



## Chapter 1

### The Strange Demon

‘Sati!’ screamed Shiva, as he rapidly drew his sword and started sprinting towards his wife, pulling his shield forward as he ran.

*She’ll run into a trap!*

‘Stop!’ yelled Shiva, picking up his pace as he saw her dash into a cluster of trees alongside the road leading to the Ramjanmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya.

Sati was totally focused on chasing the retreating hooded Naga, her sword drawn and held far from her body, like a seasoned warrior with her prey in sight.

It took a few moments for Shiva to catch up with Sati, to ascertain that she was safe. As they continued to give chase, Shiva’s focus shifted to the Naga. He was shocked.

*How did that dog move so far ahead?*

The Naga, showing surprising agility, was effortlessly navigating between the trees and undulating ground of the hillside, picking up pace. Shiva remembered battling with the Naga at the Brahma temple at Meru, when he had met Sati for the first time.

*His slow leg movements at the Brahma temple were just a battle strategy.*

Shiva flipped his shield, clipping it on to his back, to get room to run faster. Sati was keeping pace to his left. She suddenly made a grunting sound and pointed to the right, to a fork in the path that was coming up. Shiva nodded. They would split up and try to cut off the Naga from opposite ends on the narrow ridge ahead.

Shiva dashed to his right with a renewed burst of speed, sword at the ready. Sati stayed her course behind the Naga, running equally hard. The ground beneath Shiva’s feet on the new path had evened out and he managed to cover the distance rapidly. He noticed that the Naga had pulled his shield into his right hand. The wrong hand for defence. Shiva frowned.

Quickly coming up to the Naga’s right, with Sati still some distance away, Shiva reached with his left hand, drew a knife and flung it at the Naga’s neck. A stunned Shiva then saw a magnificent manoeuvre that he hadn’t imagined possible.

Without turning to look at the knife or even breaking a step, the Naga pulled his shield forward in the path of the knife. With the knife safely bouncing off the shield, the Naga effortlessly let the shield clip on to his back, maintaining his pace.

Shiva gaped in awe, his speed slackening.

*He blocked the knife without even looking at it! Who the hell is this man?*

Sati meanwhile had maintained her pace, edging closer to the Naga as Shiva ran in from the other trail onto the path that the Naga was on.

Seeing Sati cross the narrow ridge, Shiva picked up speed, closing in on his wife. Because of the steep angle of the sloping ridge, he could see the Naga further ahead, reaching the wall at the bottom of the hill. The wall protected the Ramjanmabhoomi temple at the base from animal attacks and trespassers. The height of the wall gave Shiva hope. There was no way the Naga could jump over it. He would have to climb, giving Sati and him the crucial seconds needed to catch up and mount an attack.

The Naga came to the same realisation as well. As he neared the wall, he pirouetted on his heels, hands reaching to his sides, drawing out two swords. The sword in his right hand was a traditional long sword, glinting in the evening sun. The one in his left, a short sword with a strange double blade mounted on a central pivot at the hilt. Shiva pulled his shield forward as he neared the Naga. Sati attacked the Naga from his right.

The Naga swung the long sword hard, forcing Sati to step back. With Sati on the back foot, the Naga swerved with his left hand, making Shiva duck to avoid a strike. As the Naga's sword swept safely away, Shiva jumped high and struck down from his height, a blow almost impossible to defend if the opponent is not holding a shield. The Naga, however, effortlessly stepped back, avoiding the strike, while thrusting forward with his short sword, putting Shiva on the back foot. The Neelkanth had to quickly swing his shield up to deflect the blow.

Sati again moved forward, her sword forcing the Naga back. Reaching behind with her left hand, she pulled out a knife and threw it. The Naga bent his head at the exact moment, letting the knife sail harmlessly into the wall. Shiva and Sati were yet to get a single strike on the Naga, but he was progressively being forced to retreat. It was a matter of time before he would be pinned against the wall.

