

THE NUMBER ONE INDIAN BESTSELLER!

'Shiva rocks!'

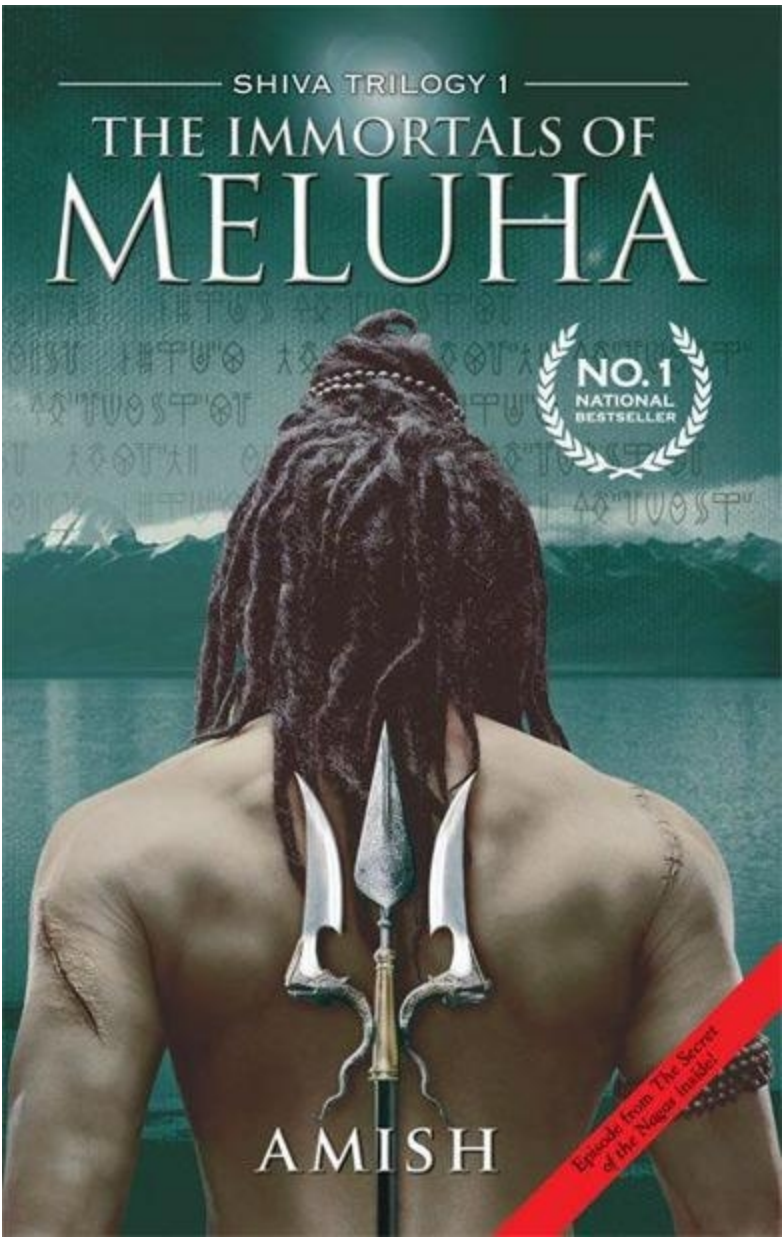
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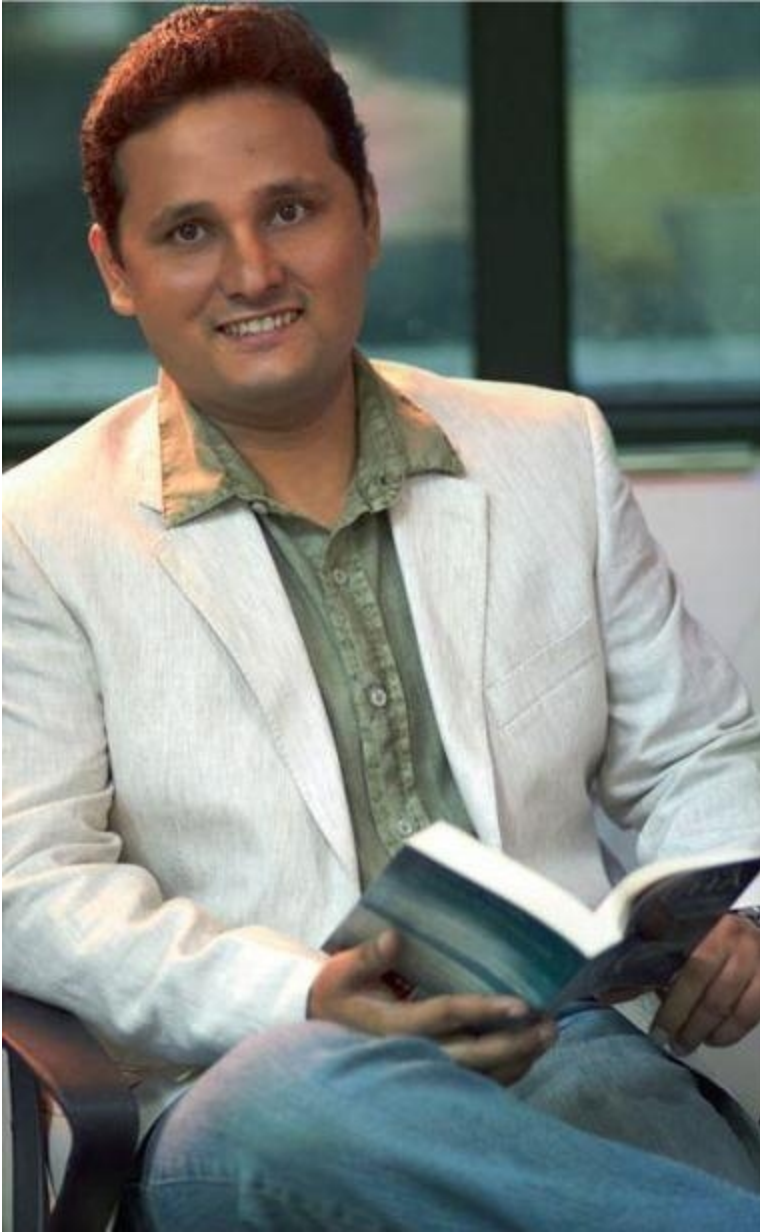
*The Times of India*

# IMMORTALS MELUJHA

THE SHIVA TRILOGY: BOOK 1

AMISH





Praise for

The Immortals of Meluha

‘Shiva rocks. Just how much Shiva rocks the imagination is made grandiosely obvious

in *The Immortals*

of *Meluha* ... Shiva's journey from cool dude... to Mahadev...

is a

reader's delight... What really engages is the author's crafting of Shiva, with almost boy-worship joy'

— The Times of India

'The story is gripping and well-paced.

An essentially

mythological story written in a

modern style, the novel creates anticipation in the readers mind and compels one to

read with great curiosity till the end. The end however is a cliff-hanger and leaves one

thirsting for more.'

— Business World

'Amongst the top 5 books recommended by Brunch... the story is fascinating.'

— The Hindustan Times

'...has philosophy as its underlying theme but is racy enough to give its readers the

adventure of a lifetime.'

— The Hindu

‘Amongst the list of favourite holiday books of 2010. A fast paced story, you are bound

to read it cover to cover in one sitting.’

— The Deccan Chronicle

‘Much before the box-office verdict on *Rajneeti*

and *Raavan*

became apparent, Indian

readers gave a thumbs-up to The

*Immortals*

*Of Meluha*.

Its author Amish, an IIM

graduate, created a delightful mix of mythology and history by making Lord Shiva the

hero of his trilogy. The first part has been on the Indian bestseller charts for quite some time now.’

— The Indian Express

‘...to me, *The Immortals*

*of Meluha*

is a political commentary with messages

for our

world and a hope that since they flow from the Mahadev himself, they will find greater

acceptance.

Be it the interpretation of Shiva's battle cry — Har Har Mahadev as Every man a Mahadev or the valour of Sati who fights her own battles — every passage

is rich

in meaning and yet, open to interpretation. Therein lies the strength of this book.'

— Indiareads.com

'...wonderful book, replete with action, love and adventure,

and extolling virtues and

principles... The author has succeeded

in making many mythological figures into simple

flesh and blood human beings, and therein lie(s) the beauty and the acceptability of this book.'

— The Afternoon

'The author takes myth and contemporises

it, raising questions about all that we hold

true and familiar. The book is (a) marvellous attempt to create fiction from folklore,

religion and archaeological

facts.'

— People

'The Immortals of Meluha... sees Lord Shiva and his intriguing life with a refreshing

perspective...

beautifully written creation... Simply unputdownable for any lover of Indian history and mythology.'

— Society

For detailed reviews, please visit

[www.shivatrilogy.com](http://www.shivatrilogy.com)

# The Immortals of Meluha

Book 1  
of the  
Shiva Trilogy

Amish



**westland**

**ltd**

Venkat

Towers,

165,



P.H.

Road,

Maduravoyal Chennai

600

095

No.38/10

(New

No.5),

Raghava

Nagat,

New

Timber

Yard

Layout,

Bangalore

560

026

Survey

No.

A-9,

II

Floor,

Moula

Ali

Industrial

Area,

Moula

Ali,

Hyderabad

500

040

23/181,

Anand

Nagar,

Nehru

Road,

Santacruz

East,

Mumbai

400

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First published by Tara Press 2010

Published by westland ltd 2010

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to any actual

person living or dead, events and locales is entirely coincidental.

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Design

by

Rashmi

Pusalkar.

Photo

of

Lord

Shiva

by

Vikram

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Photo of Kailash Mansarovar by Silvio Giroud.

Typeset

in

Garamond

by

Manju

Printed at Manipal Technologies Ltd., Manipal

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reviews with appropriate citations.

To Preeti & Neel...

You both are everything to me,

My words & their meaning,

My prayer & my blessing,

My moon & my sun,

My love & my life,

My soul mate & a part of my soul.

Om Namah Shivaiy.

The universe bows to Lord Shiva. I bow to Lord Shiva.



Contents



### [Acknowledgements](#)

They say that writing is a lonely profession. They lie. An outstanding group of people

have come together to make this book possible. And I would like to thank them.

Preeti, my wife, a rare combination of beauty, brains and spirit who assisted and

advised me through all aspects of this book.

My family, a cabal of supremely

positive individuals who encouraged,

pushed and

supported me through the long years of this project.

My first publisher and agent, Anuj Bahri, for his absolute confidence in the Shiva Trilogy.

My present publishers Westland Ltd, led by Gautam Padmanabhan,

for sharing a dream

with me.

Sharvani Pandit and Gauri Dange, my editors, for making my rather pedestrian English

vastly better and for improving the story flow.

Rashmi Pusalkar, Sagar Pusalkar and Vikram Bawa for the exceptional cover.

Atul Manjrekar, Abhijeet Powdwal, Rohan Dhuri and Amit Chitnis for the innovative

trailer film, which has helped market the book at a whole new level. And Taufiq Qureshi,

for the music of the trailer film.

Mohan Vijayan for his great work on press publicity.

Alok Kalra, Hrishikesh Sawant and Mandar Bhure for their effective advice on marketing

and promotions.

Donetta Ditton & Mukul Mukherjee for the website.

You, the reader, for the leap of faith in picking up the book of a debut author.

And lastly, I believe that this story is a blessing to me from Lord Shiva. Humbled by this experience,

I find myself a different man today, less cynical and more accepting of

different world views. Hence, most importantly, I would like to bow to Lord Shiva, for

blessing me so abundantly, far beyond what I deserve.



### [The Shiva Trilogy.](#)

Shiva! The Mahadev. The God of Gods. Destroyer of Evil. Passionate

lover. Fierce

warrior. Consummate

dancer. Charismatic leader. All-powerful, yet incorruptible. Quick

wit, accompanied

by an equally quick and fearsome temper.

Over the centuries, no foreigner who came to our land — conqueror, merchant, scholar,

ruler, traveller — believed that such a great man could possibly exist in reality. They

assumed

that he must have been a mythical God, whose existence could be possible

only in the realms of human imagination. Unfortunately, this belief became our received

wisdom.



But what if we are wrong? What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination,

but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike

because of his karma. That is the premise of the Shiva Trilogy, which interprets the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact.

This work is therefore a tribute to Lord Shiva and the lesson that his life teaches us. A lesson lost in the depths of time and ignorance. A lesson, that all of us can rise to be

better people. A lesson, that there exists a potential god in every single human being.

All we have to do is listen to ourselves.

*The Immortals*

*of Meluha*

is the first book in the trilogy that chronicles the journey of this

extraordinary hero. Two more books are to follow: *The Secret*

*of the Nagas*

and *The*

*Oath of the Vayuputras* .



# CHAPTER 1

[He has come!](#)

1900 BC, Mansarovar Lake (At the foot of Mount Kailash, Tibet)

Shiva gazed at the orange sky. The clouds hovering above Mansarovar had just parted

to reveal the setting sun. The brilliant giver of life was calling it a day once again. Shiva had seen a few sunrises in his twenty-one years. But the sunset! He tried never to miss

the sunset! On any other day, Shiva would have taken in the vista — the sun and the

immense lake against the magnificent backdrop of the Himalayas stretching as far back

as the eye could see. But not today.

He squatted and perched his lithe, muscular body on the narrow ledge extending over

the lake. The numerous battle-scars

on his skin gleamed in the shimmering reflected

light of the waters.

Shiva remembered

well his carefree

childhood days. He had

perfected the art of throwing pebbles that bounced off the surface of the lake. He still

held the record in his tribe for the highest number of bounces: seventeen.

On a normal day, Shiva would have smiled at the memory from a cheerful past that had

been overwhelmed by the angst of the present. But today, he turned back towards his

village without any hint of joy.

Bhadra was alert, guarding the main entrance. Shiva gestured with his eyes. Bhadra

turned back to find his two back-up soldiers dozing against the fence. He cursed and

kicked them hard.

Shiva turned back towards the lake.

God bless Bhadra! At least he takes some responsibility.

Shiva brought the chillum made of yak-bone to his lips and took in a deep drag. Any

other day, the marijuana would have spread its munificence, dulling his troubled mind

and letting him find some moments of solace. But not today.

He looked left, at the edge of the lake where the soldiers of the strange foreign visitor were kept under guard. With the lake behind them and twenty of Shiva's own soldiers

guarding them, it was impossible for them to mount any surprise attack.

They let themselves be disarmed so easily. They aren't like the bloodthirsty idiots in our land who are looking for any excuse to fight.

The foreigner's words came flooding back to Shiva. 'Come to our land. It lies beyond the

great mountains. Others call it Meluha. I call it Heaven. It is the richest and most

powerful empire in India. Indeed the richest and most powerful in the whole world. Our

government has an offer for immigrants. You will be given fertile land and resources for

farming. Today, your tribe, the Gunas, fight for survival in this rough, arid land. Meluha offers you a lifestyle beyond your wildest dreams. We ask for nothing in return. Just live in peace, pay your taxes and follow the laws of the land.'

Shiva mused that he would certainly not be a chief in this new land.

Would I really miss that so much?

His tribe would have to live by the laws of the foreigners. They would have to work

every day for a living.

That's better than fighting every day just to stay alive!

Shiva took another puff from his chillum. As the smoke cleared, he turned to stare at the hut in the centre of his village, right next to his own, where the foreigner had been

stationed. He had been told that he could sleep there in comfort. In fact, Shiva wanted

to keep him hostage. Just in case.

We fight almost every month with the Pakratis just so that our village can exist next to the holy lake. They are getting stronger every year, forming new alliances

with new

tribes. We can beat the Pakratis, but not all the mountain tribes together! By moving to

Meluha, we can escape this pointless violence and may be live a life of comfort. What

could possibly be wrong with that? Why shouldn't we take this deal? It sounds so damn

good!

Shiva took one last drag from the chillum before banging it on the rock, letting the ash

slip out and rose quickly from his perch. Brushing a few specks of ash from his bare

chest, he wiped his hands on his tiger skin skirt, rapidly striding to his village. Bhadra and his back-up stood to attention as Shiva passed

the gate. Shiva frowned and

gestured for Bhadra to ease up.

Why does he keep forgetting that he has been my closest friend since childhood? My

becoming

the chief hasn't really changed

anything.

He doesn't need to behave

unnecessarily

servile in front of others.

The huts in Shiva's village were luxurious compared to others in their land.

A grown

man could actually stand upright in them. The shelter could withstand the harsh

mountain winds for nearly three years before surrendering to the elements.

He flung the

empty chillum into his hut as he strode to the hut where the visitor lay sleeping soundly.

Either he doesn't realise he is a hostage. Or he genuinely believes that good behaviour

begets good behaviour.

Shiva remembered

what his uncle, also his Guru, used to say. 'People do what their

society rewards them to do. If the society rewards trust, people will be trusting.'

Meluha must be a trusting society if it teaches even its soldiers to expect the best in

strangers.

Shiva scratched his shaggy beard as he stared hard at the visitor.

He had said his name was Nandi.

The Meluhan's massive proportions appeared even more enormous as he sprawled on

the floor in his stupor, his immense belly jiggling with every breath. Despite being

obese, his skin was taut and toned. His child-like face looked even more innocent

asleep, with his mouth half open.

Is this the man who will lead me to my destiny? Do I really have the destiny my uncle

spoke of?

'Your destiny is much larger than these massive mountains. But to make it come true,

you will have to cross these very same massive mountains.'

Do I deserve a good destiny? My people come first. Will they be happy in Meluha?

Shiva continued to stare at the sleeping Nandi. Then he heard the sound of a conch

shell.

Pakratis!

'POSITIONS!' screamed Shiva, as he drew his sword.

Nandi was up in an instant, drawing a hidden sword from his fur coat kept to the side.

They sprinted to the village gates. Following standard protocol, the women started

rushing to the village centre, carrying their children along. The men ran the other way,

swords drawn.

‘Bhadra! Our soldiers at the lake!’ shouted Shiva as he reached the entrance.

Bhadra relayed the orders and the Guna soldiers obeyed instantly. They were surprised

to see the Meluhans draw weapons hidden in their coats and rush to the village. The

Pakratis were upon them within moments.

It was a well-planned ambush by the Pakratis. Dusk was usually a time when the Guna

soldiers took time to thank their gods for a day without battle. The women did their

chores by the lakeside. If there was a time of weakness

for the formidable Gunas, a

time when they weren’t a fearsome martial clan, but just another mountain tribe trying to survive in a tough, hostile land, this was it.



But fate was against the Pakratis yet again. Thanks to the foreign presence, Shiva had



ordered the Gunas to remain alert. Thus they were forewarned and the Pakratis lost the

element of surprise. The presence of the Meluhans was also decisive, turning the tide of

the short, brutal battle in favour of the Gunas. The Pakratis had to retreat.

Bloodied and scarred, Shiva surveyed the damage at the end of the battle. Two Guna

soldiers had succumbed to their injuries. They would be honoured as clan heroes. But

even worse, the warning had come too late for at least ten Guna women and children.

Their mutilated bodies were found next to the lake. The losses were high.

Bastards They kill women and children when they can't beat us!

A livid Shiva called the entire tribe to the centre of the village. His mind was made.

'This land is fit for barbarians! We have fought pointless battles with no end in sight. You know my uncle tried to make peace, even offering access

to the lake shore to the

mountain tribes. But these scum mistook our desire for peace as weakness.

We all

know what followed!'

The Gunas, despite being used to the brutality of regular battle, were shell-shocked

by

the viciousness of the attack on the women and children.

‘I keep nothing secret from you. All of you know the invitation of the foreigners,’

continued Shiva, pointing to Nandi and the Meluhans. ‘They fought shoulder-to-shoulder

with us today. They have earned my trust. I want to go with them to Meluha. But this

cannot be my decision alone.’

‘You are our chief, Shiva,’ said Bhadra. ‘Your decision is our decision. That is the

tradition.’

‘Not this time,’ said Shiva holding out his hand. ‘This will change our lives completely. I believe the change will be for the better. Anything will be better than the pointlessness of the violence we face daily. I have told you what I want to do. But the choice to go or not is yours. Let the Gunas speak. This time, I follow you.’

The Gunas were clear on their tradition. But the respect for Shiva was not just based on

convention, but also on his character. He had led the Gunas to their greatest military

victories through his genius and sheer personal bravery.

They spoke in one voice. ‘Your decision is our decision.’

It had been five days since Shiva had uprooted his tribe. The caravan had camped in a

nook at the base of one of the great valleys dotting the route to Meluha. Shiva had

organized the camp in three concentric circles. The yaks had been tied around the

outermost circle, to act as an alarm in case of any intruders. The men were stationed in

the intermediate ring to fight if there was a battle. And the women and children were in

the innermost circle, just around the fire. Expendable first, defenders second and the

most vulnerable at the inside.

Shiva was prepared for the worst. He believed that there would be an ambush. It was

only a matter of time.

The Pakratis should have been delighted to have access to the prime lands, as well as

free occupation of the lake front. But Shiva knew that Yakhya, the Pakrati chief, would

not allow them to leave peacefully. Yakhya would like nothing better than to become a

legend by claiming that he had defeated

Shiva's Gunas and won the land for the

Pakratis. It was precisely this weird tribal logic that Shiva detested. In an atmosphere

like this, there was never any hope for peace.

Shiva relished the call of battle, revelled in its art. But he also knew that ultimately, the battles in his land were an exercise in futility.

He turned to an alert Nandi sitting some distance

away. The twenty-five Meluhan

soldiers were seated in an arc around a second camp circle.

Why did he pick the Gunas to immigrate? Why not the Pakratis?

Shiva's thoughts were broken as he saw a shadow move in the distance. He stared

hard, but everything was still. Sometimes the light played tricks in this part of the world.

Shiva relaxed his stance.

And then he saw the shadow again.

'TO ARMS!' screamed Shiva.

The Gunas and Meluhans drew their weapons and took up battle positions as fifty

Pakratis charged in. The stupidity of rushing in without thought hit them hard as they

met with a wall of panicky animals. The yaks bucked and kicked uncontrollably, injuring

many Pakratis before they could even begin their skirmish. A few slipped through. And

weapons clashed.

A young Pakrati, obviously a novice, charged at Shiva, swinging wildly. Shiva stepped

back, avoiding the strike. He brought his sword back up in a smooth arc, inflicting a

superficial cut on the Pakrati's chest. The young warrior cursed and swung back,

opening his flank. That was all Shiva needed. He pushed his sword in brutally, cutting

through the gut of his enemy. Almost instantly, he pulled the blade out, twisting it as he did, and left the Pakrati to a slow, painful death. Shiva turned around to find a Pakrati ready to strike a Guna. He jumped high and swung from the elevation slicing neatly

through the Pakrati's sword arm, severing it.

Meanwhile Bhadra, as adept at the art of battle as Shiva, was fighting two Pakratists

simultaneously,

with a sword in each hand. His hump did not seem to impeded his

movements as he transferred his weight easily, striking the Pakrati on his left on his

throat. Leaving him to die slowly, he swung with his right hand, cutting across the face

of the other soldier, gouging his eye out. As the soldier fell, Bhadra brought his left

sword down brutally, ending the suffering quickly for this hapless enemy.

The battle at the Meluhan end of camp was very different. They were exceptionally well-

trained soldiers. But they were not vicious. They were following rules, avoiding killing, as far as possible.

Outnumbered and led poorly, it was but a short while before the Pakratis were beaten.

Almost half of them lay dead and the rest were on their knees, begging for mercy.

One of them was Yakhya, his shoulder cut deep by Nandi, debilitating the movement of

his sword arm.

Bhadra stood behind the Pakrati chief, his sword raised high, ready to strike. 'Shiva,

quick and easy or slow and painful?'

'Sir!' intervened Nandi, before Shiva could speak. Shiva turned towards the Meluhan.

'This is wrong! They are begging for mercy! Killing them is against the rules of war.'

'You don't know the Pakratis!' said Shiva. 'They are brutal. They will keep attacking us

even if there is nothing to gain. This has to end. Once and for all.'

'It is already ending. You are not going to live here anymore. You will soon be in

Meluha.'

Shiva stood silent.

Nandi continued, 'How you want to end this is up to you. More of the same or different?'

Bhadra looked at Shiva. Waiting.

'You can show the Pakratis that you are better,' said Nandi. Shiva turned towards the

horizon, seeing the massive mountains.

Destiny? Chance of a better life?

He turned back to Bhadra. 'Disarm them. Take all their provisions. Release them.'

Even if the Pakratis are mad enough to go back to their village, rearm and come back,

we would be long gone.

A shocked Bhadra stared at Shiva. But immediately started implementing the order.

Nandi gazed at Shiva with hope. There was but one thought that reverberated

through

his mind. *'Shiva has the heart. He has the potential.'*

*Please,*

*let it be him. I pray to you*





*Lord Ram, let it be him.'*

Shiva walked back to the young soldier he had stabbed. He lay writhing on the ground,

face contorted in pain, as blood oozed slowly out of his guts. For this first time in his life, Shiva felt pity for a Pakrati. He drew his sword and ended the young soldier's suffering.

After marching continuously for four weeks, the caravan of invited immigrants crested

the final mountain to reach the outskirts of Srinagar, the capital of the valley of Kashmir.

Nandi had talked excitedly about the glories of his perfect land. Shiva had prepared

himself to see some incredible sights, which he could not have imagined in his simple

homeland. But nothing could have primed him for the sheer spectacle of what certainly

was paradise.

*Meluha . The land of pure life!*

The mighty Jhelum river, a roaring tigress in the mountains, slowed down to the beat of

a languorous

cow as she entered the valley. She caressed



the heavenly

land of

Kashmir, meandering

her way into the immense Dal Lake. Further down, she broke

away from the lake, continuing her journey to the sea.

The vast valley was covered by a lush green canvas of grass. On it was painted the

masterpiece

that was Kashmir. Rows upon rows of flowers arrayed all of God's colours,

their brilliance broken only by the soaring Chinar trees, offering a majestic, yet warm

Kashmiri welcome. The melodious singing of the birds calmed the exhausted

ears of

Shiva's tribe, accustomed only to the rude howling of icy mountain winds.

'If this is the border province, how perfect must the rest of the country be?' whispered

Shiva in awe.

The Dal Lake was the site of an ancient army camp of the Meluhans. Upon the western

banks of the lake, by the side of the Jhelum lay the frontier town that had grown beyond

its simple encampments

into the grand *Srinagar* . Literally, the '*respected city*' .

Srinagar had been raised upon a massive platform of almost a hundred hectares

in

size. The platform built of earth, towered almost five metres high. On top of the platform were the city walls, which were another twenty metres in height and four metres thick.

The simplicity and brilliance of building an entire city on a platform astounded

the

Gunas. It was a strong protection against enemies who would have to fight up a fort wall

which was essentially

solid ground. The platform served another vital purpose: it raised

the ground level of the city, an extremely effective strategy against the recurrent floods in this land. Inside the fort walls, the city was divided into blocks by roads laid out in a neat grid pattern. It had specially constructed market areas, temples, gardens, meeting

halls and everything else that would be required for sophisticated

urban living. All the

houses looked like simple multiple-storeyed

block structures from the outside. The only  
way to differentiate a rich man's house was that his block would be bigger.  
In contrast to the extravagant  
natural landscape  
of Kashmir, the city of Srinagar itself  
was painted only in restrained greys, blues and whites. The entire city was a  
picture of  
cleanliness,  
order and sobriety. Nearly twenty thousand souls called Srinagar  
their  
home. Now an additional two hundred had just arrived from Mount Kailash.  
And their  
leader felt a lightness of being he hadn't experienced since that terrible day,  
many years ago.


I have escaped. I can make a new beginning. I can forget.

The caravan travelled to the immigrant camp outside Srinagar. The camp  
had been built

on a separate platform on the southern side of the city. Nandi led Shiva and  
his tribe to



the Foreigners' Office, which was placed just outside the camp. Nandi  
requested Shiva



to wait outside as he went into the office. He soon returned, accompanied by a young

official. The official gave a practised smile and folded his hands in a formal namaste.

‘Welcome to Meluha. I am Chitraangadh.

I will be your Orientation Executive. Think of

me as your single point of contact for all issues whilst you are here. I believe your

leader’s name is Shiva. Will he step up please?’

Shiva took a step forward. ‘I am Shiva.’

‘Excellent,’ said Chitraangadh.

‘Would you be so kind as to follow me to the registration desk please?’

You will be registered as the caretaker of your tribe. Any communication that concerns them will go through you. Since you are the designated leader, the

implementation of all directives within your tribe would be your responsibility’

Nandi cut into Chitraangadh’s

officious speech to tell Shiva, ‘Sir, if you will just excuse me, I will go to the immigrant camp quarters

and arrange

the temporary

living

arrangements

for your tribe.'

Shiva noticed that Chitraangadh's

ever-beaming

face had lost its smile for a fraction of a

second as Nandi interrupted his flow. But he recovered quickly and the smile returned to

his face once again. Shiva turned and looked at Nandi.

'Of course, you may. You don't need to take my permission, Nandi,' said Shiva. 'But in

return, you have to promise me something, my friend.'

'Of course, Sir,' replied Nandi bowing slightly.

'Call me Shiva. Not Sir,' grinned Shiva. 'I am your friend. Not your Chief.'

A surprised Nandi looked up, bowed again and said, 'Yes Sir. I mean, yes, Shiva.'

Shiva turned back to Chitraangadh,

whose smile for some reason appeared

more

genuine now. He said, 'Well Shiva, if you will follow me to the registration desk, we will complete the formalities quickly.'

The newly registered tribe reached the residential quarters in the immigration camp, to

see Nandi waiting outside the main gates; he led them in. The roads of the camp were

just like those of Srinagar. They were laid out in a neat north-south and east-west grid.

The carefully paved footpaths contrasted sharply with the dirt tracks in Shiva's own

land. He noticed something strange about the road though.

'Nandi, what are those differently coloured stones running through the centre of the

road?' asked Shiva.

'They cover the underground drains, Shiva. The drains take all the waste water of the

camp out. It ensures that the camp remains clean and hygienic'

Shiva marvelled at the almost obsessively

meticulous planning of the Meluhans.

The Gunas reached

the large building that had been assigned

to them. For the

umpteenth time, they thanked the wisdom of their leader in deciding to come to Meluha.

The three—storeyed

building had comfortable, separate living quarters for each family.

Each room had luxurious furniture including a highly polished copper plate on the wall

on which they could see their reflection. The rooms had clean linen bed sheets, towels

and even some clothes. Feeling the cloth, a bewildered Shiva asked, ‘What is this

material?’

Chitraangadh

replied enthusiastically,

‘It’s cotton, Shiva. The plant is grown in our lands

and fashioned into the cloth that you hold.’

There was a broad picture window on each wall to allow the light and the warmth of the

sun. Notches on each wall supported a metal rod with a controlled flame on top for

lighting. Each room had an attached bathroom with a sloping floor that enabled the

water to flow naturally to a hole which drained it out. At the right end of each bathroom was a paved basin on the ground which culminated in a large hole. The purpose of this



contraption was a mystery to the tribe. The side walls had some kind of device, which

when turned, allowed water to flow through.

‘Magic!’ whispered Bhadra’s mother.

Beside the main door of the building was an attached house. A doctor and her nurses

walked out of the house to greet Shiva. The doctor, a petite, wheat-skinned woman was

dressed in a simple white cloth tied around her waist and legs in a style the Meluhans

called *dhoti* . A smaller white cloth was tied as a blouse around her chest while another cloth called an *angvastram*

was draped over her shoulders. The centre of her forehead

bore a white dot. Her head had been shaved clean except for a knotted tuft of hair at the back, called a *choti* . A loose string called a *janau*

was tied down from her left shoulder

across her torso to the right side.

Nandi was genuinely startled at seeing her. With a reverential namaste, he said, ‘Lady

Ayurvati! I didn’t expect a doctor of your stature here.’

Ayurvati looked at Nandi with a smile and a polite namaste.



‘I strongly believe in the

field-work experience

programme, Captain. My team follows it strictly. However, I am

terribly sorry but I didn’t recognise you. Have we met before?’

‘My name is Captain Nandi, my lady,’ answered Nandi. We haven’t met but who doesn’t

know you, the greatest doctor in the land?’

‘Thank you, Captain Nandi,’ said a visibly embarrassed

Ayurvati. ‘But I think you

exaggerate.

There are many far superior to me.’ Turning quickly towards Shiva, Ayurvati

continued, ‘Welcome to Meluha. I am Ayurvati, your designated doctor. My nurses and I

will be at your assistance

for the time that you are in these quarters.’

Hearing no reaction from Shiva, Chitraangadh

said in his most earnest voice, ‘These

are just temporary quarters, Shiva. The actual houses that will be allocated to your tribe will be much more comfortable.

You have to stay here only for the period of the

quarantine which will not last more than seven days.’

‘Oh no, my friend! The quarters are more than comfortable. They are beyond anything

that we could have imagined. What say

*Mausi?*’

grinned Shiva at Bhadra’s mother,

before turning back to Chitraangadh with a frown. ‘But why the quarantine?’

Nandi cut in. ‘Shiva, the quarantine

is just a precaution.

We don’t have too many

diseases

in Meluha. Sometimes,

immigrants may come in with new diseases.

During

this seven—day period, the doctors will observe and cure you of any such ailments.’

‘And one of the guidelines that you have to follow to control diseases

is to maintain strict

hygiene standards,’ said Ayurvati.

Shiva grimaced at Nandi and whispered, ‘Hygiene standards?’

Nandi’s forehead crinkled into an apologetic

frown while his hands gently advised

acquiescence.

He mumbled, ‘Please go along with it, Shiva. It is just one of those things that we *have*

to do in Meluha. Lady Ayurvati is considered to be the best doctor in the land.’

‘If you are free right now, I can give you your instructions,’ said Ayurvati.

‘I am free right now,’ said Shiva with a straight face. ‘But I may have to charge you

later.’

Bhadra giggled softly, while Ayurvati stared at Shiva with a blank face, clearly not

amused at the pun.

‘I don’t understand what you’re trying to say,’ said Ayurvati frostily. ‘In any case, we will begin at the bathroom.’

Ayurvati walked into the guest house, muttering under her breath, ‘These uncouth

immigrants...’

Shiva raised his eyebrows towards Bhadra, grinning impishly.



Late in the evening, after a hearty meal, all the Gunas were served a medicinal drink in

their rooms.

‘Yuck!’ grimaced Bhadra, his face contorted. ‘This tastes like Yak’s piss!’

‘How do you know what yak’s piss tastes like?’ laughed Shiva, as he slapped his friend

hard on the back. ‘Now go to your room. I need to sleep.’

‘Have you seen the beds? I think this is going to be the best sleep of my life!’

‘I have seen the bed, dammit!’ grinned Shiva. ‘Now I want to experience it. Get out!’

Bhadra left Shiva’s room, laughing loudly. He wasn’t the only one excited by the

unnaturally

soft beds. Their entire tribe had rushed to their rooms for what they

anticipated

would be the most comfortable sleep of their lives. They were in for a surprise.

Shiva tossed and turned on his bed constantly. He was wearing an orange coloured

dhoti. The tiger skin had been taken away to be washed — for hygienic reasons. His

cotton angvastram

was lying on a low chair by the wall. A half lit chillum lay forlorn on

the side-table.

This cursed bed is too soft. Impossible to sleep on!

Shiva yanked the bed sheet off the mattress, tossed it on the floor and lay down. This

was a little better. Sleep was stealthily creeping in on him. But not as strongly as at

home. He missed the rough cold floor of his own hut. He missed the shrill winds of

Mount Kailash, which broke through the most determined efforts to ignore them. He

missed the comforting stench of his tiger skin. No doubt, his current surroundings were

excessively

comfortable, but they were unfamiliar and alien.

As usual, it was his instincts which brought up the truth:

‘It’s not the room.It’s you.’

It was then that Shiva noticed that he was sweating. Despite the cool breeze, he was

sweating profusely. The room appeared to be spinning lightly. He felt as if his body was

being drawn out of itself. His frostbitten right toe felt as if it was on fire. His battle scarred left knee seemed to be getting stretched. His tired and aching muscles felt as if a great hand was remoulding them. His shoulder bone, dislocated in days past and

never completely healed, appeared to be ripping the muscles aside so as to re-engineer

the joint. The muscles in turn seemed to be giving way to the bones to do their job.

Breathing was an effort. He opened his mouth to help his lungs along. But not enough

air flowed in. Shiva concentrated with all his might, opened his mouth wide and sucked

in as much air as he could. The curtains by the side of the window rustled as a kindly

wind rushed in. With the sudden gush of air, Shiva's body relaxed just a bit. And then

the battle began again. He focused and willed giant gasps of air into his hungry body.

Knock! Knock!

The light tapping on the door alerted Shiva. He was disoriented for a moment. Still

breathing hard! His shoulder was twitching. The familiar pain was missing. He looked

down at his knee. It didn't hurt anymore. The scar had vanished. Still gasping for breath!

He looked down at his toe. Whole and complete now. He bent to check it. A cracking

sound reverberated

through the room as his toe made its first movement in years. Still

breathing hard! There was also an unfamiliar tingling coldness in his neck. Very cold.

Knock! Knock! A little more insistent now.

A bewildered Shiva staggered  
to his feet, pulled the angvastram  
around his neck for  
warmth and opened the door.

The darkness veiled his face, but Shiva could still recognise Bhadra. He whispered in a

panic stricken voice, 'Shiva, I'm sorry to disturb you so late. But my mother has

suddenly got a very high fever. What should I do?'

Shiva instinctively touched Bhadra's forehead. 'You too have a fever Bhadra. Go to your room. I will get the doctor.'

As Shiva raced down the corridor towards the steps he encountered many more doors

opening with the now familiar message.

'Sudden fever! Help!'

Shiva sprinted down the steps to the attached building where the doctors were housed.

He knocked hard on the door. Ayurvati opened it immediately, as if she was expecting

him. Shiva spoke calmly. 'Ayurvati, almost my entire tribe has suddenly fallen ill. Please come fast, they need help.'

Ayurvati touched Shiva's forehead. You don't have a fever?'

Shiva shook his head. 'No.'

Ayurvati frowned, clearly surprised. She turned and ordered her nurses, 'Come on. It's

begun. Let's go.'

As Ayurvati and her nurses rushed into the building, Chitraangadh

appeared

out of

nowhere. He asked Shiva, 'What happened?'

'I don't know. Practically everybody in my tribe suddenly fell ill.'

'You too are sweating heavily'

'Don't worry. I don't have a fever. Look, I'm going back into the building. I want to see how my people are doing'

Chitraangadh nodded, adding, 'I'll call Nandi.'

As Chitraangadh

sped away in search of Nandi, Shiva ran into the building. He was

surprised the moment he entered. All the torches in the building had been lit. The

nurses



were going from room to room, methodically

administering

medicines

and

advising the scared patients on what they should do. A scribe walked along with each

nurse meticulously

noting the details of each patient on a palm-leaf booklet. The

Meluhans were clearly prepared for such an eventuality. Ayurvati stood at the end of the

corridor, her hands on her hips. Like a general supervising

her superbly trained and

efficient troops. Shiva rushed up to her and asked, 'What about the second and third

floor?'

Ayurvati answered

without turning to him. 'Nurses have already reached all over the

building. I will go up to supervise once the situation on this floor has stabilised. We'll cover all the patients in the next half hour.'

'You people are incredibly efficient but I pray that everyone will be okay,' said a worried Shiva.

Ayurvati turned to look at Shiva. Her eyebrows were raised slightly and a hint of a smile hovered on her serious face. 'Don't worry. We're Meluhans. We are capable of handling

any situation. Everybody will be fine.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'Yes. Please go take a bath.'

