blood rushed to my cheeks. Of all the stupid things to do. I had just ended up making a complete fool of myself. I took out my boneblade and stared at it, wondering if I should plunge it into his heart.

The vampire gasped, like he was suffocating, which was funny as vampires are actually dead and don't really breathe (or so I've heard). That's when I noticed the Vama. He stared at me, his eyes like coals. He stood there, practically naked but for a red loincloth. Vamas, a Red tantrik clan. His forehead and arms were covered in ash, his long hair was dirty and matted.

He wore a necklace made of what looked like the bones of human fingers, but that was just for effect. The real symbol he wore was a huge scorpion tattooed on his chest, with its tail disappearing into the small loincloth. It was his soulbeast. For a Vama, a soulbeast was like a mate you share your soul with, the animal you become and with which you wield your power. Vamas choose their soulbeast really seriously. The scorpion looked alive, as if it was crawling on his belly, up towards his neck. The Vama expertly pulled the vampire towards him with something that looked like a long red claw. I noticed that his hand had scorpion pincers etched on each finger. The Vama's muscles rippled as he walked; his body had been oiled to perfection. I had met Vamas in the jungle during my student days, but never seen one in the city. They avoided crowds, stayed in isolation, as they practised forbidden magic. He looked alien, like something from another world. Which was how people seemed to be treating him too.

'... welcome, Mattreya, who has captured this vampire and brought him here tonight for all of you to see. You don't need to worry about the vampire as long as this man is on our side. The evil that lurks in this vampire's heart is like a cancer ...'

Mattreya was followed by two younger men, one fat and the other thin and tall. His apprentices, I reckoned, as both were without tattoos and hadn't chosen their soulbeast yet.

'... it has become his very nature to drink human blood. It cannot be cured by any amount of goodness. Now Mattreya needs a volunteer – who will help him? Who will willingly give her arm to the vampire to help demonstrate to everyone how a tantrik can protect you?'

Everyone took a few steps back. The apprentice walked towards the stage. Whispers spread like wildfire in the crowd. I stood on one side, spellbound. What was he planning to do?

'Ah, we have a volunteer.'

Mohini offered her arm to the vampire. The vampire, overcome with hunger (and he did look famished), lunged towards the girl, snarling to show his extended canine teeth. The crowd gasped. A few of them took photographs with their mobile phones, which were immediately confiscated by the bouncers. The vamp now looked more like a hungry animal than a civilised god. I touched my lips.

'... the only kindness we can show him is to put him out of his misery, like a fatally injured animal ...'

Mattreya came forward and stared at the crowd. He raised his hands in the air. The action made him look like a scorpion, standing on its tail. Everyone stood still. He began to emit noises from deep within his throat and then looked at the audience with burning, poisonous eyes. People surged forward, curiosity sparkling in their eyes. A couple of women, whose diamonds glittered in the darkness, pointed their fingers at him.

'Does it hurt?' a middle-aged woman asked Mohini. She smiled, weakly. We could see her visibly weakening as the vampire continued to suck her blood.

'Stop it!' cried someone from the audience.

'But Mattreya, like iMagic, won't act until he hears your will. Mind power, the shakti in all of you, that's what works here. You have to say it, you have to command! You will have to

tell him that you want to kill the creature. Tell him quickly before he sucks all of the girl's blood. Kill or save? Kill or save! Vajrin's voice echoed in the silent hall.

'Kill!' shouted someone from behind. Everybody turned around, horror etched on their faces. For a second I thought they would say no, but then the chant started. It built up slowly and steadily until it reached a crescendo.

Kill, kill, KILL!

The decision was made. Mattreya raised his clawed hands towards the ceiling. He looked at us, his discoloured, crooked teeth in a snarl as he yanked the vampire away from Mohini. Blood dribbled from the vampire's mouth.

'Bhagute, bhutey, bhukanatha, namaha!'

Mattreya's claw-like left hand rose again and sank deep into the vampire's neck. There was a collective cry. Those who had been standing too close to the stage were splattered with blood. There was a second's silence and then everyone started to clap in unison. A monster had been destroyed. Nobody seemed to care that it was another monster that had done it.

'This is what iMagic can do for you. Destroy all the evil in your path. Conquer the universe so that nothing can come in your way.'

I couldn't quite see the connection between killing a vampire and owning a device, but it definitely left the crowd on a high note. The Vama picked up the head of the vampire by its hair and showed it to the audience. They cheered and clapped.

'Mattreya! Mattreya! Mattreya!'

The vampire's body lay on the stage, wilting in plain sight as blood gushed from it. Someone behind me retched. I turned around to find Dakini throwing up over her stilettos.

'Why the hell would someone do this in a civilised party,' she bellowed when she regained her voice. She wiped the puke from her face. 'I think I will leave right—'

'HOW DARE YOU DO THIS? INVITE SOILED, OBSCENE, RED FILTH HERE?'

Nasty stood in front of Vajrin, his right hand outstretched, staff pointed threateningly. Riju tried to hold him back, but Nasty was furious, his dark eyes burning in the dim light. This was going to be interesting, I thought, amused. First a Vama glory show and now a Kaula standoff. The clans of Vamas and Kaulas hated each other's guts. It had been murder, every time they met. The establishment of CAT had brokered an uneasy truce between them. At least no one had killed the other since, publicly that is. They could never trust each other completely because they just didn't trust the other's tantrism style. Kaulas were White tantriks, who used sexual energy to tap into shakti. They hated sacrifices or blood. Vamas, the Red tantriks, revelled in killing, choosing soulbeasts, sacrificing animals and hoarding the shakti created from those. They were completely different kinds of magic. And Vajrin had invited both to his party. He sure would make the headlines the next day.