*By the Holy Lake, I finally have him.*

And then, the Naga swung ferociously with his left hand. The sword was too short to reach Shiva and it appeared to be a wasted manoeuvre. Shiva pushed forward, confident he would strike the Naga on his torso. But the Naga swung back, this time his thumb pressing a lever on the pivot of the short sword. One of the twin blades suddenly extended beyond the length of the other, doubling the reach of the sword. The blade cut Shiva on his shoulder. Its poisoned edge sent a jolt of electricity through his body, immobilising him.

'Shiva!' screamed Sati, as she swung down on the sword in the Naga's right hand, hoping to knock the blade out. Moments before the impact, the Naga dropped his long sword, causing Sati to lurch, her sword slipping out of her hand as she struggled to regain her balance.

'No!' screamed Shiva, helpless on his back, unable to move.

He had noticed what Sati had forgotten. The knife Sati had flung at the Naga, when he had been discovered hiding behind a tree at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple, was tied to his right hand. The Naga swiped with his right hand at the falling Sati's abdomen. Sati realised her mistake too late.

But the Naga pulled his hand back at the last moment. What would have been a lethal blow turned into a surface wound, running a trickle of blood. The Naga jabbed Sati hard with his left elbow, breaking her nose and knocking her down.

With both his enemies immobilised, the Naga quickly flicked his long sword up with his right foot. He swung both his weapons into their scabbards, eyes still on Shiva and Sati. The Naga then jumped high, holding the top of the wall behind him with his hands.

'Sati!' screamed Shiva, rushing towards his wife as the poison released its stranglehold.

Sati was clutching her abdomen. The Naga frowned, for the wound was just a surface nick. Then his eyes flashed wide.

*She is carrying a baby.*

The Naga crunched his immense stomach, pulling his legs up in one smooth motion, soaring over the wall.

'Press tight!' shouted Shiva, expecting a deep gash.

Shiva breathed easy when he realised that it was a minor wound, though the blood loss and the knock on Sati's nose was causing him worry.

Sati looked up, blood running down her nose and her eyes ablaze with fury. She picked up her sword and growled, 'Get him!'

Shiva turned around, picking up his sword and pushing it into his scabbard as he reached the wall. He clambered quickly over. Sati tried to follow. Shiva landed on the other side on a crowded street. He saw the Naga at a far distance, still running hard.

Shiva started sprinting after the Naga. But he knew the battle was already lost. He was too far behind. He now hated the Naga more than ever. The tormentor of his wife! The killer of his brother! And yet, deep inside, he marvelled at the sheer brilliance of the

Naga's martial skills.

The Naga was running towards a horse tied outside a shop. In an inconceivable movement, he leapt up high, his right hand stretched out. As the Naga landed smoothly on top of the horse, the knife in his right hand slickly cut the reins, freeing the tethered horse. The rearing of the startled horse had caused the reins to fly back. The Naga effortlessly caught them in his left hand. Instantly, he kicked the horse, whispering in the animal's ear. The horse sprang swiftly to the Naga's words, breaking into a gallop.

A man came hurtling out of the shop, screaming loudly, 'Stop! Thief! That's my horse!'

The Naga, hearing the commotion, reached into the folds of his robe and threw something back with tremendous force while continuing to gallop away. The force of the blow caused the horseman to stagger, falling flat on his back.

'By the Holy Lake!' shouted Shiva, sprinting towards what he thought was a grievously injured man.

As he reached the horseman, he was surprised to see him get up slowly, rubbing his chest in pain, cursing loudly, 'May the fleas of a thousand dogs infest that bastard's armpits!'

'Are you all right?' asked Shiva, as he examined the man's chest.

The horseman looked at Shiva, scared into silence at seeing his blood-streaked body.

Shiva bent down to pick up the object that the Naga had thrown at the horseman. It was a pouch, made of the most glorious silk he had ever seen. Shiva opened the pouch tentatively, expecting a trap, but it contained coins. He pulled one out, surprised to see that it was made of gold. There were at least fifty coins. He turned in the direction that the Naga had ridden.

*What kind of a demon is he? He steals the horse and then leaves enough gold to buy five more!*

'Gold!' whispered the horseman softly as he snatched the pouch from Shiva. 'It's mine!'

Shiva didn't look up, still holding one coin, examining its markings. 'I need one.'

