

## JUST A LITTLE MORE

Mrs Maria Manupali had been happily retired for five years when she got a call from her former assistant. The woman she had known as little Shibi Sushal was now the head of a large media corporation worth hundreds of crores, and she wanted to propose an idea to her old mentor. Ms Sushal had just come across a television show concept that needed a capable producer and she couldn't trust anyone on her current roster to get the execution right. The show, *Vizhupuram*, would be a dramatic retelling of the downfall of the once great kingdom; answering a question that many asked. This subject was wide in scope but delicate in detail, and so Mrs Manupali was offered the deal of a lifetime - come out of retirement for one more job and she would be so well rewarded she could spend the rest of her life in a gold-plated house, bathing in milk and honey, with servants tending to her every need.

Surprisingly the money didn't appeal to Mrs Manupali that much, as she had already made her wealth. The idea of ending her career with a bang though...

Mrs Manupali's last project before she quit was released with a whimper, lambasted by critics accusing it of being a product of a bygone era and tone-deaf to modern sensibilities, too idiosyncratic and aged. Alas she had decided to leave the industry regardless and spent the next five years coming to terms with the failure of what was meant to be her magnum opus. So now this opportunity knocked too loud to ignore.

Mrs Manupali touched down in Vizhupuram and practically lept out of her coat, throwing it to the new assistant she had been assigned, so constant were the humidity and heat. A driver held up her name on a bone-white sign card then they were whisked away to their residence. Mrs Manupali would be hosted on the top floor in an executive suite; an exaggeration, as Vizhupuram's only hotel had but three storeys. The two were alone in the entire building, aside from the owner of the establishment, one Krishnaram Nair, a shifty greedy creature. The man would not do anything without immediately following it by holding out his hands for a tip. Mrs Manupali shrewdly picked up on his behaviour though and soon sent her assistant Lissy out to split one hundred rupees into small divisions of paise, much to Krishnaram's chagrin.

Mrs Manupali began her research gathering mission, speaking to historians, locals and tour guides about the ruin of the city around them. It wasn't easy. The story she had been sent to create was once that had fascinated people for years - how did this site, which was known far and wide as being a place of plenty, of abundance and riches, destroy itself so quickly to become the squalid den of wretches and perpetual dampness it was today. The government here were gangsters, the people not much different. Crime of many levels happened daily, and Mrs Manupali

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required a constant security presence - all paid for of course, by Shibi Sushal's company.

Every single person she met gave Mrs Manupali the sense that they expected something of her. For some it was obvious - Krishnaram increased the price of the rooms after a week and menus mysteriously became unavailable at nearby restaurants. But others still would ask for jobs, food, her attention. At first she'd humour them then later her security cottoned-on and stepped in. Even the people she interviewed needed bribes to speak, and wanted to tell the story their way. She could not trust anyone to be acting in a way that was pure and unselfish.

Mrs Manupali followed her own clear vision though and after a few months, armed with mounds of notes and paperwork she returned to the company office to work with a writer's room to develop the show.

But staring into the abyss in Vizhupuram did not fail to leave its mark on her. Where once Mrs Manupali had been renowned for her fairness and diplomacy, reports of various 'incidents' soon came onto Ms Sushal's desk. The writers felt they were being stifled and losing their creative voices to an overbearing presence who would only accept one person's ideas - her own. At first Ms Sushal ignored these complaints, giving the benefit of the doubt to her former boss, thinking that perhaps these indiscretions were just the side-effects of ageing. Eventually though, a writer quit, then another, and another until there was finally only one writer left on the project. This person was Lissy, who had only stayed because she had been offered a hefty bribe. For that amount of money she could endure the gross mistreatment she suffered for a little longer.

When the scripts were presented to Ms Sushal she breathed a sigh of relief. Though the material could have done with a polish, now the buck could be passed to a capable production crew of directors, cinematographers and editors, the project moving out of Mrs Manupali's sphere of control. Alas this was not to be. For some reason, similar accounts of abuse would make their way to her, but this time they would be rescinded just as quick. It seemed the wily producer had realised that just like in Vizhupuram, money spoke and she was working her way around, buying into every department, the show taking shape exactly as she liked.

It wasn't until the show came to completion and was being prepared for release that Shibi Sushal realised exactly what shady dealings were happening right under her nose. A small argument broke out among the executives, who thought the show did not speak to their target audience and Mrs Manupali had not followed the brief she had been assigned. Ms Sushal defended the project and tried to negotiate more time for a woman she believed could get the job done. Mrs Manupali however, was not interested in negotiations. She called to her assistant who brought over a briefcase, which she slammed open on the table. It was blatantly full of cash. The message was clear. The room exploded in outrage.

From this reaction it would appear that Mrs Manupali had at last come across one group that she couldn't convince. Infact, within a week even the executives changed their minds; some swiftly, some needing encouragement

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from familiar large men in suits who followed them around in an intimidating manner.

Shibi Sushal didn't know what to do. She had lost control of the project, of her staff, of the company. It was not a good look and Mrs Manupali made it very clear that unless she was careful her former assistant could easily be replaced. There were many people waiting in the wings for her position, not least Mrs Manupali's new assistant.

That's why it was a massive shock when Lissy approached Ms Sushal with a bombshell - her boss was broke. Having not been paid yet, Mrs Manupali's 'gifts' came from her own pocket. She had been spending money lavishly until now under the certainty the *Vizhupuram* would be a success, but now only held power with threats of blackmail. No one dared speak out against her, lest they themselves were revealed for being felonious. The only person who was free of this golden web of deceit was the one in control of the funds.

Shibi Sushal called Mrs Manupali into her office for the final time. It proved to be a very tense meeting. What could have been a simple warning for the ambitious producer cost her very dearly, as she slipped into a tirade threatening, belittling and finally launching attacks at the other woman's character.

Through all of this, Shibi Sushal stood her ground. She had worked for this manipulative, cunning person for decades, admiring her skills and hoping that one day she too would be able to replicate a sliver of Mrs Manupali's brilliance. Now it was clear that the woman she knew was no more. She had been replaced by a creature of greed.

So with no remaining choice, Shibi Sushal cancelled the show.

As quickly as she had risen, Mrs Manupali crashed through the false floors she'd built, spat on from above by those who'd once enjoyed her presents and turned a blind eye to her behaviour. The money had dried up. Destitute, Mrs Manupali returned to the only place that would accept a wretch like her, where she fit in like a local - *Vizhupuram*. There, she made a home among the swampland and befriended thieves and cut-throats, but even they did not trust her.

Lissy, who had been at her boss's side through the entire development process and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the project, was promptly promoted to producer of the show. Helmed by a capable young star, *Vizhupuram* was released to rave reviews and ended up kickstarting a long and illustrious career. But Ms Sushal watched her ward with a close wary eye. She just couldn't risk making a mistake like that again. Not when she'd come so close to losing it all.

So for Lissy, the money never stopped flowing.