'Death-bringers like him should stay in the wild, which is where they belong, gorging on meat from innocents!'

Mattreya stood behind Vajrin. I could see from the way his fingers were itching that he was quite riled and this could lead to a tantrik showdown. The vampire's not-quite-dead body continued to twitch on the blood-drenched stage. The guests stood still in anticipation. Oh, Nasty would get a nasty surprise as fallout for this outburst the next day. CAT didn't like tantrik ego clashes in public, especially since they were trying really hard to build a positive image for themselves. The Kaulas had closed rooms and secret organisations to kill Vamas.

Nasty seemed unstoppable though. 'This is a slap in the face for the Association! We have never been insulted like this. I wish I could turn you into a slimy mass of worms! It was a mistake! You were a mistake! I will complain about this to the Council ...'

Vajrin's beefy guards lined up, ready to drag Nasty out of the premises. But Vajrin signalled to them to back off.

'... you have some obligations to Kaulas. It's not for nothing that we brought you here. You are stuck with us whether you like it or not. If you carry on in this vein ...' Nasty was red in the face and screaming now.

'Narahara, I have done nothing. Nothing yet, that is!' Vajrin's voice was strangely calm, considering Narahara had had the gall to threaten him in his own house, in front of about three hundred people. I wondered what kind of dope Nasty had on Vajrin.

'I am the one who is responsible for your behaviour. I am the representative of the Council. I am the Council for you and you will heed my command, or else—'

'I know who you are, Swami Narahara,' replied Vajrin smoothly, as he placed his arm around Nasty's shoulders and propelled him away to a dark corner, 'as do all my guests, but it's a lovely night and we have just announced a beautiful device together. Why don't we drink instead of fighting, eh?'

As if on cue, the music grew louder. The audience lost interest and moved towards the bar; some of them got on the dance floor. They were back to their drinking and partying as if all of that had been just part of the entertainment for the evening. My phone rang. It was Madhu. The music had become too loud for me to answer it, so I headed out. I found a quiet spot outside and lit up a beedi, taking a deep puff. There was something about the small pleasures of life. Pleasures in a beedi. Pleasures in blood, drinking it, seeing it bleed from a sup and how it gave people a high. Humans were slaves to pleasure. It had always been like that. The people in the party tonight loved all types of highs – be it charak or bloodletting. I remembered Mohini, standing around, licking the splattered vampire blood off her arm. I stubbed out my beedi and called Madhu.

'Anantya, you had better come here now,' he said without a hello. He gave me an address and hung up.



Shweta Taneja

Glossary to Anantya Tantrik's fantasy universe

beedi: a thin Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flakes and wrapped in a tendu leaf. It's cheap and unfiltered.

Central Authority of Tantriks: CAT for short. This is a cohesive body created in 2009, recognised by the Indian government to oversee law and govern all activities of tantriks and supernaturals.

chandaali: creatures who are known for their shakti-filled special blood called rakta. The females of the species are the ones who produce rakta and are usually pets of tantriks, who kill the males. Their blood is used by tantriks in powerful rituals.

charak: charak is the diluted blood of a female chandaali, used as a recreational drug by tantriks and humans to sharpen animal instincts. It's highly addictive.

Kaula: White tantriks, they use sexual intercourse to tap into shakti in tantric rituals. They call themselves white because they don't sacrifice any animals or use blood in their magic.

Luv-Kush: Twin insects born together, which can relay sound energy from one to the other, making them great for listening in to someone.

Narahara: or Nasty, as Anantya nicknames him, is her step-brother. Now he's the technology head in Central Authority of Tantriks.

septifocals: vision goggles made of bone and glass which Anantya uses to see all seven planes of existence and the supernaturals invisible to the naked human eye. All seven planes have seven different colours through the septifocals.

shakti: the magical power which moves the entire universe. A tantrik harnesses it to do magic. The word can also mean a goddess.

soulbeast: the Vama tantriks, on maturation, tie their human souls with an animal soul chosen by them. They then wield the animal power in the world. This animal becomes their soulbeast.

sup: slang for 'supernatural' or anyone who is not a tantrik or a human.

tantrik: a human who knows how to perform tantrism or any occult magical art. According to CAT, a recognised tantrik is a male who is an occult magician belonging to a recognised cult or ashram and follows any one of the codified practices of a tantrik ashram, be it Red or White Tantrism.

Tantrism: The art of using shakti through magical practices, rituals and incantations for power or for changes in the universe according to your own wishes. Tantriks are taught in the apprenticeship tradition where a guru gives them knowledge and teaches them the ropes of his (or her) particular tradition. There are three kinds of Tantrism: White Tantrism, which use white fluids (discharges in sex, be it semen or vaginal fluid), Red Tantrism, which uses animal sacrifice and one's own blood, and Black Tantrism, which uses the power created by sacrificing human beings. Red Tantriks are frowned upon by CAT but accepted; Black Tantrism is completely illegal and punished with death.

Vama: Red tantriks, they tap shakti through bones of powerful dead animals. Each Vama chooses his soulbeast, an animal with whom he joins his soul. This beast-human soul is the one that does magic.

yogi: a person who is an expert at yoga