The horseman spoke gingerly, for he did not want to battle a man as powerful-looking as Shiva, 'But...'

Shiva snorted in disgust. He pulled out two gold coins from his own pouch and gave it to the horseman, who, thanking his stars for a truly lucky day, quickly escaped.

Shiva turned back and saw Sati resting against the wall, holding her head up, pressing her nose hard. He walked up to her.

'Are you all right?'

Sati nodded in response, dried blood smeared on her face. 'Yes. Your shoulder? It looks bad.'

'It looks worse than it feels. I'm fine. Don't worry.'

Sati looked in the direction that the Naga had ridden off. 'What did he throw at the horseman?'

'A pouch full of this,' said Shiva as he showed the coin to Sati.

'He threw gold coins?!'

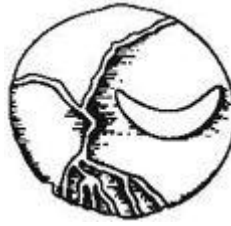
Shiva nodded.

Sati frowned and shook her head. She took a closer look at the coin. It had the face of a strange man with a crown on his head. Strange, because unlike a Naga, he had no deformity.

'He looks like a king of some kind,' said Sati, wiping some blood off her mouth.

'But look at these odd markings,' said Shiva as he flipped the coin.

It had a small symbol of a horizontal crescent moon. But the bizarre part was the network of lines running across the coin. Two crooked lines joined in the middle in the shape of an irregular cone and then they broke up into a spidery network.



'I can understand the moon. But what do these lines symbolise?' asked Sati.

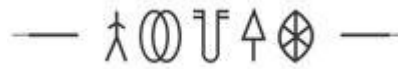
'I don't know,' admitted Shiva. But he did know one thing clearly. His gut instinct was unambiguous.

*Find the Nagas. They are your path to discovering evil. Find the Nagas.*

Sati could almost read her husband's mind. 'Let's get the distractions out of the way then?'

Shiva nodded at her. 'But first, let's get you to Ayurvati.'

'You need her more,' said Sati.



'You have nothing to do with our fight?' asked a startled Daksha. 'I don't understand, My Lord. You led us to our greatest victory. Now we have to finish the job. The evil Chandravanshi way of life has to end and these people have to be brought to our pure Suryavanshi ways.'

'But, Your Highness,' said Shiva with polite firmness, shifting his bandaged shoulder slightly to relieve the soreness. 'I don't think they are evil. I understand now that my mission is different.'

Dilipa, sitting to the left of Daksha, was thrilled. Shiva's words were a balm to his soul. Sati and Parvateshwar, to Shiva's right, were quiet. Nandi and Veerbhadra stood further away, on guard but listening in avidly. The only one as angry as Daksha was Bhagirath, the crown prince of Ayodhya.

'We don't need a certificate from a foreign barbarian to tell us what is obvious! We are not evil!' said Bhagirath.

'Quiet,' hissed Dilipa. 'You will not insult the Neelkanth.'

Turning towards Shiva with folded hands, Dilipa continued, 'Forgive my impetuous son, My Lord. He speaks before he thinks. You said your mission is different. How can Ayodhya help?'

Shiva stared at a visibly chafing Bhagirath before turning towards Dilipa. 'How do I find the Nagas?'

Startled and scared, Dilipa touched his Rudra pendant for protection as Daksha looked up sharply.

'My Lord, they are pure evil,' said Daksha. 'Why do you want to find them?'

'You have answered your own question, Your Highness,' said Shiva. He turned towards Dilipa. 'I don't believe you are allied with the Nagas. But there are some in your empire who are. I want to know how to reach those people.'

'My Lord,' said Dilipa, swallowing hard. 'It is rumoured that the King of Branga consorts with the dark forces. He would be able to answer your questions. But the entry of any foreign person, including us, is banned in that strange but very rich kingdom. Sometimes, I actually think the Brangas pay tribute to my empire only to keep us from entering their land, not because they are scared of being defeated by us in battle.'

'You have another king in your empire? How is that possible?' asked a surprised Shiva.

