



Chapter 2

Sailing Down the Sarayu

‘Tell Princess Anandmayi,’ said Parvateshwar to the Captain of the Women’s Guard at Anandmayi’s palace entrance, ‘that General Parvateshwar is waiting outside.’

‘She had told me she was expecting you, General,’ said the Captain bowing low. ‘May I request you to wait a moment while I go and check on her?’

As the Captain walked into Anandmayi’s chamber, Parvateshwar turned around. Shiva had made him in-charge of the expedition to Kashi. Shiva knew if he left the organisation to one of Ayodhya’s administrators, they would probably be debating the mode of transport for the next three years. Parvateshwar, with his typical Suryavanshi efficiency, had seen to the arrangements within a week. The contingent was to travel east down the Sarayu on royal boats, to the city of Magadh, where the river merged into the mighty Ganga. From there, they would turn west to sail up the Ganga to *Kashi, the city where the supreme light shines*.

Parvateshwar had been inundated with inane requests from some of the Ayodhya nobility who were taking the opportunity to travel with the Neelkanth. He did plan to honour some strange appeals, like one from a superstitious nobleman who wanted his boat to leave exactly thirty two minutes after the beginning of the third prahar. Others he had flatly refused, such as a request from another nobleman for his boat to be staffed only by women. The General was quite sure that Anandmayi must also have some special arrangements she wanted made.

Like carrying a ship hold of milk for her beauty baths!

The Captain was back shortly. ‘You may go in, General.’

Parvateshwar marched in smartly, bowed his head, saluted as he must to royalty and spoke out loud, ‘What is it you want, Princess?’

‘You needn’t be so coy, General. You can look up.’

Parvateshwar looked up. Anandmayi was lying on her stomach next to a picture window overlooking the royal gardens. Kanini, her masseuse, was working her magic on the princess’ exotic and supple body. Anandmayi only had one piece of cloth draped loosely from her lower back to her upper thighs. The rest of her, a feast for his eyes.

‘Beautiful view, isn’t it?’ asked Anandmayi.

Parvateshwar blushed a deep red, his head bowed, eyes turned away. To Anandmayi, he appeared to be like the rare cobra male that bows his head to its mate at the beginning of their mating dance, as though accepting the superiority of its partner.

‘I’m sorry, Princess. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.’

‘Why should you apologise for looking at the royal gardens, General? It is allowed.’

Parvateshwar, a lifelong celibate, was mollified. It did not appear as though Anandmayi had misunderstood his intentions. He whispered in a soft voice, eyes on the floor, ‘What can I do for you, Princess?’

‘It’s quite simple really. A little further south down the Sarayu is the spot where Lord Ram had stopped with his Guru Vishwamitra and brother Lakshman on his way to slay the demon Tadaka. It is the spot where Maharishi Vishwamitra taught Lord Ram the arts of Bal and Atibal, the fabled route to eternal good health and freedom from hunger and thirst. I would like to halt there and offer a puja to the Lord.’

Parvateshwar, pleased at her devotion to Lord Ram, smiled. ‘Of course, we can stop there Princess. I will make the arrangements. Would you need any special provisions?’

'None whatsoever. An honest heart is all that is needed for a prayer to reach the Lord.' Parvateshwar looked up for a brief moment, impressed. Anandmayi's eyes, however, seemed to be mocking him. He growled softly. 'Anything else, Princess?' Anandmayi grimaced. She was not getting the reaction that she had desired. 'Nothing else, General.'

Parvateshwar saluted smartly and left the room.

Anandmayi kept staring at Parvateshwar's retreating form. She sighed loudly and shook her head.

'Gather around please,' said the Pandit, 'we will commence the puja.'

Shiva's contingent was at Bal-Atibal kund, where Guru Vishwamitra had taught Lord Ram his legendary skills.

The Neelkanth was unhappy that many of Ayodhya's nobility had inveigled their way into the voyage to Kashi. What should have been a super-fast five ship convoy had turned into a lethargic fifty ship caravan. The straightforward Parvateshwar had found it difficult to deny the convoluted logic of the Chandravanshi nobility. Therefore, Shiva was delighted that Bhagirath had found an ingenious method to cut down the numbers. Craftily, he had suggested to one noble that he should rush to Kashi and set up a welcoming committee for the Neelkanth, and thus gain favour with the powerful Lord. Seeing one noble hustle away, many others had followed, in a mad dash to be the first to herald the arrival of the Neelkanth at Kashi. Within hours, the convoy had been reduced to the size that Shiva desired.