'What?!'

'Please go take a bath. Right now,' said Ayurvati as she turned back to look at her team.

'Everybody, please

remember

that all children below the age of fifteen

*must*

be

tonsured. Mastrak, please go up and start the secondary medicines. I'll be there in five

minutes.'

'Yes, my lady,' said a young man as he hurried up the steps carrying a large cloth bag.

'You're still here?' asked Ayurvati as she noticed that Shiva hadn't left.

Shiva spoke softly, controlling his rising anger, 'What difference will my bathing make?'

My people are in trouble. I want to help.'

'I don't have the time or the patience to argue with you. You will go take a bath right

now!' said Ayurvati, clearly *not* trying to control her rising temper.

Shiva glared at Ayurvati as he made a heroic effort to rein in the curses that wanted to

leap out of his mouth. His clenched fists wanted to have an argument of their own with

Ayurvati. But she was a woman.



Ayurvati too glared back at Shiva. She was used to being obeyed. She was a doctor. If

she told a patient to do something, she expected it to be done without question. But in

her long years of experience

she had also seen a few patients like Shiva, especially

from the nobility. Such patients had to be *reasoned*

with. Not *instructed*

. Yet, this was

a simple immigrant. Not some nobleman!

Controlling herself with great effort, Ayurvati said, 'Shiva, you are sweating. If you don't wash it off, it will kill you. Please trust me. You cannot be of

any help to your tribe if you are dead.’

Chitraangadh

banged loudly on the door. A bleary eyed Nandi woke up cursing. He

wrenched the door open and growled, ‘This better be important!’

‘Come quickly. Shiva’s tribe has fallen ill.’

‘Already? But this is only the first night!’ exclaimed Nandi. Picking up his angvastram he said, ‘Let’s go!’

The bathroom seemed a strange place for a bath. Shiva was used to splashing about in

the chilly Mansarovar

Lake for his bi-monthly ablutions. The bathroom felt strangely

constricted. He turned the magical device on the wall to increase the flow of water. He

used the strange cake-like substance

that the Meluhans said was a soap to rub the

body clean. Ayurvati had been very clear. The soap

*had*

to be used. He turned the

water off and picked up the towel. As he rubbed himself vigorously, the mystifying

development he had ignored in the past few hours came flooding back. His shoulder felt

better than new He looked down in awe at his knee. No pain, no scar. He stared in

wonder at his completely healed toe. And then he realised that it wasn't just the injured parts, but his entire body felt new, rejuvenated

and stronger than ever. His neck,

though, still felt intolerably cold.

What the devil is going on?

He stepped out of the bathroom and quickly wore a new dhoti. Again, Ayurvati's strict

instructions were not to wear his old clothes which were stained by his sweat. As he

was putting on the angvastram around his neck for some warmth, there was a knock on

the door. It was Ayurvati. 'Shiva, can you open the door please?

I just want to check

whether you are all right.'

Shiva opened the door. Ayurvati stepped in and checked Shiva's temperature;

it was

normal. Ayurvati nodded slightly and said, 'You seem to be healthy. And your tribe is

recovering quickly as well. The trouble has passed.'

Shiva smiled gratefully. 'Thanks to the skills and efficiency of your team. I am truly sorry for arguing with you earlier. It was unnecessary.

I know you meant well.'

Ayurvati looked up from her palm-leaf booklet with a slight smile and a raised eyebrow.

'Being polite, are we?'

'I'm not that rude, you know,' grinned Shiva. 'You people are just too supercilious!'

Ayurvati suddenly stopped listening as she stared at Shiva with a stunned look on her

face. How had she not noticed it before? She had never believed in the legend. Was

she going to be the first one to see it come true? Pointing weakly with her hands she

mumbled, 'Why have you covered your neck?'

'It's very cold for some reason. Is it something to get worried about?' asked Shiva as he pulled the angvastram off.

A cry resounded loudly through the silent room as Ayurvati staggered

back. Her hand

covered her mouth in shock while the palm leaves scattered on the floor. Her knees

were too weak to hold her up. She collapsed with her back against the wall, never once

taking her eyes off Shiva. Tears broke through her proud eyes. She kept repeating, 'Om

Brahmaye namah. Om Brahmaye namah.'

'What happened?

Is it serious?' asked a worried Shiva.

You have come! My Lord, you have come!'

Before a bewildered Shiva could react to her strange reaction, Nandi rushed in and

noticed Ayurvati on the ground. Copious tears were flowing down her face.

'What happened, my lady?' asked a startled Nandi.

Ayurvati just pointed at Shiva's neck. Nandi looked up. The neck shone an eerie

iridescent blue. With a cry that sounded like that of a long caged animal just released

from captivity, Nandi collapsed on his knees. 'My Lord! You have come! The Neelkanth

has come!'

The Captain bent low and brought his head down to touch the Neelkanth's feet

reverentially.

The object of his adoration

however,

stepped

back, befuddled

and

perturbed.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ Shiva asked agitatedly.

Holding a hand to his freezing neck, he turned around to the polished copper plate and

stared in stunned astonishment at the reflection of his *neel kanth* ; his *blue throat* .

Chitraangadh,

holding the door frame for support, sobbed like a child. ‘We’re saved!

We’re saved! He has come!’





## CHAPTER 2

### Land of Pure Life

Chenardhwaj,

the governor of Kashmir, wanted to broadcast to the entire world that the

Neelkanth

had appeared

in his capital city. Not in the other frontier towns like

Takshashila, Karachapa or Lothal. *His* Srinagar! But the bird courier had arrived almost immediately from the Meluhan capital

*Devagiri* , the *abode*

*of the gods* . The orders

were crystal clear. The news of the arrival of the Neelkanth had to be kept secret until

the emperor himself had seen Shiva. Chenardhwaj

was ordered to send Shiva along

with an escort to Devagiri. Most importantly, Shiva himself was not to be told about the

legend. ‘The emperor will advise the supposed Neelkanth in an appropriate manner,’

were the exact words in the message.

Chenardhwaj had the privilege of informing Shiva about the journey. Shiva though, was

not in the most amenable of moods. He was utterly perplexed by the sudden devotion of

every Meluhan around him. Since he had been transferred

to the gubernatorial

residence

where he lived in luxury, only the most important citizens of Srinagar had

access to him.

‘My Lord, we will be escorting you to Devagiri, our capital. It is a few weeks’ journey

from here,’ said Chenardhwaj

as he struggled to bend his enormous and muscular

frame lower than he ever had.

I’m not going till somebody tells me what is going on! What the hell is this damned

legend of the Neelkanth?’ Shiva asked angrily.

‘My Lord, please have faith in us. You will know the truth soon. The emperor himself will tell you when you reach Devagiri.’

‘And what about my tribe?’

‘They will be given lands right here in Kashmir, my Lord. All the resources

that they

need to lead a comfortable life will be provided for.'

'Are they being held hostage?'

'Oh no, my Lord,' said a visibly disturbed Chenardhwaj.

'They are *your*

tribe, my Lord.

If I had my way, they would live like nobility for the rest of their lives. But the laws cannot be broken, my Lord. Not even for you. We can only give them what had been promised.

In the course of time my Lord, you can decide to change the laws you feel necessary.

Then we could certainly accommodate

them anywhere.'

'Please, my Lord,' pleaded Nandi. 'Have faith in us. You cannot imagine how important

you are to Meluha. We have been waiting for a very long time for you. We need your

help.'

Please help me! Please!

The memory of another desperate plea from a distraught woman years ago returned to

haunt Shiva as he was stunned into silence.

'Your destiny is much larger than these massive mountains.'

Nonsense! I don't deserve any destiny. If these people knew my guilt, they would stop

this bullshit instantly!

'I don't know what to do, Bhadra.'

Shiva was sitting in the royal gardens on the banks of the Dal Lake while his friend sat

at his side, carefully filling some marijuana into a chillum. As Bhadra used the lit stick to bring the chillum to life, Shiva said impatiently, 'That's a cue for you to speak, you fool.'

'No. That's actually a cue for me to hand you the chillum, Shiva.'

'Why will you not council me?' asked Shiva in anguish. 'We are still the same friends

who never made a move without consulting each other!'

Bhadra smiled. 'No we are not. You are the Chief now. The tribe lives and dies by your

decisions. It cannot be corrupted by any other person's influence. We are not like the

Pakratis, where the Chief has to listen to whoever is the loudmouth on their council.

Only the chief's wisdom is supreme amongst the Gunas. That is our tradition.'

Shiva raised his eyes in exasperation.

'Some traditions are meant to be broken!'

Bhadra stayed silent. Stretching his hand, Shiva grabbed the chillum from Bhadra. He

took one deep puff, letting the marijuana spread its munificence into his body.

‘I’ve heard just one line about the legend of the Neelkanth,’ said Bhadra. ‘Apparently

Meluha is in deep trouble and only the Neelkanth can save them.’

‘But I can’t seem to see any trouble out here? Everything seems perfect. If they want to

see real trouble we should take them to our land!’

Bhadra laughed slightly. ‘But what is it about the blue throat that makes them believe

you can save them?’

‘Damned if I know! They are so much more advanced than us. And yet they worship me

like I am some god. Just because of this blessed blue throat’

‘I think their medicines are magical though. Have you noticed that the hump on my back

has reduced a little bit?’

‘Yes it has! Their doctors are seriously gifted.’

‘You know their doctors are called Brahmins?’

‘Like Ayurvati?’ asked Shiva, passing the chillum back to Bhadra.

‘Yes. But the Brahmins don’t just cure people. They are also teachers, lawyers, priests,

basically any intellectual profession.’

‘Talented people,’ sniffed Shiva.

‘That’s not all,’ said Bhadra, in between a long inhalation.

‘They have a concept of specialisation.

So in addition to the Brahmins, they have a

group called Kshatriyas,

who are the warriors and rulers. Even the women can be

Kshatriyas!’

‘Really? They allow women into their army?’

‘Well, apparently there aren’t too many female Kshatriyas. But yes, they are allowed into the army.’

‘No wonder they are in trouble!’

The friends laughed loudly at the strange ways of the Meluhans. Bhadra took another

puff from the chillum before continuing his story. ‘And then they have Vaishyas, who are

craftsmen, traders and business

people and finally the Shudras who are the farmers

and workers. And one caste cannot do another caste’s job.’

‘Hang on,’ said Shiva. ‘That means that since you are a warrior, you would not be

allowed to trade at the marketplace?’

‘Yes.’

‘Bloody stupid! How would you get me my marijuana? After all that is the only thing you

are useful for!’

Shiva leaned back to avoid the playful blow from Bhadra. ‘All right, all right. Take it

easy!’ he laughed. Stretching out, he grabbed the chillum from Bhadra and took another

deep drag.

We’re talking about everything except what we should be talking about.

Shiva became serious again. ‘But seriously, strange as they are, what should I do?’

‘What are you thinking of doing?’

Shiva looked away, as if contemplating the roses in the far corner of the garden. ‘I don’t

— ʌ ⊗ ∪ † ⊗ —

— ʌ ⊗ ∪ † ⊗ —

want to run away once again.’

‘What?’ asked Bhadra, not hearing Shiva’s tormented whisper clearly.

‘I said,’ repeated Shiva loudly, ‘I can’t bear the guilt of running away once again.’

‘That wasn’t your fault...’

‘YES IT WAS!’

Bhadra fell silent. There was nothing that could be said. Covering his eyes, Shiva

sighed once again. ‘Yes, it was...’

Bhadra put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, pressing

it gently, letting the terrible

moment pass. Shiva turned his face. ‘I’m asking for advice, my friend. What should I

do? If they need my help, I can’t turn away from them. At the same time, how can I

leave our tribe all by themselves out here? What should I do?’

Bhadra continued to hold Shiva’s shoulder. He breathed deeply. He could think of an

answer. It may have been the correct answer for Shiva, *his friend* . But was it the correct answer for Shiva, *the leader* !

‘You have to find that wisdom yourself, Shiva. That is the tradition.’

‘O the hell with you!’

Shiva threw the chillum back at Bhadra and stormed away.

In was only a few days later that a minor caravan consisting of Shiva, Nandi and three



soldiers was scheduled

to leave Srinagar.

The small party would ensure that they

moved quickly through the realm and reached Devagiri as soon as possible.  
Governor

Chenardhwaj was anxious for Shiva to be recognised quickly by the empire  
as the true

Neelkanth. He wanted to go down in history as the governor who found the  
Lord.

Shiva had been made 'presentable'

for the emperor. His hair had been oiled and  
smoothened.

Lines of expensive

clothes, attractive ear-rings,

necklaces

and other

jewellery were brought to adorn his muscular frame. His fair face had been  
scrubbed

clean with special

*Ayurvedic*

herbs to remove years of dead skin & decay. A cravat

had been fabricated out of cotton to cover his glowing blue throat. Beads  
had been

cleverly darned on to the cravat to make it look like the traditional necklaces  
that

Meluhan men wore while on religious exercises.

The cravat felt warm on his still cold  
throat.

‘I will be back soon,’ said Shiva as he hugged Bhadra’s mother. He was  
amazed that

the old lady’s limp was a little less noticeable.

*Their medicines*

*are truly magical .*

As a morose Bhadra looked at him, Shiva whispered, ‘Take care of the tribe.  
You are in

charge till I come back.’

Bhadra stepped back, startled. ‘Shiva you don’t have to that just because

I am your

friend.’

‘I have to do it, you fool. And the reason I have to do it that you are more  
capable than

me.’

Bhadra stepped up and embraced Shiva, lest his friend notice the tears in his eyes. 'No

Shiva, I am not. Not even my dreams.'

'Shut up! Listen to me carefully,' said Shiva as Bhairav smiled sadly. 'I don't think the

Gunas are at any risk out here. At least not as much as we were at Mount Kailash. But

even then, if you feel you need help, ask Ayurvati. I saw her when the tribe was ill. She

showed tremendous commitment save us all. She is worth trusting.'

Bhadra nodded, hugged Shiva again and left the room.



Ayurvati knocked politely on the door. 'May I come in, my Lord?'

This was the first time she had come into his presence since that fateful moment seven

days back. It seemed like a lifetime to her. Though she appeared to be her confident

self again, there was a slightly different look about her. She had the appearance

of

someone who had been touched by the divine.

'Come in Ayurvati. And please, none of this "Lord" business. I am still the same uncouth

immigrant you met a few days ago.'

'I am sorry about that comment, my Lord. It was wrong of me to say that and I am willing

to accept any punishment that you may deem fit.'

'What's wrong with you? Why should I punish you for speaking the truth? Why should

this bloody blue throat change anything?'

'You will discover the reason, my Lord,' whispered Ayurvati with her head bowed. We

have waited for centuries for you.'

'Centuries?!'

In the name of the holy lake, why? What can I do that any of you smart people can't?'

'The emperor will tell you, my Lord. Suffice it to say that from all that I have heard from your tribe, if there is one person worthy of being the Neelkanth, it is you.'

'Speaking of my tribe, I have told them that if they need any help, they can request you.

I hope that is all right.'

'It would be my honour to provide any assistance to them, my Lord.'

Saying this, she bent down to touch Shiva's feet in the traditional Indian form of showing respect. Shiva had resigned himself to accepting this

gesture from most Meluhans but

immediately stepped back as Ayurvati bent down.

‘What the hell are you doing, Ayurvati?’ asked a horrified Shiva. You are a doctor, a

giver of life. Don’t embarrass me by touching my feet.’

Ayurvati looked up at Shiva, her eyes shining with admiration and devotion. This was

certainly a man worthy of being the Neelkanth.

Nandi entered Shiva’s room carrying a saffron cloth with the word ‘Ram’ stamped

across every inch of it. He requested Shiva to wrap it around his shoulders. As Shiva

complied, Nandi muttered a quick short prayer for a safe journey to Devagiri.

‘Our horses wait outside, my Lord. We can leave when you are ready,’ said Nandi.

‘Nandi,’ said an exasperated

Shiva. ‘How many times must I tell you? My name is

Shiva. I am your friend, not your Lord’

‘Oh no, my Lord,’ gasped Nandi. ‘You are the Neelkanth. You *are* the Lord. How can I take your name?’

Shiva rolled his eyes, shook his head slightly and turned towards the door. ‘I give up!’

Can we leave now?’

‘Of course, my Lord.’

They stepped outside to see three mounted soldiers waiting patiently, while tethered

close to them were three more horses. One each for Shiva and Nandi, while the third

was assigned for carrying their provisions. The well-organised

Meluhan Empire had rest

houses and provision stores spread across all major travel routes. As long as there

were enough provisions for just one day, a traveller carrying Meluhan coins could

comfortably keep buying fresh provisions to last a journey of months.

Nandi’s horse had been tethered next to a small platform. The platform had steps

leading up to it from the other side. Clearly, this was convenient infrastructure for obese riders who found it a little cumbersome

to climb onto a horse. Shiva looked at Nandi’s



enormous form, then at his unfortunate horse and then back at Nandi.

‘Aren’t there any laws in Meluha against cruelty to animals?’ asked Shiva with the most

sincere of expressions.

‘Oh yes, my Lord. Very strict laws. In Meluha ALL life is precious. In fact there are strict guidelines as to when and how animals can be slaughtered and...’

Suddenly Nandi stopped speaking. Shiva’s joke had finally breached Nandi’s slow wit.

They both burst out laughing as Shiva slapped Nandi hard on his back.

Shiva’s entourage followed the course of the Jhelum which had resumed its thunderous

roar as it crashed down the lower Himalayas. Once on the magnificent flat plains, the

turbulent river calmed down once again and flowed smoothly on. Smooth enough for the

group to get on one of the many public transport barges to sail quickly down to the town

of Brihateshpuram.

From there on, they went east by a well laid and marked road through Punjab, the heart

of the empire’s northern reaches.

*Punjab*

literally meant the *land of the five rivers* . The

land of the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi and Beas. The four eastern rivers aspired to

grasp

the grand

Indus,

which flowed farthest

to the west.

They succeeded

spectacularly,

after convoluted journeys on the rich plains of Punjab. The Indus itself

found comfort and succour in the enormous, all embracing ocean. The mystery of the

ocean's final destination though was yet to be unravelled.

‘What is Ram?’ enquired Shiva as he looked down at the word covering every inch of

his saffron cloth.

The three accompanying

soldiers rode at a polite distance behind Shiva and Nandi. Far

enough not to overhear any conversation but close enough to move in quickly at the first

sign of trouble. It was a part of their standard Meluhan service rules.



‘Lord Ram was the emperor who established

our way of life, my Lord,’ replied Nandi.

‘He lived around one thousand two hundred years ago. He created our systems,

our

rules, our ideologies, everything. His reign is known simply as ‘*Ram Rajya*’

or ‘*the rule*

*of Ram* . The term ‘Ram Rajya’ is considered to be the gold standard of how an empire must be administered,

to create a perfect life for all its citizens. Meluha is still run

according to his principles. Jai Shri Ram.’

‘He must have been quite a man! For he truly created a paradise right here on earth.’

Shiva did not lie when he said this. He truly believed that if there was a paradise

somewhere,

it couldn’t have been very different from Meluha. This was a land of

abundance,

of almost ethereal perfection! It was an empire ruled by clearly codified and

just laws, to which every Meluhan was subordinated,

including the emperor. The

country supported a population of nearly eight million, which without exception seemed

well fed, healthy and wealthy. The average intellect was exceptionally high. They were a

slightly serious people, but unfailingly polite and civil. It seemed to be a flawless society where everyone

knew his role and played it perfectly. They were conscious,

not

obsessive,

about their duties. The simple truth hit Shiva: if the entire society was

conscious

of its duties, nobody would need to fight for their individual rights. Since

*everybody's*

*rights*

would be automatically

taken care of through

*someone*

*else's*

*duties* . Lord Ram was a genius!

Shiva too repeated Nandi's cry, signifying *Glory to Lord Ram*. 'Jai Shri Ram.'

Having left their horses at the government authorised crossing-house,  
they crossed the



river Ravi, close to

*Hariyupa* , or the

*City of Hari* . Shiva lingered there admiring

Hariyupa at a slight distance, while his soldiers waited just beyond his  
shadow, having

mounted their freshly allocated horses from the crossing-house

on the other side of the

Ravi. Hariyupa was a much larger city than Srinagar

and seemed

grand from the

outside. Shiva thought seriously about exploring the magnificent city but  
that would

have meant a delay in the trip to Devagiri. Next to Hariyupa, Shiva saw a  
construction

project being executed. A new platform was being erected as Hariyupa had  
grown too

populous to accommodate

everyone on its existing platform.

How the hell do they raise these magnificent platforms?

Shiva made a mental note to visit the construction site on his return journey.

At a

distance, Jattaa, the captain of the river crossing house, was talking to Nandi while he

was about to climb the platform to mount his fresh horse.

‘Avoid the road via Jratak giri,’ advised Jattaa. ‘There was a terrorist attack there last night. All the Brahmins were killed and the village temple was destroyed. The terrorists

escaped as usual before any backup soldiers could arrive.’

‘When in Lord Agni’s name will we fight back? We should attack their country!’ snarled a

visibly angry Nandi.

‘I swear by Lord Indra, if I ever find one of these Chandravanshi

terrorists, I will cut his

body into minute pieces and feed it to the dogs,’ growled Jattaa, clenching his fists tight.

‘Jattaa! We are followers of the Suryavanshis.

We cannot even think of barbaric warfare

such as that!’ said Nandi.

‘Do the terrorists follow the rules of war when they attack us? Don’t they kill unarmed

men?’

‘That does not mean that we can act the same way, Captain. We are Meluhans!’ said

Nandi shaking his head.

Jattaa did not counter Nandi. He was distracted by Shiva still waiting at a distance. ‘Is he with you?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘He doesn’t wear a caste amulet. Is he a new immigrant?’

‘Yes.’ replied Nandi, getting uncomfortable answering questions about Shiva.

‘And you’re going to Devagiri?’ asked an increasingly suspicious Jattaa, looking harder

towards Shiva’s throat. ‘I’ve heard some rumours coming from Srinagar...’

Nandi interrupted Jattaa suddenly. ‘Thank you for your help, Captain Jattaa.’

Before Jattaa could act on his suspicions, Nandi quickly climbed the platform, mounted

his horse and rode towards Shiva. Reaching quickly, he said, ‘We should leave, my

Lord.’

Shiva wasn’t listening. He was perplexed once again as he saw the proud Captain

Jattaa on his knees. Jattaa was looking directly at Shiva with his hands folded in a

respectful

namaste.

He appeared

to be mumbling something

very quickly. Shiva

couldn't be sure from that distance, but it seemed that the Captain was crying. He shook

his head and whispered, 'Why?'

'We should go, my Lord,' repeated Nandi, a little louder.

Shiva turned to him, nodded and kicked his horse into action.

Shiva looked to his left as he rode on the straight road, observing Nandi goading his

valiant horse along. He turned around and was not surprised to see his three bodyguard

soldiers riding at exactly the same distance as before. Not too close, and yet, not too

far. He glanced back at Nandi, suspicious that the jewellery Nandi wore was not merely

ornamental.

He wore two amulets on his thick right arm. The first one had some

symbolic lines which Shiva could not fathom. The second one appeared

to have an

animal etching. Probably a bull. One of his gold chains had a pendant shaped like a perfectly circular sun with rays streaming outwards. The other pendant was a brown,

elliptical seed-like object with small serrations all over it.

‘Can you tell me the significance of your jewellery or is that also a state secret?’ teased Shiva.

‘Of course I can, my Lord,’ replied Nandi earnestly. He pointed at the first amulet that

had been tied around his massive arm with a silky gold thread. This is the amulet which

represents

my caste. The lines drawn on it are a symbol of the shoulders

of the

*Parmatma,*

*the almighty* . This means that I am a Kshatriya.’

‘I am sure there are clearly codified guidelines for representing the other castes as well.’

‘Right you are, my Lord. You are exceptionally intelligent.’

‘No, I am not. You people are just exceptionally predictable.’

Nandi smiled as Shiva continued. ‘So what are they?’

‘What are what, my Lord?’

‘The symbols for the Brahmins, Vaishyas and Shudras.’

Well, if the lines are drawn to represent the head of the Parmatma, it would mean the

wearer is a Brahmin. The symbol for a Vaishya would be the lines forming a symbol of

the thighs of the Parmatma. And the feet of the Parmatma on the amulet would make

the wearer a Shudra.'

'Interesting,' said Shiva with a slight frown. 'I imagine most Shudras are not too pleased about their placement.'

Nandi was quite surprised at Shiva's comments. He couldn't understand why a Shudra

would have a problem with this long ordained symbol. But he kept quiet for fear of

disagreeing

with his Lord.

'And the other amulet?' asked Shiva.

'This second amulet depicts my chosen-tribe. Each chosen-tribe takes on jobs which fit

its profile. Every Meluhan, under the advice of their parents, applies for a chosen-tribe when they turn twenty—five years old. Brahmins choose from birds, while Kshatriyas

apply for animals.

Flowers are allocated

to Vaishyas



while Shudras

must choose

amongst fishes. The Allocation Board allocates

the chosen-tribe

on the basis of a

rigorous examination process. You must qualify for a chosen-tribe that represents

both

your ambitions and skills. Choose a tribe that is too mighty and you will embarrass

yourself throughout your life if your achievements

don't measure up to the standards of

that tribe. Choose a tribe too lowly and you will not be doing justice to your own talents.

My chosen-tribe is a bull. That is the animal that this amulet represents.'

'And if I am not being rude, what does a bull mean in your rank of Kshatriya chosen-

tribes?'

'Well, it's not as high as a lion, tiger or an elephant. But it's not a rat or a pig either!'

'Well, as far as I am concerned, the bull can beat any lion or elephant,' smiled Shiva.

And what about the pendants on your chain?’

‘The brown seed is a representation  
of the last Mahadev, Lord Rudra. It symbolises the  
protection and regeneration  
of life. Even divine weapons  
cannot destroy the life it  
protects.’

‘And the Sun?’

‘My Lord, the sun represents the fact that I am a follower of the  
*Suryavanshi*

kings —

the kings who are *the descendants*

*of the Sun*’

‘What? The Sun came down and some queen...’ teased an incredulous  
Shiva.

‘Of course not, my Lord,’ laughed Nandi. ‘All it means is that we follow the  
solar

calendar. So you could say that we are the followers of the “path of the sun”.  
In practical terms it denotes that we are strong and steadfast.

We honour our word and keep our

promises even at the cost of our lives. We never break the law. We deal  
honourably

even with those who are dishonourable.

Like the Sun, we never take from anyone but



always give to others. We sear our duties into our consciousness

so that we may never

forget them. Being a Suryavanshi

means that we must always strive to be honest, brave

and above all, loyal to the truth.'

'A tall order! I assume that Lord Ram was a Suryavanshi

king?'

'Yes, of course,' replied Nandi, his chest puffed up with pride. 'He was *the* Suryavanshi king. Jai Shri Ram.'

'Jai Shri Ram,' repeated Shiva.

Nandi and Shiva crossed the river Beas on a boat. Their three soldiers waited to cross

on the following craft. The Beas was the last river to be crossed after which stretched

the straight road towards Devagiri. Unseasonal

rain the previous night had made the

crossing-house

captain

consider

cancelling

the day's crossings

across

the river.

However the weather had been relatively calm since the morning, allowing the captain

to keep the service operational.

Shiva and Nandi shared the boat with two other

passengers

as well as the boatman who rowed them across. They had traded in their

existing horses at the crossing-house

for fresh horses on the other side.

They were a short distance from the opposite bank when a sudden burst of torrential

rain came down from the heavens. The winds took on a sudden ferocity. The boatman

made a valiant effort to row quickly across,

but the boat tossed

violently as it

surrendered to the elements. Nandi stretched to tell Shiva to stay low for safety. But he did not do it gently enough. His considerable weight caused the boat to list dangerously, and he fell overboard.

The boatman tried to steady the boat with his rows to save the other passengers.

Even

as he did so, he had the presence of mind to pull out his conch and blow an emergency

call to the crossing-house

on the other side. The other two passengers

should have

jumped overboard to save Nandi but his massive build made them hesitate. They knew

that if they tried to save him, they would most likely drown.

Shiva felt no such hesitation as he quickly tossed aside his angvastram, pulled off his

shoes and dived into the turbulent river. Shiva swam with powerful strokes and quickly

reached a rapidly drowning Nandi. He had to use all of his considerable strength to pull

Nandi to the surface. In spite of being buoyed by the water, Nandi weighed significantly

more than what any normal man would. It was fortunate that Shiva felt stronger than

ever since the first night at the Srinagar immigration camp. Shiva positioned himself

behind Nandi and wrapped one arm around his chest. He used his other arm to swim to

the bank. Nandi's weight made it very exhausting work, but Shiva was able to tow the

Meluhan captain to the shore soon as the emergency

staff from the crossing-house

came rapidly towards them.

Shiva helped them drag Nandi's limp body on to the land. He was unconscious.

The emergency

staff then began a strange procedure. One of them started pressing

Nandi's chest in a quick rhythmic motion to the count of five. The moment he would

stop, another emergency

staff would cover Nandi's lips with his own and breathe hard

into his mouth. Then they would repeat the procedure all over again. Shiva did not

understand

what was going on but trusted both the knowledge

as well as the

commitment of the Meluhan medical personnel.

After several anxious moments, Nandi suddenly coughed up a considerable amount of

water and woke up with a start. At first he was disoriented but he quickly regained his

wits and turned abruptly towards Shiva, screeching,

‘My Lord, why did you jump in after

me? Your life is too precious. You must never risk it for me!’

A surprised Shiva supported Nandi’s back and whispered calmly, ‘You need to relax, my

friend.’

Agreeing with Shiva, the medical staff quickly placed Nandi on a stretcher to carry him into the rest house that was attached to the crossing-house.

The other boat passengers

were looking at Shiva with increasing

curiosity. They knew that the fat man was a

relatively senior Suryavanshi

soldier, judging by his amulets. Yet he called this fair,

caste-unmarked

man ‘his Lord’. Strange. But all that mattered was that the soldier was

safe. They dispersed as Shiva followed the medical staff into the rest house.





## CHAPTER 3

### [She Enters His Life](#)

Nandi lay in a semi-conscious

state for several hours as the medicines administered by

the doctors worked on his body. Shiva sat by his side, repeatedly changing the wet cloth

on his burning forehead to control the fever. Nandi kept babbling incoherently as he

tossed and turned in his sleep, making Shiva's task that much more difficult.

'I've been searching...

long... so long... a hundred years...

never thought I.... find

Neelkanth... Jai Shri Ram...'

Shiva tried to ignore Nandi's babble as he focussed on keeping the fever down. But his

ears had caught on to something.

He's been searching for a hundred years?!

Shiva frowned.

The fever's affecting his bloody brain! He doesn't look a day older than twenty years!

‘I’ve been searching for a hundred years...,’ continued the oblivious Nandi.  
‘...I found...

Neelkanth...’

Shiva stopped for a moment and stared hard at Nandi. Then shaking  
his head

dismissively, he continued his ministrations.

Shiva had been walking on a paved, signposted road along the River Beas  
for the better

part of an hour. He had left the rest house to explore the area by himself,  
much against

a rapidly recovering Nandi’s advice. Nandi was out of danger, but they had  
to wait for a

few days nevertheless,

so that the Captain could be strong enough to travel. There was

not much Shiva could do at the rest house and he had begun to feel restless.  
The three

soldiers had tried to shadow Shiva, but he had angrily dismissed them. ‘Will  
you please

stop trying to stick to me like leeches?’

The rhythmic hymns sung by the gentle waters of the Beas soothed Shiva. A  
cool

tender breeze teased

his thick lock of hair. He rested his hand on the hilt of his

scabbard as his mind swirled with persistent questions.

Is Nandi really more than a hundred years old? But that's impossible! And what the hell

do these crazy Meluhans need me for anyway? And why in the name of the holy lake is

my bloody throat still feeling so cold?

Lost in his thoughts, Shiva did not realise that he had strayed off the road into a

clearing. Staring him in the face was the most beautiful building he had ever seen. It

was built entirely with white and pink marble. An imposing flight of stairs led up to the top of a high platform, which had been

adorned

by pillars around

its entire

circumference.

The ornate roof was topped by a giant triangular spire, like a giant

'namaste' to the gods. Elaborate sculptures were carved upon every available space on

the structure.

Shiva had spent many days in Meluha and all the buildings he had seen so far were

functional and efficient. However, this particular one was oddly flamboyant.

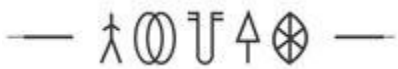
At the

entrance, a signpost announced, 'Temple of Lord Brahma'. The Meluhans appeared to

reserve their creativity for religious places.

There was a small crowd of hawkers around the courtyard in the clearing. Some were

selling flowers, others were selling food. Still others were selling assorted items required



for a *puja*. There was a stall where worshippers could leave their footwear as they went up to the temple. Shiva left his shoes there and walked up the steps. Entering the main

temple, he stared at the designs and sculptures, mesmerized by the sheer magnificence

of the architecture.

‘What are you doing here?’

Shiva turned around to find a Pandit staring at him quizzically. His wizened face sported a flowing white beard matched in length only by his silvery mane. Wearing a saffron

dhobi and angvastram,

he had the calm, genteel look of a man who had already attained

*nirvana*, but had chosen to remain on earth to fulfil some heavenly

duties. Shiva

realised that the Pandit was the first truly old person that he had seen in Meluha.

‘I am sorry. Am I not allowed in here?’ asked Shiva politely.

‘Of course you are allowed in here. Everyone is allowed into the house of the gods.’

Shiva smiled. Before he could respond however, the Pandit questioned once again, ‘But

you don’t believe in these gods, do you?’

Shiva’s smile disappeared

as quickly as it came.

How the hell does he know?

The Pandit answered the question in Shiva’s eyes. ‘Everyone who enters this place of

worship looks only at the idol of Lord Brahma. Almost nobody notices the efforts and the

brilliance of the architects who built this lovely temple. You, however, have eyes only for the work of the architects. You have not yet cast even a glance upon the idol.’

Shiva grinned apologetically.

You guessed

right. I don’t believe in symbolic gods. I

believe that the real god exists all around us. In the flow of the river, in the rustle of the trees, in the whisper of the winds. He speaks to us all the time. All we need to do is

listen. However, I apologise  
if I have caused  
some offence in not showing proper  
respect for your god.'

You don't need to apologise,  
my friend,' smiled the Pandit. There is no "your god" or  
";my god". All godliness  
comes from the same source. Just the manifestations  
are

different. But I have a feeling that one day you will find a temple worth  
walking into just for prayer, not to admire its beauty.'

'Really? Which temple might that be?'

'You will find it when you are ready, my friend.'

Why do these Meluhans always talk in bizarre riddles?

Shiva nodded politely, his expression pretending an appreciation for the  
Pandit's words

that he did not truly feel. He thought it wise to flee the temple before his  
welcome was

stretched any further.

'It's time to get back to my rest house now, Pandit *ji*. But I eagerly look  
forward to finding the temple of my destiny. It was a pleasure meeting you,'  
said Shiva, as he bent down

to touch the Pandit's feet.

Placing his hand on Shiva's head, the Pandit said gently,

*'Jai Guru Vishwamitra.*

*Jai*

*Guru Vashishta.'*

Shiva rose, turned and walked down the steps. Looking at Shiva walking away from

him, clearly out of earshot, the Pandit whispered with an admiring smile, for he had

recognised his *fellow traveller*

*in karma* . 'The pleasure was all mine, my *karmasaathi*'

Shiva reached the shoe stall, out on his shoes and offered a coin for the service. The

shoe-keeper

politely declined. 'Thank you Sir, but this is a service provided by the government of Meluha. There is no charge for it.'

Shiva smiled. 'Of course! You people have a system for everything. Thank you.'

The shoe-keeper

smiled back. 'We are only doing our duty, Sir.'

Shiva walked back to the temple steps. As he sat down, he breathed in deeply and let

the tranquil atmosphere

suffuse him with its serenity.

And then it happened.

The

moment that every unrealised

heart craves for. The unforgettable instant that a soul,

clinging on to the purest memory of its previous life, longs for. The second, that in spite of a conspiracy of the gods, only a few lucky men experience.

The moment when *she*

enters *his* life.

She rode in on a chariot, guiding the horses expertly into the courtyard, while a lady

companion by her side held on to the railings. Although her black hair was tied in an

understated

bun, a few irreverent strands danced a spellbinding

*kathak*

in the wind.

Her piercingly magnetic, blue eyes and bronzed skin were an invitation for jealousy from

the goddesses.



Her body, though covered demurely in a long angvastram,  
still ignited

Shiva's imagination enough to sense the lovely curves which lay beneath.  
Her flawless

face was a picture of concentration

as she manoeuvred

the chariot skilfully into its

parking place. She dismounted the chariot with an air of confidence.

It was a calm

confidence which had not covered the ugly distance towards arrogance.

Her walk was

dignified. Stately enough to let a beholder know that she was detached, but not cold.

Shiva stared at her like a parched piece of earth mesmerised

by a passing rain cloud.

Have mercy on me!

'My lady, I still feel it's not wise to wander so far from the rest of your entourage,' said her companion.

She answered.

'Krittika, just because others don't know the law, doesn't mean that we

can ignore it. Lord Ram clearly stated that once a year, a pious woman has to visit Lord

Brahma. I will not break that law, no matter how inconvenient it is to the bodyguards!’

The lady noticed Shiva staring at her as she passed by him. Her delicate eyebrows

arched into a surprised and annoyed frown. Shiva made a valiant attempt to tear his

glance away, but realised that his eyes were no longer in his control. She continued

walking up, followed by Kritika.

She turned around at the top of the temple steps, to see the caste unmarked immigrant

at a distance,

still staring at her unabashedly.

Before turning to walk into the main

temple, she muttered to Kritika, ‘These uncouth immigrants! As if we’ll find our saviour amongst these barbarians!’

It was only when she was out of sight that Shiva could breathe again. As he desperately

tried to gather his wits, his overwhelmed and helpless mind took one obvious decision

— there was no way he was leaving the temple before getting another look at her. He

sat down on the steps once again. As his breathing and heartbeat returned to normal,

he finally began to notice the surroundings

that had been consecrated

by her recent

presence.

He stared once again at the road on the left from where she had turned in.

She had ridden past the cucumber seller standing near the banyan tree.

Incidentally, why is the cucumber seller not trying to hawk his wares? He just seems to

be staring at the temple. Anyway, it is not any of my concern.

He followed the path that her chariot had taken as it had swerved to its left, around the fountain at the centre of the courtyard. It had then taken a sharp right turn past the

shepherd standing at the entrance of the garden.

Incidentally, where were this shepherd's sheep?

Shiva continued to look down the path the chariot had taken into the parking lot. Next to the chariot stood another man who had just walked into the temple complex, but had

inexplicably not entered the temple itself. He turned to the shepherd and appeared to

nod slightly. Before Shiva could piece together the information that he had just seen, he felt her presence again. He turned immediately to see her walking down the steps, with

Krittika walking silently behind. Still finding this rude, caste-unmarked,  
obviously foreign

man staring at her, she walked up to him and asked in a firm but polite  
voice, 'Excuse

me, is there a problem?'

'No. No. There's no problem. I just felt that I had seen you before  
somewhere,'

replied a

flustered Shiva.

The lady was not sure how to respond to this. It was obviously a lie but there  
appeared

to be a sincere voice behind it. Before she could react, Krittika cut in rudely.  
'Is that the best line you could come up with?'