'We aren't like the obsessive Suryavanshis. We don't insist on everyone following one single law. Every kingdom has the right to its own king, its own rules and its own way of

life. They pay Ayodhya a tribute because we defeated them in battle through the great *Ashwamedh yagna* .

*Horse sacrifice?*

‘Yes, My Lord,’ continued Dilipa. ‘The sacrificial horse travels freely through any kingdom in the land. If a king stops the horse, we battle, defeat and annexe that territory. If they don’t stop the horse, then the kingdom becomes our colony and pays us tribute, but is still allowed to have its own laws. So we are more like a confederacy of aligned kings rather than a fanatical empire like Meluha.’

‘Mind your words, you impudent fool,’ ranted Daksha. ‘Your confederacy seems a lot like extortion to me. They pay you tribute because if they don’t, you will attack their lands and plunder them. Where is the Royal Dharma in that? In Meluha, being an emperor does not just give you the right to receive tribute, but it also confers the responsibility to work for the good of all the empire’s subjects.’

‘And who decides what is good for your subjects? You? By what right? People should be allowed to do whatever they wish.’

‘Then there will be chaos,’ shouted Daksha. ‘Your stupidity is even more apparent than your immoral values!’

‘Enough!’ asserted Shiva, struggling to tame his irritation. ‘Will both your Highnesses please desist?’

Daksha looked at Shiva in surprised anger. Seeing a much more confident Shiva, not just accepting, but living his role as the Neelkanth. Daksha’s heart sank. He knew that fulfilling his father’s dream of a member of their family being Emperor of all India, and bringing the Suryavanshi way of life to all its citizens, was becoming increasingly remote. He could defeat the Swadweepans in battle due to his army’s superior tactics and technology, but he did not have enough soldiers to control the conquered land. For that, he needed the faith that the Swadweepans had in the Neelkanth. If the Neelkanth didn’t go along with his way of thinking, his plans were bound to fail.

‘Why do you say that the Brangas are allied with the Nagas?’ asked Shiva.

‘I can’t say for sure, My Lord,’ said Dilipa. ‘But I am going on the rumours that one has heard from traders in Kashi. It is the only kingdom in Swadweep that the Brangas deign to trade with. Furthermore, there are many refugees from Branga settled in Kashi.’

‘Refugees?’ asked Shiva. ‘What are they fleeing from? You said Branga was a rich land.’

‘There are rumours of a great plague that has struck Branga repeatedly. But I’m not quite certain. Very few people can be certain about what goes on in Branga! But the King of Kashi would certainly have better answers. Should I summon him here, My Lord?’

‘No,’ said Shiva, unsure whether this was another wild goose chase or whether the Brangas actually had something to do with the Nagas.

Sati suddenly piped up as a thought struck her and turned towards Dilipa. Her voice was nasal due to the bandage on her nose. ‘Forgive me, Your Highness. But where exactly is Branga?’

‘It is far to the East, Princess Sati, where our revered river Ganga meets their holy river which comes in from the northeast, Brahmaputra.’

Shiva started as he realised something. He turned to Sati, smiling. Sati smiled back.

*They aren’t lines! They are rivers!*



Shiva reached into his pouch and pulled out the coin he had recovered from the Naga and showed it to Dilipa. 'Is this a Branga coin, Your Highness?' 'Yes, My Lord!' answered a surprised Dilipa. 'That is King Chandraketu on one side and a river map of their land on the other. But these coins are rare. The Brangas never send tribute in coins, only in gold ingots.'

Dilipa was about to ask where Shiva got the coin from, but was cut off by the Neelkanth. 'How quickly can we leave for Kashi?'



'Mmmm, this is good,' smiled Shiva, handing the chillum to Veerbhadra.

'I know,' smiled Veerbhadra. 'The grass is much better here than in Meluha. The Chandravanshis certainly know how to savour the finer things in life.'

Shiva smiled. The marijuana was working its magic on him. The two friends were on a small hill outside Ayodhya, enjoying the evening breeze. The view was stunning.

The gentle slope of the grassy hill descended into a sparsely forested plain, which ended in a sheer cliff at a far distance. The tempestuous Sarayu, which had cut through the cliff over many millennia, flowed down south, rumbling passionately. The sun setting gently beyond the horizon completed the dramatic beauty of the tranquil moment.