The puja platform had been set up some fifty metres from the riverbank. It was believed that anyone who conducted this prayer with full devotion would never be inflicted with disease. Shiva, Sati, Parvateshwar, Ayurvati, Bhagirath and Anandmayi sat in the innermost circle next to the Pandit. Others like Nandi, Veerbhadra, Drapaku, Krittika and the men of the joint Suryavanshi-Chandravanshi brigade sat a little further back. The earnest Brahmin was reciting Sanskrit shlokas in the exact same intonations that had been taught to him by his Guru.

Sati was uneasy. She had an uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching her. For some strange reason, she felt intense hatred directed at her. Along with that she also felt boundless love and profound sadness. Confused, she opened her eyes. She turned her head to her left. Every single person had his eyes closed, in accordance with the guidelines of this particular puja. She then turned to the right and started as she saw Shiva gazing directly at her. His eyes open wide, reflecting an outpouring of love, Shiva's face sported a slight smile.

Sati frowned at her husband, gesturing with her eyes that he should concentrate on his prayers. Shiva, however, pursed his lips together and blew her a kiss. A startled Sati frowned even more. Her Suryavanshi sensibilities felt offended at such frivolous behaviour, which she considered a violation of the code. Shiva pouted like a spoilt child, closed his eyes and turned towards the fire. Sati turned too, eyes closed, allowing herself a slight smile at the fact that she had been blessed with an adoring husband.

But she still felt she was being watched. Stared at intently.

The last ship of the Neelkanth's convoy turned round the bend in the Sarayu. With his enemies out of sight, the Naga emerged from the trees. He walked briskly to the place where the Brahmin had just conducted the puja. He was followed by the Queen of the Nagas and a hundred armed men. They stopped at a polite distance from the Naga, leaving him alone.

Karkotak, Prime Minister to the Queen of the Nagas, looked up at the sky, judging the time. Then he looked disconcertedly at the Naga in the distance. He wondered why the Lord of the People, as the Naga was referred to in his lands, was so interested in this particular puja. The Lord had far greater powers and knowledge. Some even considered him better than the Naga Queen.

'Your Highness,' said Karkotak to the Queen, 'do you think it advisable to emphasise to the Lord of the People the importance of returning home?'

'When I want your advice, Karkotak,' said the Queen in a curt whisper, 'I will ask for it.' Karkotak immediately retreated, terrified as always of his Queen's temper.

The Queen turned back towards the Naga, her mind considering Karkotak's words. She had to admit that her Prime Minister was right. The Nagas had to return to their capital quickly. There was little time to waste. The *Rajya Sabha*, the Naga *Royal Council* was to be held soon. The issue of medical support to the Brangas would come up again. She knew that the severe cost of that support was turning many Nagas against the alliance with the Brangas, especially the peace-loving ones who wanted to live their ostracised lives quietly, calling it a product of their bad karma. And without the alliance, her vengeance was impossible. More importantly, she could not desert the Brangas in their hour of need when they had been unflinchingly loyal to her.

On the other hand, she could not abandon her nephew, the Lord of the People. He was troubled; the presence of that vile woman had disturbed his usual calm demeanour. He was taking unnecessary risks. Like the idiotic attack on Sati and Shiva at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. If he didn't want to kill her, why the hell did he put his own person in such grave peril? What if he had been killed? Or worse, caught alive? He had justified it later as an attempt to draw Sati out of Ayodhya, as capturing her within the city was impossible. For what it was worth, he had succeeded in drawing her out on a voyage to Kashi. But she was accompanied by her husband and a whole brigade. It was impossible to kidnap her.

The Queen saw her nephew move slightly. She stepped forward a little distance, motioning for Karkotak and the men to remain behind.

The Naga had taken out a knife from a newly built hold on his belt. It was the knife Sati had flung at him at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. He looked at it longingly, letting the blade run up his thumb. Its sharp edge cut his skin lightly. He shook his head angrily, dug the knife hard into the sand and turned around to walk towards the Queen.

He stopped abruptly. Oddly hesitant.

The Queen, clearly out of her nephew's earshot, willed her thoughts in a quiet whisper. 'Let it go, my child. It's not worth it. Let it go.'

The Naga stood rooted to his spot. Indecision weighed heavy on him. The men in the distance were shocked to see their Lord in such a weak state. To the Queen's dismay, the Naga turned around and walked back to the spot where he had buried the knife. He picked it up carefully, held it reverentially to his forehead and put it back into his side hold.