As Shiva was about to retort, he was alerted by a quick movement from the  
cucumber

seller. Shiva turned to see him pulling out a sword as he tossed his shawl  
aside. The

shepherd

and the man next to the chariot also stood poised in traditional fighter

positions with their swords drawn. Shiva immediately drew his sword and  
stretched out

his left hand protectively, to pull the object of his fascination behind him.  
She however deftly side-stepped

his protective hand, reached into the folds of her angvastram

and

drew out her own sword.

Shiva glanced at her, surprised, and flashed her a quick, admiring smile. Her eyes

flashed right back, acknowledging

the unexpected yet providential partnership.

She whispered under her breath to Krittika, 'Run back into the temple. Stay there till this is over.'

Krittika protested. 'But my lady...'

'NOW!' she ordered.

Krittika turned and ran up the temple steps. Shiva and the lady stood back to back in a

standard defensive-partner

position. They covered all the directions of any possible

attack. The three attackers charged in. Two more jumped in from behind the trees to

join the other three. Shiva raised his sword defensively as the shepherd came up close.

Feigning a sideward movement to draw the shepherd into an aggressive

attack, Shiva

dropped his sword low. The shepherd should have been tempted to move in for a kill

wound and in response, Shiva would have quickly raised his sword and dug it deep into

the shepherd's heart.

The shepherd, however, moved unexpectedly.

Instead of taking advantage

of Shiva's

opening, he tried to strike Shiva's shoulder. Shiva quickly raised his right arm and

swung viciously, inflicting a deep wound across the shepherd's torso. As the shepherd

fell back, another attacker moved in from the right. He swung from a distance. Not too

smart a move, as it would merely have inflicted a surface nick. Shiva stepped back to

avoid the swing and brought his sword down in a smooth action to dig deep into the

attacker's

thigh. Screaming

in agony, this attacker too fell back As another attacker

joined in the fight from the left, Shiva realised that this was indeed a very strange

assault.

The attackers

seemed

to know what they were doing. They seemed

to be good

warriors. But they also seemed to be in a bizarre dance of avoidance.

They did not

appear to want to kill. Merely injure. It was because they held themselves

in check that

they were being beaten back very easily. Shiva parried off another attack from the left

and pushed his sword viciously into the man's shoulder. The man screamed in pain as

Shiva pushed him off the blade with his left hand. Slowly, but surely, the attackers were being worn out. They were suffering too many injuries to seriously carry on the assault

for long.

Suddenly a giant of a man ran in from behind the trees carrying swords in both hands.

The man was cloaked in a black hooded robe from head to toe while his face was

hidden by a black mask, shaped exactly like a human face. The only visible parts of his

body were his large impassive

almond-shaped

eyes and strong fleshy hands. He

charged upon Shiva and the lady as he barked an order to his men. He was too large to

battle with agility. But he compensated

for his slow pace with his unusually skilled arms.

Shiva registered from the corner of his eye that the other attackers were picking up the

injured and withdrawing. The hooded figure was fighting a brilliant rearguard action as

his men retreated.

Shiva realised that the man's hood would impair his side vision. That was a weakness

that could be exploited. Moving to the left, Shiva swung ferociously, hoping to peg him back so that the lady could finish the job from the other side. But his opponent was up to the challenge. As he stepped slightly back, he deflected Shiva's swing with a deft move

of his right hand. Shiva noticed a leather band on the hooded figure's right wrist. It had a sharp symbol on it. Shiva swung his sword back but the hooded figure moved aside

effordlessly to avoid the blow. He pushed back a brutal flanking attack from the lady with his left hand. He was keeping just enough distance from Shiva and the lady to defend

himself while at the same time keeping them engaged in combat.



All of a sudden the hooded figure disengaged  
from the battle and stepped back. He  
began to tread backwards as he continued to point both his swords ahead,  
one at Shiva  
and the other at the lady. His men had all disappeared  
into the trees. As he reached a  
safe distance, he turned and ran behind his men. Shiva considered  
chasing him but  
almost immediately decided against it. He might just rush into an ambush.

Shiva turned to the lady warrior and inquired, 'Are you alright?'

'Yes I am,' 'she nodded before asking with a sombre expression. Are you injured?'

'Nothing serious. I'll survive!' he grinned.

In the meantime, Krittika came running down the temple steps and asked  
breathlessly,

'My lady. Are you alright?'

'Yes I am,' she answered. 'Thanks to this foreigner here.'

Krittika turned to Shiva and said, 'Thank you very much. You have helped a  
very

important woman.'

Shiva did not seem to be listening though. He continued to stare at Krittika's  
mistress as if he were possessed.

Krittika struggled to conceal a smile.

The noble woman averted her eyes in embarrassment,

but said politely, 'I am sorry, but

I am quite sure that we have not met earlier.'

'No it's not that,' said a smiling Shiva. 'It's just that in our society, women don't fight. You move your sword quite well for a woman.'

O hell! That came out all wrong.

'Excuse me?' she said, a slightly belligerent tone in her voice, clearly upset about the

*for-a-woman*

remark. You don't fight too badly either for a barbarian.'

'Not too badly?! I'm an exceptional sword fighter! Do you want to try me?'

O bloody hell! What am I saying? I'm not going to impress her like this!

Her expression resumed its detached, supercilious look once again. 'I have no interest

in duelling with you, foreigner.'

'No. No. Don't get me wrong. I didn't want to duel with you. I just wanted to tell you that I am quite good at sword-fighting. I am good at other things as well. And it came out all

wrong. I rather like the fact that you fought for yourself.

You are a very good

swordsman. I mean a swordswoman.

In fact, you are quite a woman....,' bumbled Shiva,

losing the filter of judgement, exactly at the time when he needed it the most.

Krittika, with her head bowed, smiled at the increasingly appealing exchange.

Her mistress,

on the other hand, wanted to chastise

the foreigner for his highly

inappropriate words. But he had saved her life. She was bound by the Meluhan code of

conduct. 'Thank you for your help, foreigner. I owe you my life and you will not find me

ungrateful. If you ever need my help, do call on me.'

'Can I call on you even if I don't need your help?'

Shit! What am I saying?!

She glared at the caste-unmarked

foreigner who clearly did not know his place. With

superhuman effort, she controlled herself, nodded politely and said, 'Namaste.'

With that, the aristocratic woman turned around to leave. Krittika continued to stare at

Shiva with admiring eyes.

However, on seeing her mistress leaving, she too turned hurriedly to follow.

‘At least tell me your name,’ said Shiva, walking to keep pace with her.

She turned around, staring even more gravely at Shiva.

‘Look, how will I find you if I need your help?’ asked Shiva sincerely.

For a moment, she was out of words or a glare. The request seemed reasonable.

She

turned towards Krittika and nodded.

‘You can find us at Devagiri,’ answered Krittika. ‘Ask anyone in the city for Lady Sati.’

‘Sati...,’ said Shiva, letting the ethereal name roll over his tongue. ‘My name is Shiva.’

‘Namaste, Shiva. And I promise you, I will honour my word if you ever need my help,’

said Sati as she turned and climbed into her chariot, followed by Krittika.

Expertly turning the chariot, Sati urged her horses into a smooth trot. Without a

backward look she sped away from the temple. Shiva kept staring at the disappearing

profile of the chariot. Once it was gone, he continued to stare at the dust with intense

jealousy. It had been fortunate enough to have touched her.

I think I’m going to like this country.

For the first time in the journey, Shiva actually looked forward to reaching the capital city of the Meluhans. He smiled and started towards the rest house.

Have to get to Devagiri quickly.



## CHAPTER 4

### Abode of the Gods

‘What! Who attacked you?’ cried a concerned Nandi as he rushed towards Shiva to

check his wounds.

‘Relax Nandi,’ replied Shiva. ‘You are in worse shape than I am after your adventure in

the water. It’s just a few superficial cuts. Nothing serious. The doctors have already

dressed the wounds. I am alright.’

‘I am sorry, my Lord. It’s entirely my fault. I should never have left you alone. It will never happen again. Please forgive me, my Lord.’

Pushing Nandi gently back on to the bed, Shiva said, ‘There’s nothing to forgive, my

friend. How can this be your fault? Please calm down. Getting overworked will not do

your health any good.’

Once Nandi had calmed down a bit, Shiva continued, ‘In any case, I don’t think they

were trying to kill us. It was very strange.’

‘Us?’

‘Yes, there were two women involved.’

‘But who could these attackers be?’ asked Nandi. Then a disturbing thought dawned on

Nandi. ‘Did the attackers wear a pendant with a crescent moon on it?’

Shiva frowned. ‘No. But there was this one strange man. The best swordsmen of them

all. He was covered from head to toe in a hooded robe, his face veiled by a mask, the

kind I’ve seen you people wear at that *colour festival* . What is it called?’

‘ *Holi* , my Lord?’

‘Yes, the *holi* kind of mask. In any case, you could only see his eyes and his hands.

His only distinguishing feature was a leather bracelet with a strange symbol on it’

‘What symbol, my Lord?’

Picking up a palm-leaf booklet and the thin charcoal writing-stick from the side table,

Shiva drew the symbol.

Nandi frowned. ‘That is an ancient symbol that some people used for the word Aum. But

who would want to use this symbol now?’

‘Aum?’ asked Shiva.

‘My Lord, Aum is the holiest word in our religion. It is considered to be the primeval

sound of nature. The hymn of the universe. It was so holy that for many millennia, most

people would not insult it by putting it down in written form.'

'Then how did this symbol come about?'

'It was devised by Lord Bharat, a great ruler who had conquered practically all of India

many thousands

of years ago. He was a rare

*Chandravanshi*

who was worth







respecting and had even married a *Suryavanshi* princess with the aim of ending our perpetual war.'

'Who are the *Chandravanshis*?

' asked Shiva.

'Think of them as the very antithesis of us, my Lord. They are the followers of the kings who are *the descendants of the moon* .'

'And they follow the lunar calendar?'

'Yes, my Lord. They are a crooked, untrustworthy and lazy people with no rules, morals

or honour. They are cowards and never attack like principled Kshatriyas.

Even their

kings are corrupt and selfish. The *Chandravanshis* are a blot on humanity!'

‘But what does the Aum symbol have to do with this?’

‘Well, King Bharat came up with this symbol of unity between the Suryavanshis

and the

Chandravanshis.

The top half in white represented the Chandravanshis.

The bottom half in red represented the Suryavanshis.

The part in orange coming out of the meeting of these two parts represented the

common path.

The crescent moon to the right of the symbol was the existing Chandravanshi

symbol.

And the sun above it was the existing Suryavanshi

symbol.

To signify that this was a pact blessed by the gods, Lord Bharat got a mandate for the



pronunciation of this symbol as the holy word Aum.'

'And then what happened?'

'As expected, the pact died with the good king. Once the influence of Lord Bharat was

gone, the Chandravanshis

were up to their old ways and the war began once again.

The symbol was forgotten. And the word Aum reverted to its original form of a word

without a written representation.'

'But the symbol on the bracelet of this hooded man was not coloured. It was all black.

And the parts of the symbol didn't look like lines to me. They looked like a drawing of

three serpents.'

'Naga!' exclaimed a shocked Nandi, before mumbling a soft prayer and touching his

Rudra pendant for protection.

'Now who the bloody hell are the Nagas?' asked Shiva.

'They are cursed people, my Lord,' gasped

Nandi. 'They are born with hideous

deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen

faces. But they have tremendous

strength and skills. The Naga

name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart. They are not even allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu.'

'The Sapt Sindhu?'

'Our land, my Lord, the land of the seven rivers. The land of the Indus, Saraswati,

Yamuna,

Ganga,

Sarayu,

Brahmaputra

and Narmada.

This is where Lord Manu

mandated that all of us, Suryavanshis

and Chandravanshis,

live.'

Shiva nodded as Nandi continued. 'The city of the Nagas exists to the south of the

Narmada, beyond the border of our lands. In fact, it is bad luck to even speak of them,

my Lord!'

‘But why would a Naga attack me? Or any Meluhan for that matter?’

Cursing under his breath, Nandi said, ‘Because

of the Chandravanshis!

What levels

have these two-faced people sunk to? Using the demon Nagas in their attacks! In their

hatred for us, they don’t even realise how many sins they are inviting on their own

souls!’

Shiva frowned. During the attack, it hadn’t appeared that the Naga was being used by

the small platoon of soldiers. In fact, it looked to him like the Naga was the leader.

It took another week for them to reach Devagiri. The capital city of the Meluhans stood

on the west bank of the Saraswati,

which emerged at the confluence of the Sudej and

Yamuna rivers. Sadly, the Saraswati’s

flow was severely reduced compared to her once

mighty size. But even in her abbreviated state, she was still massive and awe-inspiring.

Unlike many of the tempestuous

rivers of the Punjab, the Saraswati

was achingly calm.

The river seemed to sense that her days were coming to an end. Yet, she did not fight

aggressively

to thrust her way through and survive. Instead, she unselfishly gave her all to those who came to seek her treasures.

The soaring Devagiri though, was in complete contrast to the mellow Saraswati.

Like all

Meluhan cities, Devagiri too was built on giant platforms, an effective protection against floods and a sturdy defence against enemies.

However, where Devagiri was different

from other Meluhan cities was in its sheer size. The city sprawled over three giant

platforms, each of them spreading over three hundred and fifty hectares,

significantly

larger than other cities. The platforms were nearly eight metres high and were bastioned

with giant blocks of cut stone interspaced

with baked bricks. Two of the platforms,

named

*Tamra*

and *Rajat* , literally,

*bronze*

and *silver* , were for the common man,

whereas the platform named

*Svarna*

or *gold*

was the royal citadel. The platforms

were connected to each other by tall bridges, made of stones and baked bricks, which

rose above the flood plains below.

Along the periphery of each enormous platform were towering city walls, with giant

spikes facing outwards. There were turrets at regular intervals along the city walls from where approaching

enemies

could be repelled. This spectacle

was beyond anything

that Shiva had ever seen. In his mind, the construction of a city like this must truly be man's greatest achievement.

Shiva's entourage rode up to the drawbridge across the field of spikes to the Tamra

platform. The drawbridge had been reinforced with metal bars at the bottom and had

roughened

baked bricks laid out on top so that horses and chariots would not slip.

There was something about the bricks he had seen across the empire that had intrigued

Shiva. Turning to Nandi he asked,

Are these bricks made as per some standard

process?’

‘Yes my Lord,’ replied a surprised Nandi. All the bricks in Meluha are made as per

specifications and guidelines given by the Chief Architect of the empire. But how did you guess?’

‘They are all exactly the same dimension.’

Nandi beamed in pride at his empire’s efficiency and his Lord’s power of observation.

The platform rose at the end of the drawbridge, with a road spiralling up to the summit in one gentle turn, facilitating the passage

of horses and chariots. In addition, there was a

broad flight of stairs leading straight up the incline for pedestrians.

The city walls and

the platform extended steeply onto the sides around this slope, making it a valley of



death for any enemy foolish enough to attack the platform from this area.

The city gates were made of a metal that Shiva had never seen before. Nandi clarified

that they were made of iron, a new metal that had just been discovered.

It was the

strongest of all the metals but very expensive.

The ore required to make it was not

easily available. At the platform entry, on top of the city gates, was etched the symbol of the Suryavanshis

— a bright red circular sun with its rays blazing out in all directions.

Below it was the motto that they lived by ‘ *Satya. Dharma. Maan* ’: *Truth. Duty. Honour* .

Seeing just this much of the city had left Shiva awestruck. However, the sight that he

witnessed at the top of the platform, within the city gates, was truly breathtaking both in its efficiency and simplicity. The city was divided into a grid of square blocks by the

paved streets. There were footpaths on the side for pedestrians,

lanes marked on the

street for traffic in different directions, and of course, there were covered drains running through the centre. All the buildings were constructed as standard two storied block

structures made of baked bricks. On top were wooden extensions

for increasing

the

height of the building, if required. Nandi clarified to Shiva that the structure of the

buildings differed internally depending on their specific requirements.

All windows and

doors were built strictly on the side walls of buildings, never facing the main road.

The blank walls that faced the main roads bore striking black line drawings depicting the different legends of the Suryavanshis,

while the background was painted in the sober

colours of grey, light blue, light green or white. The most common background colour

though, appeared to be blue. In the Meluhan mind, blue was the holiest colour of them

all. It was the colour of the sky. It was just above green, the colour of the earth, in the colour spectrum. Meluhans,

who liked to see some greater design in every act of

nature, thought it was marvellous that blue was above green in the colour spectrum just

as the sky was above the earth.



The most recurring illustrations on the walls were about the great emperor, Lord Ram.

His victories over his enemies, his subjugation of the wicked Chandravanshis,

incidents

that proved his statesmanship

and wisdom, had been lovingly recreated. Lord Ram was

deeply revered, and many Meluhans had come to worship him like a god. They referred

to him as *Vishnu* , an ancient title for the greatest of the gods meaning

*protector*

*of the*

*world & propagator*

*of good .*

As Shiva learned from Nandi, the city was divided into many districts consisting of four

to eight blocks. Each district had its own markets, commercial and residential areas,

temples and entertainment

centres. Manufacturing or any other polluting activity was

conducted in separate quarters away from the districts. The efficiency and smoothness

with which Devagiri functioned belied the fact that it was the most populous city in the

entire empire. The last census just two years back had pegged the population of the city

at two hundred thousand.

Nandi led Shiva and the three soldiers to one of the city's numerous guest houses, built

for the many tourists that frequented Devagiri, for both business and leisure. Tying up

their horses in the designated

area outside the guest house, the party walked in to

register themselves

and check into their rooms. The guest house had a style similar to

the many that Shiva had seen throughout their journey. There was a central courtyard

with the building built around it. The rooms were comfortably furnished and spacious.

'My Lord, it's almost time for dinner,' said Nandi. 'I will speak with the housekeeper

and

have some food arranged.

We should eat early and get enough sleep since our

appointment with the Emperor has been fixed at the beginning of the second prahar

tomorrow’

‘Sounds like a good idea.’

‘Also, if it is all right with you, shall I dismiss the soldiers and send them back to

Srinagar?’

‘That also sounds like a good idea,’ said a smiling Shiva. Why Nandi, you are almost

like a fount of brilliant ideas!’

Nandi laughed along with Shiva, always happy to be the cause of a smile on his Lord’s

face. ‘I’ll just be back, my Lord.’

Shiva lay down on his bed and was quickly lost in the thoughts that really mattered to

him.

I’ll finish the meeting with the Emperor as soon as humanly possible, give him whatever

the bloody hell he wants and then scour the city for Sati.

Shiva had considered asking Nandi about the whereabouts

of Sati but had eventually

decided against it. He was painfully aware that he had made a less than spectacular

impression on her at their first meeting. If she hadn't made it easy for him to find her, it only meant that she wasn't terribly stirred by him. He didn't want to compound the issue

by speaking casually about her to others.

He smiled as the memory of her face came flooding back to him. He replayed the

magical moments when he had seen her fighting. Not the most romantic of sights for

most men of his tribe. But for Shiva, it was divine. He sighed recalling her soft, delicate body, which had suddenly developed brutal, killer qualities upon being attacked. The

curves that had so captivated him swung smoothly as she transferred her weight to

swing her sword. The sober tied hair had swayed sensuously

with each move of the

sword arm. He breathed deeply.

What a woman!

It was early in the morning when Shiva and Nandi crossed the bridge between the

Tamra and Svarna platforms to reach the royal citadel. The bridge, another marvel of



Meluhan engineering,

was flanked on the sides by a thick wall. Holes had been drilled on the walls, to shoot arrows or pour hot oil on enemies. The bridge was bisected by a massive gate, a final protection just in case the other platform was lost to an enemy.

When they crossed

over to the Svarna

platform, Shiva was completely

taken by

surprise, not by the grandeur of the royal area but by the lack of it. He was shocked by

the fact that there was no opulence. Despite ruling over such a massive and wealthy

empire, the nobility lived in a conspicuously

simple manner. The structure of the royal

citadel was almost exactly like the other platforms. There were no special concessions

for the aristocrats. The same block structures that dominated all of Meluha were to be

found in the royal citadel as well. The only magnificent structure was to the far right and sported the sign 'Great Public Bath'. The Bath also had a glorious temple to Lord Indra

to the left. The temple, built of wood, stood on a raised foundation of baked bricks, its cupola plated with solid gold! It seemed that special architecture

was reserved only for

structures built for the Gods or ones that were for the common good.

Probably just like how Lord Ram would have preferred.

The only concession

to the emperor, however, was that his standard block structure

was larger than the others. Significantly larger.

Shiva and Nandi entered the royal private office to find Emperor Daksha sitting on a

simple throne at the far end of the modestly furnished room, flanked by a man and a

woman.

Daksha,

greeting

Shiva with a formal namaste,

said. 'I hope your journey was

comfortable.'

He looked too young to be an emperor of such a large country. Though he was

marginally shorter than Shiva, the major difference between them was the musculature.

While the strapping Shiva was powerfully built, Daksha's body showed that it had not



been strained by too much exercise. He wasn't obese either. Just average.

The same

could be said about his wheatish complexioned face. Average sized, dark eyes flanked

a straight nose. He wore his hair long like most Meluhan men and women. The head

bore a majestic crown with the sun symbol of the Suryavanshis

manifested in the centre

through sparkling gem stones. An elegant dhoti, with an angvastram

hung down the

right shoulder and a large amount of functional jewellery, including two amulets on his

right arm, complemented Daksha's average appearance.

His only distinguishing feature

was his smile — which spread its innocent conviction all the way to his eyes. Emperor

Daksha looked like a man who wore his royalty lightly.

'Yes it was, your highness,' replied Shiva. The infrastructure in your empire is wonderful.

You are an extraordinary emperor.'

'Thank you. But I only deserve reflected credit. The work is done by my people,'

‘You are too modest, your Highness.’

Smiling politely, Daksha asked, ‘May I introduce my most important aides?’

Without

waiting for an answer, he pointed to the woman on his left, ‘This is my prime minister,

Kanakhala. She takes care of all administrative, revenue and protocol matters.’

Kanakhala did a formal namaste to Shiva. Her head was shaved except for a tuft of

smooth hair at the back which had been tied in a knot. She had a string called the janau

tied across from her left shoulder down to the right side of her torso. She looked young

like most Meluhans, but was a little overweight as was clearly evident from the excess

flesh she bore between the white blouse and dhoti. She had a dark and incredibly

smooth complexion and like all her countrymen, wore jewellery that was restrained and

conservative.

Shiva noticed that the second amulet on Kanakhala’s

arm showed a

pigeon. Not a very high chosen-tribe amongst the Brahmins. Shiva bent low and did a

formal Namaste in reply.

Pointing to his right, Daksha said, 'And this is my chief of the armed forces, General

Parvateshwar.

He looks after the army, navy, special forces, police etc'

Parvateshwar

looked like a man that Shiva would think twice about taking on in a battle.

He was taller than Shiva and had an immensely muscular physique that dominated the

space around him. His curly and long hair had been combed fastidiously and fell neatly

from under his crown. His smooth, swarthy skin was marked by the proud signs of long

years in battle. His body was hairless, in a rare departure from the normally hirsute

Kshatriya men who took body hair to be a sign of machismo. Probably to make up for

this deficiency,

Parvateshwar

maintained

a thick and long moustache

which curled

upwards at the edges. His eyes reflected his uncompromisingly  
strong and righteous  
character. The second amulet on his arm showed Parvateshwar  
as a tiger, a very high  
chosen-tribe  
amongst the Kshatriyas.

He nodded curdy at Shiva. No Namaste.

No

elaborate

bow of his proud head.

Shiva,

however,

smiled warmly and greeted

Parvateshwar

with a formal Namaste.

‘Please wait outside, Captain,’ advised Parvateshwar,

looking at Nandi.

Before Nandi could respond, Shiva cut in. ‘My apologies. But is it alright if Nandi stays here with me? He has been my constant companion since I left my homeland and has

become a dear and trusted friend.’

‘Of course he may,’ replied Daksha.

‘Your Highness, it is not appropriate for a Captain to be witness to this discussion,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘In any case, his service rules clearly state that he can only escort a guest into the emperor’s

presence

and not stay there while a matter of state is discussed.’

‘Oh relax Parvateshwar.

You take your service rules too seriously sometimes.’

Turning

to Shiva, Daksha continued, ‘If it is alright with you, may we see your neck now?’

Nandi slid behind Shiva to untie the cravat. Seeing the beads darned on the cravat to

convey the impression that the throat was covered for religious reasons, Daksha smiled

and whispered, ‘Good idea.’

As Nandi pulled Shiva’s cravat off, Daksha and Kanakhala came close to inspect

Shiva’s throat in greater detail. Parvateshwar

did not step forward but strained his neck

slightly to get a better look. Daksha and Kanakhala seemed clearly stunned by what

they saw.

The emperor felt the throat and whispered in awe, 'The colour comes from the inside. It

is not a dye. It is true and genuine.'

Daksha and Kanakhala glanced at each other, tears glistening in their astounded eyes.

Kanakhala folded her hands into a namaste and began mumbling a chant under her

breath. Daksha looked up at Shiva's face, trying desperately

to suppress the ecstasy

that coursed through his insides. With a controlled smile, the Emperor of Meluha said, I

hope we have not done anything to cause you any discomfort since your arrival in

Meluha.'

Despite Daksha's controlled reaction, Shiva could guess that both the emperor and his

prime minister were taken aback by his blue throat.

Just how important is this bloody blue throat for the Meluhans?

‘Umm, none at all your Highness,’ replied Shiva as he tied the cravat back around his

neck. ‘In fact, my tribe and I have been delighted by the hospitality that we have

received here.’

‘I’m glad for that,’ smiled Daksha, bowing his head politely. ‘You may want to rest a litde bit and we could talk in more detail tomorrow. Would you like to shift your residence to

the royal citadel? It is rumoured that the quarters here are a litde more comfortable.’

‘That is a very kind offer, your Highness.’

Daksha turned to Nandi and asked, ‘Captain, what did you say your name was?’

‘My name is Nandi, your Highness.’

‘You too are welcome to stay here. Make sure that you take good care of our honoured

guest. Kanakhala, please make all the arrangements.’

‘Yes, your Highness.’

Kanakhala called in one of her aides, who escorted Shiva and Nandi out of the royal

office.

As Shiva exited the room, Daksha went down on his haunches with great ceremony and

touched his head to the ground on which Shiva had just stood. He mumbled a prayer

softly and stood up again to look at Kanakhala with tears in his eyes. Kanakhala's eyes,

however, betrayed impatience and a touch of anger.

'I didn't understand,

your Highness,' glared Kanakhala.

'The blue mark was genuine.

Why did you not tell him?'

'What did you expect me to do?' cried a surprised Daksha. 'This is his second day in

Devagiri. You want me to just accost him and tell him that he is the Neelkanth, our

saviour? That he has been sent to solve all our problems?'

'Well, if he has a blue throat, then he is the Neelkanth, isn't he? And if he is the

Neelkanth, then he is our saviour. He has to accept his destiny.'

An exasperated

Parvateshwar

interjected. 'I can't believe that we are talking like this.

We are Meluhans! We are the Suryavanshis!

We have created the greatest civilisation



ever known to man. And some barbarian with no education, no skills, no merit is going

to be our saviour? Just because he has a blue throat?’

‘That is what the legend says Parvateshwar,’

countered Kanakhala.

Daksha interrupted both his ministers. ‘Parvateshwar,

I believe in the legend. My people

believe in the legend. The Neelkanth has chosen my reign to appear. He will transform

all of India to the ideals of Meluha — a land of truth, duty and honour. With his

leadership, we can end the Chandravanshi

crisis once and for all. All the agonies they

inflict upon us will be over — from the terrorist attacks to the shortage of Somras to the killing of the Saraswati.’

‘Then why delay telling him, your Highness?’

asked Kanakhala.

‘The more days we

waste, the weaker becomes the resolve of our people. You know there was another

terrorist attack just a few days back at a village not far from Hariyupa. As our reaction becomes

weak, our enemies

become bolder, your Highness. We must tell the Lord

quickly and announce his arrival to our people. It will give us the strength to fight our cruel enemies.'

'I will tell him. But I am trying to be more farsighted than you. So far our empire has only faced

the

morale-sapping

influence

of fraudulent

Neelkanths.

Imagine

the

consequences

if people found out that the true Neelkanth has come but refuses to

stand by us. First we must be sure that he is willing to accept his destiny. Only then will we announce him to our people. And I think that the best way to convince him is to

share the whole truth with him. Once he sees the unfairness of the attacks we face, he

will fight with us to destroy evil. If that takes time, so be it. We have waited for centuries for the Neelkanth. A few more weeks will not destroy us.'



## CHAPTER 5

### Tribe of Brahma

Shiva was walking in the verdant gardens of the royal guest house. His things were

being moved into the royal guest house by Nandi and Kanakhala's efficient aide. Shiva

sat down on a comfortable bench overlooking a bed of red and white roses. The

charming cool breeze in the open gardens brought a smile to his face. It was early

afternoon and the garden was deserted.

Shiva's

thoughts kept going back to the

conversation he had had with the Emperor in the morning. Despite Daksha's controlled

reaction, Shiva could understand that his blue throat was of great significance

to the

Meluhans, even to the Emperor. It meant that the legend of the Neelkanth, whatever it

was, was not restricted to some small sect in Kashmir. If the Emperor himself took it so

seriously, all of Meluha must need the help of the Neelkanth.

But what the bloody hell do they want help for? They are so much more advanced than

us!

His thoughts were distracted by the sounds of a *dhhol* , a percussion

instrument and

some

*ghungroos*

, anklets worn by dancers. Someone seemed to be practising in the

garden. A hedge separated

the dance pavilion from the rest of the garden. Shiva,

himself a passionate

dancer, would normally have stepped in to move to the rhythm of

the beat, but his mind was preoccupied. Some words floated in from the group that was

dancing.

‘No my lady, you must let yourself go,’ said a distinguished male voice. ‘It’s not a chore that you have to do. Enjoy the dance. You are trying too hard to remember all the steps

rather than letting the emotion of the dance flow through you.’

Then a lady’s voice interjected. ‘My lady, Guruji is right. You are dancing correcdy, but not enjoying it. The concentration shows on your face. You have to relax a little bit.’

‘Let me get the steps right first. Then I can learn to enjoy them.’

The last voice made Shiva’s hair stand up on end. It was her. It was Sati. He quickly got up and followed the sound of the voices. Coming up from behind the hedge, he saw Sati

dancing on a small platform. She had her hands raised rigidly to her sides as she

enacted the various movements of the dance. She danced in accordance

with the steps

first to the left and then to the right. She moved her shapely hips to the side and placed her hands precisely

on her waist, to convey the mood of the dance.

He was

mesmerised

once again.

However, he did notice that though Sati was dancing all her steps correctly, the Guruji

was right. She was moving in a mechanical

manner; the uninhibited surrender that is

characteristic

of a natural dancer was absent. The varying emotions of bliss and anger

of the story being told were missing in her moves. And unlike a proficient dancer, Sati

wasn't using the entire platform. Her steps were small, which kept her movements

constricted to the centre.

The dance teacher sat facing her and playing on a dhol to give Sati her beats. Her

companion Krittika sat to the right. It was the dance teacher who noticed Shiva first and immediately

stood up. Sati and Krittika turned around as well and were clearly

astonished to find Shiva standing in front of them. Unlike Sati, Krittika could not control her surprise and blurted out, 'Shiva?'

Sati, in her characteristic

composed

and restrained

manner,

asked

sincerely,

'Is

everything alright, Shiva? Do you need my help for something?'

How have you been? I've missed you. Don't you ever smile?

Shiva continued to stare at Sati, the words running through his mind, not on his lips. A

smiling Krittika looked at Sati for her reaction. An even more serious Sati repeated, very politely, ‘Can I help you with something, Shiva?’

‘No, no, I don’t need any help,’ replied Shiva as reality seemed

to enter his

consciousness

again. ‘I just happened to be in the area and heard your dancing. I mean

your talk. Your dance steps were not so hard that I could hear it. You were dancing very

accurately. Actually, technically it was all...’

Krittika interjected. ‘You know a bit about dancing, do you?’

‘Oh, not much. Just a little,’ said Shiva to Krittika with a smile, before turning rapidly back to Sati. ‘My apologies Sati, but Guruji is right. You were being far too methodical.

As they say in the land that I come from, the

*mudras*

and the

*kriyas*

were all

technically correct. But the *bhav*

or emotion was missing. And a dance without bhav is

like a body without a soul. When the emotions of the dancer participate, she would not



even need to remember the steps. The steps come on their own. The bhav is something

that you cannot learn. It comes to you if you can create the space in your heart for it.'

Sati listened patiently to Shiva without saying a word. Her eyebrows were raised slightly as the barbarian spoke. How could he know more than a Suryavanshi

about dancing?

But she reminded herself that he had saved her life. She was duty bound to honour him.

Krittika, however, took offence at this caste-unmarked

foreigner pretending that he knew

more about dancing than her mistress. She glowered at Shiva. 'You dare to think that

you know more than one of the best dancers in the realm?'

Shiva gathered he may have caused some offence. He turned to Sati in all seriousness.

'I am terribly sorry. I didn't mean to insult you in any way. Sometimes I just keep talking without realising what I am saying.'

'No, no', replied Sati. 'You did not insult me. Perhaps you are right. I don't feel the

essence

of the dance as much as I should. But I am sure that with Guruji's guidance, I

will pick it up in due time.'

Seizing his chance to impress Sati, Shiva said, 'If it is alright with you, may I perform the dance? I am sure that I am not as technically correct as you. But perhaps, there may be

something in the sentiment that will guide me through the correct steps.'

That was wellput! She can't say no!

Sati looked surprised. This was unexpected. 'Umm, okay,' she managed to say.

A delighted Shiva immediately  
moved to the centre of the stage.

He took off the

angvastram

covering his upper body and tossed it aside. Krittika's quick anger at the  
perceived insult to her mistress was forgotten quickly as she sighed at  
Shiva's rippling

physique. Sati, though, began to wonder how Shiva would bend such a  
muscular body

into the contortions that were required for this style of dancing. Flexibility  
was usually sacrificed by a human body at the altar of strength.

Playing lightly on his dhol, the Guruji asked Shiva, 'Tell me the beat that  
you are

comfortable with, young man.'

Shiva folded his hands into a namaste, bent low and said, ‘Guruji, could you just give

me a minute please? I need to prepare for the dance.’

Dancing was something Shiva knew as well as warfare. Facing east, he closed his eyes

and bowed his head slightly. Then he bent down on his knees and reverentially touched

the ground with his head. Standing up, he turned his right foot outwards. Then he raised

his left leg off the floor in a graceful arching movement till the foot was above knee

height, as he bent his right knee slightly to balance himself. His left foot pointed in a direction exactly between the bearing of his right foot and his face. Only a calm breeze

broke the almost deathly silence that enveloped the audience.

The Guruji, Sati and

Krittika looked in amazement

at Shiva. They did not understand what he was doing but

could feel the energy that Shiva’s stance was emanating.

Shiva raised both his arms in an elegant circular movement to the sides to bring them in line with his shoulder. His right hand was moulded into a position like it was holding an imaginary

*dumru* , a small, handheld percussion instrument. His left hand was open with

its palm facing upward, almost like it was receiving some divine energy. He held this

pose for some time; as his glowing face showed that Shiva was withdrawing into his

own world. Then his right hand moved effortlessly forward, almost as if it had a mind of

its own. Its palm was now open and facing the audience.

Somehow,

the posture

seemed

to convey a feeling of protection to a very surprised Sati. His left arm then

moved slowly from its shoulder height position to come in front of him with the palm

facing down. The left arm stopped moving when the hand was pointing almost directly

at the left foot. Shiva held this pose for some time. And then began the dance.

Sati stared in wonder at Shiva. He was performing the same steps as her. Yet it looked

like a completely different dance. His hands moved effortlessly as his body moved

almost magically.

How could a body this muscular also be so flexible? The Guruji tried helplessly to get

his dhol to give Shiva the beats. But clearly that wasn't necessary.

For it was Shiva's

feet which were leading the beat for the dhol!

The dance conveyed the various emotions of a woman. At the beginning it conveyed

her feelings of joy and lust as she cavorted with her husband. Then it conveyed her fury

and pain on the wrongful death of her mate. Even with Shiva's rough masculine body,

he managed to convey the tender yet strong emotions of a grieving woman.

Shiva's eyes were open. But the audience realised that he was oblivious to them. Shiva

was in his own world. He did not dance for the audience.

He did not dance for

appreciation.

He did not dance for the music. He danced only for himself. Rather, it

almost seemed like his dance was guided by a celestial force. Sati realised that Shiva

was right. He had opened himself and the dance had come to him.

After what seemed like an eternity the dance came to an end, with Shiva firmly shutting

his eyes. He held the final pose for a long time as the glow slowly left him. It was almost like he was returning to this world. Shiva gradually opened his

eyes to find Sati, Krittika and the Guruji gaping at him in complete awe.

The Guruji was the first to find his voice. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am Shiva.’

‘No, no. Not the body. I meant who are *you*? ’

Shiva crooked his eyes together in a frown and repeated, ‘I am Shiva.’

‘Guruji, may I ask a question?’ asked Sati.

‘Of course you may.’

Turning to Shiva, Sati asked, ‘What was that you did before the dance? Was it some

kind of preparatory step?’

‘Yes. It’s called the *Natarajpose*.

The pose of *the Lord of dance*!

‘The Nataraj pose? What does it do?’

‘It aligned my energy to the universal energy so that the dance emerges on its own.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well, it’s like this: amongst our people, we believe that everything in the world is a

carrier of *shakti* or *energy* . The plants, animals, objects, our bodies, everything carries and transmits energy. But the biggest carrier of energy that we are physically in touch

with is Mother Earth herself — the ground that we walk on.’

‘What does that have to do with your dance?’

‘For anything that you do, you need energy. You have to source the energy around you.

The energy comes from people, from objects, from Mother Earth herself. You have to

ask for that energy respectfully.’

‘And your Nataraj pose helps you to access

any energy that you want?’ asked the

Guruji.



‘It depends on what I want the energy for. The Nataraj pose helps me to ask respectfully

for energy for a dance that wants to come to me. If I wanted the energy for a thought to

come to me, I would have to sit cross-legged

and meditate.’

‘It seems that the energy favours you, young man,’ said the Guruji. ‘You are the *Nataraj, the Lord of dance!*’

‘Oh no!’ exclaimed Shiva. ‘I am just a medium of the boundless Nataraj energy. Anyone

can be the medium.’

‘Well, then you are a particularly efficient medium, young man,’ said the Guruji. Turning to Sati, he said, ‘You don’t need me if you have a friend like him, my child. If you want to be taught by Shiva, it would be my honour to excuse myself.’

Shiva looked at Sati expectantly. This had gone much better than he expected.

Say yes, dammit!

Sati however seemed to withdraw into herself. Shiva was startled to see the first signs

of vulnerability in this woman. She bowed her head, an act which did not suit her proud

bearing and whispered softly, ‘I mean no disrespect

to anyone, but perhaps I do not

have the skills to receive training of this level.’

‘But you do have the skill,’ argued Shiva. ‘You have the bearing. You have the heart.

You can very easily reach that level.’

Sati looked up at Shiva, her eyes showing just the slightest hint of dampness.

The

profound sadness they conveyed took Shiva aback.

What the hell is going on?

‘I am very far from any level, Shiva,’ mumbled Sati.



As she said that, Sati found the strength to control herself again. The politely proud

manner returned to her face. The mask was back. 'It is time for my puja. With your

permission Guruji, I must leave.' She turned towards Shiva. 'It was a pleasure meeting

you again Shiva.'