'I guess the Emperor of Meluha is finally happy,' smiled Veerbhadra, handing the chillum back to Shiva.

Shiva winked at Veerbhadra before taking a deep drag. He knew Daksha was unhappy about his changed stance on the Chandravanshis. And as he himself did not want any distractions while searching for the Nagas, he had hit upon an ingenious compromise to give Daksha a sense of victory and yet keep Dilipa happy as well.

Shiva had decreed that Daksha would henceforth be known as Emperor of India. His name would not only be taken first during prayers at the royal court at Devagiri, but also at Ayodhya. Dilipa, in turn, would be known as Emperor of Swadweep within the Chandravanshi areas, and the 'brother of the Emperor' in Meluha. His name would be taken after Daksha's in court prayers in both Devagiri and Ayodhya. Dilipa's kingdom would pay a nominal tribute of a hundred thousand gold coins to Meluha, which Daksha had pronounced would be donated to the Ramjanmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya.

Thus Daksha had at least one of his dreams fulfilled: Being Emperor of India. Content, Daksha had returned to Devagiri in triumph. The ever pragmatic Dilipa was delighted that despite losing the war with the Suryavanshis, for all practical purposes, he retained his empire and his independence.

'We leave for Kashi in a week?' asked Veerbhadra.

'Hmmm.'

'Good. I'm getting bored here.'

Shiva smiled handing the chillum back to Veerbhadra. 'This Bhagirath seems like a very interesting fellow.'

'Yes, he does.' Veerbhadra took a puff.

'What have you heard about him?'

'You know,' said Veerbhadra, 'Bhagirath was the one who had thought of taking that contingent of hundred thousand soldiers around our position at Dharmakhet.'

'The attack from the rear? That was brilliant. May have worked too, but for the valour of Drapaku.'

'It would certainly have worked if Bhagirath's orders had been followed to the T.'

'Really?' asked Shiva, smoking.

'I have heard Bhagirath wanted to take his army in the quiet of the night through a

longer route that was further away from the main battleground. If he had done that, we would not have discovered the troop movement. Our delayed response would have ensured that we would have lost the war.'

'So what went wrong?'

'Apparently, the War Council didn't want to meet at night, when Bhagirath called them.'

'Why in the name of the holy lake wouldn't they meet urgently?'

'They were sleeping!'

'You're joking!'

'No, I'm not,' said Veerbhadra, shaking his head. 'And what is worse, when they did meet in the morning, they ordered Bhagirath to stick close to the valley between Dharmakhet and our position, helping us discover their movement.'

'Why the hell did the War Council make such a stupid decision?' asked a flabbergasted Shiva.

'Apparently, Bhagirath is not trusted by his father. And therefore, not by most Swadweepan kings or generals either. They believed he would have taken the soldiers, escaped to Ayodhya and declared himself Emperor.'

'That's ridiculous. Why does Dilipa not trust his own son?'

'Because he believes Bhagirath thinks he is a fool and a terrible emperor.'

'I'm sure Bhagirath doesn't actually think that!'

'Well, from what I've heard,' smiled Veerbhadra as he junked out the ash from the chillum, 'Bhagirath actually *does* think so of his father. And he's not far from wrong, is he?'

Shiva smiled.

'And then, to make matters worse,' continued Veerbhadra, 'the entire fiasco was blamed on Bhagirath. It was said that because he took a hundred thousand soldiers away, they lost the war.'

Shiva shook his head, saddened to see an intelligent man being rubbished by the idiots surrounding him. 'I think he is a capable person, whose wings have been clipped.'

The tranquil moment was suddenly shattered by a loud scream. Shiva and Veerbhadra looked up to see a rider galloping away, while his companion, lagging far behind, was screeching loudly: 'Help! Somebody help, Prince Bhagirath!'