The Queen snorted in disgust and turned around, signalling Karkotak to come forward. She knew she had no choice. She would have to leave her nephew with bodyguards, while she herself would ride out towards Panchavati, her capital.

'Portage charges? What rubbish!' bellowed Siamantak, Ayodhya's Prime Minister. 'This ship belongs to the Emperor of Swadweep. It carries a very important individual, the most important in the land.'

Siamantak was in the pilot boat of Andhak, Port Minister of Magadh, who unlike typical Chandravanshis, was known to turn a blind eye to everything except the letter of the law. Siamantak turned to look nervously at the massive ship that carried the Neelkanth. Shiva was standing on the balustrade with Parvateshwar and Bhagirath. Siamantak was aware that Shiva wanted to stop at Magadh. He had expressed a desire to visit the Narsimha temple on the outskirts of the city. Siamantak did not want to disappoint the Neelkanth. However, if he paid portage charges for the ship, it would set a dangerous precedent. How could the Emperor's ship pay portage in his own empire? It would open a can of worms with all the river port kingdoms across the empire. The negotiations with Andhak were delicate.

'I don't care who the ship belongs to,' said Andhak. 'And I don't care if you have Lord Ram himself on that ship. The law is the law. Any ship that ports at Magadh has to pay portage. Why should Emperor Dilipa be worried about a small fee of one thousand gold coins?'

'It's not the money. It's the principle,' argued Siamantak.

'Precisely! It is the principle. So please pay up.'

Shiva was getting impatient. 'What the hell are they talking about for so long?'

'My Lord,' said Bhagirath. 'Andhak is the Port Minister. He must be insisting that the law of portage charges be followed. Siamantak cannot allow any ship owned by my father to pay portage. It is an insult to my father's fragile ego. Andhak is an idiot.'

'Why would you call a person who follows the law stupid?' frowned Parvateshwar. 'On the contrary, he should be respected.'

'Sometimes even circumstances should be looked at, General.'

'Prince Bhagirath, I can understand no circumstance under which the letter of the law should be ignored.'

Shiva did not want to witness yet another argument between the Suryavanshi and Chandravanshi way of life. 'What kind of ruler is the King of Magadh?'

'King *Mahendra*?' asked Bhagirath.

'Doesn't that mean *the conqueror of the world*?'

'Yes, it does, My Lord. But he does not do justice to that name. Magadh was a great kingdom once. In fact, there was a time when it was the overlord kingdom of Swadweep and its kings were widely respected and honoured. But as it happens with many great kings, their unworthy descendants frittered away the wealth and power of their kingdoms. They have been trying hard to live up to Magadh's past glory, but have been spectacularly unsuccessful. We share a prickly relationship with them.'

'Really, why?'

'Well, Ayodhya was the kingdom that defeated them more than three hundred years ago to become the overlord of Swadweep. It was a glorious Ashwamedh Yagna, for this was a time when Ayodhya had still not fallen prey to the wooden kings who rule it today. As you can imagine, Magadh was not quite pleased about the loss of status and revenue from tributes.'

'Yes, but three hundred years is a long time to carry a grudge!'

Bhagirath smiled. 'Kshatriyas have long memories, My Lord. And they still suffer from their defeat to Ayodhya. Magadh could theoretically benefit from the fact that it is at the confluence of two rivers. It becomes the most convenient trading hub for merchants travelling on river ports on the Sarayu or the Ganga. This advantage was negated after they lost the Ashwamedh to us. A ceiling was imposed on their portage and trading hub charges. And then, our enmity received a fresh lease of life a hundred years back.'

'And how did that happen?'

'There is a kingdom to the west, up the Ganga, called Prayag. It had historically been in close alliance with Magadh. In fact the ruling families are very closely related.'

'And...'

'And when the Yamuna changed course from Meluha and started flowing into Swadweep, it met the Ganga at Prayag,' said Bhagirath.

'That would have made Prayag very important?' asked Shiva.

'Yes, My Lord. Just like Magadh, it became a crucial junction for river trade. And unlike Magadh, it was not bound by any treaty on its portage and trading charges. Any trader or kingdom wanting to settle or trade in the newly opened hinterlands of the Yamuna had to pay charges at Prayag. Its prosperity and power grew exponentially. There were even rumours that they were planning to support Magadh in an Ashwamedh Yagna to challenge Ayodhya's suzerainty. But when my great grandfather lost the battle to the Suryavanshis and a dam was built on the Yamuna to turn the flow towards Meluha,

Prayag's importance fell again. They have blamed Ayodhya ever since. They actually believe we purposely lost the war to give them a devastating blow.'