Before Shiva could respond, Sati turned quickly and left, followed by Krittika.

The Guruji continued to stare at a flummoxed Shiva. At length, he bent low with a formal

namaste towards Shiva and said, 'It has been my life's honour to see you dance.'

Then he too turned and left. Shiva was left wondering at the inscrutable ways of the

Meluhans.

It was late in the morning the next day when Shiva and Nandi entered the private royal

office to find Daksha, Parvateshwar

and Kanakhala waiting for him. A surprised Shiva

said, 'I am sorry your Highness. I thought we were to meet four hours into the second

prahar. I hope I haven't kept you waiting.'

Daksha, who had stood up with a formal namaste, bowed low and said, ‘No, my Lord.

You don’t need to apologise. We came in early so that we wouldn’t keep you waiting. It

was our honour to wait for you.’

Parvateshwar

rolled his eyes at the extreme subservience

that his emperor, the ruler of

the greatest

civilisation

ever established,

showed

towards

this barbarian.

Shiva,

controlling his extreme surprise at being referred to as the ‘Lord’ by the emperor, bowed low towards Daksha with a namaste and sat down.

‘My Lord, before I start off my monologue about the legend of the Neelkanth, do you

have any questions that you would like to ask?’ enquired Daksha.

The most obvious question came to Shiva’s mind first.

Why in the holy lake's name is my blessed blue throat so important?

But his instincts told him that though this appeared to be the most obvious question, it

could not be answered unless he understood more about the society of Meluha itself.

'It may sound like an unusual question your Highness,' said Shiva. 'But may I ask what

your age is?'

Daksha looked in surprise at Kanakhala. Then turning back towards Shiva with an awed

smile, he said, 'You are exceptionally

intelligent my Lord. You have asked the most

pertinent question first.' Crinkling his face into a conspiratorial grin, Daksha continued,

'Last month I turned one hundred and eighty four.'

Shiva was stunned. Daksha did not look a day older than thirty years. In fact nobody in

Meluha looked old. Except for the Pandit that Shiva had met at the Brahma temple.

So Nandi is more than a hundred years old.

'How can this be, your Highness?'

asked a flabbergasted

Shiva. 'What sorcery makes

this possible?’

‘There is no sorcery at all my Lord,’ explained Daksha. ‘What makes this possible is the

brilliance of our scientists who make a potion called the *Somras*,

the *drink, of the*

*gods*. Taking the Somras at defined times not only postpones our death considerably, but it also allows us to live our entire Eves as if we are in the prime of our youth —

mentally and physically’

‘But what is the Somras? Where does it come from? Who invented it?’

‘So many questions my Lord,’ smiled Daksha. ‘But I will try my best to answer them one

by one. The Somras was invented many thousands of years ago by one of the greatest

Indian scientists that ever lived. His name was Lord Brahma.’

‘I think there is a temple dedicated to him that I visited on the way to Devagiri. At a place named Meru?’

‘Yes my Lord. That is where he is said to have lived and worked. Lord Brahma was a

prolific inventor. But he never took any of the benefits of his inventions for himself. He was always

interested

in ensuring

that his inventions were used for the good of

mankind. He realised

early on that a potion as powerful as the Somras

could be

misused by evil men. So he implemented an elaborate system of controls on its use.'

'What kind of controls?'

'He did not give the Somras freely to everyone,' continued Daksha. After conducting a

rigorous

country-wide

survey,

he chose

a select

group of adolescent

boys of

impeccable character — one from each of the seven regions of ancient India. He chose

young boys so that they would live with him at his *gurukul*

and he could mould their

character into selfless helpers of society. The Somras medicine was administered only

on these boys. Since these boys were practically given an additional life due to the

Somras, they came to be known as the *dwija*

or *twice born* . With the strength of the

Somras,

the training of Lord Brahma and the numerous other inventions that they

collectively produced, this group became more powerful than anyone in history. They

honed their minds to achieve almost superhuman

intelligence. The ancient Indian title

for men of knowledge was

*Rishi* . Since Lord Brahma's chosen men were seven in

number, they came to be known as the *Saptrishi* ?

‘And these Saptrishis used their skills for the good of society’

‘Yes my Lord. Lord Brahma instituted strict rules of conduct for the Saptrishis.

They

were not allowed to rule or to practice any trade — essentially anything that would have

caused

them personal gain. They had to use their skills to do the task of priests,  
teachers,

doctors, amongst other intellectual professions

where they could use their

powers to help society. They were not allowed to charge anything for their  
services and

had to live on alms and donations from others.'

'Tough service rules,' joked Shiva with a slight wink at Parvateshwar.

Parvateshwar

did not respond but Daksha, Kanakhala

and Nandi guffawed loudly.

Shiva took a quick look at the prahar lamp by the window. It was almost the  
third prahar.

The time that Sati would probably come out to dance.

'But they followed their code of conduct stricdy my Lord,' continued  
Daksha. 'Over time,

as their responsibilities

grew, the Saptrishis

selected

many more people to join their

tribe. Their followers swore by the same code that the Saptrishis lived by and were also administered

the Somras. They devoted their lives to the pursuit of knowledge and for the wellbeing of society without asking for any material gain in return. It is for this reason that society accorded

these people almost devotional respect.

Over the ages the

Saptrishis and their followers came to be known as the *Tribe of Brahma*

or simply, the

*Brahmins*’.

‘But as it usually happens with all good systems over long periods of time, some people

stopped following the Brahmin code, right?’

‘Absolutely, my Lord,’ answered Daksha, shaking his head at the all too familiar human

frailty. ‘As many millennia went by, some of the Brahmins forgot the strict code that Lord Brahma had enforced and the Saptrishis

propagated.

They started misusing

the

awesome

powers that the Somras



gave them for their own personal gains. Some

Brahmins

started

using their influence

over large number of people to conquer

kingdoms and start ruling. Some Brahmins misused other inventions of the Saptrishis

and Lord Brahma to accumulate fabulous wealth for themselves.'

'And some of the Brahmins,' interjected Kanakhala with a particular sense of horror,

'even rebelled against the *Saptrishi*

*Uttradhikaris* '.

'Saptrishi Uttradhikaris?' inquired Shiva.

'They were the *successors*

*to the Saptrishis*

my Lord,' clarified Kanakhala. 'When any

of the Saptrishis knew that he was coming to the end of his mortal life, he would appoint a man from his gurukul as his successor.

This successor

was treated for all practical

purposes like the Saptrishi himself.'

‘So rebelling against the Saptrishi Uttradhikaris was like rebelling against the Saptrishis themselves?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ answered Kanakhala. ‘And the most worrying part of this corruption was

that it was being led by the higher chosen-tribe Brahmins like the eagles, peacocks and

the swans. In fact, due to their higher status, these chosen-tribes were actually not even allowed to work under the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, lest they get enticed by the lure of

the material world. Yet they succumbed to the temptations of evil before anyone else.’

‘And chosen-tribes

like yours, the pigeons, remained loyal to the old code despite

working for the Kshatriyas?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ replied Kanakhala, her chest puffed up with pride.

The town bell indicating the beginning of the third prahar sounded out loudly. All the

people in the room, including Shiva, said a quick short prayer welcoming the new time

chapter. Shiva had learnt some of the ways of the Meluhans. A Shudra came in, reset

the prahar lamp precisely and left as quietly as he came. Shiva reminded himself that

anytime now Sati would start her dance in the garden.

‘So what revolution caused the change your Highness?’ asked Shiva turning to Daksha.

‘You, Parvateshwar

and Nandi are Kshatriyas

and yet you clearly have taken the

Somras. In fact I have seen people of all four castes in your empire look youthful and

healthy. This means that the Somras is now given to everybody. This change must have

obviously happened due to a revolution, right?’

‘Yes, my Lord. And the revolution was known as Lord Ram. The greatest emperor that

ever lived! Jai Shri Ram!’

‘Jai Shri Ram!’ repeated everyone in the room.

‘His ideas and leadership

transformed the society of Meluha dramatically,’

continued

Daksha. ‘In fact, the course of history itself was radically altered. But before I continue with Lord Ram’s tale, may I make a suggestion?’

‘Of course, your Highness.’

‘It is into the third prahar now. Should we move to the dining room and partake of some

lunch before continuing with this story?’

‘I think it is an excellent idea to have lunch your Highness,’ said Shiva. ‘But may I be

excused for some time? There is another pressing engagement

that I have. Could we

perhaps continue our conversation tomorrow if that is suitable to you?’

Kanakhala’s

face

fell immediately

while

Parvateshwar’s

was

covered

with a

contemptuous

grin. Daksha, however, kept a smiling face. ‘Of course we could meet

tomorrow my Lord. Will the beginning of the second hour of the second prahar be all

right with you?’

‘Absolutely, your Highness. My apologies for this inconvenience.’

‘Not at all my Lord,’ said an ever smiling Daksha. ‘Can one of my chariots take you to

your destination?’

‘That’s very kind of you, your Highness. But I will go there myself. My apologies once

again.’

Bidding a namaste

to everyone

in the room, Shiva and Nandi walked quickly out.

Kanakhala looked accusingly at Daksha. The emperor just nodded his head, gesturing

with his hands for calm. ‘It’s all right. We are meeting tomorrow, aren’t we?’

‘My Lord, we are running out of time,’ said Kanakhala. The Neelkanth needs to accept

his responsibilities immediately!’

‘Give him time, Kanakhala.

We have waited for so long. A few days is not going to

cause a collapse!’

Parvateshwar

got up suddenly,

bowed low towards Daksha and said, ‘With your

permission your Highness, may I be excused?

There are more practical things that  
need my attention as compared to educating a barbarian.'

'You will speak of him with respect Parvateshwar,'  
growled Kanakhala.

'He is the  
Neelkanth!'

'I will speak of him with respect only when he has earned it through some  
real

achievements,'

snarled Parvateshwar.

'I respect only achievements,  
nothing else. That

is the fundamental rule of Lord Ram. Only your karma is important. Not  
your birth. Not

your sex. And certainly not the colour of your throat. Our entire society is  
based on

merit. Or have you forgotten that?'

'Enough!' exclaimed

Daksha. 'I respect the Neelkanth. That means everybody  
will

respect him!’



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## CHAPTER 6

### Vikarma, the Carriers of Bad Fate

Nandi waited at a distance in the garden as he had been asked to, while Shiva went

behind the hedge to the dance area. The silent dance stage had already convinced

Nandi that his Lord would not find anybody there. However, Shiva was filled with hope

and waited expectantly for Sati. After having waited for the larger part of an hour, Shiva realised that there would be no dance practice today. Deeply disappointed,

he walked

silently back to Nandi.

‘Is there somebody I can help you find, my Lord?’ asked an earnest Nandi.

‘No Nandi. Forget it.’

Trying to change the topic, Nandi said, ‘My Lord, you must be hungry. Should we go

back to the guest house and eat?’

‘No, I’d like to see a little more of the city,’ said Shiva, hoping that fate would be kind to him and he would run into Sati in the town. ‘Shall we go to one of the restaurants on the Rajat platform?’

‘That would be wonderful!’ smiled Nandi who hated the simple Brahmin-influenced



vegetarian food served at the royal guest house. He missed the spicy meats that were

served in rough Kshatriya restaurants.

‘Yes, what is it Parvateshwar?’

asked Daksha.

‘My Lord, I am sorry for the sudden meeting. But I just received some disturbing news

and had to tell you this in private.’

‘Well, what is it?’

‘Shiva is already causing trouble.’

‘What have you got against

the Neelkanth,’

groaned

Daksha,

raising his eyes in

disapproval. ‘Why can’t you believe that the Neelkanth has come to save us?’

‘This has nothing to do with my views on Shiva, my Lord. If you will please listen to my

news. Chenardhwaj saw Shiva in the gardens yesterday’

‘Chenardhwaj is here already?’

‘Yes your Highness. His review with you has been fixed for the day after tomorrow’

‘Anyway, so what did Chenardhwaj see?’

‘He is also sickeningly taken in by the Neelkanth. So I think we can safely assume that

he doesn’t have any prejudice.’

‘All right, I believe you. So what did he see the Neelkanth do?’

‘He saw Shiva dancing in the gardens,’ answered Parvateshwar.

‘So? Is there a law banning dance that I am not aware of?’

‘Please

let me continue, your Highness. He was dancing while Sati watched in rapt attention.’

His interest suddenly captivated, Daksha leaned forward to ask, ‘And?’

‘Sati behaved

correctly

and left the moment Shiva tried to get too familiar. But

Chenardhwaj heard Shiva whisper something when Sati left.’

‘Well, what did he whisper?’

‘He whispered — *Holy Lake, help me get her. I will not ask for anything else from you*

*ever again!*’



Daksha appeared delighted. ‘You mean the Neelkanth may actually be in love with my

daughter?’

‘Your Highness,

you cannot forget the laws of the land,’ exclaimed

a horrified

Parvateshwar.

You know that Sati cannot marry’

‘If the Neelkanth decided to marry Sati, no law on earth can stop him.’

‘My Lord, forgive me. But the entire basis of our civilisation is that nobody is above the law. That’s what makes us who we are. Better than the Chandravanshis

and the Nagas.

Not even Lord Ram was above the law. Then how can this barbarian be considered so

important?’

‘Don’t you want Sati to be happy?’ asked Daksha. ‘She’s also called Parvati for a

reason — it’s because she is your goddaughter. Don’t you want her to find joy again?’

‘I love Sati like the daughter I never had, your Highness,’ said Parvateshwar,

with a rare

display of emotion in his eyes. 'I would do anything for her. Except break the law.'

'That is the difference between you and me. For Sati's sake, I would not mind breaking

any law. She is my daughter. My flesh and blood. She has suffered enough already. If I

can find some way to make her happy, I will do it. No matter what the consequences!'

Shiva and Nandi tied their horses in the designated

area next to the main Raj at

platform market. Walking forward, Nandi guided Shiva towards one of his favourite

restaurants.

The inviting aroma of freshly cooked meat brought forth a long-lost hunger in Nandi that had not been satisfied in the past two days at the royal guest house. The

owner however stopped Shiva at the entry.

'What's the matter, brother?' asked Nandi.

'I am deeply sorry brothers. But I too am undergoing religious vows at this time,' said

the restaurant owner politely, pointing to the beads around his throat. 'And you know

that one of the vows is that I cannot serve meat to fellow religious vow keepers.'

Nandi blurted out in surprise, 'But who has taken religious...'

He was stopped by Shiva who signalled downwards with his eyes at the bead covered

cravat around his throat. Nandi nodded and followed Shiva out of the restaurant.

'This is the time of the year for religious vows, my Lord,' explained Nandi. Why don't you wait on the side? There are some good restaurants on the lane at the right. I will just go and check if we have a restaurant owner who has not taken his vows.'

Shiva nodded his ascent. As Nandi hurried off, Shiva looked around the street. It was a

busy market area with restaurants

and shops spread evenly. But despite the large

number of people and the commerce being conducted, the street was not bursting with

noise. None of the shopkeepers

came out to scream and advertise their wares. The

customers spoke softly and in an unfailingly polite manner, even if they were bargaining.

These well-mannered

idiots would not be able to get any business

done in our

boisterous mountain market!

Shiva, lost in his thoughts about the strange practices of the Meluhans, did not hear the announcement

of the town crier till he was almost right behind him.

‘Procession of vikarma women. Please move!’

A surprised Shiva turned around to find a tall Meluhan Kshatriya looking down at him.

‘Would you like to move aside, sir? A procession of vikarma women needs to pass for

their prayers.’

The crier’s tone and demeanour was unquestionably

courteous. But Shiva was under

no illusions. The crier was not *asking*

Shiva to move. He was

*telling*

him. Shiva

stepped back to let the procession pass as Nandi touched him gendy on his arm.

‘I have found a good restaurant, my Lord,’ said an ecstatic Nandi. ‘One of my favourites.

And his kitchen is going to run for at least an hour more. A lot of food to stuff ourselves

with!’

Shiva laughed out loud. ‘It’s a wonder that just one restaurant can actually make enough food to satisfy your hunger!’

Nandi laughed along good naturedly as Shiva patted his friend on the back.

As they turned and walked into the lane, Shiva asked, ‘Who are vikarma women?’

‘Vikarma people, my Lord,’ said Nandi sighing deeply, ‘are people who have been

punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth. Hence they have to live this life out with dignity and tolerate their present sufferings with grace. This is the only way they can wipe their karma clean of the sins of their previous births. Vikarma men have their

own order of penance and women have a different order.’

‘There was a procession of vikarma women on the road we just left. Is their puja a part

of the order?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes, my Lord. There are many rules that the vikarma women have to follow. They have

to pray for forgiveness

every month to Lord Agni, the purifying Fire God, through a

specifically mandated puja. They are not allowed to marry since they may poison others

with their bad fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them

or is not part of their normal duties. There are many other conditions as well that I am

not completely aware of. If you are interested, we could meet up with a Pandit at the

Agni temple later and he could tell you all about vikarma people.'

'No, I am not interested in meeting the Pandit right now,' said Shiva with a smile. 'He

might just bore me with some very confusing and abstruse philosophies! But tell me one

thing. Who decides that the vikarma people had committed sins in their previous birth?'

'Their own karma, my Lord,' said Nandi, his eyes pointing at the obvious. 'For example if a woman gives birth to a still born child, why would she be punished thus unless she

had committed some terrible sin in her previous birth. Or if a man suddenly contracts an

incurable disease and gets paralysed,

why would it happen to him unless the universe

was penalising him for the sins of his previous life.'

'That sounds pretty ridiculous to me. A woman could have given birth to a still born child simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant. Or it could just be

a disease.



How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of her previous birth?’

Nandi, shocked by Shiva’s opinion, struggled to find words to respond. He was a

Meluhan and deeply believed in the concept of karma being carried over many births.

He mumbled softly, ‘It’s the law, my Lord...’

‘Well, to be honest, it sounds like a rather unfair law to me.’

Nandi’s crestfallen face showed that he was profoundly disappointed that Shiva did not

understand such a fundamental concept about Meluha. But he also kept his counsel for

fear of opposing what Shiva said. After all, Shiva was his Lord.

Seeing a dejected Nandi, Shiva patted him gently on the back. ‘Nandi, that was just my

opinion. If the law works for your people, I am sure there must be some logic to it. Your society might be a little strange at times, but it has some of the most honest and decent

people I have ever met.’

As a smile returned almost instantly to Nandi’s face, his whole being was overcome by

his immediate problem. His debilitating hunger! He entered the restaurant as a man on

a mission, with Shiva chuckling softly behind.

A short distance away on the main road, the procession

of vikarma women walked

silently on. They were all draped in long angvastrams

which were dyed in the holy blue

colour. Their heads were bowed low in penitence, their *puja thalis* or *prayer plates* full

of offerings to Lord Agni. The normally quiet market street became almost deathly silent

as the pitiful women lumbered by. At the centre of the procession,

unseen by Shiva,

with her head bowed low, draped in a blue angvastram

that covered her from head to

toe, her face a picture of resigned dignity, trudged the forlorn figure of Sati.



‘So where were we, my Lord?’ said Daksha, as Shiva and Nandi settled down in his

private office the next morning.

‘We were about to discuss the changes that Lord Ram brought about, your Highness.

And how he defeated the rebellion of the renegade Brahmins,’ answered Shiva.

‘That’s right,’ said Daksha. ‘Lord Ram did defeat the renegade

Brahmins. But in his

view, the core problem went deeper. It wasn’t just an issue of some Brahmins who did

not follow the code. The problem was a conflict between a person’s natural karma and

what society forced him to do.’

‘I didn’t understand your Highness.’

‘If you think about it, what was the essential

problem with the renegade

Brahmins?

Some of them wanted to be Kshatriyas and rule. Some of them wanted to be Vaishyas,

make money and live a life of luxury. However, their birth confined them to being

Brahmins.’

‘But I thought that Lord Brahma had decreed that people became Brahmins through a

competitive examination process,’ said Shiva.

‘That is true my Lord. But over time this process of selection lost its fairness. Children of Brahmins became Brahmins. Children of Kshatriyas became Kshatriyas and so on. The

formal system of selection soon ceased to exist. A father would ensure that his children

got all the resources and support needed to grow up and become a member of his own

caste. So the caste system became rigid.'

'So did that also mean that there could have been a person talented enough to be a

Brahmin but if he was born to Shudra parents, he would not get the opportunity to

become a Brahmin?' asked Shiva.

'Yes Shiva,' said Parvateshwar,

speaking for the first time to Shiva. He noticed that

Parvateshwar

did not fawn over him and call him Lord. 'In Lord Ram's view, any society

that conducted its transactions based on anything besides merit could not be stable. His

view was that a person's caste should be decided

*only on that person's*

*karma* . Not his

birth. Not his sex. No other reason should interfere.'

'That is nice in theory, Parvateshwar,'

argued Shiva. 'But how do you ensure it in

practice. If a child is born in a Brahmin family, he would get the upbringing and

resources which would be different from that of a child born in a Shudra family. So this

child would grow up to be a Brahmin even if he was less talented than the Shudra boy.

Isn't this unfair to the child born in the Shudra family? Where is the "merit" in this

system?'

'That was the genius of Lord Ram, Shiva,' smiled Parvateshwar.

'He was of course a

brave general, a brilliant administrator and a fair judge. But his greatest legacy is the system he created to ensure that a person's karma is determined only by his abilities,

nothing else. That system is what has made Meluha what it is — the greatest nation in

history'

'You can't underestimate

the role that Somras has played, Parvateshwar,'

said Daksha.

'Lord Ram's greatest act was to provide the Somras to everyone.

The elixir is what

makes Meluhans the smartest people in the universe! The Somras is what has given us

the ability to create this remarkable and near perfect society.'

'Begging your pardon, your Highness,' said Shiva before turning back to Parvateshwar.

'But what was the system that Lord Ram set up?'

'The system is simple,' said Parvateshwar.

'As we agreed, the best society is when a

person's caste is decided only by his abilities and karma. Not by any other factor. Lord

Ram created a practical system that ensured this. All children that are born in Meluha

are compulsorily adopted by the empire. To ensure that this is done methodically,

a

great hospital city called Maika was built deep in the south, just north of the Narmada river. All pregnant women have to travel there for their delivery.

Only pregnant women

are allowed into the city. Nobody else.'

'Nobody else? What about her husband, her parents?' asked Shiva.

'No, there are no exceptions to this rule except for one. This exception was voted in

around three hundred years ago. Husbands and parents of women of noble families

were allowed to enter,' answered Parvateshwar,

his expression clearly showing that he

violently disagreed with this corruption of Lord Ram's system.

'Then who takes care of the pregnant woman in Maika?'

'The hospital staff. They are well trained in this,' continued Parvateshwar.

'Once the

child is born, he or she is kept in Maika for a few weeks for health reasons while the

mother travels back to her own city'

'Without her child?' asked a clearly surprised Shiva.

'Yes,' replied Parvateshwar,

with a slight frown as if this was the most obvious fact in

the world. 'The child is then put into the Meluha Gurukul, a massive school created by

the empire close to Maika. Every single child receives the benefit of exactly the same

education system. They grow up with all the resources of the empire available to them.'

'Do they maintain records of the parents and their children?'

'Of course they do. But the records are kept in utmost secrecy and only with the record-

keeper of Maika.'

‘That would mean that in the Gurukul or in the rest of the empire, nobody would know

who the child’s birth parents are,’ reasoned Shiva, as he worked out the implications of

what he was hearing. ‘So every child, whether born to a Brahmin or a Shudra, would get

exactly the same treatment at the Gurukul?’

‘Yes,’ smiled Parvateshwar.

He was clearly proud of the system. ‘As the children enter

the age of adolescence,

they are all given the Somras. Thus every child has exactly the

same opportunity to succeed. At the age of fifteen, when they have reached adulthood,

all the children are given a comprehensive

examination. The results of this examination

decide which varna or caste the child will be allocated to — Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya

or Shudra.’

Kanakhala

cut in. ‘And then the children are given one more year’s caste-specific

training. They wear their varna colour bands — white for Brahmins, red for Kshatriyas,



green for Vaishyas and black for Shudras — and retreat to the respective caste schools

to complete their education.’

‘So that’s why your caste system is called the varna system,’ said Shiva. ‘*Varna* means *colour*,

right?’

‘Yes my Lord,’ smiled Kanakhala. You are very observant.’

With a withering look at Kanakhala, Parvateshwar

added sarcastically,

‘Yes, that was a

very difficult conclusion to draw.’

Ignoring the barb, Shiva asked, ‘So what happens after that?’

‘When the children turn sixteen, they are allocated to applicant parents from their caste.

For example,

if some Brahmin parents had applied to adopt a child, one randomly

chosen student from Maika, who had won the Brahmin caste in the examination, will be

allotted to them. Then the child grows up with these adopted parents as their own child.’

‘And society is perfect,’ marvelled

Shiva, as the simple brilliance of the system

enveloped his mind. 'Each person is given a position in society based only on his own

abilities. The efficiency and fairness of this system is astounding!'

'Over time my Lord,' interjected Daksha, 'we found the percentage of higher castes

actually going up in the population. Which means that everybody in the world has the

ability to excel. All it takes is for a child to be given a fair chance to succeed.'

'Then the lower castes must have loved Lord Ram for this?' asked Shiva. 'He gave

them an actual chance to succeed.'



'Yes they did love him,' answered

Parvateshwar.

'They were his most loyal followers.

Jai Shri Ram!'

'But I guess not too many mothers would have been happy with this. I can't imagine a

woman willingly giving up her child as soon as he is born with no chance of meeting him

ever again.'

‘But it’s for the larger good,’ said Parvateshwar,

scowling at the seemingly

stupid

question. ‘And in any case, every mother who wants an offspring can apply for one and

be allocated a child who suits her position and dreams. Nothing can be worse for a

mother than having a child who does not measure up to her expectations.’

Shiva frowned at Parvateshwar’s

explanation,

but let the argument pass. ‘I can also

imagine that many of the upper castes like the Brahmins would have been unhappy with

Lord Ram. After all, they lost their stranglehold on power.’

‘Yes,’ added Daksha. ‘Many upper castes did oppose Lord Ram’s reforms. Not just

Brahmins, but even Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Lord Ram fought a great battle to defeat

them. Those of the vanquished who survived are the Chandravanshis

we see today’

‘So your differences go that far back?’

‘Yes,’ said Daksha. ‘The Chandravanshis

are corrupt and disgusting people. No morals.

No ethics. They are the source of all our problems. Some of us believe that Lord Ram

was too kind. He should have completely destroyed them. But he forgave them and let

them live. In fact, we have to face the mortification of seeing the Chandravanshis

rule

over Lord Ram's birthplace — Ayodhya!'

Before Shiva could react to this information, the bell of the new prahar was rung.

Everyone

said a quick prayer

to welcome

the subsequent

time chapter.

Shiva

immediately looked towards the window. A look of expectancy appeared on his face.

Daksha smiled as he observed Shiva's expression.

'We could break for lunch now, my

Lord. But if you have another engagement

you would like to attend, we could continue

tomorrow’

Parvateshwar

glared at Daksha disapprovingly. He knew exactly what the emperor was

trying to do.

‘That would be nice, your Highness,’ smiled Shiva. ‘Is my face that transparent?’

‘Yes it is my Lord. But that is a gift you have. Nothing is prized more than honesty in

Meluha. Why don’t you leave for your engagement

and we could convene here again

tomorrow morning?’

Thanking Daksha profusely, Shiva left the room with Nandi in tow.

Shiva approached the hedge with excitement and trepidation. The moment he heard the

sound of the dhol coming from the garden, he despatched

Nandi to have lunch at the

guest house. He wanted to be alone. He let out a deep sigh of ecstasy

as he crept

behind the hedge to find Sati practising under the watchful eye of the Guruji and Kritika.

‘So good to see you again, Shiva,’ said the Guruji as he stood up with a formal

namaste.

‘The pleasure is all mine, Guruji,’ said Shiva, as he bent down to touch the Guruji’s feet as a sign of respect.

Sati watched

silently

at a distance

with her gaze

on the floor. Kritika said

enthusiastically,

‘I just couldn’t get your dance out of my mind!’

Shiva blushed at the compliment. ‘Oh it wasn’t that good.’

‘Now you’re fishing for compliments,’ teased Kritika.

‘I was wondering if we could start off where we left last time,’ said Shiva, turning

towards Sati. ‘I don’t think I have to be your teacher or anything like that. I just wanted to see you dance.’

Sati felt her strange discomfort returning again. What was it about Shiva that made her feel that she was breaking the law in speaking with him? She was allowed to talk to men

as long as she kept a respectable

distance. Why should she feel guilty?

‘I will try my best,’ said Sati formally. ‘It would be enriching to hear your views on how I can improve myself. I really do respect you for your dancing skills.’

Respect?!

Why respect? Why not love?!

Shiva smiled politely. Something inside told him that saying anything at this point of time would spoil the moment.

Sati took a deep breath, girded her angvastram around her waist and committed herself

to the Nataraj pose. Shiva smiled as he felt Mother Earth project her shakti, her energy, into Sati.

Energised by the earth she stood upon, Sati began her dance. And she had really

improved. The emotions

seemed

to course

through her. She was always

good

technically, but the passion elevated her dance to the next level. Shiva felt a dreamy

sense of unreality overcome him again. Sati radiated a magnetic hold on him as she

moved her lithe body into the dance steps. For some moments, Shiva imagined that he

was the man that Sati was longing for in her dance. When she finally came to a stop,

the audience spontaneously

applauded.

‘That was the best I have ever seen you dance,’ said the Guruji with pride.

‘Thank you Guruji,’ said Sati as she bowed. Then she looked expectantly at Shiva.

‘It was fantastic,’ exclaimed Shiva. ‘Absolutely fabulous. Didn’t I tell you that you had it in you?’

‘I thought that I didn’t get it exactly right at the attacking sequence,’

said Sati critically.

‘You’re being too hard on yourself,’ consoled Shiva. ‘That was just a slight error. It

happened only because

you missed one angle on your elbow. That made your next

move a little odd.’ Rising swiftly to his feet, Shiva continued, ‘See, I’ll show you.’

He walked quickly towards Sati and touched her elbow to move it to the correct angle.

Sati immediately

recoiled in horror as there was a gasp from the Guruji as well as



Krittika. Shiva instantly realised that something terrible had happened.

‘I am sorry,’ said Shiva, with a look of sincere regret. ‘I was just trying to show you

where your elbow should be.’

Sati continued to stare at Shiva, stunned into immobility.

The Guruji was the first to recover his wits and realised that Shiva must undergo

*the*

*purification*

*ceremony*

. ‘Go to your Pandit, Shiva. Tell him you need a *shudhikaran*

. Go

before the day is over.’

‘What? What is a shudhikaran?’

Why would I need it?’

‘Please go for a shudhikaran, Shiva,’ said Sati, as tears broke through her proud eyes.

‘If something happened to you, I would never be able to forgive myself.’

‘Nothing will happen to me! Look, I am really sorry if I have broken some rule in

touching you. I will not do it again. Let’s not make a big deal out of this.’

‘IT IS A BIG DEAL!’ shouted Sati.

The violence of Sati’s reaction threw Shiva off balance.

Why the hell is this simple thing being blown completely out of proportion?

Krittika came close to Sati, careful not to touch her and whispered, ‘We should go back

home, my lady’

‘No. No. Please stay,’ pleaded Shiva. ‘I won’t touch you. I promise.’

With a look of hopeless despair, Sati turned to leave, followed by Krittika and Guruji. At the edge of the hedge, she turned around and beseeched

Shiva once again, ‘Please go

for your shudhikaran before nightfall. Please.’

At the look of uncomprehending

mutiny on Shiva’s face, the Guruji advised, ‘Listen to

her, Shiva. She speaks for your own good.’



‘What bloody nonsense!’ yelled Shiva as his disturbed thoughts finally broke through his

desperate

efforts at silent acceptance.

He was lying in his bedroom at the royal guest

house. He had not undergone the shudhikaran.

He had not even bothered to find out  
what the ceremony was.

Why would I need  
to be purified for touching Sati?

I want to spend  
all my  
remaining years

touching her in every possible way. Am I going to keep on undergoing a  
shudhikaran every day? Ridiculous!

Just then a troubling thought entered Shiva's mind.

Is it because of me? Am I not allowed to touch her because I am caste-  
unmarked?

An

inferior barbarian?

'No. That can't be true,' whispered Shiva to himself. 'Sati doesn't think like  
that. She is a good woman.'

But what if it's true? Maybe if she knows I am the Neelkanth...



## CHAPTER 7

### Lord Ram's Unfinished Task

‘You seem to be a little distracted this morning, my Lord. Are you alright?’ asked a

concerned Daksha.

‘Hmm?’ said Shiva as he looked up. ‘I’m sorry your Highness. I was a little distracted.’

Daksha looked with a concerned expression at Kanakhala. He had seen a similar look

of despair on Sati’s face at dinner the previous night. But she had refused to say

anything.

‘Do you want to meet later?’ asked Daksha.

‘Of course not, your Highness. It’s alright. My apologies. Please continue,’ said Shiva.

‘Well,’ continued a concerned Daksha, ‘we were talking about the changes that Lord

Ram brought about in society’

‘Yes,’ said Shiva, shaking his head slightly to get the disturbing image of Sati’s last plea out of his mind.

‘The Maika system worked fantastically well. Our society boomed. Ours was always one

of the wealthiest lands on earth. But in the last one thousand two hundred years we

have shot dramatically

ahead of everyone else. Meluha has become the richest and

most powerful country in the world by far. Our citizens lead ideal lives.

There is no

crime. People do what they are suited for and not what an unfair social order would

compel them to do. We don't force or fight unprovoked wars with any other country. In

fact, ours has become a perfect society.'

'Yes, your Highness,' agreed Shiva, slowly getting into the conversation. 'I don't believe that perfection can ever be achieved. It is more of a journey than a destination. But your society is certainly a near perfect society.'

'Why do you think we are not perfect?' argued Parvateshwar

aggressively.

'Do you think it is perfect Parvateshwar?'

asked Shiva politely. 'Does everything in

Meluha go exactly as Lord Ram would have mandated?'

Parvateshwar

fell silent. He knew the obvious, even if he didn't like the answer.

'The Lord is right Parvateshwar,'

said Daksha. 'There are always things to improve.'

'Having said that, your Highness,' spoke Shiva, 'your society is wonderful. Things do

seem very well ordered. What doesn't make sense to me then, is why you and your

people are so concerned about the future. What is the problem? Why is a Neelkanth

required? I don't see anything that is so obviously wrong that disaster would be just a

breath away. This is not like my homeland where there are so many problems that you

wouldn't know where to begin!'

'My Lord, a Neelkanth is needed because we are faced with challenges

that we cannot

confront. We keep to ourselves and let other countries lead their lives. We trade with

other societies but we never interfere with them. We don't allow uninvited foreigners into Meluha beyond the frontier towns. So we think it's only fair that other societies leave us alone to lead our lives the way we want to.'

'And presumably they don't, your Highness?'

'No they don't.'

'Why?'

'One simple word, my Lord,' replied Daksha. 'Jealousy.'

They hate our superior ways.

Our efficient family system is an eyesore

to them. The fact that we take care of

everyone

in our country makes

them unhappy

because

they can't take care of

themselves.

They lead sorry lives. And rather than improving themselves,

they want to

pull us down to their level.'

'I can understand. My tribe used to face a lot of jealousy in Mount Kailash since we had

control over the shore of the Mansarovar Lake and hence the best land in the region.

But sometimes I wonder if we could have avoided bloodshed if we had shared our good

fortune more willingly.'

'But we do share our good fortune with those who wish it, my Lord. And yet, jealousy

blinds our enemies.

The Chandravanshis

realised

that it was the Somras

that

guaranteed

our superiority. Funnily enough, even they have the knowledge

of the

Somras. But they have not learnt to mass produce it like we do and hence haven't

reaped all the benefits of it.'

'Sorry to interrupt, your Highness, but where is the Somras produced?'

'It is produced at a secret location called Mount Mandar. The Somras

powder is

manufactured there and then distributed throughout the empire. At designated

temples

across Meluha, trained Brahmins mix it with water and other ingredients to administer it

to the population.'

'Alright,' said Shiva.



The Chandravanshis

could not become as powerful as us since they never had enough

Somras. Eaten up by their jealousy, they devised a devious way to destroy the Somras

and hence us. One of the key ingredients in the Somras is the waters of the Saraswati.

Water from any other source does not work’ ‘Really? Why?’

We don’t know my Lord. The scientists

can’t explain it. But only the waters of the

Saraswati

will do. That is why, the Chandravanshis

tried to kill the Saraswati

to harm

us.’

‘Kill the river?’ asked Shiva incredulously.

‘Yes my Lord!’ said Daksha, as his childlike eyes flared up at the Chandravanshi

perfidy.

‘The Saraswati

comes from the confluence of two mighty rivers up north — the Sutlej

and the Yamuna. In the olden days, the course of the Sutlej and Yamuna used to be

neutral territory. Both the Chandravanshis

and we visited the land to draw waters for the

Somras.'

'But how did they try to kill the Saraswati your Highness?'

'They diverted the course of the Yamuna so that instead of flowing south, it started

flowing east to meet their main river, Ganga.'

'You can do that?' asked Shiva in amazement.

'Change the course of a river!'

'Yes, of course you can,' answered Parvateshwar.

'We were livid,' interjected Daksha. 'But we still gave them a chance to make amends

for their duplicity'

'And?'

'What can you expect from the Chandravanshis,

my Lord?' said Daksha in disgust.

They denied any knowledge of this. They claimed that the river made such a dramatic

change in its course all by itself, due to some minor earthquake.

And even worse, they

claimed that since the river had changed course of its own accord, we Meluhans would

simply have to accept what was essentially God's will!

'We of course refused to do that,' said Parvateshwar.

'Under the leadership

of King

Brahmanayak,

his Highness' father, we attacked Swadweep.'

'The land of the Chandravanshis?'

asked Shiva.

'Yes Shiva,' said Parvateshwar.

'And it was a resounding victory. The Chandravanshi

army was routed. King Brahmanayak

kindly let them keep their lands and even their

system of governance.

We didn't even ask for any war reparations

or yearly tribute

either. The only term of the surrender treaty was the return of the Yamuna.

We restored

the Yamuna to her original course to meet with the Saraswati.'

‘You fought in that war, Parvateshwar?’

‘Yes,’ said Parvateshwar,

his chest swollen with pride. ‘I was a mere soldier then. But I  
did fight in that war.’

Turning to Daksha, Shiva asked, ‘Then what is the problem now, your  
Highness? Your

enemy was comprehensively

defeated. Then why is the Saraswati still dying?’

We believe that the Chandravanshis

are up to something again. We don’t understand it

as yet. After their defeat, the area between our two countries was made into  
a no-man’s

land and the jungle has reclaimed it. That included the early course of the  
Yamuna as

well. We stuck to our part of the bargain and never disturbed that region. It  
appears that they didn’t honour their end of the promise.’

‘Are you sure of that your Highness?

Has the area been checked?

Has this been

discussed with the Chandravanshis’

representative

in your empire?’

‘Are you trying to say that we are lying?’ countered Parvateshwar.

True Suryavanshis

don’t lie!’

‘Parvateshwar!’

scolded Daksha angrily. ‘The Lord was not implying anything like that.’

‘Listen to me, Parvateshwar,’

said Shiva politely. ‘If I have learnt something from the

pointless battles of my land, it is that wars should be the last resort. If there is another solution possible,

there is no harm in saving some young soldier’s life. A mother

somewhere would bless us for it.’

‘Let’s not fight! Wonderful! What a great saviour we have!’ Parvateshwar

muttered

under his breath.