Bhagirath had lost control of his speeding horse and was hurtling towards the cliff. A near certain death. Shiva jumped onto his horse and charged towards him with Veerbhadra in tow. It was a long distance, but the gentle slope helped Shiva and Veerbhadra make up the expanse quickly. Shiva rode in an arc to intercept Bhagirath's horse. A few minutes later, Shiva was galloping along Bhagirath's path. He was impressed that Bhagirath seemed calm and focussed, despite facing a life threatening situation.

Bhagirath was pulling hard on his reins, trying to slow his horse down. But his action agitated the horse even further. It picked up more speed.

'Let the reins go!' shouted Shiva, over the loud rumble of the threateningly close Sarayu river.

'What?!' screamed Bhagirath. All his training told him letting the reins go was the stupidest thing to do when a horse was out of control.

'Trust me! Let it go!'

Bhagirath would later explain it to himself as fate guiding him towards the Neelkanth. At this moment, his instinct told him to forget his training and trust this barbarian from Tibet. Bhagirath let go. Much to his surprise, the horse immediately slackened.

Shiva rode in close. So close that he could almost whisper into the animal's ear. Then he began to sing a strange tune. The horse gradually started calming down, reducing its speed to a canter. The cliff was coming close. Very close.

'Shiva!' warned Veerbhadra. 'The cliff is a few hundred metres away!'

Shiva noted the warning, matching the pace of his horse with Bhagirath's. The prince kept his control, staying on the horse, while Shiva kept singing. Slowly but surely, Shiva was gaining control. It was just a few metres before the cliff that Bhagirath's horse finally came to a halt.

Bhagirath and Shiva immediately dismounted as Veerbhadra rode in.

'Damn!' said Veerbhadra, peering towards the cliff. 'That was too close!'

Shiva looked at Veerbhadra, before turning towards Bhagirath. 'Are you all right?'

Bhagirath kept staring at Shiva, before lowering his eyes in shame. 'I'm sorry for putting you through so much trouble.'

'No trouble at all.'

Bhagirath turned to his horse, hitting its face hard for embarrassing him.

'It's not the horse's fault!' shouted Shiva.

Bhagirath turned back to Shiva, frowning. Shiva walked towards Bhagirath's horse, gently cradling its face, almost like it was a child being punished unfairly. Then he carefully pulled its reins out, signalled to Bhagirath to come closer and showed him the nail buried in the leather close to the horse's mouth.

Bhagirath was shocked. The inference was obvious.

Shiva pulled the nail out, handing it to Bhagirath. 'Somebody doesn't like you, my friend.'

Meanwhile, Bhagirath's companion had caught up with them. 'My Prince! Are you all right?'

Bhagirath looked towards his companion. 'Yes I am.'

Shiva turned towards the man. 'Tell Emperor Dilipa his son is an exceptional rider. Tell him that the Neelkanth has yet to see a man with greater control over an animal, even when the odds were stacked so desperately against him. Tell him the Neelkanth requests the honour of Prince Bhagirath accompanying him to Kashi.'

Shiva knew that for Dilipa, this would not be a request but an order. This was probably the only way of keeping Bhagirath safe from the unknown threat to his life. The companion immediately went down on his knee. 'As you command, My Lord.'

Bhagirath stood dumbfounded. He had come across people who plotted against him, people who took credit for his ideas, people who sabotaged him. But this... This was unique. He turned to his companion. 'Leave us.'

The man immediately rode away.

'I have experienced such kindness from only one person up until now,' said Bhagirath, his eyes moist. 'And that is my sister, Anandmayi. But blood justifies her actions. I don't know how to react to your generosity, My Lord.'

'By not calling me Lord,' smiled Shiva.

'That is one order I would request you to allow me to refuse,' said Bhagirath, his hands folded in a respectful namaste. 'I will follow any other order you give. Even if it is to take my own life.'

'Now don't get so dramatic! I am not about to ask you to commit suicide right after having worked strenuously to save your life.'

Bhagirath smiled softly. 'What was it you sang to my horse, My Lord?'

'Sit with me over a chillum sometime and I will teach you.'

'It will be my honour to sit at your feet and learn, My Lord.'

'Don't sit at my feet, my friend. Sit beside me. The sound carries a little better there!'

Bhagirath smiled as Shiva patted him on the shoulder.