'I see.'

'Yes,' said Bhagirath, shaking his head. 'But to be honest, we lost the war because my great grandfather employed terrible battle strategy.'

'So you people have hated each other forever?'

'Not forever, My Lord. There was a time when Ayodhya and Magadh were close allies.'

'So will you be welcome here?'

Bhagirath burst out laughing. 'Everyone knows I don't really represent Ayodhya. This is one place I will not be suspect. But King Mahendra is known to be highly suspicious. We should expect spies keeping a close tab on us all the time. He does that to every important visitor. Having said that, their spy network is not particularly efficient. I do not foresee any serious problems.'

'Will my blue neck open doors here?'

Bhagirath looked embarrassed. 'King Mahendra does not believe in anything my father believes in, My Lord. Since the Emperor of Ayodhya believes in the Neelkanth, the Magadh king will not.'

Their conversation was interrupted by Siamantak climbing up the ship ladder. He came up to the Neelkanth, saluted smartly and said, 'A deal has been struck, My Lord. We can disembark. But we will have to stay here for at least ten days.'

Shiva frowned.

'I have temporarily transferred the ownership of the ship to a palace guesthouse owner in Magadh, My Lord. We will stay in his guesthouse for ten days. He will pay the portage charges to Andhak from the guesthouse rent we pay. When we wish to leave, the ownership of the ship will be transferred back to King Dilipa. We have to stay for ten days so that the guesthouse owner can earn enough money for his own profit and for portage charges.'

Shiva gaped at Siamantak. He didn't know whether to laugh at this strangely convoluted compromise or be impressed at Siamantak's bureaucratic brilliance in achieving Shiva's objective of visiting Magadh while upholding his Emperor's prestige. The portage charges would be paid, but technically not by Emperor Dilipa.

The Naga and his soldiers had been silently tracking the fleet carrying Shiva, Sati and their entourage. The Naga Queen, Prime Minister Karkotak and her bodyguards had left for Panchavati, the Naga capital. The smaller platoon allowed the Naga to maintain a punishing pace, staying abreast with the fast moving ships of Shiva's convoy.

They had wisely remained away from the banks. Far enough to not be visible to the boat look-outs but close enough to follow their paths. They had moved further inland to avoid Magadh and intended to move closer to the river once they had bypassed the city. 'A short distance more, My Lord,' said Vishwadyumna. 'Then we can move back towards the river.'

The Naga nodded.

Suddenly, the still of the forest was shattered by a loud scream. 'NOOOOO!'

The Naga immediately went down on his knees, giving Vishwadyumna rapid orders with hand signals. The entire platoon went down quickly and quietly, waiting for the danger to pass.

But trouble had just begun.

A woman screamed again. 'No! Please! Leave him!'

Vishwadyumna silently gestured to his soldiers to stay down. As far as he was concerned, there was only one course of action to take. Retrace their steps, take a wide arc around this area and move back towards the river. He turned towards his Lord, about to offer this suggestion. The Naga, however, was transfixed, eyes glued to a heartbreaking sight.

At a distance, partially hidden by the trees and underbrush, lay a tribal woman, frantically clutching a boy, no older than six or seven years. Two armed men, possibly Magadhan soldiers, were trying to pull the child away. The woman, showing astounding strength for her frail frame, was holding on to the child desperately.

'Dammit!' screamed the leader of the Magadhans. 'Push that woman off, you louts!'

In the wild and unsettled lands between the Ganga and Narmada lived scattered tribes of forest people. In the eyes of the civilised city folk living along the great rivers, these tribals were backward creatures because they insisted on living in harmony with nature. While most kingdoms ignored these forest tribes, others confiscated their lands at will as populations grew and need for farmlands increased. And a few particularly cruel ones preyed on these helpless groups for slave labour.

The Magadhan leader kicked the woman hard. 'You can get another son! But I need this boy! He will drive my bulls to victory! My father will finally stop his endless preening about winning every race for the last three years!'

The Naga looked at the Magadhan with barely concealed hate. Bull-racing was a craze in the Chandravanshi areas, subject to massive bets, royal interest and intrigue. Riders were needed to scream and agitate the animals to keep them running on course. At the same time, if the riders were too heavy, they would slow down the animal. Therefore, boys between the ages of six and eight were considered perfect. They would shriek out of fear and their weight was inconsequential. The children would be tied to the beasts. If the bull went down, the boy rider would be seriously injured or killed. Therefore, tribal children were often kidnapped to slave away as riders. Nobody important missed them if they died.