‘You have something to say Parvateshwar?’

barked Kanakhala. ‘I have told you before.

You will not insult the Neelkanth in my presence!’

‘I don’t take orders from you,’ growled Parvateshwar.

‘Enough!’ ordered Daksha. Turning to Shiva, he continued, ‘I am sorry my Lord. You are

right. We shouldn't just declare war without being sure. That is why I have avoided a

war till now. But look at the facts of the case. The flow of the Saraswati has been slowly depleting for the last fifty years.'

'And the last few years have been horrible,' said Kanakhala as she controlled her tears

at the slow death of the river most Meluhans regarded as a mother. 'The Saraswati

doesn't even reach the sea now and ends in an inland delta just south of Rajasthan.'

'And the Somras cannot be made without water from the Saraswati,' continued Daksha.

'The Chandravanshis

know that and that is why they are trying to kill her.'

'What does the Swadweep representative say about it? Has he been questioned?'

'We have no diplomatic relations with Swadweep, my Lord,' said Daksha.

'Really? I thought having representatives of other countries was one of your innovative systems.

It gives you an opportunity to better understand

them and maybe avoid

jumping into a war. I had heard of a diplomatic mission from Mesopotamia coming in

two days ago. Then why not have this with Swadweep as well?’

‘You don’t know them, my Lord. They are untrustworthy people. No follower of the

Suryavanshi

way will dirty his soul by even speaking to a Chandravanshi willingly’

Shiva frowned but didn’t say anything.

‘You don’t know the levels they have sunk to my Lord. Over the previous few years they

have even started using the cursed Nagas in their terrorist attacks on us!’ said

Kanakhala, with a disgusted look.

‘Terrorist attacks?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Daksha. Their defeat kept them quiet for many decades.

And

because of our overwhelming victory in the previous war, they believe that they cannot

overpower us in an open confrontation. So they have resorted to a form of assault that

only repulsive people like them could turn to. Terrorist attacks.'

'I didn't understand. What exactly do they do?'

'They send small bands of assassins

who launch surprise attacks on non-military but

public places. Their idea is to attack non-combatants

— the Brahmins, Vaishyas

or

Shudras. They try to devastate

places like temples, public baths — areas where there

may not be soldiers to fight back — but whose destruction will wreck the empire's

morale and spread terror.'

'That's disgusting! Even the Pakratis in my land, a bunch of complete barbarians, would

not do that,' said Shiva.

'Yes,' said Parvateshwar.

'These Chandravanshis

don't fight like men. They fight like

cowards!'



‘Then why don’t you attack their country? Finish this once and for all.’

‘We would like to my Lord,’ said Daksha. ‘But I am not sure we can defeat them.’

Shiva observed Parvateshwar

seething silently at the insult to his army, before turning

towards Daksha. ‘Why, your Highness? You have a well trained and efficient force. I am

sure your army can defeat them.’

‘Two reasons,

my Lord. Firstly, we are outnumbered.

We were outnumbered even a

hundred years back. But not by a very significant margin. But today, we estimate that

they have a population of more than eighty million compared to our eight million. They

can throw a much larger army at us — their sheer numbers will cancel out our

technological superiority.’

‘But why should your population be less? You have people who live beyond the age of

two hundred years! Your population should be higher.’

‘Sociological causes, my Lord,’ said Daksha. ‘Our country is rich. Children are a matter

of choice, more than a duty. Parents would adopt children from the Maika system in

small numbers, may be one or two, so that they could devote more attention on their

upbringing. Fewer and fewer mothers are giving birth at Maika as well. In Swadweep,

for the poor, children are bonded labour to supplement a family's income. The more

children they have, the less poor the family. So that country as a whole has a far larger population.'

'And the second reason for avoiding war?'

The second reason is something that is under our control. We fight with "rules of war".

With norms and ethics. The Chandravanshis

do nothing like that. And I fear that this is a

weakness in us that our ruthless enemies can exploit.'

'Rules of war?' asked Shiva.

'Yes. For example, we will not attack an unarmed man. A superior armed person like a

cavalry man will not attack an inferior armed person like a spear wielding foot-soldier. A swordsman will never attack a person below his waist because

that is unethical. The

Chandravanshis

don't care for such niceties. They will attack whomsoever and however they find expedient to ensure victory'

'Begging your pardon, your Highness,' said Parvateshwar.

'But that difference is what

makes us who we are. like Lord Ram said, a person's ethics and character are not

tested in good times. It is only in bad times that a person shows how steadfast he is to

his dharma.'

'But Parvateshwar,'

sighed Daksha. 'We are not under attack by people who are as

ethical and decent as us. Our way of life is under assault. If we don't fight back in any which way we can, we will lose.'

'My apologies once again, your Highness,' said Parvateshwar.

'I have never said that

we should not fight back. I am eager to attack. I have been asking repeatedly for

permission to declare war on the Chandravanshis.

But if we fight without our rules, our

codes,

our ethics,

then “our way of life” is as good as destroyed.

And the

Chandravanshis

would have won without even fighting us!’

At the ringing of the prahar town bell, the conversation was halted, as everyone said a

quick prayer. Shiva turned towards the window, wondering if Sati would be dancing

today.

Daksha turned to Shiva expectantly. ‘Do you need to leave my Lord?’

‘No, your Highness,’ said Shiva, hiding the pain and confusion he felt inside. ‘I don’t believe I am expected anywhere at this point of time.’

At this, the smile on Daksha’s face disappeared

with his hopes. Shiva continued, ‘If it is

alright with you, your Highness, may we continue our conversation?

Perhaps we can

have our lunch a little later.’

‘Of course we may, my Lord,’ smiled Daksha, pulling himself together.

‘I have got the story so far, your Highness. While I can understand your reasons for not

wanting to attack right now, you clearly have a plan, in which my blue throat has some

strange role to play’

‘Yes, we do have a plan, my Lord. I feel that as an emperor, my giving in unthinkingly to the righteous anger of some of our people will not solve our problem. I believe that the

people of Swadweep

themselves

are not evil. It is their Chandravanshi

rulers and their

way of life that has made them evil. The only way forward for us is to save the

Swadweepans

themselves.’

‘Save the Swadweepans?’

asked Shiva, genuinely surprised.

‘Yes, my Lord. Save them from the evil philosophy that infects their soul. Save them

from their treacherous

rulers. Save them from their sorry, meaningless

existence.

And

we can do this by giving them the benefits of the superior Suryavanshi

way of life. Once

they become like us, there will be no reason to fight. We will live like brothers. This is the unfinished task of my father, King Brahmanayak.

In fact, it is the unfinished task of

Lord Ram.'

'That is a big task to take on, your Highness,' said Shiva. 'It is sweeping in its kindness and reason. But it is a very big task. You will need soldiers to defeat their army and

missionaries to bring them to your side. It is not going to be easy.'

'I agree.

There are many in my empire who have concerns

about even attacking

Swadweep,

and I am putting forth a much bigger challenge

to them, of reforming

Swadweep.

That is why I did not want to launch this without the Neelkanth, my Lord.'

Shiva remembered

his uncle's words, spoken many years back, in what was almost

another life. *Your destiny*

*lies beyond*

*the mountains.*

*Whether*

*you fulfil it or run away*

*once again, is up to you .*

As Daksha spoke once again, Shiva refocused his attention on him.

‘The problems that we are facing were prophesied, my Lord,’ continued Daksha. ‘Lord

Ram had himself said that any philosophy, no matter how perfect, works only for a finite

period. That is the law of nature and cannot be avoided. But what the legends also tell

us is that when the problems become insurmountable

for ordinary men, the Neelkanth

will appear. And that he will destroy the evil Chandravanshis

and restore the forces of

good. My Lord, you are the Neelkanth.

You can save us. You can complete the

unfinished task of Lord Ram. You must lead us and help us defeat the Chandravanshis.

You must rally the Swadweepans

around to the side of good. Otherwise I fear that this

beautiful country that we have, the near perfect society of Meluha, will be destroyed in

years of endless war. Will you help us my Lord? Will you lead us?’

Shiva was confused. ‘But I didn’t understand, your Highness? What exactly would I do?’

‘I don’t know, my Lord. We only know our destination and that you will be our leader.

The path we take is up to you.’

They want me to destroy the entire way of life of eighty million people by myself! Are

they mad?

Shiva spoke carefully. ‘I empathise with your people and their hardships, your Highness.

But to be quite honest, I don’t really understand

how one man like me can make a

difference.’

‘If that man is you my Lord,’ said Daksha, his moist eyes opened wide in devotion and

faith, ‘he can change the entire universe.’

‘I am not so sure of that, your Highness,’ said Shiva with a weak smile.

‘Why will my

being present make such a difference?

I am no miracle worker. I cannot snap my



fingers and cause bolts of lightning to descend on the Chandravanshis.'

'It is your presence

itself that will make the difference, my Lord. I invite you to travel

through the empire. See the effect your blue throat has on the people. Once my people

believe that they can do it, they will be able to do it!'

'You are the Neelkanth, my Lord,' added Kanakhala. The people have faith in the bearer

of the blue throat. They will have faith in you. 'Will you help us, my Lord?'

Will you run away once again?

'But how do you know that my blue throat makes me the genuine Neelkanth?' asked

Shiva. 'For all you know, there may be many Meluhans with a blue throat waiting to be

discovered!'

'No, my Lord,' said Daksha.

'It cannot be a Meluhan. The legend says that the

Neelkanth will be a foreigner. He cannot be from the Sapt-Sindhu.

And that he will get a

blue throat on drinking the Somras.'

Shiva did not answer. He looked stunned as truth suddenly dawned upon him.

Srinagar.

The first night. Somras. That's how my body got repaired. That's why I'm feeling stronger than ever.

Daksha and Kanakhala looked at Shiva breathlessly,  
waiting for his decision. Praying  
for his *right* decision.

*But why only me? All the Gunas*

*were*

*given*

*the Somras.*

*Was my uncle*

*right? Do I*

*really have a destiny?*

Parvateshwar

stared at Shiva with narrowed eyes.

I don't deserve any destiny. But maybe this is my chance to redeem myself.

But first...

Shiva asked with controlled politeness, 'Your Highness, before I answer,  
may I ask you

a question?'

‘Of course, my Lord.’

‘Do you agree that honesty is required to make any friendship work? Even if it means

deeply offending your friend with the truth?’

‘Yes, of course,’ replied Daksha, wondering where Shiva was going with this.

‘Complete honesty is not just the bedrock of an individual relationship, but of any stable society,’ interjected Parvateshwar.

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ said Shiva. ‘And yet, Meluha wasn’t honest with me.’

Nobody said anything.

Shiva continued in a courteous, but firm tone. ‘When my tribe was being invited to come

to Meluha, we had the impression you wanted immigrants because you needed people

to work. And I was happy to escape my benighted land. But now I realise that you were

systematically

searching for the Neelkanth.’

Turning to Nandi, Shiva said, ‘We weren’t told that a medicine called the Somras would

be administered to us as soon as we entered. We weren’t told that the medicine would

have such effects.’

Nandi looked down with guilty eyes. His Lord had the right to be angry with him.

Turning to Daksha, Shiva continued, 'Your Highness, you know that the Somras was

probably administered to me on my first night in Kashmir, without my knowledge.'

'I am truly sorry about that dishonesty

my Lord,' said Daksha, with his hands in a

penitent namaste. 'It's something that I will always be ashamed of. But the stakes were

too high for us. And the Somras has considerably

positive effects on your body. It

doesn't harm you in any way.'

'I know. I am not exactly upset about having to live a long and healthy life,' said Shiva wryly. 'Do you know that my tribe was also probably given the Somras that night? And

they fell seriously ill, perhaps because of the Somras.'

'They were under no risk my Lord,' said Kanakhala apologetically.

'Some people are

predisposed towards certain diseases.

When the Somras enters the body, it triggers the

immediate occurrence of these diseases,

which when cured, never recur. Hence, the

body remains healthy till death. Your tribe is actually much healthier now.'

'No doubt they are,' said Shiva. 'The point is not about the effects of the Somras. Both

my tribe and I are better for it. Yet, from what I understand of Meluha, getting somebody to do something without telling him all the facts would not have been Lord Ram's way.

You should have told us the complete truth at Mount Kailash. Then you should have let

*us*

make an informed choice rather than *you*

making a choice for us. We probably

would still have come to Meluha anyway but then it would have been *our* choice.'

'Please forgive us the deception, my Lord,' said Daksha, with guilty regret. 'It is not our way to do something like this. We pride ourselves

on our honesty. But we had no

choice. We are truly sorry, my Lord. Your people are well taken care of. They are

healthier than ever. They will live long, productive lives.'

Parvateshwar

finally broke his silence, speaking what was always in his heart since the search had begun many decades

ago. 'Shiva, we are truly sorry for what has been done. You have every right to be angry. Lying is not our way. I think what was done is

appalling and Lord Ram would have never condoned this. No matter how serious our

troubles, we have no right to deceive someone into helping us. I am deeply sorry'

Shiva raised his eyebrow a bit.

Parvateshwar

is the only one apologising

instead of making excuses.

He is a true

follower of the great king Ram's way

Shiva smiled.

Daksha let out an audible sigh of relief.

Shiva turned towards Daksha. 'Let us put this in the past, your Highness. Like I said,

there are some things about your nation that could be improved. No doubt about that.

But it is amongst the best societies that I have seen. And it *is* worth fighting for. But I have a few conditions.'

'Of course, my Lord,' said Daksha, eager to please.

‘At this point of time, I am not saying that I can perform the tasks that you expect of me nor am I saying that I cannot do it. All I am saying is that I will try my best. But before that, I want to understand more of your society before I can be sure of how I can help. I am assuming that nothing will be hidden from me nor will I be misled.’

‘Of course, my Lord.’

‘Secondly,

you still need immigrants to expand your population. But you should not

mislead them. I think that you should tell them the entire truth about Meluha and let

them make an informed decision on whether to come here. Or you don’t invite them at

all. Is that fair?’

‘Of course

it is, my Lord,’ said Daksha.

Nodding briefly towards Kanakhala,

he

committed, ‘We will implement that immediately.’

‘Furthermore, it is clear to me that I am not going back to Kashmir. Can my tribe, the

Gunas, be brought to Devagiri? I would like them to be with me.’

‘Of course, my Lord,’ said Daksha with a quick look at Kanakhala.

‘Instructions will be

sent today itself to bring them to Devagiri.'

'Also, I would like to visit the location where you manufacture the Somras. I would like to understand this drink of the gods. Something tells me that it is important to do so.'

'Of course you may, my Lord,' said Daksha, his face finally breaking into a nervous

smile. 'Kanakhala will take you there tomorrow itself. In fact, my family is also scheduled for a visit there day after tomorrow for a puja at the Brahma temple. Perhaps we could

meet there.'

'That would be nice,' said Shiva smiling. Then taking a deep breath he added, 'And

lastly, I guess that you would like to announce the arrival of the Neelkanth to your

people.'

Daksha and Kanakhala nodded hesitantly.

'I would like to request that you don't do that for now.'

Daksha and Kanakhala's face fell immediately. Nandi's eyes were glued to the floor. He

had stopped listening to the conversation. The enormity of his prevarication was tearing

him apart.

'Your Highness, I have a terrible feeling that when people know I am the Neelkanth,



every action and word of mine will be over-interpreted

and over—analysed,’

explained

Shiva. ‘I am afraid that I don’t know enough about your society or my task to be able to

handle that at this point of time.’

‘I understand my Lord,’ said Daksha, willing a broken smile back on his face. You have

my word. Only my immediate staff, my family and the people you allow will know of the

Neelkanth’s arrival. Nobody else.’

‘Thank you, your Highness. But I will say it again: I am a simple tribal man who just

happened to get a blue throat because

of some exotic medicine. Honesdy, I still don’t

know what one man like me can do in the face of the odds that you face.’

‘And I’ll say it again my Lord,’ said Daksha, with a child-like smile. ‘If that man is you, he can change the entire universe!’



## CHAPTER 8

### Drink of the Gods

Shiva and Nandi were walking back to the royal guest house. Shiva had decided he

wanted to eat lunch alone. Nandi walked a few steps behind, his head bowed in self-

recrimination. 'My Lord, I am so sorry'

Shiva turned around to gaze at Nandi.

'You are right, my Lord. We were so lost in our own troubles and the search for the

Neelkanth that we didn't realise the unfairness of our actions on immigrants. I misled

you my Lord. I lied to you.'

Shiva didn't say anything. He continued to stare intensely into Nandi's eyes.

'I am so sorry my Lord. I have failed you. I will accept whatever punishment you give

me.'

Shiva's lips broke into a very faint smile. He patted Nandi lightly on his shoulders,

signalling he had forgiven him. But his eyes delivered a clear message.

'Never lie to me

again, my friend.'

Nandi nodded and whispered, 'Never, my Lord. I am so sorry'

'Forget it Nandi,' said Shiva, his smile a little broader now. 'It's in the past.'

They turned and continued walking. Suddenly

Shiva shook his head and chuckled

slighdy. 'Strange people!'

'What is it, my Lord?' asked Nandi.

'Nothing really. I was just wondering at some of the interesting

things about your

society.'

'Interesting, my Lord?' asked Nandi, feeling a little more confident now that Shiva was

speaking to him again.

'Well, some people in your country think just the presence of my blue throat can help

you achieve impossible tasks. Some people actually think that my name has suddenly

become so holy that they can't even speak it.'

Nandi smiled slightly.

'On the other hand,' continued Shiva, 'some people clearly think that I am not required.

In fact, they even think that my touching them is so polluting that I need to get a

shudhikaran done!’

‘Shudhikaran?’

Why would you need that my Lord?’ asked Nandi, a little concerned.

Shiva weighed his words carefully. ‘Well, I touched someone.

And I was told that I

would need to undergo a shudhikaran.’

‘What? Who did you touch my Lord? Was it a vikarma person?’ asked a troubled Nandi.

‘Only the touch of a vikarma person would mean that you would need to get a

shudhikaran.’

Shiva’s

face abruptly changed

colour. A veil lifted from his eyes.

He suddenly

understood the significance of the events of the previous day. Her hasty withdrawal at

being touched. The shocked reactions from the Guruji and Krittika.

‘Go back to the guest house, Nandi. I will see you there,’ said Shiva, as he turned

towards the guest house garden.

‘My Lord, what happened?’

asked Nandi, trying to keep pace with Shiva. ‘Did you get the shudhikaran done or not?’

‘Go to the guest house Nandi,’ said Shiva walking rapidly away. ‘I will see you there.’



Shiva waited for the larger part of an hour. But it was in vain, for Sati did not make an appearance.

He sat on the bench by himself, cursing the moment when that terrible thought had entered his mind.

How could I have even thought that Sati would find my touch polluting? I am such a

bloody idiot!

He replayed moments of that fateful encounter in his mind and analysed every facet of

it.

‘If something happened to you, I would never be able to forgive myself.’

What did she mean by saying that? Does she have feelings for me? Or is she just an

honourable woman who can’t bear to be the cause of someone else’s misfortune? And

why should she think of herself as inferior? This entire concept of the vikarma is so

damned ridiculous!

Realising

that she wasn't going to come, Shiva got up. He kicked the bench hard, getting a painful reminder that his once numb toe had got its sensation back. Cursing

out loud, he started walking back to the guest house. Walking past the stage, he noticed

that there was something lying on the dance floor. He went closer and bent down to pick

it up. It was her bead bracelet. He had seen it on her right hand. The string did not seem broken.

Had she purposely dropped it here?

He smelt it. It had the fragrance of the holy lake on a sun-kissed evening. He brought it delicately to his lips and kissed it gently. Smiling, he dropped the bracelet into the pouch tied around his waist. He would come back from Mount Mandar and meet her. He *had*

to meet her. He would pursue her to the end of the world if required. He would fight the

entire human race to have her. His journey in this life was incomplete without her. His

heart knew it. His soul knew it.

'How much further is it, Madam Prime Minister?' asked Nandi, behaving like an excited

child.

A visit to the mythical Mount Mandar, the hub where the drink of the gods was

manufactured,

was a rare honour for any Meluhan. For most Suryavanshis,

Mount

Mandar was the soul of their empire, for as long as it was safe, so was the Somras.

‘It’s only been an hour since we left Devagiri, Captain,’ said Kanakhala smiling. ‘It’s a day’s journey to Mount Mandar.’

‘Actually because

of the blinds on the carriage windows, I can’t see anything outside.

And I can’t tell how much time has gone by since I can’t see the Sun either. That’s why I was asking’

‘The prahar lamp is right behind you, Captain. The blinds are down for your own

protection.’

Shiva smiled at Kanakhala.

He could understand

that the blinds were not for *their*

protection, but for the safety of Mount Mandar. To keep its location secret. Very few

people knew of its exact location. There was an elite team of soldiers called the

Arishtanemi who protected the road to Mount Mandar and the travellers on it. Except for

the scientists

of Mount Mandar, the Arishtanemi and any person authorised

by the

Emperor, nobody was allowed

to the mountain or to know its location.

If the

Chandravanshi

terrorists attacked Mount Mandar, all would be lost for Meluha.

‘Who would we be meeting there, Kanakhala?’ asked Shiva.



‘My Lord, we would be meeting Brahaspati. He is the Chief Scientist of the empire. He

leads the team of scientists who manufacture

the Somras for the entire country. Of

course, they also conduct research in many other fields. A bird courier has already been

sent to him informing him of your arrival. We will be meeting him tomorrow morning.’



‘Shiva nodded slightly, smiled at Kanakhala, and said, Thank you.’

As Nandi looked at the prahar lamp again, Shiva went back to his book. It was an

interesting manuscript about the terrible war that was fought many thousands of years

ago, between the *Devas* , the *gods* ; and the *Asuras* , the *demons*

— an eternal

struggle between opposites: good and evil. The *Devas*, with the help of Lord Rudra, the

*Mahadev* , the *God of Gods* , had destroyed the *Asuras* and established

righteousness

in the world again.

‘I hope you slept well, my Lord,’ said Kanakhala as she welcomed Shiva and Nandi into

the chamber outside Brahaspati’s

office.

It was the beginning of the last hour of the first prahar. Days began early at Mount

Mandar.

‘Yes, I did,’ said Shiva. Though there was a strange rhythmic sound on through the

night’

Kanakhala smiled but did not offer any explanation. She bowed her head and opened

the door to let Shiva into Brahaspati's

office. Shiva walked in followed by Kanakhala and

Nandi. There were various strange instruments spread throughout Brahaspati's

large

office, neatly organised

on tables of different heights. There were palm leaf notes

alongside

each

of the instruments

where

some

experiments

had clearly

been

conducted. The room was a restrained blue. There was a large picture window in the

corner which afforded a breathtaking

view of the dense forest at the foot of the

mountain. At the centre, many simple, low seats had been arranged together in a

square. It was a frugal room, in line with a culture that celebrated simplicity over style at every turn.

Brahaspati was standing in the centre of the room, his hands folded in a namaste. Of

medium height, much shorter than Shiva, his wheat-coloured

skin, deep set eyes and

well-manicured

beard gave Brahaspati

a distinguished

appearance.

A clean shaven

head, except for the choti and a serene expression,

gave his face an intellectual look.

His body was slightly overweight. His broad shoulders and barrel chest would have

been markedly pronounced if they had been exercised a bit, but Brahaspati's body was

a vehicle for his intellect and not the temple that it is to a warrior or Kshatriya.

Brahaspati wore a typical white cotton dhoti and an angvastram

draped loosely over his

shoulders. He wore a janau tied from his left shoulder down to the right side of his hips.

‘How are you Kanakhala?’ asked Brahaspati. ‘It has been a long time.’

‘Yes it has, Brahaspati,’ said Kanakhala, greeting Brahaspati with a namaste and a low

bow.

Shiva noticed that the second amulet on Brahaspati’s

arm showed him as a swan. A

very select chosen-tribe among Brahmins.

‘This is Lord Shiva,’ said Kanakhala, pointing towards Shiva.

‘Just Shiva will do, thank you,’ smiled Shiva, with a polite namaste towards Brahaspati.

‘Alright then. Just Shiva it is. And, who might you be?’ asked Brahaspati,

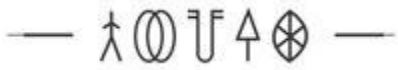
turning

towards Nandi.

‘This is Captain Nandi,’ answered Kanakhala. ‘Lord Shiva’s aide.’

‘A pleasure to meet you, Captain,’ said Brahaspati, before turning back to Shiva. ‘I don’t mean to sound rude Shiva. But would it be possible for me to see your throat’

Shiva nodded. As he took off his cravat, Brahaspati came forward to examine the throat.



His smile disappeared

as he saw Shiva's throat radiating a bright blue hue. Brahaspati

was speechless

for a few moments. Slowly gathering

his wits, he turned towards

Kanakhala. 'This is not a fraud. The colour comes from the inside. How is this possible?

This means that...'

'Yes,' said Kanakhala

softly, with a happiness

that seemed

to emanate

from deep

inside. 'It means the Neelkanth has come. Our saviour has come.'

'Well, I don't know if I am a saviour or anything like that,' said an embarrassed

Shiva,

retying the cravat around his throat. 'But I will certainly try my best to help your

wonderful country. It is for this reason that I come to you. Something tells me that it is important for me to know how the Somras works.'

Brahaspati still seemed to be in a daze. He continued to watch Shiva but his attention

seemed

elsewhere.

He appeared

to be working out the implications

of the true

Neelkanth's arrival.

'Brahaspati...'

said Kanakhala, as she tried to call the chief scientist back into the here and now.

'Huh!'

'Can you tell me how the Somras works, Brahaspati?'

asked Shiva again.

'Of course,' said Brahaspati,

as his eyes refocused

on the people in front of him.

Noticing Nandi he asked, 'Is it alright to speak in front of the captain?'

'Nandi has been my friend through my time in Meluha,' said Shiva. 'I hope it is alright if he stays here.'

Nandi felt touched that his Lord still trusted him so openly. Nandi swore once again, on

pain of death, to never lie to his Lord.

'Whatever you say, Shiva,' said Brahaspati, smiling warmly.

Shiva noticed that Brahaspati

was not submissive

or excessively

deferential

on

discovering

that he

*was*

the Neelkanth. Just like Parvateshwar,

Brahaspati

called

Shiva by his name and not 'My Lord'. However, Shiva felt that while Parvateshwar's

attitude was driven by a distrusting surliness,

Brahaspati's

was driven perhaps by an

assured affability.

'Thank you,' smiled Shiva. 'So, how does the Somras work?'

The royal procession moved slowly on the road to Mount Mandar. There was a pilot

guard of one hundred and sixty cavalrymen who rode before the five royal carriages in

columns of four abreast. A rearguard of another one hundred and sixty rode behind the

royal carriages,

in a similar formation. A side guard of forty each marched along the left

and right flanks. Each carriage also had ten soldiers and five serving maids seated on

the side supports. The soldiers were the legendary Arishtanemi, the most feared militia

in all of India.

The five carriages

were made of solid wood, with no windows or apertures, except for

upward pointed slits at the top for ventilation. There was a grill in front, behind the rider, to allow in light and air and this could be shut instantly in case of an attack. All the

carriages were of exactly the same dimension and appearance,



making it impossible to

say which carriage carried the royal family. If a person had *divyadrishti*,

*divine vision* , to

look beyond what human eyes could see, he would observe that the first, third and

fourth carriages

were empty. The second carried the royal family — Daksha, his wife

Veerini and his daughter Sati. The last carriage carried Parvateshwar

and some of his

key brigadiers.

‘Father, I still don’t understand why you insist on taking me along to pujas. I am not

even allowed to attend the main ceremony,’ said Sati.

‘I have told you many times before,’ smiled Daksha, as he patted Sati’s hand fondly.



‘None of my pujas are complete and pure till I have seen your face. I don’t care about

the damned law.’

‘Father!’ whispered Sati with an embarrassed

smile and a slight, reproachful shake of

her head. She knew it was wrong of her father to insult the law.

Sati's mother, Veerini, looked at Daksha with an awkward smile. Then taking a quick

look at Sati, returned to her book.

At a short distance from the royal procession, hidden by the dense forest, a small band

of fifty soldiers slunk along silently. The soldiers wore light leather armour on their torso and had their dhotis tied in military style to ensure ease of movement. Each of them

bore two swords, a long knife and had a hardshield made of metal and leather tied

loosely around their back. Their shoes had grooves to hold three small knives. At the

head were two men. One of them, a handsome

young man with a battle scar

embellishing his face, wore a dark brown turban which signified that he was the captain.

His leather armour had been tied a little loose and a gold chain and pendant had slipped

out carelessly.

The pendant had a beautiful, white representation

of a horizontal

crescent moon, the Chandravanshi

symbol.

Next to him walked a giant of a man covered in a long robe from head to toe. A hood

stitched onto the robe was pulled up while his face was covered with a black mask. Very

little of him was visible except for his strong fleshy hands and his expressionless,

almond-shaped

eyes. He had a leather bracelet tied to his right wrist with the serpent

Aum symbol embroidered on it. Without turning to the captain, the hooded figure said,

‘Vishwadyumna,

your mark is visible. Put it in and tighten your armour.’

An embarrassed

Vishwadyumna

immediately pushed the chain inside and pulled the

two strings on the side of his shoulder to tighten the breastplate.

‘My Lord, begging your pardon,’ said Vishwadyumna.

‘But perhaps we could move

ahead to confirm that this is the route to Mount Mandar. Once we know that, we’ll be

sure that our informant was correct. I am sure that we can come back to kidnap her

later. We are dangerously outnumbered in any case. We can't do anything right now.'

The hooded figure replied calmly, 'Vishwadyumna,

have I ordered an attack? Where

does the question of us being outnumbered come in? And we are going in the direction

of Mount Mandar. A few hours delay will not bring the heavens

down. For now, we

follow.'

Vishwadyumna

swallowed hard. There was nothing he hated more than opposing his

lord's views. After all, it was his lord who had found the rare Suryavanshi

sympathetic to

their cause. This breakthrough would make it possible for them to rip out and destroy

the very heart of Meluha. He spoke softly, 'But my Lord, you know the Queen doesn't

like delays. There is unrest brewing amongst the men that perhaps the focus is being

lost.'

The hooded figure turned sharply. His body seemed to convey anger but his voice was

composed. 'I am not losing focus. If you want to leave, please go. You will get your

money. I will do this alone if I have to.'

Shocked

to see the rare show of emotion on his leader, Vishwadyumna

retracted

immediately. 'No, my Lord. That is not what I was trying to imply. I am sorry. I will stay with you till you release me. You are right. A few hours will make no difference when we

have waited for centuries.'

The platoon continued tracking the royal caravan silently.

'At a conceptual level, how the Somras works is ridiculously simple,' said Brahaspati.

'The almost impossible task was to convert the concept into reality. That was the genius

of Lord Brahma. Jai Shri Brahma!'

'Jai Shri Brahma,' repeated Shiva, Kanakhala and Nandi.

'Before understanding

how the medicine slows down the ageing process dramatically,

we have to understand what keeps us alive,' said Brahaspati.

‘There is a fundamental  
thing that none of us can live without.’

Shiva stared at Brahaspati, waiting for him to expound.

‘And that fundamental thing is energy,’ explained Brahaspati. ‘When we walk, talk, think, that is when we do anything that can be called being alive, we use energy.’

‘We have a similar concept amongst our people,’ said Shiva. ‘Except, we call it Shakti.’

‘Shakti?’ asked a surprised Brahaspati.

‘Interesting. That word has not been used to  
describe energy for many centuries. It was a term of the Pandyas,  
the ancestors of all  
the people of India. Do you know where your tribe came from? Their  
lineage?’

‘I am not really sure but there is an old woman in my tribe who claims to  
know

everything about our history. Perhaps we should ask her when she comes to  
Devagiri.’

‘Perhaps we should!’ smiled Brahaspati.

‘In any case, getting back to the subject, we  
know nothing can be done by our body without energy. Now where does  
this energy  
come from?’

‘From the food that we eat?’ suggested

Nandi, timidly. He was finally getting the

confidence to speak in front of such important people.

‘Absolutely right. The food that we eat stores energy, which we can expend. That’s also

why if we don’t eat, we feel weak. However, you don’t get energy just by eating food.

Something inside the body has to draw the energy so that we can put it to good use.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Shiva.

‘The conversion

of food into energy

is done by the air we breathe,’

continued

Brahaspati. ‘The air has various gases in it. One of these gases is called oxygen, which

reacts with our food and releases

energy. If we don’t get oxygen, our body would be

starved of energy and we would die.’

‘But this is the process that keeps us alive,’ said Shiva. ‘What does the medicine have

to do with it? The medicine has to work on that which causes us to grow old, become

weaker and die.’

Brahaspati

smiled. ‘What I told you does have something to do with how we age.

Because

as it appears,

nature has a sense of humour. The very thing that keeps us

alive is also what causes us to age and eventually die. When oxygen reacts with our

food to release energy, it also releases free radicals called oxidants. These oxidants are toxic as well. When you leave any fruit out and it goes bad, it’s because

it has been

“oxidised” or the oxidants have reacted with it to make it rot. A similar “oxidising

process” causes metals to corrode. It happens especially

with the new metal we have

discovered — iron. The same thing happens to our body when we breathe in oxygen.

The oxygen helps convert the food we eat into energy. But it also causes the release of



oxidants into our body which start reacting inside us. We rust from the inside out, and

hence age and die.'

'By the holy god Agni!' exclaimed Nandi. 'The very thing that gives us life also slowly

kills us?'

'Yes,' said Brahaspati. 'Think about it. The body tries to store everything that you need from the outside world to survive. It stores enough food so that even if you don't eat for a few days you won't die. It stocks up on water so that a few days of thirst will not kill you. It seems logical, right? If your body needs something, it keeps some of it as backup for possible shortages.'

'Absolutely,' agreed Shiva.

'On the other hand, the body does not store enough oxygen,

the most crucial

component of staying alive, to last for more than just a few minutes. It doesn't make

sense at all. The only explanation can be that the body realises that despite being an

elixir, oxygen is also a poison. Hence it is dangerous to store.'

'So, what did Lord Brahma do?' asked Shiva.

'After a lot of research,

Lord Brahma invented the Somras,

which when consumed,

reacts with the oxidants, absorbs them and then expels them from the body as sweat or

urine. Because of the Somras, there are no oxidants left in the body'

'Is that why the sweat released from the body is poisonous the first time after a person

drinks the Somras?'

'Yes. Your sweat is particularly dangerous

the first time after you drink the Somras.

Having said that, remember,

sweat and urine released

from the body even after a

person has drunk the Somras for years remains toxic. So you have to eject it from the

body and make sure that it does not affect anyone else.'

'So, that's why the Meluhans are so obsessed with hygiene.'

'Yes. That's why all Meluhans are taught about two things from a young age — water

and hygiene. Water is the cleanest absorber of the effluents that the Somras generates

and excretes as toxins. Meluhans are taught to drink gallons of water. And everything

that can be washed, should be washed! The Meluhans bathe at least twice a day. All

ablutions are done in specific rooms and the waste is carried out by underground drains

safely out of the city’

‘Strict hygiene standards!’ smiled Shiva, as he remembered his first day in Kashmir and

Ayurvati’s strong words. ‘What goes into manufacturing the Somras?’

‘Manufacturing the Somras is not without its fair share of difficulties. It requires various ingredients that are not easily available. For example, the Sanjeevani

tree. The empire

has giant plantations

to produce these trees. The manufacturing

procedure

also

generates

a lot of heat. So we have to use a lot of water during the processing to keep

the mixture stable. Also, the crushed branches

of the Sanjeevani

tree have to be

churned with the waters of the Saraswati

river before processing

begins. Water from

other sources doesn't work'

'Is that the strange noise I keep hearing: the churners?'

'That's exactly what it is. We have giant churning machines in a massive cavern at the

base of this mountain. The Saraswati

waters are led in here through a complex system

of canals.

The water is collected

in an enormous

pool in the cavern which we

affectionately call *Sagar*.'

*'Sagar*

*An ocean*

You call a pool of water by that name?' asked a surprised Shiva, for

he had heard legends about the massive, never-ending expanse of water called Sagar.

'It is a bit of hyperbole,' admitted Brahaspati with a smile. 'But if you did see the size of the pool, you would realise that we are not that off the mark!'

'Well I would certainly like to see the entire facility. It was too late when we came in last night so I haven't seen much of the mountain as yet.'

‘I will take you around after lunch,’ said Brahaspati.

Shiva grinned in reply. He was about to say something, but checked himself in time,

looking at both Kanakhala and Nandi.

Brahaspati noticed the hesitation. He felt Shiva might want to ask him something, but

not in front of Nandi and Kanakhala. Brahaspati turned to them and said, ‘I think Shiva

wants to ask me something. May I request you to wait outside?’

It was a measure

of the respect

that Brahaspati

commanded,

that Kanakhala

immediately

rose to leave the room after a formal namaste,

followed by Nandi.

Brahaspati turned to Shiva with a smile. ‘Why don’t you ask me the real question you

came to ask?’



## CHAPTER 9

### Love and its Consequences

‘I didn’t want to question you in front of them. Their faith is overwhelming,’ explained

Shiva with a wry grin. He was beginning to like Brahaspati. He enjoyed being around a

man who treated him like an equal.

Brahaspati nodded. ‘I understand, my friend. What do you want to ask?’

‘Why me?’ asked Shiva. Why did the Somras have this strange effect on me? I might

have a blue throat, but I don’t know how I am going to become the saviour of the

Suryavanshis.

The Emperor tells me that I am supposed

to be the one who will

complete Lord Ram’s unfinished work and destroy the Chandravanshis.’

‘He told you that?’ asked Brahaspati, his eyes wide in surprise. ‘The Emperor can be a

little tiresome at times. But suffice it to say that what he told you is not completely

correct. The legend doesn’t exactly say that the Neelkanth will save the Suryavanshis.

The legend says two things. First, that the Neelkanth will *not be* from the Sapt-Sindhu.

And second, the Neelkanth will be the “destroyer of evil”. The Meluhans believe that this implies that the Neelkanth will destroy the Chandravanshis, since they are obviously

evil. But destroying the Chandravanshis

doesn't mean that the Suryavanshis

will be

saved! There are many other problems, besides the Chandravanshis,

that we need to

solve.’

‘What kind of problems? Like the Nagas?’

Brahaspati

seemed

to hesitate for a moment. He replied carefully. ‘There are many

problems. We are working hard to solve them. But coming back to your question, why

did the Somras have this effect on you?’

‘Yes, why did it? Why did my throat turn blue? Forget about stopping the degeneration

of my body, the Somras actually repaired a dislocated shoulder and a frostbitten toe.’

‘It repaired an injury?’ asked an incredulous Brahaspati.

‘That’s impossible! It is just

supposed to prevent diseases

and ageing, not repair injuries.’

‘Well, it did in my case.’

Brahaspati thought for a bit. ‘We will have to do experiments to come up with a definitive answer. For now though, I can think of only one explanation. From what I know, you

come from the high lands beyond the Himalayas, right?’

Shiva nodded.

‘The air gets thinner as you go higher up the mountains,’ continued Brahaspati. ‘There

is less oxygen in thinner air. That means your body was used to surviving with less

oxygen and resultant it was less harmed by the oxidants. Therefore the anti-oxidants in

the Somras may have had a stronger effect on you.’

‘That could be one of the reasons,’ agreed Shiva. ‘But if that was the case, the rest of

my tribe should have also turned cold and blue. Why just me?’

‘A good point,’ conceded

Brahaspati.



‘But tell me one thing. Did your tribe also  
experience an improvement in their pre—existing conditions?’

‘Actually, yes they did.’

‘So maybe the diluted air you all lived in did have some role to play. But  
since all of your tribe did not develop blue throats, it is obvious that the  
“thinner air” theory may be a  
partial explanation.

We can always research  
it more. I am sure there is a scientific  
explanation for the blue throat.’

Shiva looked at Brahaspati intently, as he read between the lines of  
Brahaspati’s  
last



statement. ‘You don’t believe in the legend of the Neelkanth, do you?’

Brahaspati smiled at Shiva awkwardly. He was beginning to like Shiva and  
did not want

to say anything to insult him. But he wasn’t going to lie either. ‘I believe in  
science. It provides a solution and a rationale for everything. And if there is  
anything that appears like a miracle, the only explanation

is that a scientific reason for it has not been  
discovered as yet.’

‘Then why do the people of Meluha not look to science for solving their problems?’

‘I am not sure,’ said Brahaspati thoughtfully. ‘Perhaps it is because science is a capable but cold-hearted master. Unlike a Neelkanth, it will not solve your problems for you. It

will only provide you the tools that you may need to fight your own battles. Perhaps it is easier for people to believe that someone else will come and solve their problems rather

than solve it themselves.’

‘So what do you think is the role that the Neelkanth has to play in Meluha?’

Brahaspati looked at Shiva sympathetically.

‘I would like to think that true Suryavanshis

should fight their own demons rather than put pressure on someone else and expect

him to solve their problems. A true Suryavanshi’s

*duty* is to push himself to the limit of

his abilities and strength.

The coming of the Neelkanth

should only redouble

a

Suryavanshi’s

efforts, since it is obvious that the time for the destruction of evil is near.’

Shiva nodded.

‘Are you concerned that it may be too much of a strain for you to take up a responsibility that you don’t really want, because of the pressure of faith?’ asked Brahaspati.

‘No, that is not my concern,’ replied Shiva. This is a wonderful country and I certainly

want to do all I can to help. But what if your people depend on me to protect them and I

can’t? Right now, I can’t say that I can do all that is expected from me. So how can I

give my word?’

Brahaspati

smiled. According to his rule book, any man who took his own word seriously was worth respecting.

‘You appear to be a good man, Shiva. You will probably face a lot of pressure in the

coming days. Be careful, my friend. Because

of the blue throat and the blind faith it

generates,

your decisions

will have ramifications

for the entire land. Remember,

whether a man is a legend or not is decided by history, not fortune-tellers.’

Shiva smiled, glad to have finally found a man who understood his predicament.

And

more importantly, was willing to at least *offer*

some advice.

It was late in the evening. Having spent a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon on a detailed

tour of Mount Mandar with Brahaspati,

Shiva lay on his bed, reading a book. A spent

chillum lay on the side table.

A few aspects of the story he was reading, ‘The Righteous War against the Asuras’,

troubled him. The Asuras were demons and were expected to behave like demons,

having a pathological hatred for the Devas. They routinely attacked Deva cities, trying to force them to accept the Asura way of life. This was not a surprise to Shiva. What was

unexpected

though was the way some of the Devas behaved,

going to unusually

unethical limits in their blind pursuit of victory. Lord Rudra, though personally a great man, seemed to ignore the indiscretions of the Devas in

the interest of the larger good.

Shiva heard a commotion outside the Guest House. He looked out of his first floor

balcony to notice that the royal caravan had just arrived. The Arishtanemi soldiers had

formed a neat salutary row at the entrance. Some people appeared to be disembarking

from the far side of the second carriage. Shiva assumed it must be the royal family. The

surprise was that the Arishtanemi seemed to be going through just the normal motions

in receiving the royal family. There wasn't the usual servitude that would be expected in

front of royalty. Shiva suspected that this could be due to the usual Meluhan obsession with perceived equality.

However, Shiva's equality theory was challenged

when he looked at the fifth carriage

from which Parvateshwar

alit. Here, the Arishtanemi seemed to be in a tizzy. The senior

captain rushed in front of Parvateshwar

and executed a Meluhan military salute — a

quick click of the heels, the body rigid in attention and the right hand, balled in a fist, brought rapidly and violently to his left chest. After this salute, the

captain bent low in respect to the chief of the army. The soldiers at the back repeated

their captain's

greeting. Parvateshwar

formally saluted in return, accompanied

with a slight bow of his

head.

He started towards his soldiers, inspecting them, while the captain politely fell two steps behind.

Shiva had a feeling that the admiration reserved for Parvateshwar

was not because of

the post he held. It was for the man himself. For all his surliness, Parvateshwar

had a

reputation of a brave warrior, a soldier's general respected as a man whose word was

true. Shiva could see the strength of that repute in the eyes of each Arishtanemi who

bent low on receiving the attention of his general.

A little while later, Shiva heard a soft knock on his door. He did not need to open it to know who was on the other side. Sighing softly, he opened the door.

Daksha's fixed smile disappeared

and he started a little as the unfamiliar odour of the marijuana assaulted his senses.

Kanakhala, standing to the Emperor's right, appeared equally perplexed.

'What is that stench?' Daksha asked Brahaspati, who stood to the left. 'Perhaps you should change the Lord's room. How can you subject him to this discomfort?'

'I have a feeling that Shiva is comfortable with this aroma, your Highness,' said

Brahaspati.

'It is a smell that travels with me, your Highness,' said Shiva. 'I like it.'

Daksha was baffled. His face did nothing to hide his revulsion. But he quickly recovered

his composure. After all, the Lord was happy with the malodour. 'I'm sorry to disturb

you, my Lord,' said Daksha, his smile back in place. 'I had just thought I would inform

you that my family and I have reached the guest house.'

'It's very kind of you to inform me, your Highness,' said Shiva with a formal namaste.

‘My family and I were hoping to have the honour of eating breakfast with you tomorrow

morning, my Lord.’

‘The honour would be mine, your Highness.’

‘Excellent. Excellent,’ beamed Daksha as he moved on to the question that dominated

his mind. ‘What do you think of the Somras, my Lord? Isn’t it really the drink of the

Gods?’

‘Yes your Highness. It does appear to be a miraculous drink.’

‘It is the basis of our civilisation,’ continued Daksha. ‘Once you have taken a tour of our land, you will see the goodness of our way of life. I am sure you will find it in your heart to do something to save it.’

‘Your Highness, I already think highly of your country. It truly is great and treats its

citizens well. I wouldn’t doubt that it is a way of life that is worth protecting. However, what I am not sure about is what I can do. Yours is such an advanced civilisation and I

am just a simple tribal man.’

‘Faith is a very potent weapon, my Lord,’ said Daksha, his hands joined in supplication.

‘All that is needed is for you to have as much faith in yourself as we have in you. I am

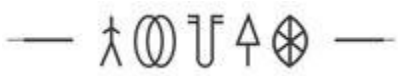
sure that if you spend a few more days in our country and see the effect that your



presence has on our people, you will realise what you can do.'

Shiva gave up arguing against Daksha's childlike belief.

Brahaspati winked at Shiva before coming to his rescue. 'Your Highness, Shiva looks



tired to me. It has been a long day. Maybe he should retire and we could meet

tomorrow?'

Daksha smiled, 'Perhaps you are right, Brahaspati.

My apologies for troubling you, my

Lord. We will see you at breakfast. Have a good night.'

'Good night,' wished Shiva in return.

Sati waited quietly at the table as Daksha glanced nervously at the prahar lamp. To the

left were Kanakhala, Brahaspati and Parvateshwar.

To his right was an empty chair. For

the 'Neelkanth', thought Sati. Next to the empty chair sat Sati and to her right was her

mother, Veerini. Daksha had agonised deeply over the seating to get it exactly right.

Sati looked over the arrangements.

A formal table and chairs for breakfast rather than

the preferred low table and floor cushions that Meluhans normally sat upon to eat. The

beloved banana leaf had been replaced by gold plates. The taste enhancing

*kulhads* ,

or *mud cups* , had been replaced by refined silver glasses.

She thought that her father

was really pulling out all stops for this breakfast meeting. She had seen him pin his

hopes on too many so-called Neelkanths earlier. Miracle men who had turned out to be

frauds. She hoped that her father would not have to face disillusionment again.

The crier announced Shiva and Nandi. As Daksha rose with a reverential namaste to

receive the Lord, Parvateshwar

rolled his eyes at the servile behaviour of his Emperor.

At the same instant, Sati bent down to pick up a glass that she had accidentally

knocked over to the floor.

‘My Lord,’ said Daksha pointing to the people standing around the table.

‘Kanakhala,

Brahaspati

and Parvateshwar,

you already know. At the far right is my wife, Queen

Veerini.'

Shiva smiled politely as he returned Veerini's namaste with a formal namaste and a low

bow.

'And next to her,' said Daksha with a broad smile as Sati came up holding the glass she

had retrieved, 'is my daughter, Princess Sati.'

The breath went out of Shiva as he looked at his life staring back at him. His heart beat a frantic rhythm. He could swear that he had a whiff of his favourite fragrance in the

world: the aroma of the holy lake at sunset. As before, he was mesmerized.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. Except for the noise made by the

unfortunate glass which fell from Sati's hand again. The clang of the rolling glass

distracted Sati slightly from her fixed gaze. With superhuman

effort, she managed

to

control the look of shock on her face. She was breathing heavily, as if she had just

danced a duet with Shiva. What she did not know was that her soul was doing exactly

that.

Daksha gazed at the dumbstruck couple with glee. He had the look of a director who

had just seen his play being perfectly executed.

Nandi, standing right behind Shiva,

could see Sati's expression.

Suddenly

everything became

clear to him. The dance

practices, the vikarma touch, the shudhikaran and his Lord's anguish. While some part

of him was afraid, another reconciled to it quickly. If his Lord wanted this, he would

support it in every way possible.

Brahaspati

stared blankly at the couple, deep in

thought about the implications of this unexpected situation. Parvateshwar

looked at the

goings on with barely concealed repugnance.

What was happening was wrong, immoral

and worst of all, illegal.

‘My Lord,’ said Daksha pointing to the empty seat at his right. ‘Please take your seat

and we shall begin.’

Shiva did not react. He had not heard Daksha’s words. He was in a world where the

only sound was the harmonious melody of Sati’s heavy breathing. A tune he could

blissfully dance to for his next seven lives.

‘My Lord,’ repeated Daksha, a little louder.

A distracted Shiva finally looked at Daksha, as if from another world.

‘Please take your seat, my Lord,’ said Daksha.

‘Yes of course, your Highness,’ said Shiva averting his eyes in embarrassment.

As Shiva sat down, the food was brought in. It was a simple delicacy that the Meluhans

loved for breakfast. Rice and some cereals fermented and ground into a thick batter.

Small portions of this batter were then wrapped in banana leaves and steamed

into

cylindrical roundels. The preparation was served while still draped in the banana leaf,

along with some spicy lentils for taste. The dish was called an idli.

‘You’re the Neelkanth?’ a still shocked Sati whispered softly to Shiva, as she had willed some calmness into her breathing.

‘Apparently so,’ replied Shiva with a playful grin. ‘Impressed?’

Sati answered

that question with a raised disdainful brow. The mask was back. ‘Why

would I be impressed?’

What?!

‘My Lord,’ said Daksha.

‘Yes, your Highness,’ said Shiva, turning towards Daksha.

‘I was thinking,’ said Daksha. ‘Our puja should be over by this evening. Yet I have to

stay here for two more days for some reviews with Brahaspati.

There is no point in

having Veerini and Sati get thoroughly bored out here for so much time.’

‘Thank you, your Highness,’ said Brahaspati with a sly grin. ‘Your vote of confidence in

the interest that the royal family has in Mount Mandar is most reassuring.’

The entire table burst out laughing. So did Daksha, exhibiting a sporting spirit.

‘You know what I meant Brahaspati!’

said Daksha, shaking his head. Turning back to

Shiva, he continued, 'From what I know, my Lord, you were planning to leave for

Devagiri tomorrow morning. I think it may be a good idea for Veerini and Sati to

accompany you. The rest of us can catch up with you two days later.'

Sati looked up in alarm. She wasn't sure why, but something told her that she shouldn't

agree to this plan. Another part of her said that she had no reason to be scared. In all

the eighty-five years she had spent as a vikarma, she had never broken the law. She

had the self-control to know what was right, and what wasn't.

Shiva though had no such thoughts. With very obvious delight, he said, 'I think that is a very good idea, your Highness. Nandi and I could travel with both her Highnesses

back

to Devagiri.'

'It's settled then,' said a visibly content Daksha. Turning to Parvateshwar, he said,

'Parvateshwar,

please ensure that the Arishtanemi escort are broken up into two groups for the return journey.'

'My Lord, I don't think that is wise,' said Parvateshwar.

‘A large part of the Arishtanemi

are still in Devagiri preparing for the material transfer. Also, the standing contingent in Mount Mandar cannot be reduced under any circumstances.

We may not have enough

soldiers for two caravans. Perhaps, we could all travel together day after tomorrow’

‘I am sure there won’t be a problem,’ said Daksha. ‘And don’t you always say that each

Arishtanemi is equal to fifty enemy soldiers? It’s settled. The Lord Neelkanth, Veerini

and Sati will leave tomorrow morning. Please make all the arrangements.’

Parvateshwar

went unhappily back to his thoughts as Shiva and Sati started whispering to each other again.

‘You did go for a shudhikaran, didn’t you?’ asked Sati seriously.

‘Yes,’ said Shiva. He wasn’t lying. He had gone for a purification ceremony on his last

night at Devagiri. He didn’t believe he needed it. However, he knew that Sati would ask

him the next time they met. And he didn’t want to lie to her.

‘Though I think the concept of doing a shudhikaran

is completely absurd,’ whispered





Shiva. 'In fact, the entire concept of the vikarma is ridiculous. I think that is one of the few things in Meluha that is not fair and should be changed.'

Sati looked up suddenly at Shiva, her face devoid of any expression. Shiva stared hard

into her eyes, trying to gauge some of the thoughts running through her mind. But he hit

a blank wall.

It was the beginning of the second prahar the next day when Shiva, Veerini, Sati and

Nandi departed for Devagiri along with a hundred Arishtanemi. Daksha, Parvateshwar

and Kanakhala stood outside the guest house to see them off. Brahaspati had been

detained by some scheduled experiments.

The entourage had to sit in the same carriage as there were guidelines that a minimum

of four carriages had to be kept aside for any caravan that carried the Emperor. Since

the royal procession

had come in five carriages,

that left only one carriage for this

caravan.

Parvateshwar

was deeply unhappy

about the unorthodox way in which

members

of the royal family had to travel without any dummy carriages,

but his

objections were overruled by Daksha.

Sitting on one of the comfortable sofas inside the carriage, Sati noticed that Shiva was

wearing his cravat again. 'Why do you cover your throat all the time?'

'I am uncomfortable with the attention that comes when anyone sees the blue throat,'

replied Shiva.

'But you will have to get used to it. The blue throat is not going to disappear.'

'True,' answered Shiva with a smile. 'But till I get used to it, the cravat is my shield.'

As the caravan left, Parvateshwar

and Kanakhala came up to Daksha.

'Why do you have so much faith in that man, my Lord?' asked Parvateshwar

of Daksha.

‘He has done nothing to deserve respect. How can he lead us to victory when he has

not even been trained for it? The entire concept of the Neelkanth goes against our rules.

In Meluha a person is supposed to be given a task only if he is found capable of it and

trained by the system.’

‘We are in a state of war, Parvateshwar,’

replied Daksha. ‘An undeclared

one, but a

state of war all the same. We face a terrorist attack every other week. These cowardly

Chandravanshis

don’t even attack from the front so that we can fight them. And our

army is too small to attack their territory openly. Our “rules” are not working. We need a miracle. And the first rule of serendipity is that miracles come when we forget rational

laws and have faith. I have faith in the Neelkanth. And so do my people.’

‘But Shiva has no faith in himself. How can you force him to be our saviour when he

himself doesn’t want to do it?’

‘Sati will change that.’

‘My Lord, you are going to use your own daughter

as bait?’ asked

a horrified

Parvateshwar.

And do you really want a saviour who decides to help us just because of

his lust!’

‘IT IS NOT LUST!’

Parvateshwar

and Kanakhala kept quiet, shocked by Daksha’s reaction.

‘What kind of a father do you think I am?’ asked Daksha. You think I will use my

daughter so? She just may find comfort and happiness with the Lord. She has suffered

enough already. I want her to be happy. And if in doing so, I help my country as well,

what is the harm?’

Parvateshwar

was about to say something, but thought the better of it.

‘We need to destroy the Chandravanshi

ideology,’ continued Daksha. ‘And the only way

we can do that is if we can give the benefits of our lifestyle to the people of Swadweep.

The common Swadweepans

will be grateful for this, but their Chandravanshi

rulers will

try everything in their power to stop us. They may be able to resist us, but try as they might, they cannot stop a people led by the Neelkanth. And if Sati is with the Neelkanth, there is no way he would refuse to lead us against the Chandravanshis.'

'But your Highness, do you really think the Lord would come to our side just because he

is in love with your daughter?' asked Kanakhala.

'You have missed the point. The Lord does not need to be convinced to be on our side,'

said Daksha. 'He already is. We are a great civilisation. Maybe not perfect, but great all the same. One has to be blind to not see that. What the Neelkanth needs is the

motivation and belief in himself to lead us. That belief in himself will assert itself when he moves closer to Sati.'

'And how is that going to happen, your Highness?'

asked Parvateshwar,

frowning

slightly.

'You know what is the most powerful force in a man's life?' asked Daksha.

Kanakhala and Parvateshwar

looked at Daksha nonplussed.

‘It is his intense desire to impress the person he loves most,’ expounded Daksha. ‘Look

at me. I have always loved my father. My desire to impress him is what is driving me

even today. Even after his death, I still want to make him proud of me. It is driving me to my destiny as the King who will re-establish

the pure Suryavanshi

way of life across

India. And when the Neelkanth develops a deep desire to make Sati proud of him, he

will rise to fulfil his destiny.’

Parvateshwar

frowned, not quite agreeing with the logic, but kept quiet all the same.

‘But what if Sati seeks something different?’ asked Kanakhala.

‘Like a husband who

spends all his time with her.’

‘I know my daughter,’ replied Daksha confidently. ‘I know what it takes to impress her.’

‘That’s an interesting point of view, my Lord,’ smiled Kanakhala. ‘Just out of curiosity, what do you think is the most powerful force in a woman’s life?’

Daksha laughed out loud. ‘Why do you ask? Don’t you know?’

‘Well the most powerful force in my life is the desire to get out of the house before my

mother-in-law wakes up!’

Both Daksha and Kanakhala guffawed loudly.

Parvateshwar

didn’t seem to find it funny. ‘I am sorry but that is no way to speak about your mother-in-law.’

‘Oh relax, Parvateshwar,’

said Kanakhala. ‘You take everything too seriously’

‘I think,’ said Daksha smiling, ‘the most powerful force in a woman’s life is the need to be appreciated,

loved and cherished for what she is.’

Kanakhala smiled and nodded. Her emperor truly understood human emotions.



## CHAPTER 10

### The Hooded Figure Returns

As the caravan emerged

from the carefully chiselled passage

leading out from the

depths of Mount Mandar, Veerini requested that the carriage be stopped for a minute.

Veerini, Sati, Shiva and Nandi went down on their knees and offered a short prayer to

the mountain for its continued benefaction. Watching over them on high alert was the

Arishtanemi Bhabravya,

a strapping man of sixty years with an intimidating moustache

and beard.

After a short while, Bhabravya

came up to Veerini and said with barely concealed

impatience: ‘Your Highness, perhaps it’s time to get back into the carriage.’

Veerini looked up at the captain and with a quick nod got up. Sati, Shiva and Nandi

followed.



‘It’s her,’ said Vishwadyumna putting down the scope and turning towards his Lord.

The platoon was at a safe distance,

concealed

from the caravan.

The dense and

impenetrable foliage was an effective shield.

‘Yes’, said the hooded figure and let his eyes linger on Shiva’s muscular body. Even

without using the scope he was in no doubt that this was the same man who had fought

him at the Brahma temple some weeks ago. ‘Who is that man?’

‘I don’t know my Lord.’

‘Keep your eye on him. He was the one who foiled the last attack.’

Vishwadyumna

wanted

to say that the previous

attempt failed because

it was

unplanned.

The presence

of the caste-unmarked

man had little role to play.

Vishwadyumna

could not understand the recent irrational decisions of his Lord. It was

unlike him. Perhaps it was the closeness

of the ultimate objective that was clouding his

judgement. Vishwadyumna

was, however, wise enough to keep his thoughts to himself.

‘Perhaps we could track them for around an hour before we attack, my Lord. It will be a

safe distance from the Arishtanemi back-up. We can get this over with quickly and

report back to the Queen that the informer was correct’

‘No, we’ll wait for a few hours more when they are at least a half day’s distance from

Mount Mandar. Their new carriages

have systems that can send an emergency

signal

immediately. We need to ensure our task is done before back-up arrives.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Vishwadyumna,

happy to see that his Lord’s famed tactical

brilliance had not diminished.

‘And, remember, I want it done quickly,’ added the hooded figure. ‘The more time we

take, the more people get hurt.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

It was the beginning of the third prahar when the caravan stopped at the half-way

clearing for lunch. Here the forest had been cut back to a distance that made a surprise

attack impossible. The Queen’s maids quickly unpacked the food and started heating it

in the centre of the clearing. The royal party and Shiva were sitting closer to the head of the caravan, in the direction towards Devagiri. Bhabravya stood on the higher ground in

the rear, keeping an eagle eye on the surroundings. Apart from the royal party, half the

Arishtanemi soldiers had also sat down to eat while the others kept watch.

Shiva was about take a second helping of rice when he heard the crack of a twig down

the road. Stopping mid-way, he listened intently for another sound. There was none. His

instincts told him this was a predator, who realising he had made a mistake, was now

keeping still. Shiva looked over at Sati to see if she had heard the sound. She too was

staring intently down the road. There was a soft crunch as the foot on the broken twig

eased its pressure

slightly. It would have been missed by most, except a focussed listener.

Shiva immediately put his plate down, pulled out his sword and fixed his shield on his

back. Bhabravya

saw Shiva across the caravan and drew his sword as well, giving

quick, silent signals to his men to do the same. The Arishtanemi were battle ready in a

matter of seconds. Sati and Nandi too pulled out their swords and got into traditional

fighter positions.

Sati whispered to Veerini without turning, 'Mother, please sit in the carriage and lock it.

Take the maids in too. But get them to disconnect the horses from the carriage first We

are not retreating and we don't want the enemy kidnapping you either.'

'Come with me Sati,' pleaded Veerini as her maids rushed to pull out the holds on the

carriage.

'No, I'm staying here. Please hurry. We may not have much time.'

Veerini rushed into the carriage followed by the maids who quickly locked it from the inside.

At a distance, Bhabravya whispered to his aide. 'I know their tactics. I have seen these

cowards on the southern border. They will send an advance suicide party, pretend to

retreat and draw us into a stronghold. I don't care about the losses. We will chase those bastards and destroy every single one of them. They have run into the Arishtanemi.

They will pay for this mistake.'

Shiva, meanwhile, turned to Sati and whispered carefully, 'I think they must be aiming

for a high profile target. Nothing would be more significant than the royal family. Do you think that you too should wait in the carriage?'

Sati's eyes darted up at Shiva in surprise. A pained look crossed her face before being

replaced by a defiant glare. 'I am going to fight...'

What's wrong with her?! What I said is completely logical. Make the main objective of

the enemy difficult to get at and they will lose the will to fight.

Shiva pushed these thoughts out of his mind to focus on the road. The rest of the

caravan strained every nerve to listen intently for any movement from the enemy. They

were prepared for the ambush. It was the enemy's turn to make a move. Just as they

thought that it may have been a false alarm, the sound of a conch shell reverberated

from down the road — from the direction of Mount Mandar. Shiva turned around but did

not move. Whatever was making the noise was moving rapidly towards them.

Shiva could not recognise the cacophonous sound. However, the Arishtanemi from the

southern border knew exactly what it was. That was the sound of a *Nagadhvani*

conch.

It was blown to announce the launch of a Naga attack!

Though impatient to fight, Bhabravya did not forget the standard operating procedures.

He ordered an aide, who rushed to the carriage and pulled out a red box fixed at the

bottom. Kicking it open, the aide pressed a button on the side. A tubular chimney-like

structure extended straight up from the box for nearly twenty-five feet. The chimney

ensured that the smoke signal was not lost in the dense forest and could be seen by the

scouts at both Devagiri and Mount Mandar. The soldier picked a branch from the fire

and pushed it into the last of the four slots on the right side of the box. Red smoke

fumed out of the chimney, signifying the presence of the highest level of danger. Help was six hours away. Four, if the back-up rode hard. Bhabravya did not intend the battle

to last that long. He intended to kill each of the Nagas and the Chandravanshis

long

before that.

Then the attack began, from the side of the road leading to Mount Mandar. A small

band of ten Chandravanshi

soldiers charged

at the Arishtanemi.

One soldier was

holding the Naga conch shell and blowing hard. Another amongst them had covered his

entire face and head with a cloth, except for small slits for his eyes. The Naga himself!

Shiva did not move. He could see the battle raging at the far end of the caravan. There

were only ten Chandravanshis.

The Arishtanemi did not need any support. He signalled

to

Sati and Nandi to stay where they were. Sati agreed for she too expected this attack to

be a ruse.

The battle was short and fierce. The Chandravanshi

soldiers fought viciously but were

outnumbered. As Bhabravya expected, they turned in no time and retreated fast.

‘After them,’ yelled Bhabravya. ‘Kill them all.’

The

Arishtanemi

dashed

behind

their

captain

in pursuit

of the

retreating

Chandravanshis.

Most of them did not hear Shiva cry out loud. ‘No! Stay here. Don’t



chase them.’

By the time some of the Arishtanemi heard Shiva’s order, a majority had already left,

chasing the Chandravanshis.

Shiva was left in the clearing with Sati, Nandi and just

twenty—five soldiers. Shiva turned back towards the side of the road leading to Devagiri

— the direction from which the crack of the twig had come.

He turned again to look at the remaining Arishtanemi. Pointing towards his back, he

spoke with a voice that was both steady and calm, ‘This is where the actual attack will

come from. Get into a tight formation in fours, facing that direction. Keep the princess in the middle. We will have to hold them back for about five or ten minutes. The other

Arishtanemi will return when they realise there are no Chandravanshis

to fight in that

direction.’

The Arishtanemi looked at Shiva and nodded. They were battle-hardened men. They

liked nothing more than a clearheaded

and calm leader who knew exactly what he was

doing. They quickly got into the formation ordered by Shiva and waited.

Then the real attack began. Forty Chandravanshi

soldiers led by a hooded figure

emerged

from the trees,

walking slowly towards

the Suryavanshi

caravan.

The

outnumbered

Arishtanemi remained stationary, waiting for their enemy to come to them.

‘Surrender the princess to us and we will leave,’ said the hooded figure. ‘We want no

unnecessary

bloodshed.’

The same joker from the Brahma temple? He ‘s got a strange costume, but he fights

well.

‘We don’t want any bloodshed either,’ said Shiva. ‘Leave quietly and we promise not to

kill you.’

‘*You*’ re the one who’s looking at death in the face, barbarian,’ said the hooded figure, conveying

anger through his posture rather than his voice, which remained

eerily

composed.

Shiva noticed the brown-turbaned

officer look impatiently at the hooded figure. He

clearly wanted to attack fast and get this over with.

Dissension in the ranks?

‘The only face I’m looking at is a stupid festival mask. And it’s soon going to be shoved down your pathetic little throat! Also tell that brainless

lieutenant of yours that he

shouldn’t give battle plans away.’

The hooded figure remained calm. Not turning to look at Vishwadyumna.

Damn! This man is good.

‘This is the last warning, barbarian,’ repeated the hooded figure. ‘Hand her over right

now’

Sati suddenly turned towards the carriage as she realised something, shouting, ‘Mother!

The new emergency conch shell close to the front grill. Blow it now!’

A loud plea for help emitted from the carriage.

Bhabravya

and his men had been

summoned. The hooded figure cursed as he realised his advantage

had been taken

away. He had very little time to complete his operation. The other  
Suryavanshis

would

be back soon. 'Charge!'

The Arishtanemi stayed in position.

'Steady,' said Shiva. 'Wait for them. All you have to do is buy time. Keep  
the princess

safe. Our friends will be back soon.'

As the Chandravanshis

came closer, Sati suddenly

broke through the cordon and

attacked

the hooded

figure.

Sati's

surprise

attack

slowed

the charge

of the

Chandravanshis.

The Arishtanemi had no choice. They charged at the Chandravanshis like vicious tigers.

Shiva moved quickly to protect the right flank of Sati as an advancing Vishwadyumna

got dangerously

close to her. Vishwadyumna

swung his sword to force Shiva out of his

way. However, the speed of Shiva's advance

left Vishwadyumna

unbalanced.

Shiva

easily

parried the blow and pushed

Vishwadyumna

back with his shield. Nandi

meanwhile moved rapidly to the left of Sati to block the Chandravanshis trying to charge down that side.

In the meantime, Sati was attacking the hooded figure with fierce blows. The hooded

figure, however, seemed intent to defend himself and was not striking back. He wanted

her alive and unharmed.

Shiva cut Vishwadyumna savagely across the shoulder that had been exposed when he

was pushed back. Grimacing, Vishwadyumna

brought his shield up to fend off another

attack from Shiva. With the same movement, Vishwadyumna

brought his sword arm up

to thrust at Shiva's torso. Shiva quickly pulled his shield in to protect himself. But not quickly enough. Vishwadyumna

was able to slash Shiva's chest. Stepping back and

jumping to his right, Shiva brought his sword swiftly down in a brutal jab. While

Vishwadyumna

promptly brought his shield up to block the attack, Shiva's unorthodox

move unsettled

him. He staggered  
back realising  
that Shiva  
was an excellent  
swordsman. It was going to be a hard and long duel.  
Nandi had already brought down one Chandravanshi  
soldier who had broken a law of  
combat of never attacking below the waist and cut Nandi's thigh. Bleeding  
profusely,  
Nandi was ferociously battling another soldier who had attacked him from  
the left. The  
Chandravanshi  
brought his shield down hard on Nandi's injured leg, making him stagger  
and fall. The Chandravanshi  
thought he had his man. Raising his sword high with both  
his hands, he was about to bring it down to finish the job but he suddenly  
arched  
forward, as if a brutal force had pounded him from the back. As he fell,  
Nandi saw a  
knife buried deep in the Chandravanshi's  
back. Looking up, he saw Shiva's left arm

continue down in a smooth arc from the release  
of the dagger. With his right hand,  
Shiva brought his sword up to block a vicious cut from Vishwadyumna.

As Nandi

stumbled back to his feet, Shiva reached behind to pull his shield in front  
again.

The hooded figure knew they were taking too long. The other Arishtanemi  
would be

back soon. He tried to go behind Sati, to club her on the back of the head  
and knock her

unconscious

but she was too quick. She moved swifdy to the left to face her enemy

again. Taking a knife out of her angvastram

folds with her left hand, she slashed

outwards to cut deep across the hooded figure's immense stomach. The  
knife sliced

through the robe but its effect was broken by the armour.

And then with a resounding roar, Bhabravya and the other Arishtanemi  
rushed back to





fight alongside their mates.

Seeing themselves

vastly outnumbered, the hooded figure had no choice. He ordered

his soldiers to retreat. Shiva stopped Bhabravya from chasing the Chandravanshis

once

again.

‘Let them go, brave Bhabravya,’

said Shiva. ‘We will have other chances to get them.

Right now the primary objective is to protect the royal family’

Bhabravya looked at Shiva with admiration for the way this foreigner fought, not the blue throat of which he was unaware. He nodded politely. ‘It makes sense, foreigner.’

Bhabravya quickly formed the Arishtanemi soldiers into a tight perimeter and pulled the

wounded within. Dead bodies were not touched. At least three Arishtanemi lost their

lives while nine Chandravanshi

bodies lay in the clearing. The last one had taken his

own life since he was too wounded to escape. Better to meet one’s maker rather than

fall alive in enemy hands and reveal secrets. Bhabravya ordered his soldiers to stay low

and keep their shields in front for protection against any arrows. And they waited so till the rescue party arrived.

‘My God,’ cried an anxious Daksha as he hugged Sati tight.

The rescue party of five hundred soldiers had reached by the fourth hour of the second

prahar. Daksha, Brahaspati

and Kanakhala

had accompanied

the caravan

despite

Parvateshwar’s

warnings of the risks. Releasing

Sati from his grip, Daksha whispered

as a small tear escaped his eyes, ‘You are not injured, are you?’

‘I am alright father,’ said Sati self-consciously.

‘Just a few cuts. Nothing serious.’

‘She fought very bravely,’ said Veerini, as she beamed with pride.

‘I think that is a mother’s bias,’ said Sati, as her serious expression

was restored.

Turning towards Shiva, she continued, ‘It was Shiva who saved the day, father. He

figured out the real plan of the Chandravanshis

and rallied everyone

at the crucial

moment. It was because of him that we beat them back.'

'Oh, I think she's too generous,' said Shiva.

She's impressed. Finally!!

'She isn't being generous

at all, my Lord,' said a visibly grateful Daksha. 'You have

started your magic already. We have actually beaten back a terrorist attack. You don't

know how significant this is for us!'

'But it wasn't a terrorist attack, your Highness' said Shiva. 'It was an attempt to kidnap the princess.'

'Kidnap?' asked Daksha.

'That hooded man certainly wanted her alive and unharmed.'

'What hooded man?!' cried Daksha, alarmed.

'That was the Naga, your Highness,'

said Shiva, surprised

at Daksha's

hysterical

response.

‘I have seen that man fight. He is an excellent warrior. A little slow in his movements, but excellent all the same. But while fighting Sati he was trying his best not to hurt her.’

The colour drained completely from Daksha’s face. Veerini glared at her husband with a

strange mixture of fear and anger. The expressions

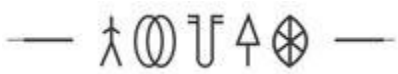
on their faces made Shiva feel

uncomfortable, as if he was intruding on a private family moment.

‘Father?’ asked a worried Sati. ‘Are you alright?’

Hearing no response from Daksha, Shiva turned to Sati and said, ‘Perhaps it’s best if

you speak to your family alone. If you don’t mind, I will go check if Nandi and the other soldiers are alright.’



Parvateshwar

was walking around his men, checking on the injured and ensuring that

they received medical help, with Bhabravya

two steps behind. He came up to the

Chandravanshi

who had been killed by Shiva while protecting Nandi. He roared in

horror, ‘This man has been stabbed in the back!’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Bhabravya with his head bowed.

‘Who did this? Who broke the sacred rules of combat?’

‘I think it was the foreigner, my Lord. But I heard that he was trying to protect Captain Nandi who had been attacked by this Chandravanshi.

And the Chandravanshi

himself

was not following the combat rules having attacked Nandi below the waist.’

Parvateshwar

turned with a withering look at Bhabravya,

causing him to cower in fear.

‘Rules are rules,’ he growled. ‘They are meant to be followed even if your enemy

ignores them.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Go make sure that the dead get proper cremations. Including the Chandravanshis.’

‘My Lord?’ asked a surprised Bhabravya. ‘But they are terrorists.’

‘*They*

may be terrorists,’ snarled Parvateshwar.

‘But we are Suryavanshis.

We are the

followers of Lord Ram. There are norms that we follow even towards our enemies. The

Chandravanshis

will get proper cremations. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Why do you call the foreigner “Your Lord”?’ asked an injured Arishtanemi lying next to

Nandi.

Shiva had just departed after spending half an hour with Nandi and the other injured

soldiers. If one saw the injured at this point, it would be impossible to believe that they had fought a battle just a few hours ago. They were talking jovially with each other.

Some were ribbing their mates about how they had fallen for the red-herring at the

beginning of the battle. In the Kshatriya way, to laugh in the face of death was the

ultimate mark of a man.

‘Because he *is* my Lord,’ answered Nandi simply.

‘But he is a foreigner. A caste unmarked foreigner,’ said the Arishtanemi.

‘He is a brave warrior, no doubt. But there are so many brave warriors in Meluha. What makes him so

special? And why does he spend so much time with the royal family?’

‘I can’t answer that, my friend. You will get to find out when the time is right.’

The Arishtanemi looked at Nandi quizzically. Then shook his head and smiled. He was

a soldier. He bothered himself only with the here and now. Bigger questions did not

dwell too long in his mind. ‘In any case, I think the time is right to tell you that you are a brave man, my friend. I saw you fight despite your injury. You don’t know the meaning of

the word surrender. I would be proud to have you as my *bhraata!* ’

That was a big statement from the Arishtanemi. The *bhraata* system that was followed

in the Meluhan army meant that each soldier up to the rank of a captain was assigned a

mate of equal rank. The two *bhraatas* would be like brothers who would always fight

together and look out for each other. They would willingly fight the world for each other, would never love the same woman and would always tell each other the truth, no matter

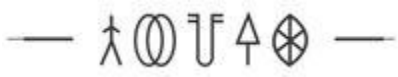
how bitter.

The Arishtanemi were elite soldiers of the empire. An Arishtanemi offered to be a

*bhraata* only to his own kind. Nandi knew that he could never really be the Arishtanemi’s

*bhraata*. He had to stay with the Lord. But the honour of being offered the brotherhood

of an Arishtanemi was enough to bring tears to Nandi's eyes.



‘Don’t get teary on me now,’ chorted the Arishtanemi, wrinkling his nose in amusement.

Nandi burst out in laughter as he slapped the Arishtanemi on his arm.

‘What is your name, my friend?’ asked Nandi.

‘Kaustav,’ replied the Arishtanemi. ‘Someday

we shall batde the main Chandravanshi

army together, my friend. And by the grace of Lord Ram, we will kill all those bastards!’

‘By Lord Agni, we will!’

‘It was interesting how you got into the Naga’s mind,’ said Brahaspati as he watched

Shiva getting the gash on his torso cleaned and dressed.

Shiva had insisted that his injuries receive medical attention only after every other

soldier’s wounds had been tended.

‘Well, I can’t really explain it,’ said Shiva. ‘How the Naga would think just seemed so

obvious to me.’

‘Well, I can explain it!’

‘Really? What?’



‘The explanation is that you are the omnipotent “N”, whose name cannot be spoken!’

said Brahaspati,

opening his eyes wide and conjuring his hands up like an ancient magician.

They burst out laughing, causing Shiva to rock back slightly. The military doctor gave

Shiva a stern look, at which he immediately quietened down and let him finish tending to

the wound. Having applied the Ayurvedic paste and covering it with the medicinal neem

leaf, the doctor bandaged the wound with a cotton cloth.

‘You will need to change that every second day, foreigner,’ said the doctor pointing at

the bandage. ‘The royal doctor in Devagiri will be able to do it for you. And don’t let this area get wet for a week. Also, avoid the Somras for this period since you will not be able to take a complete bath.’

‘Oh he doesn’t need the Somras,’ joked Brahaspati. ‘It’s already done all the damage it

can on him.’

Shiva and Brahaspati collapsed into helpless laughter again as the doctor walked away,

shaking his head in exasperation.

‘But seriously,’ said Brahaspati calming down. ‘Why would they attack you? You have

not harmed anybody’

‘I don’t think the attack was on me. I think it was for Sati.’

‘Sati! Why Sati? That’s even more bizarre.’

‘It probably wasn’t specifically

for Sati,’ said Shiva. ‘I think the target was the royal

family. The primary target was probably the Emperor. Since he wasn’t there, they went

for the secondary target, Sati. I think the aim was to kidnap a royal and use that person as leverage.’