The Magadhan leader nodded to one of his men who drew his sword. He then looked at the woman. 'I am trying to be reasonable. Let your son go. Or I will have to hurt you.'

'No!'

The Magadhan soldier slashed his sword, cutting across the mother's right arm. Blood spurted across the child's face, making him bawl inconsolably.

The Naga was staring at the woman, his mouth open in awe. Her bloodied right arm hanging limply by her side, the woman still clung to her son, wrapping her left arm tightly around him.

Vishwadyumna shook his head. He could tell it was a matter of time before the woman would be killed. He turned towards his soldiers, giving hand signals to crawl back. He turned back towards his Lord. But the Naga was not there. He had moved swiftly forward, towards the mother. Vishwadyumna panicked and ran after his Lord, keeping his head low.

'Kill her!' ordered the Magadhan leader.

The Magadhan soldier raised his sword, ready to strike. Suddenly, the Naga broke out from the cover of the trees, his hand holding a knife high. Before the soldier knew what had happened, the knife struck his hand and his sword dropped harmlessly to the ground.

As the Magadhan soldier shrieked in agony, the Naga drew out two more knives. But he had failed to notice the platoon of Magadhan soldiers at the back. One had his bow at the ready, with an arrow strung. The soldier released it at the Naga. The arrow rammed into his left shoulder, slipping between his shoulder cap and torso armour, bursting through to the bone. The force of the blow caused the Naga to fall to the ground, the pain immobilising him.

Seeing their Lord down, the Naga's platoon ran in with a resounding yell.

'My Lord!' cried Vishwadyumna, as he tried to support the Naga back to his feet.

'Who the hell are you?' screamed the cruel Magadhan leader, retreating towards the safety of his platoon, before turning back to the Naga's men.

'Get out of here if you want to stay alive!' shouted one of the Naga's soldiers, livid at the

injury to his Lord.

'Bangas!' yelled the Magadhan, recognising the accent. 'What in the name of Lord Indra are you scum doing here?'

'It's Branga! Not Banga!'

'Do I look like I care? Get out of my land!'

The Branga did not respond as he saw his Naga Lord getting up slowly, helped by Vishwadyumna. The Naga signalled Vishwadyumna to step back and tried to pull the arrow out of his shoulder. But it was buried too deep. He broke its shaft and threw it away.

The Magadhan pointed at the Naga menacingly. 'I am Ugrasen, the Prince of Magadh. This is my land. These people are my property. Get out of the way.'

The Naga did not respond to the royal brat.

He turned around to see one of the most magnificent sights he had ever seen. The mother lay almost unconscious behind his soldiers. Her eyes closing due to the tremendous loss of blood. Her body shivering desperately. Too terrified to even whimper.

And yet, she stubbornly refused to give up her son. Her left hand still wrapped tight around him. Her body protectively positioned in front of her child.

What a mother!

The Naga turned around. His eyes blazing with rage. His body tense. His fists clenched tight. He whispered in a voice that was eerily calm, 'You want to hurt a mother because she is protecting her child?'

Sheer menace dripped from that soft voice. It even managed to get through to a person lost in royal ego. But Ugrasen could not back down in front of his fawning courtiers. Some crazy Branga with an unseasonal holi mask was not going to deprive him of his prize catch. 'This is my kingdom. I can hurt whoever I want. So if you want to save your sorry hide, get out of here. You don't know the power of...'

'YOU WANT TO HURT A MOTHER BECAUSE SHE IS PROTECTING HER CHILD?'

Ugrasen fell silent as terror finally broke through his thick head. He turned to see his followers. They too felt the dread that the Naga's voice emanated.

A shocked Vishwadyumna stared at his Lord. He had never heard his Lord raise his voice so loud. Never. The Naga's breathing was heavy, going intermittently through gritted teeth. His body stiff with fury.

And then Vishwadyumna heard the Naga's breathing return slowly to normal. He knew it instantly. His Lord had made a decision.

The Naga reached to his side and drew his long sword. Holding it away from his body. Ready for the charge. And then he whispered his orders. 'No mercy.'

'NO MERCY!' screamed the loyal Branga soldiers. They charged after their Lord. They fell upon the hapless Magadhans. There was no mercy.