Brahaspati

did not respond. He seemed

worried. Clasping his hands together and

bringing them close to his face, he looked into the distance, deep in thought. Shiva

reached into his pouch and pulled out his chillum, before carefully filling it with some

dried marijuana. Brahaspati turned to look at his friend, unhappy at what he was doing.

‘I’ve never told you this before Shiva and I probably shouldn’t as, well... since you are a free man,’ said Brahaspati. ‘But I consider you my friend. And it is my duty to tell you the truth. I have seen some Egyptian merchants in Karachapa with this marijuana habit. It’s

not good for you.'

'You're wrong, my friend,' said Shiva, grinning broadly. 'This is actually the best habit in the world.'

'You probably don't know, Shiva. This has many harmful side effects. And worst of all, it even harms your memory, causing

untold damage

to your ability to draw on past

knowledge.'

Shiva's

face

suddenly

became

uncharacteristically

serious.

He gazed

back

at

Brahaspati with a melancholic smile. 'That is exactly why it is good, my friend. No idiot who smokes this is scared of forgetting'

Shiva lit up his chillum, took a deep drag and continued, 'They are scared of *not*

forgetting.'

Brahaspati stared sharply at Shiva, wondering what terrible past could have prompted

his friend to get addicted to the weed.



# CHAPTER 11

## Neelkanth Unveiled

The next morning the royal caravan resumed its journey to Devagiri after spending the

night at a temporary camp in the clearing. It wasn't safe to travel at night considering the circumstances.

The wounded, including Nandi, were lying in the first three carriages and the fifth one. The royal family and Shiva travelled in the fourth. All the soldiers who had fought in the previous day's battle were given the privilege of riding on horses in relative comfort. Brahaspati

and Kanakhala

walked along with the rest of the troops, in

mourning for the three slain Arishtanemi.

Parvateshwar,

Bhabravya

and two other

soldiers bore a make-shift wooden palanquin that carried three urns containing the

ashes

of the martyrs. The urns would be given to their families for a ceremonial submersion in the Saraswati.

Shiva, Sati and Nandi too wanted to walk but the doctor insisted they were in no condition to do so.

Parvateshwar

walked with pride at the bravery of his soldiers. His *boys* , as he called them, had shown they were made of a metal forged in Lord Indra's own furnace. He

cursed himself for not being there to fight with them. He castigated himself for not being there to protect his goddaughter,

his Sati, when she was in danger. He prayed for the

day when he would finally get a chance to destroy the cowardly Chandravanshis.

He

also silently pledged that he would anonymously

donate his salary for the next six

months to the families of the slain soldiers.

'Even I didn't think he would fall to these levels!' exclaimed Daksha in disgust.

Shiva and Sati, comfortably asleep

in the carriage,

were woken up by Daksha's

outburst. Veerini looked up from the book that she was reading, narrowing her eyes to

concentrate on her husband.

‘Who, your Highness?’ asked Shiva groggily.

‘Dilipa! That blight on humanity!’ said Daksha, barely concealing his loathing.

Veerini continued to stare hard at her husband. She slowly reached out, pulled Sati’s

hand in hers, brought it close to her lips and kissed it gently. Then she put her other

hand protectively on top of Sati’s hand. Sati looked at her mother warmly with a hint of a smile and rested her tired head on Veerini’s shoulders.

‘Who is Dilipa, your Highness?’ asked Shiva.

‘He is the Emperor of Swadweep,’

answered Daksha. ‘Everyone knows Sati is the apple

of my eye. And they were possibly trying to kidnap her to force my hand!’

Shiva gazed at Daksha with sympathy. He could understand the outrage of the Emperor

at the latest Chandravanshi

treachery.

‘And to be reduced to the level of even using a Naga for this nefarious plan,’ said a

furious Daksha. ‘This just shows what the Chandravanshis

are capable of!’

‘I don’t know if the Naga was being used, your Highness,’ said Shiva softly.  
‘It appeared as though he was the leader.’

Daksha however was too lost in his righteous anger to even explore Shiva’s insinuation.

‘The Naga may have been the leader of this particular platoon, my Lord, but he would

almost certainly be under the overall command of the Chandravanshis.

No Naga can be

a leader. They are cursed people born with horrific deformities and diseases in this birth

as a punishment for terrible crimes that they have committed in their previous birth. The Nagas are embarrassed

to even show their face to anyone. But they have tremendous

power and skills. Their presence

strikes terror in the heart of all Meluhans, and most



Swadweepans

as well. The Chandravanshis

have sunk low enough to even consort

with those deformed demons. They hate us so much that they don’t even realise the

sins they are bringing on their own souls by interacting with the Nagas.’



Shiva, Sati and Veerini continued to hear Daksha's ranting in silence.

Turning towards Shiva, Daksha continued, 'Do you see the kind of vermin we are up

against, my Lord? They have no code, no honour. And they outnumber us ten to one.

We need your help my Lord. It's not just my people, but my family as well. We are in

danger.'

'Your Highness, I will do all that I can to help you,' said Shiva. 'But I am not a general. I cannot lead an army against the Chandravanshis.

I am just a simple tribal leader. What

difference can one man make?'

'At least let me announce your presence to the court and the people, my Lord,' urged

Daksha. 'Just spend a few weeks travelling through the empire. Your presence will raise

the morale of the people. Look at the difference you made yesterday.

We actually foiled

a terrorist attack because

of you, because

of your presence

of mind. Please,

let me

announce your arrival. That is all I ask.'

Shiva looked at Daksha's

earnest

face with trepidation. He could feel Sati's and

Veerini's eyes on him. Especially Sati's.

What am I getting myself into?

'All right,' said Shiva in resignation.

Daksha got up and hugged Shiva in an unyielding grip.

'Thank you, my Lord!' exclaimed Daksha, as Shiva withdrew from his embrace to come

up for air. 'I will announce your presence

at the court tomorrow itself. Then you can

leave for a tour of the empire in another three weeks. I will personally make all the

arrangements.

You will have a full brigade travelling with you for security. Parvateshwar

and Sati will accompany you as well.'

'No!' protested Veerini in a harsh tone that Sati had never heard her mother use. 'Sati is not going anywhere. I am not going to allow you to put our daughter's life in danger. She is staying with me in Devagiri.'

‘Veerini, don’t be silly,’ said Daksha calmly. ‘You really think that anything would happen to Sati if the Lord Neelkanth was around. She is at the safest when she is with the Lord.’

‘She is not going. And that is final!’ glared Veerini in a firm voice, clutching Sati’s hand tightly.

Daksha turned towards Shiva, ignoring Veerini. ‘Don’t worry, my Lord. I will have all the arrangements

made. Parvateshwar

and Sati will also travel with you. You will just have

to restrain Sati sometimes.’

Shiva frowned. So did Sati.

Daksha smiled genially. ‘My darling daughter has the tendency to be a little too brave at

times. like this one time, when she was just a child, she had jumped in all by herself,

with nothing but her short sword, to save an old woman being attacked by a pack of wild

dogs. She nearly got herself killed for her pains. It was one of the worst days of my life. I think it is the same impulsiveness

which worries Veerini as well.’

Shiva looked at Sati. There was no expression on her face.

‘That’s why,’ continued Daksha, ‘I am suggesting

that you keep her restrained.

Then

there should be no problem.'

Shiva glanced again at Sati. He felt a surge of admiration coupled with the boundless

love he felt for her.

She did what I couldn't do.

The next morning, Shiva found himself seated next to Daksha in the Meluhan royal



court. The magnificence

of the court left him wonderstruck.

Since this was a public

building, the usual Meluhan reticence and understated

designs had been bypassed.

It

was built next to the Great Public Bath. While the platform had been constructed of the

standard kiln-bricks, the structure itself, including the floor, was made of teak wood —

easily carved and shaped, yet strong. Brawny wooden pillars had been laid into set

grooves on the platform. The pillars had been extravagantly

sculpted with celestial

figures like *apsaras*,

*devas*

and *rishis*

— *celestial*

*nymphs*,

*gods*

and *sages*

—

amongst others. An ornately carved wooden roof that had been inlaid with gold and

silver designs crowned the top of the pillars. Pennants of the holy blue colour and royal red colour hung from the ceiling. Each niche on the walls had paintings depicting the life of Lord Ram. But Shiva had little time to admire the glorious architecture of the court.

Daksha's

expectations

would be apparent

in his speech

and were causing

him

considerable discomfort.

‘As many of you may have heard,’ announced

Daksha, ‘there was another terrorist

attack yesterday.

The Chandravanshis

tried to harm the royal family on the road from

Mount Mandar to Devagiri.’

Murmurs of dismay filled the court. The question troubling everyone

was how the

Chandravanshis

had discovered

the route to Mount Mandar. Shiva meanwhile

kept

reminding himself that this wasn’t a terrorist attack. It was just a kidnap attempt.

‘The Chandravanshis

had planned their attack with great deception,’

said Daksha,

drowning out the murmurs with his booming voice.

The talented architects of the court had designed the structure in a manner that any

voice spoken from the royal platform resonated across the entire hall. ‘But we beat them

back. For the first time in decades, we beat back a cowardly terrorist attack.’

An exultant roar went up in the court at this announcement.

They had beaten back open

military assaults from the Chandravanshis

before. But until this day, the Meluhans had

found no answer to the dreaded terrorist strikes. For the terrorists usually launched

surprise attacks on non-military locations and fled before the Suryavanshi soldiers could

arrive.

Raising his hand to quieten the crowd, Daksha continued, ‘We beat them back because

the time for truth to triumph has finally arrived! We beat them back because we were led

by Father Manu’s messenger!

We beat them back because

our time for justice has

come!’

The murmurs grew louder. Had the Neelkanth finally arrived? Everyone had heard the

rumours. But nobody believed them. There had been too many false declarations in the

past.

Daksha raised his hand. He waited for just enough time for the anticipation to build up.

And then jubilantly bellowed, 'Yes! The rumours are true. Our saviour has come! The

Neelkanth has come!'

Shiva winced at being put on display on the royal platform with his cravat removed. The

Meluhan elite thronged around him, their varying statements buzzing in Shiva's ears.

'We had heard the rumours, my Lord. But we never believed them to be true.'

'We have nothing to fear anymore, my Lord. The days of evil are numbered!'

'Where are you from, my Lord?'

'Mount Kailash? Where is that, my Lord? I would like to take a pilgrimage there.'

Answering these repeated questions and being confronted by the blind faith of these

people disturbed Shiva. The moment he had a chance,

he requested

Daksha for



permission to leave the court.

A few hours later, Shiva sat in the quiet comfort of his chamber, considering what had



happened at the court. The cravat was back around his neck.

‘By the Holy Lake, can I really deliver these people from their troubles?’

‘What did you say, my Lord?’ asked Nandi, who was sitting patiently at a distance.

‘The faith of your people makes me anxious,’ said Shiva, loud enough for Nandi to hear.

‘If there was a one-on-one battie, I could take on any enemy to protect your people. But

I am no leader. And I am certainly not a “destroyer of evil”.’

‘I am sure that you can lead us to victory against anyone, my Lord. You beat them back

on the road to Devagiri.’

‘That wasn’t a genuine victory,’ said Shiva dismissively.

‘They were a small platoon,

aiming to kidnap and not to kill. If we face a well organised and large army, whose aim

is to kill, the situation may be very different. If you ask me, it appears that Meluha is against some formidable and ruthless enemies. Your country doesn’t need faith in just

one man. That is not the answer. Your people need to adapt to the changing times.

Maybe you are too innocent in your way of life to actually take on such a cold-blooded

enemy. A new system is needed. I am not some god who will magically solve your

problems.'

'You are right, my Lord,' said Nandi, with all the conviction of a simple, lucky man not

troubled by too many thoughts. 'A new system is required, and I obviously don't know

what this new system should be. But I do understand one thing. More than a thousand

years back, we faced a similar situation and Lord Ram came and taught us a better

way. I am sure that, similarly, you will lead us to a superior path.'

'I am no Lord Ram, Nandi!'

How can this fool even compare me to Lord Ram, the Maryada Purushottam, the Ideal

Man?

'You are better than Lord Ram, my Lord,' said Nandi.

'Stop this nonsense, Nandi! What have I done to even be compared with Lord Ram? Let

alone be considered better?'

‘But you *will* do deeds that will place you above him, my Lord.’ ‘Just shut up!’

The preparations for Shiva’s tour of the empire were in full swing. Shiva, however, still found time for Sati’s dance lessons

every afternoon. They were developing a quiet

friendship. But Shiva agonised over the fact that while she showed respect, there was

no softening of emotions in her or expression of feelings.

In the meantime, Shiva’s tribe had been summoned to Devagiri, where they were given

comfortable accommodation

and jobs. Bhadra, however, was not to stay with the

Gunas. He had instead been assigned to accompany the Neelkanth on his voyage.

‘*Veer* bhadra! When the hell did you get this name?’ Shiva asked Bhadra, meeting him for the first time since his departure from Kashmir.

‘Stupid

reason

actually,’

smiled

Bhadra,

whose

slight hump had disappeared

completely, thanks to the magical Somras. ‘On the journey here, I saved the caravan

leader from a tiger attack. He gave me the tide *for a brave man* before my name.’

‘You fought a tiger single-handed?’

asked Shiva, clearly impressed.

Bhadra nodded feeling awkward.

‘Well, then you really deserve to be called Veerbhadra!’

‘Yeah right!’ smiled Bhadra, suddenly turning serious. ‘The crazy label of “destroyer of

evil”... Are you okay with this? You are not giving in to these pleas just because of your past, are you?’

‘I am going with the flow right now, my friend. Something tells me that despite all my

misgivings, I can actually help these people. These Meluhans are completely mad, no

doubt. And I certainly can’t do ALL that they expect of me. But I do feel that if I can

make a difference, however small, I can reconcile with my past.’

‘If you are sure, then so am I. I will follow you anywhere.’

‘Don’t follow. Walk beside me!’

Veerbhadra laughed and embraced his friend. ‘I missed you Shiva.’

‘I missed you too.’

‘Let’s meet in the garden in the afternoon. I’ve got a great batch of marijuana.’

‘It’s a deal!’

Brahaspati

too had sought permission

to travel with Shiva. He explained

that a

Mesopotamian

ship carrying some rare chemicals,

essential

for a critical experiment,

was to dock at the port city of Karachapa soon. His team had to check and obtain those

materials anyway. It would be a good idea to do this while travelling with Shiva. Daksha

said that he had no problems with Brahaspati joining the tour if the Lord was okay with

it. Shiva agreed enthusiastically

to the suggestion.

Three weeks after the court announcement

about the Neelkanth, the day finally dawned

for Shiva's tour of the empire. On the morning of the day itself, Daksha walked into

Shiva's chambers.

'You could have summoned me, your Highness,' said Shiva with a namaste.

'You did

not need to come here.'

'It is my pleasure to come to your chambers, my Lord,' smiled Daksha, returning Shiva's

greeting with a low bow. 'I thought I would introduce the physician who would be

travelling with your entourage. She arrived from Kashmir last night.'

Daksha moved aside to let his escort show the doctor into the room.

'Ayurvati!' exclaimed Shiva, his face lit up in a brilliant smile. 'It's so good to see you again!'

'The pleasure is all mine, my Lord,' beamed Ayurvati, as she bent down to touch Shiva's

feet.

Shiva immediately

moved back to neatly side-step Ayurvati. 'I have told you before,

Ayurvati,' said Shiva. 'You are a giver of life. Please don't embarrass me by touching my feet.'

‘And you are the Neelkanth, my Lord. The destroyer of evil,’ said Ayurvati with devotion.

‘How can you deny me the privilege of being blessed by you?’

Shiva shook his head in despair and let Ayurvati touch his feet. He gently touched her

head and blessed her.

A few hours later, Shiva, Sati, Parvateshwar,

Brahaspati,

Ayurvati, Krittika, Nandi and

Veerbhadra

set off. Accompanying

them was a brigade of fifteen hundred soldiers,

twenty-five handmaidens

and fifty support staff for their security and comfort. They

planned to travel by road till the city of Kotdwaar on the Beas river. From there, they

would use boats to travel to the port city of Karachapa. Then they would move due east

to the city of Lothal. Finally, they would move north by road to the inland delta of the

Saraswati and then by boats back to Devagiri.





## CHAPTER 12

### Journey through Meluha

‘Who was Manu?’ asked Shiva. ‘I have heard of him often, referred to as “the Father”.’

The caravan had been travelling for a few days on the broad road from Devagiri to

Kotdwaar. The central part consisted of a row of seven carriages

identical to the ones

used during the trip to Mandar. Five of them were empty. Shiva, Sati, Brahaspati and

Krittika travelled in the second carriage.

Parvateshwar

was in the fifth, along with

Ayurvati and his key brigadiers.

The general’s

presence

meant every rule had to be

adhered to strictly. Hence Nandi, whose rank did not allow him to travel in the carriage, was riding a horse with the rest of the cavalry. Veerbhadra

had been inducted as a

soldier in Nandi’s platoon. Led by their respective

captains,

the brigade were in

standard forward, rear and side defence formations around the caravan.

Both Brahaspati and Sati started answering Shiva simultaneously.

‘Lord Manu was the...’

They both stopped talking.

‘After you please, Brahaspatiji,’ said Sati.

‘No, no,’ said Brahaspati with a warm smile. ‘Why don’t you tell him the story?’

He knew whose voice the Neelkanth would prefer.

‘Of course not, Brahaspatiji.

How can I supersede

you? It would be completely

improper.’

‘Will somebody answer me or are you two going to keep up this elaborate protocol

forever?’ asked Shiva.

‘Alright, alright,’ laughed Brahaspati. ‘Don’t turn blue all over now.’

‘That is hilarious Brahaspati,’

smiled Shiva. ‘Keep this up and you might actually get

someone to laugh in a hundred years.’

As Brahaspati and Shiva chortled, Sati was astounded at the inappropriate manner in

which the conversation

was going on. But if the revered

chief scientist

seemed

comfortable, she would not say anything. And in any case, how could she reprimand

Shiva? Her code of honour forbade it. He had saved her life. Twice.

‘Well, you are right about Lord Manu being the Father,’ said Brahaspati.

‘He is

considered the progenitor of our civilisation by all the people of India.’

‘Including Swadweepans?’

asked Shiva incredulously.

‘Yes, we believe so. In any case, Lord Manu lived more than eight and a half thousand

years before the present day. He was apparently a prince from south India. A land way

beyond the Narmada river, where the earth ends and the great ocean begins. That land

is the Sangamtamil.’

‘Sangamtamil?’

‘Yes. Sangamtamil

was then the richest and most powerful country in the world. Lord

Manu’s family, the Pandyas,

had ruled that land for many generations.

However, from

the records left by Lord Manu, we know that by his time the kings had lost their old code of honour. Having fallen on corrupt ways, they spent their days in the pleasures

of their

fabulous wealth rather than being focused on their duties and their spiritual life. Then a terrible calamity occurred. The seas rose and destroyed their entire civilisation.’

‘My God!’ exclaimed Shiva.

‘Lord Manu knew that this day would come and had in fact prepared for it. He believed it

was the decadence

his old country had fallen into that had incurred the wrath of the



gods. Wanting to escape the calamity, he led a band of his followers to the northern,

higher lands in a fleet of ships. He established

his first camp at a place called

Mehragarh deep in the western mountains of present day Meluha. Wanting to establish

a moral and just society, he gave up his princely robes and became a priest. In fact the

term for priests in India, pandit, is a derivation of Lord Manu's family name — Pandya.'

'Interesting. So how did Lord Manu's little band grow into the formidable India we see today?'

'The years immediately following their arrival at Mehragarh were harsh on them. With

each year's monsoon, the flooding and sea tides would become stronger. But after

many years and with the force of Lord Manu's prayers, the anger of the gods abated

and the waters stopped advancing.

The sea, however, never receded to its original levels.'

'This means

that somewhere

in the deep south, the sea still covers the ancient

Sangamtamil

cities?'

‘We believe so,’ answered

Brahaspati.

‘Once the sea stopped advancing,

Lord Manu

and his men came down the mountains. They were shocked to see that the minor

stream of Indus had become a massive river. Many other rivulets across northern India

too had swollen and six great rivers had emerged — Indus, Saraswati,

Yamuna, Ganga,

Sarayu

and Brahmaputra.

Lord Manu said the rivers started flowing because

the

temperatures

of our land rose with the wrath of the gods. With the rise in temperatures,

huge channels

of ice or glaciers frozen high in the Himalayas

had started melting,

creating the rivers.’

‘Hmm...’

‘Villages, and later cities, grew on the banks of these rivers. Thus our land of the seven rivers, Sapt-Sindhu,

was born out of the destruction of the Sangamtamil.’

‘Seven? But you mentioned the creation of six rivers in North India.’

‘Yes, that’s true. The seventh river already existed. It is the Narmada and it became our southern border. Lord Manu strictly forbade his descendants

to go south of the

Narmada. And if they did so, they could never return. This is a law that we believe even

the Chandravanshis

adhere to.’

‘So what are Lord Manu’s other laws?’

‘There are numerous laws actually. They are all listed in an extensive treatise called the Manusmriti. Would you be interested in listening to the entire text?’

‘Tempting,’ smiled Shiva. ‘But I think I’ll pass.’

‘With your permission, my Lords, perhaps we can further discuss Lord Manu’s guidance

of our society over lunch,’ suggested

Krittika.

At a short distance from the road on which the Neelkanth’s caravan travelled, a small

band of about forty men trudged silently along the Beas. One in two men of the platoon

carried a small coracle on his head. It was typical of this region. The locals made small and light boats made of bamboo, cane and rope, portable enough to be carried by a

single man on his head. Each boat could ferry two people with relative safety and

speed. At the head of the platoon was a young man with a proud battle scar adorning

his face, his head crowned with a brown turban. A little ahead of him walked a hooded

figure. With his head bowed, his eyes scrunched,

he took slow methodical steps, his

mind lost in unfathomable thoughts. His breathing was hard. He brought his hand up

languidly to rub his masked forehead. There was a leather bracelet on his right wrist

with the serpent Aum symbol embroidered on it.

‘Vishwadyumna,’

said the hooded figure. ‘We will enter the river from here. Whenever

we come close to populated areas, we will move away from the river to avoid detection.

We have to reach Karachapa within two months.’

‘Karachapa,



my Lord?’ asked Vishwadyumna  
surprised. ‘I was under the impression  
that we were to have a secret audience with the Queen outside Lothal.’  
‘No,’ answered the hooded figure. We will meet her outside Karachapa.’  
‘Yes, my Lord,’ answered Vishwadyumna,  
as he looked back in the direction of the road  
to Kotdwaar. He knew that his Lord would have dearly liked to make one  
more attempt  
to kidnap the princess.  
He also knew that it was foolhardy to endeavour  
to do so  
considering the strength of the force accompanying  
the caravan. In any case, they were  
behind schedule for their main mission. They had to meet the Queen  
urgently.  
Turning towards one of his soldiers,  
Vishwadyumna  
ordered, ‘Sriktaa,  
place your  
coracle in the river and give me your oar. I will row the Lord through this  
part of the

journey’

Sriktaa immediately did as instructed. Vishwadyumna

and the hooded figure were the

first of the platoon to enter the river. Vishwadyumna

had already started rowing as his

men started placing their boats into the waters. At a distance further down the river, the hooded figure saw two women lounging carelessly

on a boat. One of the women was

sloppily splashing water from the side of the boat on to her friend who was making a

hopeless attempt to avoid getting wet. Their childish game caused their boat to sway

dangerously

from side to side. The hooded figure saw that the women had not detected

a crocodile that had entered the river from the opposite bank. Having spied what must

have looked like an appetising meal, the crocodile was swimming swiftly towards the

women’s boat.

‘Look behind you!’ shouted the hooded figure to the women, as he motioned to

Vishwadyumna to row rapidly in their direction.

The women could not hear him from the distance. What they did see, however, was two

men were rowing towards them. They could see one of them was almost a giant

covered from head to toe in a strange robe, his face covered with a mask. This man

was making frantic gestures.

Behind the duo were a large number of soldiers swiftly

pushing their boats on to the river. That was all the warning the women needed.

Thinking that the men were coming towards them with evil intent, the women put all

their effort behind the oar and started hastily rowing away from the hooded figure's boat.

Into the path of the crocodile.

'No!' shouted the hooded figure.

He grabbed the oar from Vishwadyumna,

using his powerful arms to row rapidly. He

was shortening the distance between them and the women. But not fast enough. The

crocodile closed in on the women's boat and diving underwater charged at the craft,

rocking it with its massive

body. The tiny vessel tilted and capsized,  
throwing the  
women into the Beas.

Screams

of terror rent the air as the women fought to stay afloat. The crocodile had  
moved too far ahead in its dash. Turning around, it swam towards the  
struggling

women. The delay of those crucial seconds proved fateful for the women.  
The rescue

boat arrived between the crocodile and them. Turning towards  
Vishwadyumna,

the

hooded figure ordered, 'Save the women.'

Before Vishwadyumna

could react, he had flung his robe aside and dived into the river.

With his knife held tight between his teeth, he swam towards the advancing  
crocodile.

Vishwadyumna

pulled one of the women into the boat. She had already

lost

consciousness.

Turning to the other woman, he reassured,

‘I am coming back soon.’

Vishwadyumna

turned and paddled vigorously towards the bank. On the way he passed some of his other soldiers. ‘Row quickly. The Lord’s life is in danger.’

The other soldiers paddled towards the area where the hooded figure had dived into the

river. The water had turned red with blood from the battle raging under water. The

soldiers said a silent prayer to Lord *Varun*, the *god of the water and the seas*, hoping



that the blood did not belong to their Lord.

One of the soldiers was about to jump into the water with his sword when the hooded

figure emerged onto the surface, soaked in blood. It was that of the crocodile. He swam

forcefully towards the other woman who was on the verge of losing consciousness.

Reaching her in the nick of time, he pulled her head out of the water. Meanwhile, two of

the Chandravanshi

soldiers dived off their coracle.

‘My Lord, please get into the boat,’ said one of them. ‘We will swim ashore.’

‘Help the woman first,’ replied the hooded figure.

The soldiers pulled the unconscious woman on to the coracle. The hooded figure then

carefully climbed aboard and rowed towards the shore. By the time the hooded figure

reached the river bank, the other woman had been revived by Vishwadyumna.

She sat

disoriented at the rapid chain of events.

‘Are you alright?’ Vishwadyumna asked the woman.

In answer, the woman looked beyond Vishwadyumna and screamed.

Vishwadyumna

turned around. On the river bank, the hooded figure was coming ashore carrying the

other woman’s

limp body. His clothes were glued to his massive

body. To the

disoriented woman, the crocodile's blood all over his clothes, seemed like that of her

friend.

‘What have you done, you beast?’ shrieked the woman.

The Naga looked up abruptly. His eyes showed mild surprise. He, however, refrained

from saying anything. He gently laid the unconscious woman on the ground. As he did

so, the mask on his face came undone. The woman next to Vishwadyumna stared at

him with horror.

‘Naga!’ she screeched.

Before Vishwadyumna

could react, she leapt to her feet and fled screaming,

‘Help!

Help! A Naga is eating my friend!’

The Naga looked at the fleeing woman with melancholic eyes. He shut the windows to

his tormented soul and shook his head slightly. Vishwadyumna meanwhile turned to see

his Lord's face for the first time in years. He immediately lowered his gaze, but not

before he had seen the rare emotion of intense pain and sorrow in his Lord's normally

expressionless

eyes. Seething in anger, Vishwadyumna

drew his sword, swearing to

slay the ungrateful wench he had just saved.

'No, Vishwadyumna,'

ordered the Naga. Pulling his mask back on, he turned to his other

soldiers. 'Revive her.'

'My Lord,' argued Vishwadyumna.

'Her friend will bring others here. Let's leave this

woman to her fate and go.'

'No.'

'But my Lord, someone may come soon. We must escape.'

'Not till we've saved her,' said the Naga, in his usual calm voice.

The royal party, including Nandi and Veerbhadra,

were sitting together enjoying their

lunch in the courtyard of the rest-house they had stopped at. Half the brigade too was

eating their meal. They needed

all the energy they could gather to march in this



scorching heat. Parvateshwar

had come in to check on the food arrangements.

He was

especially

concerned about Sati's comfort. However, he had refused to join them. He

was going to eat later with his soldiers.

A loud commotion from the area of one of the perimeter guards disturbed Shiva. He got

up to investigate,

motioning to Brahaspati,

Nandi and Veerbhadra

to remain seated.

Parvateshwar

too had heard the racket and was moving towards the uproar.

'Please save her!' cried the woman. 'A Naga is eating her alive!'



'I am sorry,' answered the captain. 'But we have strict orders. We are not to leave the

vicinity of this rest-house under any circumstances.'

'What is the matter?' asked Parvateshwar.

Turning in surprise, the captain saluted and bowed low.

‘My Lord,’ said the captain. ‘This woman alleges that a Naga has attacked her friend.

She’s asking us to help her.’

Parvateshwar

looked at the woman intensely. He would have liked nothing more than to chase the Naga party and destroy them. But his orders were crystal clear. He was not to

leave the Neelkanth and Sati. Their protection was the only objective of the brigade. But he was a Kshatriya. What kind of Kshatriya would he be if he didn’t fight to protect the

weak? Seething at the restrictions forced upon him, Parvateshwar was about to say

something when Shiva appeared.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Shiva.

‘My Lord,’ said the captain in awe. He could not believe that he was actually getting a

chance to converse with the Neelkanth. This woman claims that her friend has been

attacked by Nagas. We are concerned that it may be a trap. We have heard about the

Chandravanshi

duplicity on the Mount Mandar road.’

Shiva heard his inner voice cry. *'Go back! Help her!'*

Drawing his sword in one smooth motion he told the woman, 'Take me to your friend.'

Parvateshwar

looked at Shiva with respect. It was mild, but it was respect all the same.

He immediately drew his own sword and turned to the captain, 'Follow us with your

platoon. Brigadier Vraka, put the entire brigade on alert for any surprise attack. The

princess must be kept safe at all costs!'

Shiva and Parvateshwar

ran behind the woman who seemed to lead them with ease.

She was obviously a local. The captain trailed them with his platoon of thirty soldiers.

After sprinting for the larger part of half an hour, they finally reached the riverside to find a dazed woman sitting on the ground. With heavy breaths, she was staring in shock at

an imaginary vision in the distance. There was blood all over her clothes, but strangely, no injury to her. There were many footsteps that appeared to be coming out of the river

and going back in.

The captain looked at the woman who had led them here with suspicious eyes. Turning

to his soldiers, he ordered, 'Form a perimeter around the General and the Neelkanth. It

could be a trap.'

'She was being eaten alive, I tell you,' screeched

the woman, absolutely stunned to see

her friend alive and unharmed.

'No she wasn't,' said Shiva calmly. He pointed at the corpse of the crocodile floating in the river. A large flock of crows had settled on the carcass,

fighting viciously over its

entrails. 'Somebody just saved her from that crocodile.'

'Whoever it was has rowed across the river, my Lord,' said the captain, pointing towards

the heavy footmarks close to the river.

'Why would a Naga risk his own life to save this woman?' asked Shiva.

Parvateshwar

seemed as surprised. This was completely unlike the usual blood thirsty

Nagas they had dealt with till now.

'My Lords,' said the captain, addressing

both Shiva and Parvateshwar.

'The women

appear safe. Perhaps it is not wise for everybody to stay here. If I have your permission, I will escort these women back to their village and rejoin the caravan at Kotdwaar. You

could retire to the rest-house.'

'All right,' said Parvateshwar.

'Take four soldiers with you just in case.'

Both Shiva and Parvateshwar

walked back, baffled by this bizarre event.

It was late in the evening. Shiva, Brahaspati, Nandi and Veerbhadra sat quietly around the camp fire. Shiva turned to see Sad sitting at a distance, on the rest-house veranda,

along with Ayurvati and Krittika, having a serious conversation. Parvateshwar

as usual,

moved among his soldiers, personally

supervising

the security arrangements

of the

camp and the comfort of his boys.

'It's ready, Shiva,' said Veerbhadra, handing over the chillum to the Neelkanth.

Shiva brought the pipe up to his lips and pulled hard. He relaxed visibly. Feeling the

need for respite, he smoked some more before passing it back to his friend.  
Veerbhadra

offered it to Brahaspati and Nandi, who both declined. Brahaspati stared at  
Shiva who

kept stealing glances at Sati. He smiled and shook his head.

‘What?’ asked Shiva who had noticed Brahaspati’s

gesture.

‘I understand your longing, my friend,’ whispered Brahaspati. ‘But what you  
are hoping

for is quite difficult. Almost impossible.’

‘When it’s so valuable, it can’t be easy. Can it?’

Brahaspati smiled and patted Shiva on his hand.

Veerbhadra

knew what his friend needed. Dance and music. It always improved his  
mood. ‘Don’t people sing and dance in this wretched country.’

‘Private Veerbhadra,’

said Nandi, his tone different with a subordinate,

‘firstly, this

country is not wretched. It’s the greatest land in the world.’

Veerbhadra playfully put his hands together in a mock apology.

‘Secondly,’ continued Nandi, ‘we dance only when an occasion demands it, like the Holi

festival or a public performance.’

‘But the greatest joy of dancing is when you do it for no reason at all, Captain,’ said

Veerbhadra.

‘I agree,’ said Shiva.

Nandi immediately fell silent.

Without any warning, Veerbhadra suddenly burst out into one of the folk songs of his

region. Shiva smiled at his friend, for Veerbhadra

was singing one of his favourites.

Continuing to sing, Veerbhadra rose slowly and began dancing to the lilting tune, now

accompanied

by Shiva. The combination of marijuana and dance immediately changed

his mood.

Brahaspati stared at Shiva, first in shock and then with pleasure. He noticed a pattern in their dancing, a smooth six-step combination repeated rhythmically. Shiva reached out

and pulled Brahaspati and Nandi to their feet. They joined in, tentative at first. But it was only a matter of time before a reluctant Brahaspati

was dancing with abandon. The

group moved together in a circle around the fire, the singing louder and livelier.

Shiva suddenly darted out of the ring towards Sati. 'Dance with me.'

A flabbergasted

Sati shook her head.

'Oh come on! If you can dance while your Guruji and I watch, why not here?'

'That was for *knowledge!*'

said Sati.

'So? Is it wrong if we're not dancing for knowledge?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Fine. Have it your way,' said Shiva with a frustrated gesture. 'Ayurvati, come!'

A startled Ayurvati didn't know how to react. Before she could decide on a course of

action, Shiva held her hand and pulled her into the circle. Veerbhadra lured Kritika in as well. The group danced boisterously and sang loudly, making a racket in an otherwise

quiet night. Sati got up, clearly agitated, glared at Shiva's back and ran into the rest-

house. Shiva's anger rose even higher as he noticed her absence

when he turned

towards the veranda.



Damn!

He got back to his dance, his heart in a strange mixture of pain and joy. He turned once

again towards the veranda. There was nobody.

Who's behind that curtain?

Shiva was dragged into the next move by Veerbhadra. It was a few moments later that

Shiva was in a position to look again at the veranda. He could see Sati, outlined behind

the curtain, staring at him. Only at him.

Wow!

A surprised and delighted Shiva swung back into his dance, moving in his prime form.

He had to impress her!



## CHAPTER 13

### Blessings of the Impure

Kotdwaar was in all its glory to receive the Neelkanth. Torches had been lit across the

fort perimeter

as if it was Diwali. Red and blue pennants,

embellished

with the

Suryavanshi

Sun, had been hung down the fort walls. In a rare breach of protocol, the

governor had come outside the city to personally receive the Neelkanth. After the formal

exhibition of the Neelkanth for the Kotdwaar elite at the local court, a public function had been organised

the following day. Sixty-five thousand people, practically the entire

population of Kotdwaar, had converged for the event. Considering the vast number of

attendees,

the event had been organised outside the city platform to ensure that every person could be accommodated.

A speech by Shiva convinced the Kotdwaarans that Meluha's days of trouble were soon

to end. The remarkable effect Shiva seemed to have on the people was a revelation to

him. Though he was careful with his words, telling them that he would do all he could to

support the people of Meluha, the public made their own interpretations.

'The cursed Chandravanshis

will finally be destroyed,' said one man.

'We don't have to worry about anything

now. The Neelkanth

will take care of

everything,' said a woman.

Seated with Brahaspati and Sati on the speaker's

platform, Parvateshwar

was deeply

unhappy at the public's reaction. Turning to the chief scientist, he said, 'Our entire

society is based on laws and we are not supposed to blindly follow anyone. We are

expected to solve our problems ourselves

and not hope for miracles from a solitary

man. What has this man done to deserve such blind faith?’

‘Parvateshwar,’

said Brahaspati politely, for he greatly respected him. ‘I think Shiva is a

good man. I think he cares enough to want to do something. And aren’t good intentions

the first step towards any good deed?’

Parvateshwar

didn’t completely agree. Never a believer in the legend of the Neelkanth,

the general thought that every man or woman had to earn his station in life with training and preparation, not just get it on a silver platter because of a blue throat. ‘Yes, that may be true. But intentions aren’t enough. They have to be backed by ability as well. Here

we are, putting an untrained man on a pedestal and acting as though he is our saviour.

For all we know, he might lead us to complete disaster. We are acting on faith. Not logic or laws or even experience.’

‘Sometimes

one needs a little bit of faith when faced with a difficult situation. Rational

answers don’t always work. We also need a miracle.’

*‘You’re*

talking about miracles? A scientist?’

‘You can have scientific miracles too, Parvateshwar,’

smiled Brahaspati.

Parvateshwar

was distracted by the sight of Shiva stepping off the platform. As he came down there was a surge of people wanting to touch his hand. The soldiers, led by Nandi

and Veerbhadra, were holding them back. There was one blind man amongst them who

looked like he might be injured in the melee.

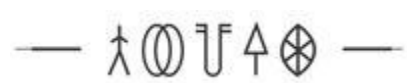
‘Nandi, let that man through,’ said Shiva.

Nandi and Veerbhadra lowered the rope to let him in.

Another man shouted, ‘I am his son. He needs me to guide him.’

‘Let him in as well,’ said Shiva.

The son rushed in and held his father’s hand. The blind man, who seemed lost without



his son’s hand, smiled warmly as he recognised the familiar touch. He was led close to

Shiva and the son said, ‘Father, the Neelkanth is right in front of you. Can you sense his presence?’

Copious tears flowed from the blind man’s eyes. Without thinking, he bent down to try

and touch Shiva's feet. His son cried out in shock as he pulled the man back sharply.

'Father!' scolded the son.

Shiva was stunned by the harshness in the son's tone compared to the loving manner in

which he had spoken so far. 'What happened?'

'I am sorry, my Lord,' apologised the son. 'He didn't mean to. He just lost control due to your presence.'

'I am sorry, my Lord,' said the blind man, his tears flowing stronger.

'Sorry for what?'

'He is a vikarma, my Lord,' said his son, 'ever since disease blinded him twenty years

ago. He should not have tried to touch you.'

Sati, who was now standing near Shiva, had heard the entire conversation.

She felt

sympathy

for the blind man. She knew the torment of having even your touch

considered impure. But what he had tried to do was illegal.

'I am sorry, my Lord,' continued the blind man. 'But please don't let your anger with me

stop you from protecting our country. It is the greatest land that *Parmatma* created.

Save it from the evil Chandravanshis.

Save us, my Lord.'

The blind man continued to cry folding his hands in a penitent namaste.

Shiva was

shaken by the dignity of the blind man.

He still loves a country that treats him so unfairly. Why 1? Even worse he doesn't even

appear to think he's being treated unfairly.

Tears welled up in Shiva's eyes as he realised that he was looking at a man whom fate

had been very unkind to.

I will stop this nonsense.

Shiva stepped forward and bent down. The flabbergasted

son trembled in disbelief as

he saw the Neelkanth touch the feet of his vikarma father. The blind man was at sea for

a moment. When he did understand what the Neelkanth had done, his hand shot up to

cover his mouth in shock.

Shiva rose and stood in front of the blind man. 'Bless me, sir, so that I find the strength to fight for a man as patriotic as you.'

The blind man stood dumb-struck. His tears dried up in his bewilderment.  
He was about

to collapse when Shiva took a quick step forward to hold him, lest he fall to  
the ground.

The blind man found the strength to say, '*Vijayibhav*'.

*May you be victorious*

.

The son caught hold of his father's limp body as Shiva released him. The  
entire crowd

was stunned into silence by what the Neelkanth had done. Forget the gravity  
of

touching a vikarma, the Neelkanth had just asked to be blessed by one.  
Shiva turned to

see Parvateshwar's

enraged face. Shiva had broken the law. Broken it brazenly and in

public. Next to him stood Sati. Her face, her eyes, her entire demeanour  
expressionless.

What the hell is she thinking?

Brahaspati and Sati entered Shiva's chambers as soon as he was alone.  
Shiva's smile

at seeing his two favourite people in the world disappeared

on hearing Sati's voice, 'You

must get a shudhikaran done.'



He looked at her and answered simply, ‘No.’

‘No? What do you mean no?’

‘I mean No. Nahin. Nako,’ said Shiva, adding the words for ‘no’ in the Kashmiri and the

Kotdwaar dialect, for good measure.



‘Shiva,’ said Brahaspati,

keeping his composure. ‘This is no laughing matter. I agree

with Sati. The governor too was worried about your safety and has arranged for a

pandit. He waits outside as we speak. Get the ceremony done now.’

‘But I just said I don’t want to.’

‘Shiva,’ said Sati, reverting to her usual tone. ‘I respect you immensely.

Your valour.

Your intelligence.

Your talent. But you are not above the law. You have touched a

vikarma. You have to get a shudhikaran. That is the law.’

‘Well if the law says that my touching that poor blind man is illegal, then the law is

wrong!’

Sati was stunned into silence by Shiva's attitude.

'Shiva, listen to me,' argued Brahaspati.

'Not doing a shudhikaran

can be harmful to

you. You are meant for bigger things. You are important to the future of India. Don't put your own person at risk out of obstinacy.'

'It's not obstinacy. You tell me, honestly, how can it harm me if I happened to touch a

wronged man, who I might add, still loves his country despite the way he has been

ostracised and ill-treated?'

'He may be a good man Shiva, but the sins of his previous birth will contaminate your

fate,' said Brahaspati.

'Then let them! If the weight on that man's shoulders lessens, I will feel blessed.'

'What are you saying Shiva?' asked Sati. 'Why should you carry the punishment of

someone else's sins?'

'Firstly, I don't believe in the nonsense that he was punished for the sins of his previous birth. He was just infected by a disease, plain and simple. Secondly, if it is my choice to carry the weight of someone else's so called sins, why should it matter to anyone?'

'It matters because we care about you!' cried Brahaspati.

‘Come on Sati,’ said Shiva. ‘Don’t tell me you believe in this rubbish.’

‘It is not rubbish.’

‘Look, don’t you want me to fight for you? Stop this unfairness that your society has

subjected you to.’

‘Is that what this is about? Me?’ asked Sati, outraged.

‘No,’ retorted Shiva immediately, then added. ‘Actually yes. This is also about you. It is about the vikarma and the unfairness that they have to face. I want to save them from

leading the life of an outcast.’

‘I DON’T NEED YOUR PROTECTION! I CANNOT BE SAVED!’  
shouted Sati, before

storming out of the room.

Shiva glared at her retreating form in irritation. ‘What the hell is it with this woman?!’

‘She’s right Shiva,’ advised Brahaspati. ‘Don’t go there.’

‘You agree with her on this vikarma business?’

Answer with your heart, Brahaspati.

Don’t you think it is unfair?’

‘I wasn’t talking about that. I was talking about Sati.’

Shiva continued to glare at Brahaspati defiantly. Everything in his mind, body and soul

told him that he should pursue Sati. That his life would be meaningless without her. That

his soul's existence would be incomplete without her.

‘Don’t go there, my friend,’ reiterated Brahaspati.

The caravan left the river city of Kotdwaar on a royal barge led and followed by two

large boats of equal size and grandeur as the royal vessel. Typical of the Meluhan

security system, the additional boats were to confuse any attacker about which boat the

royal family may be on. The entire royal party was in the second boat. Each of the three

large boats was manned by a brigade of soldiers. Additionally, there were five small and

quick cutter boats on both sides of the royal convoy, keeping pace and protecting the sides in case of an ambush.

‘When the monsoon is not active, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati, ‘the rivers are the best way to travel. Though we have good roads connecting all major cities, it cannot match the

rivers in terms of speed and safety.’

Shiva smiled at Ayurvati politely. He was not in the frame of mind for much conversation. Sati had not spoken to Shiva since that fateful day at Kotdwaar when he

had refused to undergo a shudhikaran.

The royal barge stopped at many cities along the river. The routine seemed much the

same. Extreme exuberance

would manifest itself in each city on the arrival of the

Neelkanth.

It was a kind of reaction unnatural in Meluha. But then, a Neelkanth didn't grace the

land every day.

'Why?' asked Shiva of Brahaspati, after many days of keeping quiet about the disquiet

in his troubled heart.

'Why what?'

'You know what I am talking about, Brahaspati,'

said Shiva, narrowing his eyes in

irritation.

'She genuinely believes that she deserves to be a vikarma,' answered Brahaspati with a

sad smile.

'Why?'

'Perhaps because of the manner in which she became a vikarma.'

'How did it happen?'

‘It happened during her earlier marriage.’

‘What! Sati was married?!’

‘Yes. That was around ninety years back. It was a political marriage with one of the

noble families of the empire. Her husband’s

name was Chandandhwaj.

She got

pregnant and went to the Maika to deliver the child. It was the monsoon season.

Unfortunately, the child was stillborn.’

‘Oh my god!’ said Shiva, empathising with the pain Sati must have felt.

‘But it was worse. On the same day, her husband, who had gone to the Narmada to

pray for the safe birth of their child, accidentally

drowned. On that cursed day, her life

was destroyed.’

Shiva stared at Brahaspati,

too stunned to react. ‘She became

a widow and was

declared a vikarma the same day.’

‘But how can the husband’s

death be considered

her fault?’ argued Shiva. ‘That is

completely ridiculous.’

‘She wasn’t declared a vikarma because

of her husband’s death. It was because

she

gave birth to a stillborn child.’

‘But that could be due to any reason. Maybe there was a mistake that the local doctors

committed.’

‘That doesn’t happen in Meluha, Shiva,’ said Brahaspati calmly. ‘Having a stillborn child is probably one of the worst ways for a woman to become a vikarma. Only giving birth to

a Naga child would be considered worse. Thank god that didn’t happen. Because then

she would have been completely ostracised from society.’

‘This has to be changed. The concept of vikarma is unfair.’

Brahaspati looked at his friend intensely. ‘You might save the vikarma, Shiva. But how

do you save a woman who doesn’t want to be saved?

She genuinely believes she

deserves this punishment.’

‘Why? I’m sure she is not the first Meluhan woman to give birth to a stillborn. There

must have been others before her. There will be many more after her.’

‘She was the first *royal* woman to give birth to a stillborn. Her fate has been a source of



embarrassment

to the emperor. It raises questions about his ancestry’

‘How would it raise questions about his lineage?’

Sati is not his birth daughter. She

would also have come from Maika, right?’

‘No, my friend. That law was relaxed for families of nobility around two hundred and fifty years back. Apparently in the ‘national interest’, noble families were allowed to keep

their birth-children. Some laws can be amended,

provided ninety per cent of the

Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas above a particular chosen-tribe and job status vote

for the change. There have been rare instances

of such unanimity. This was one of

them. Only one man opposed this change.’

‘Who?’



‘Lord Satyadhwaj,  
the grandfather of Parvateshwar.

Their family had vowed not to have  
any birth children since this law was passed. Parvateshwar  
honours that promise to this  
day.’

‘But if the birth law could be changed,’ said Shiva working things out, ‘why  
couldn’t the law of vikarma?’

‘Because  
there aren’t enough noble families affected by that law. That is the harsh  
truth.’

‘But all this goes completely against Lord Ram’s teachings!’

‘Lord Ram’s teachings also say that the concept of the vikarma is correct.  
Don’t you  
want to question that?’

Shiva glanced at Brahaspati silently, before looking out over the river.

There is nothing wrong with questioning Lord Ram’s laws, my friend,’ said  
Brahaspati.

‘There were many times when he himself stood down because  
of someone  
else’s

rationale. The question is that what are your motives for wanting to change the law? Is it because you genuinely think the law itself is unfair? Or is it because you are attracted to Sati and you want to remove an inconvenient law which stands in your path.'

'I genuinely think the vikarma law is unfair. I felt that from the moment I found out about it. Even before I knew Sati was a vikarma.'

'But Sati doesn't think the law is unfair.'

'But she is a good woman. She doesn't deserve to be treated this way.'

'She is not just a good woman. She is one of the finest I have ever met. She is beautiful, honest, straight-forward,

brave and intelligent — everything a man could want in a

woman. But you are not just any man. You are the Neelkanth.'

Shiva turned around and rested his hands on the craft's railing. He looked into the

distance at the dense forest along the riverbanks as their boat glided across the water.

The soothing evening breeze fanned Shiva's long locks.

'I've told you before, my friend,' said Brahaspati.

'Because

of that unfortunate blue

throat, every decision you take has many ramifications. You have to think many times

before you act.'

It was late in the night. The royal convoy had just set sail from the city of Sutgengarh

on

the Indus. The emotions at Sutgengarh

had erupted in the now predictable routine of

exuberance

at the sight of the Neelkanth. The saviour of their civilisation had finally

arrived.

Their saviour, however, was in his own private hell. Sati had maintained her distance

from Shiva for the last few weeks. He was torn, experiencing pain and dismay at depths

he didn't think fathomable.

The convoy's next stop was the famous city of *Mohan Jo Daro*

or the *Platform*

*of*

*Mohan* . The city, on the mighty Indus, was dedicated to a great philosopher-priest called

Lord Mohan, who lived in this region many thousands of years ago. Once he had met

with the people of Mohan Jo Daro, Shiva expressed

a desire to visit the temple of Lord

Mohan. This temple stood outside the main city platform, further down the Indus. The

governor of Mohan Jo Daro had offered to take the Lord Neelkanth there in a grand

procession. Shiva however insisted on going alone. He felt drawn to the temple. He felt

that it would have some solutions for his troubled heart.

The temple itself was simple. Much like Lord Mohan himself. A small non—descript

structure announced itself as the birthplace of the sage. The only sign of the temple's

significance was the massive gates in the four cardinal directions of the compound. As

instructed by Shiva, Nandi and Veerbhadra, along with their platoon, waited outside.

Shiva, with his comforting cravat back around his neck, walked up the steps feeling

tranquil after a long time. He rang the bell at the entrance and sat down against a pillar with his eyes shut in quiet contemplation. Suddenly, an oddly familiar voice asked: 'How

are you, my friend?'



## CHAPTER 14

### Pandit of Mohan Jo Daro

Shiva opened his eyes to behold a man who was almost a replica of the pandit he had

met at the Brahma temple, in what seemed like another life. He sported a similar long

flowing white beard and a big white mane. He wore a saffron dhoti and angvastram.

The

wizened face bore a calm and welcoming smile. If it wasn't for this pandit's much taller

frame, Shiva could have easily mistaken him for the one he had met at the Brahma

temple.

'How are you, my friend?' repeated the pandit sitting down.

'I am alright, Panditji,' said Shiva, using the Indian term '*ji*' as a form of respect. He couldn't follow why, but the intrusion was welcome to him. It almost seemed as though

he was drawn to this temple because

he was destined to meet the pandit. 'Do all

pandits in Meluha look alike?'

The man smiled warmly. 'Not all the pandits. Just us.'

‘And who might “*us*” be, Panditji?’

‘The next time you meet one of us, we will tell you,’ said the Pandit cryptically. ‘That is a promise.’

‘Why not now?’

‘At this point of time, our identity is not important,’ smiled the Pandit. What is important is that you are disturbed about something. Do you want to talk about it?’

Shiva took a deep breath. Gut instinct told him that he could trust this man.

‘There is this task that I supposedly have to do for Meluha.’

‘I know. Though I wouldn’t dismiss the Neelkanth’s role as a “task”. He does much more

than that.’ Pointing at Shiva’s throat, the Pandit continued, ‘Pieces of cotton cannot

cover divine brilliance.’

Shiva looked up with a wry smile. ‘Well, Meluha does seem like a wonderful society.

And I want to do all I can to protect it from evil.’

‘Then what is the problem?’

‘The problem is that I find some grossly unfair practices in this nearly perfect society.

And this is inconsistent with the ideals that Meluha aspires to.’

‘What practices are you referring to?’ asked the Pandit.

‘For example, the way the vikarma are treated.’

‘Why is it unfair?’

‘How can anyone be sure that these people committed sins in their previous birth? And

that their present sufferings are a result of that? It might be sheer bad luck. Or a random act of nature.’

‘You’re right. It could be. But do you think that the fate of the vikarma is about them

personally?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘No it isn’t,’ explained the Pandit. ‘It is about the society as a whole. The vikarma

acceptance

of their fate is integral to the stability of Meluha.’

Shiva frowned.

‘What any successful

society needs, O Neelkanth, is flexibility with stability. Why would

you need flexibility? Because every single person has different dreams and capabilities.

The birth son of a warrior could have the talent to be a great businessman.

Then society

needs to be flexible enough to allow this son to change his vocation from his father’s

profession. Flexibility in a society allows change, so that all its members have the space to discover their true selves and grow to their potential. And if every person in a society achieves his true potential, society as a whole also achieves its true potential.'

'I agree.'

But what does this have to do with the vikarma?

'I'll come to the obvious question in a bit. Just bear with me,' said the Pandit. 'If we

believe that flexibility is key to a successful

society, the Maika system is designed to

achieve it in practice. No child knows what the professions of his birth-parents are. They are independent to pursue what their natural talent inspires them to do.'

'I agree. The Maika system is almost breathtakingly

fair. A person can credit or blame

*only himself*

for what he does with his life. Nobody else. But this is about flexibility.

What about stability?'

'Stability allows a person the freedom of choice, my friend. People can pursue their

dreams only when they are living in a society where survival is not a daily threat. In a

society without security and stability, there are no intellectuals or businessmen



or artists

or geniuses.

Man is constantly in fight or flight mode. Nothing better than an animal.

Where is the chance then to allow ideas to be nurtured or dreams to be pursued? That

is the way all humans were before we formed societies. Civilisation is very fragile. All it takes is a few decades

of chaos for us to forget humanity and turn into animals. Our

base natures can take over very fast. We can forget that we are sentient beings, with

laws and codes and ethics.'

'I understand. The tribes in my homeland were no better than animals. They didn't even

want to live a better life!'

'They didn't know a better life was possible, Neelkanth. That is the curse of constant

strife. It makes us forget the most beautiful part of being human. That is why society

must remain stable so that we don't put each other in a situation of having to fight for

survival.'

'All right. But why would letting people achieve their potential cause instability? In fact, it should make people

happier

with their lives and hence

society

would become

increasingly steady.'

'True, but only partially. People are happy when they change their lives for the better.

But there are two situations in which change can lead to chaos. First, when people face

a change by others, situations that they cannot understand. This scares them almost as

much as the fear of death. When change happens too fast, they resist it.'

'Yes, change forced by others is difficult to accept.'

'And too rapid a change causes instability. That is the bedrock of Lord Ram's way of life.

There are laws which help a society change slowly and allow it to remain stable. At the

same time, it allows its citizens the freedom to follow their dreams. He created an ideal balance of stability and flexibility.'

'You mentioned a second situation...'

'The second is when people *cannot*

make the transition they want to improve their lives

for reasons

beyond their control. Say there is an exceptional

warrior who loses his

hand-eye coordination due to a disease.

He is still a fighter, but not extraordinary any

more. The odds are that he will be frustrated about what he perceives

as injustice

meted out to him. He is likely to blame his doctor, or even society at large.

Many such

discontented people can become a threat to society as a whole.'

Shiva frowned. He didn't like the logic. But he also knew that one of the main reasons

the Pakratis had rejected the peace offer by his uncle years ago was because

their

diseased

and old chief was desperate

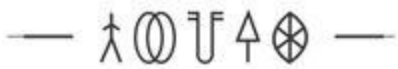
to live up to his initial reputation of being an

exceptional warrior who could have defeated the Gunas.

'Their combined rage can lead to unrest, even violence,' said the Pandit.

'Lord Ram

sensed that. And that is why the concept of Vikarma came into being. If you make a



person believe that his misfortune in this birth is due to his sins in his previous birth, he will resign himself to his fate and not vent his fury on society at large.'

'But I disagree that ostracising the vikarma can work. It would lead to more suppressed

anger.'

'But they are not ostracised. Their living is subsidised by the government. They can still interact with family members.

They are allowed to gain personal excellence

in their

chosen fields, wherever possible. They can also fight to protect themselves.

What they

can't do is ever be in a position to influence others. And this system has worked for one thousand years. Do you know how common rebellion was in India before Lord Ram

created this empire? And most of the times, the rebellions were not led by farsighted

men who thought they would create a better way of life for the common man. They were

led by men discontented with their lot in life. People very much like the vikarma. And

these rebellions usually caused chaos and decades went by before order was restored.'

'So are you saying that anyone who is frustrated with life should simply resign himself to being a vikarma,' said Shiva.

'Why?'

'For the larger good of society'

Shiva was aghast. He could not believe what he was hearing. He deeply disliked the

arguments

being presented

to him. 'I am sorry, but I think this system is completely

unfair. I have heard that almost one twentieth of the people in Meluha are vikarma. Are

you going to keep so many people as outcast forever? This system needs to change.'

'You can change it. You are the Neelkanth. But remember,

no system is absolutely

perfect. In Lord Ram's time, a lady called Manthara triggered a series of events which

led to the loss of millions of lives. She had suffered terribly due to her physical

deformities. And then, fate put her in a position of influence over a powerful queen and

thus over the entire kingdom. Therefore, the karma of one maladjusted victim of fate led

to the mass destruction that followed. Would it not have been better for everybody if this person had been declared a vikarma? There are no easy answers.

Having said that,

maybe you are right. Maybe there are so many vikarma now that it can lead to a tipping

point, tumble society into chaos. Do I have the solution to this problem? No. Maybe you

could find it.'

Shiva turned his face away. He believed in his heart that the vikarma system was unfair.

'Are you concerned about *all* the vikarma, O Neelkanth?' asked the Pandit. 'Or just one in particular?'

'What is the Lord doing in there?' asked Nandi. 'He is taking too long.'

'I don't know,' said Veerbhadra.

'All I know is that if Shiva says he needs to do something, I accept it.'

'Why do you call the Lord by his name?'

'Because that is his name!'

Nandi smiled at the simple answer and turned to look at the temple.

‘Tell me Captain,’ said Veerbhadra coming close to Nandi. ‘Is Krittika spoken for?’

‘Spoken for?’

‘I mean,’ continued Veerbhadra. ‘Is she off limits?’

‘Off limits?’

‘You know what I mean,’ said Veerbhadra turning beet red. ‘She is a widow,’ said Nandi.

‘Her husband died fifteen years back.’

‘Oh, that’s terrible!’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Nandi, as he smiled at Veerbhadra. ‘But to answer your question, she is

“not spoken for” right now.’



‘My Lady, may I say something?’ asked Krittika.

Sati turned from the guest-room window to look at Krittika with a surprised frown. ‘Have

I ever stopped you from speaking your mind? A true Suryavanshi

always speaks her

mind.’

‘Well,’ said Krittika. ‘Sometimes, it may not be that harmful to lose control of yourself.’

Sati frowned even more.

Krittika spoke quickly, before her courage deserted her. ‘Forget about him being the

Neelkanth, my Lady. Just as a man, I think he is the finest I have seen. He is intelligent and brave, funny and kind, and worships the ground you walk on. Is that really so bad?’

Sati glared at Krittika; she didn’t know if she was more upset at Krittika for what she was saying or at herself for having feelings which were apparently so evident.

Krittika continued, ‘Maybe, just maybe, breaking the rules can lead to happiness.’

‘I am a Suryavanshi,’

said Sati, her voice dropping. ‘Rules are *all* that I live by. What

have I got to do with happiness?’

Don’t ever dare to speak to me about this again!’

‘Yes, there is this particular vikarma,’ admitted Shiva. ‘But that is not why I think the vikarma law is unfair.’

‘I know that,’ said the Pandit. ‘But I also know that what troubles you right now is your relationship with that one in particular. You don’t want her to think that you would

change the law, however justified, just to get her. Because if Sati believes that, she will never come to you.’

‘How do you know her name?’ asked Shiva, flabbergasted.



‘We know many things, my friend.’

‘My entire life is meaningless

without her.’

‘I know,’ smiled the Pandit. ‘Perhaps I can help you.’

Shiva frowned. This was unexpected.

‘You want her to reciprocate

your love. But how can she when you don’t even

understand her?’

‘I think I understand her. I love her.’

‘Yes, you do love her. But you don’t understand her. You don’t know what she wants.’

Shiva kept quiet. He knew the Pandit was right. He was thoroughly confused about Sati.

‘You can hazard a guess towards what she wants,’ continued the Pandit, ‘with the help

of the theory of transactions.’

What?’ asked a flummoxed Shiva.

‘It makes up the fabric of society.’

‘Excuse me, but what does this have to do with Sati?’

‘Indulge me for a little while, Neelkanth,’ said the Pandit. You know the cloth that you

wear is created when cotton threads are woven together, right?’

‘Yes,’ answered Shiva.

‘Similarly, transactions

are threads that when woven together make up a society, its

culture. Or in the case of a person, weaves together their character.’

Shiva nodded.

‘If you want to know the strength of a cloth, you inspect the quality of its weave. If you want to understand a person’s character, look closely at their interpersonal behaviour or their transactions.’

‘Alright,’ said Shiva slowly, absorbing the Pandit’s words. ‘But transactions are...’



‘I’ll explain,’

interrupted

the Pandit.

Transactions

are interactions

between

two

individuals. It could be trading goods, like a Shudra farmer offering grain for money from a Vaishya. But it could also be beyond material concerns,

like a Kshatriya offering

protection to a society in return for power.'

Shiva nodded in agreement. 'Transactions are about give and take.'

'Exactly. So going by this logic, if you want something from someone, you have to give

that person something they want.'

'So what do you think she wants?' asked Shiva.

'Try and understand Sati's transactions. What do you think she wants?'

'I don't know. She is very confusing'

'No, she isn't. There is a pattern. Think. She is probably the most eminent vikarma in

history. She has the power to rebel if she wants to. She certainly has the spirit since she never backs off from a fight. But she does not rebel against the vikarma law. Neither

does she fade into the background like most vikarmas and live her life in anonymity.

She follows the commandments,

and yet, she does not whine and complain to others.

However unfairly life treats her, she conducts herself with dignity. Why?'

'Because she is a righteous person?'

'That she is, no doubt. But that is not the reason. Remember, in a transaction, you give

something because

you want something in return. She is accepting

an unfair law

without trying to make anyone feel guilty about it. And most importantly, she continues

to use her talents to contribute to the good of society whenever she can. What do you

think a person who is giving all this in her transactions with society wants in return?’

‘Respect,’ answered Shiva.

‘Exactly!’ beamed the Pandit. ‘And what do you think you do when you try to *protect*

such a person?’ ‘Disrespect her.’

‘Absolutely! I know it comes naturally to you to want to protect any good person who

appears in need. But control that feeling in relation to Sati. Respect her. And she will

feel irresistibly drawn towards you. She gets many things from the people who love her.

What she doesn’t get is what she craves the most — respect.’

Shiva looked at the Pandit with a grateful smile. He had found his answer.

Respect.

After two weeks,

the Neelkanth's

convoy reached

the city of Karachapa

at the

confluence of the Indus into the Western Sea. It was a glittering city which had long

grown beyond the one platform it was built on. The *Dwitiya*

or *second*

platform, had

been erected fifty years ago on an even grander scale than the first. The Dwitiya

platform was where the Karachapa

elite lived. The Governor, a diminutive Vaishya

called Jhoolshwar,

had heard of and followed the new tradition of receiving

the

Neelkanth outside the city.

Karachapa,

with its hundred thousand citizens, was at its heart a frontier trading city.

Therefore it was an act of foresight by Lord Brahmanayak,

Emperor Daksha's father, to

have appointed a Vaishya as its governor over a hundred years ago.  
Jhoolshwar

had

ruled the city extraordinarily well, gilding its fate in gold and was considered its wisest and most efficient governor ever. Karachapa had long overtaken Lothal on the eastern

part of the empire to become Meluha's premier city of commerce. While foreigners such

as Mesopotamians

and Egyptians were allowed into this liberal city, they were not

allowed to travel further into Meluha without express royal permission.

Jhoolshwar

escorted the Neelkanth on an excursion to the Western Sea on his very

first day in Karachapa.

Shiva had never seen the sea and was fascinated by the near

infinite expanse of water. He spent many hours at the port where

Jhoolshwar

proudly

expounded on the various types of ships and vessels

manufactured

at the shipyard

attached to the Karachapa port. Brahaspati accompanied

them to the port to check on

the imports due for him from the Mesopotamian merchants.

At the evening state dinner organised for Shiva, Jhoolshwar

proudly announced that a

*yagna* , a *ceremonial*

*fire sacrifice*

, was being organised the next day in honour of the

Neelkanth, under the auspices of Lord Varun and the legendary Ashwini Kumar twins.

The Ashwini Kumar twins were celebrated ancient seafarers

who had navigated ocean

routes from Meluha to Mesopotamia

and beyond. Their maps, guidance and stories

were a source of inspiration and learning for this city of seamen.

After dinner, Shiva visited the chambers where Sati and Kritika were housed.

‘I was wondering,’ said Shiva, still careful with Sati since she had gone back to being

formal with him, ‘will you be coming to the yagna tomorrow?’

‘I am very sorry, Lord Neelkanth,’ said Sati courteously. ‘But it may not be possible for me to attend the ceremony. I am not allowed to attend such yagnas.’

Shiva was about to say that nobody would question her since she would be attending

with the Neelkanth. But he thought better of it. ‘Perhaps we could have a dance practise

tomorrow? I cannot remember the last time we had a dance session.’

‘That would be nice. I have not had the benefit of your instruction in a long time,’ said Sati.

Shiva nodded unhappily at Sati — the freeze in their relationship tormented him.

Bidding goodbye, he turned to leave.

Krittika glanced at Sati, shaking her head imperceptibly.





## CHAPTER 15

### [Trial by Fire](#)

The little boy hurried through a dusty goat trail, trying to avoid the sharp stones,

bundling into his fur coat. The dense, wet forest encroached on the path menacingly. It

was difficult to see beyond the trees lining the narrow path. The boy was sure that there were terrible monsters lurking in the dense foliage, waiting to pounce on him if he

slowed down. His village was but a few hours away. The sun was fast setting behind the

mountains. Monsters love the darkness

— he had heard his mother and grandmother

say repeatedly when he was being difficult. He would have liked being accompanied

by

an elder, as monsters didn't trouble the elders.

His heart skipped a beat as he heard a strange heaving sound. He immediately drew

out his short sword, suspecting

an attack from behind. His friends had heard many

stories about the monsters of the forests. The cowards never attacked from the front.

He stood still straining to determine  
the direction of the sound. It had a peculiar  
repetitive rhythm and seemed vaguely familiar. He felt as though he had  
heard it before.

The heaving was now accompanied  
by a heavy grunting male voice. This was not a  
monster! The boy felt excitement  
run through his body. He had heard his friends  
whisper in giggles about it, but never seen the act himself. This was his  
chance!

He crept slowly into the foliage, his sword dangling by his side. He did not  
have to go

too far when he came upon the source of the sound. It came from a small  
clearing. He

hid behind a tree trunk and peeped.

It was a couple. They seemed to be in a hurry. They had not even disrobed  
completely.

The man was extraordinarily hairy — almost like a bear. The boy could see  
just his back from this angle. He had a frontal view of the woman. She was  
astonishingly

beautiful. Her wavy hair, long and lustrous. The partly torn blouse  
revealed

a firm

breast, with deep red welts due to the brutal intercourse. Her skirt had been ripped and

revealed exquisite long legs. The boy was excited beyond imagination. Wait till his best

friend Bhadra heard of this!

As he enjoyed the show, his disquiet grew. Something seemed amiss. The man was in

the throes of passion while the woman lay passive

— almost dead. Her hands lay

lifeless

by her side.

Her mouth was

tightly shut.

She

was

not whispering

encouragements

to her lover. Were those tears of ecstasy rolling down her cheeks'? Or

was she being forced? But how could that be? The man's knife lay within the woman's

reach. She could have picked up the blade and stabbed him if she wanted.

The boy shook his head. He tried to silence his conscience.

‘Just shut up. Ijet me look.’

And then came the moment that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The woman’s

eyes suddenly fell upon him.

‘HELP!’ she cried out, ‘Please help!’

The startled boy fell back, dropping his sword. The hairy monster turned to see who the

woman was calling. The boy quickly picked up his sword and fled, ignoring the searing

pain on his frost-bitten foot as he ran. He was terrified at the thought that the man was chasing him. He could hear the man’s heavy breathing.

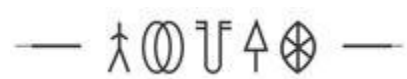
The boy leapt onto the goat trail and sped towards his village. He could still hear the

heavy breathing. It was drawing closer every second. The boy suddenly swerved to his

left, pivoted and slashed back with his sword.

There was nobody there. No sound of heavy breathing.

The only sound was the



haunting plea of a distraught woman.

‘Help! Please help!’

The little boy looked back. That poor woman.

‘Go back! Help her!’ cried his inner voice.

He hesitated for a moment. Then turned and fled towards his village.

**NO! GO BACK! HELP HER!**

Shiva woke up sweating,

his heart pounding madly. He instinctively turned around,

wanting desperately

to go back to that dreadful day. To redeem himself. But there would

be no redemption. The woman’s terrified face came flooding back. He shut his eyes. But

how do you shut your eyes to an image branded on your mind?

He pulled his knees up and rested his head on them. Then he did the only thing that

helped. He cried.

The yagna platform had been set up at the central square of the Dwitiya platform. For

Karachapa,

it was not the usual austere affair typical of Meluha. The frontier city had

decorated the area with bright colours that vied for attention. The platform itself had

been painted in a bright golden hue. Colourfully decorated

poles, festooned

with

flowers, held aloft a

*shamiana*

, a

*cloth canopy* . Red and blue pennants,

with the

Suryavanshi

symbol painted on, hung proudly from many poles. The entire atmosphere was that of pomp and show.

Jhoolshwar received Shiva at the head of the platform and guided him to his ritual seat

at the yagna. At the governor's repeated requests, Shiva had removed his cravat for the

duration of the ceremony. Parvateshwar

and Brahaspati sat to the right of the Neelkanth

while Jhoolshwar

and Ayurvati sat to his left. Nandi and Veerbhadra

had also been

invited to sit behind Shiva. Though this was unorthodox, Jhoolshwar

had acceded to

the Neelkanth's

request.

Jhoolleshwar

governed

a cosmopolitan

border city and

believed that many of the strict Meluhan laws could be bent slightly for the sake of

expediency.

His liberal attitude had made Karachapa a magnet for people from a wide variety of races and a hub for the exchange of goods, services and ideas.

Shiva looked towards Sati's balcony,

which overlooked

the central square

in the

distance. Though Sati was not allowed to step on the platform while the yagna was

being conducted, she could look on at the proceedings

from the safe distance of her

chambers.

Shiva noticed her standing behind the balcony curtain, with Krittika by her

side, observing the proceedings.

As was the custom before such a yagna, the pandit stood up and asked formally, 'If

anybody here has any objection to this yagna, please speak now. Or forever hold your

peace.'

This was just a traditional question, which wasn't actually supposed to be answered.

Hence there was an audible, collective groan when a voice cried out loudly, 'I object'

Nobody needed to look to recognise

where the voice came from. It was Tarak, an

immigrant from the ultra-conservative

northwest regions of the empire. Since Tarak had

come to Karachapa,

he had taken it upon himself to be the 'moral police' of this

'decadent city of sin'.

Shiva strained his neck to see who had objections. He saw Tarak standing at the back,

at the edge of the puja platform, very close to Sati's balcony. He was a giant of a man

with a fair face cut up brutally due to a lifetime of strife, an immense stomach and a



miner's bulging muscular arms. He cut an awesome figure. It was obvious, without even

looking at his amulets, that Tarak was a Kshatriya who had made his living working in

the lower rungs of the army.

Jhooleshwar

glared at Tarak in exasperation.

‘What is it now? This time we have

ensured that we have not used the white Chandravanshi

colours in our decorations. Or

do you think the water being used for the ceremony is not at the correct temperature as

per the Vedas?’

The gathering sniggered. Parvateshwar

looked at Jhooleshwar sharply. Before he could

reprimand the Governor for his cavalier reference to the Vedas, Tarak spoke up. ‘The

law says no vikarma should be allowed on the yagna platform.’

‘Yes,’ said Jhooleshwar.

‘And unless you have been declared a vikarma, I don’t think

that law is being broken.’

‘Yes it is!’

There were shocked murmurs from the congregation. Jhoolleshwar raised his hand.

‘Nobody is a vikarma here, Tarak,’ said Jhoolleshwar.

‘Now please sit down.’

‘Princess Sati defiles the yagna with her presence.’

Shiva and Parvateshwar

looked sharply at Tarak. Jhoolleshwar

was as stunned as the

rest of the assembly

by Tarak’s statement. ‘Tarak!’ said Jhoolleshwar.

‘You go too far.

Princess Sati is confined in the guest-house,

abiding by the laws of the yagna. She is

not present on the yagna platform. Now sit down before I have you whipped.’

‘On what charge will you have me whipped, Governor?’ yelled Tarak.

‘Standing up for

the law is not a crime in Meluha.’

‘But the law has not been broken!’

‘Yes it has. The exact words of the law is that no vikarma can be on the same platform

while a yagna is being conducted.

The yagna is being conducted

on the Dwitiya

platform of the city. By being on the same platform, the princess defiles the yagna.’

Tarak was technically correct. Most people interpreted that law to mean that a vikarma

could not be on the *prayer*

*ceremony*

*platform* . However, since Karachapa,

like most

Meluhan cities, was built on a platform, a strict interpretation of the law would mean that Sati should not be anywhere on the *entire Dwitiya platform* . To keep the yagna legal, she would either have to move to the other platform of the city or outside the city walls.

Jhooleshwar

was momentarily

taken aback as Tarak’s objection was accurate

in

principle. He tried a rally weakly. ‘Come, come Tarak. You are being too conscientious.

I

think that is too strict an interpretation. I think...'

'No, Shri Jhoolleshwarji,'

reverberated a loud voice through the gathering.

Everybody turned to see where the sound came from. Sati, who had come out on her

balcony, continued. 'Please accept my apologies for interrupting you, Governor,' said

Sati with a formal namaste.

'But Tarak's interpretation of the law is fair. I am terribly

sorry to have disturbed the yagna. My entourage and I shall leave the city immediately.

We will return by the beginning of the third prahar, by which time the ceremony should

be over.'

Shiva clenched his fist. He frantically wanted to wring Tarak's neck but he controlled

himself with superhuman effort. Within minutes Sati was out of the guest-house,

along

with Krittika and five personal

bodyguards.

Shiva turned to look at Nandi and

Veerbhadra, both of whom rose to join Sati. They understood that Shiva wanted them to

ensure that she was safe outside the city.

‘It is disgusting that you did not realise this yourself,’ Tarak said scornfully to Sati. What kind of a princess are you? Don’t you respect the law?’

Sati looked at Tarak. Her face calm. She refused to be drawn into a debate and waited

patiently for her guards to prepare the horses.

‘I don’t understand

what a vikarma woman is doing travelling with the convoy of the

Neelkanth. She is polluting the entire journey,’ raged Tarak.

‘Enough!’ intervened Shiva. ‘Princess Sati is leaving with dignity. Stop your diatribe right now.’

‘I will not!’ screeched

Tarak. What kind of a leader are you? You are challenging Lord

Ram’s laws.’



‘Tarak!’ yelled Jhooleshwar.

‘The Lord Neelkanth has the right to challenge the law. If

you value your life, you will not defy his authority’

‘I am a Meluhan,’ shrieked Tarak. ‘It is my right to challenge anyone breaking the law. A *dhobi* , a mere *washerman*

, challenged Lord Ram. It was his greatness

that he acceded

to the man’s objection and renounced his wife. I would urge the Neelkanth to learn from

Lord Ram’s example and use his brains for making decisions.’

‘ENOUGH TARAK!’ erupted Sati.

The entire congregation

was stunned into silence by Tarak’s remark. But not Sati.

Something inside her snapped. She had tolerated too many insults for too long. And she

had endured them with quiet dignity. But this time, this man had insulted Shiva. Her

Shiva, she finally acknowledged

to herself.

‘I invoke the right of *Agnipariksha*’

said Sati, back in control.

The stunned onlookers could not believe their ears. *A trial by fire!*

This was getting worse and worse. Under Agnipariksha,

an unfairly injured soul could

challenge their tormentor to a duel. It was called Agnipariksha as combat would take

place within a ring of fire. There was no escape from the ring. The duellists had to keep fighting till one person surrendered

or died. An Agnipariksha was extremely rare these

days. And for a woman to invoke the right was almost unheard of.

‘There is no reason for this, my lady,’ pleaded Jhoolshwar.

Just like his subjects, he

was terrified that Princess Sati might be killed in his city. For the gargantuan

Tarak

would certainly slay her. The Emperor’s wrath would be terrible. Turning to Tarak,

Jhoolshwar ordered, ‘You will not accept this challenge.’

‘And be called a coward?’

‘You want to prove your bravery?’ spoke Parvateshwar

for the first time. ‘Then fight me.

I will act as Sati’s second for the challenge.’

‘Only I have the right to appoint a second, *pitratulya*’

said Sati, reverentially referring to

Parvateshwar

as being ‘*like a father*’. Turning to Tarak, she said, ‘I am appointing no

second. You will fight with me.'

'You will do no such thing Tarak,' Brahaspati objected this time.

'Tarak, the only reason you wouldn't want to fight is if you are afraid of being killed,' said Shiva.

Every person turned towards the Neelkanth, shocked by his words. Turning to Sati,

Shiva continued, 'Citizens of Karachapa, I have seen the Princess fight. She can defeat

anyone. Even the gods.'

Sati stared at Shiva, shocked.

'I accept the challenge,' growled Tarak.

Sati nodded at Tarak, climbed on her white steed and turned to leave. At the edge of the

square, she pulled up her horse and turned to take one more look at Shiva. She smiled

at him, turned and rode away.

It was the beginning of the third prahar as Shiva and Brahaspati stole quietly into the

local *varjish graha* , the *exercise*

*hall* , to observe Tarak exercising with two partners.

The day's yagna had been a disaster. With everyone petrified that the princess would



die the next day, no one was inclined to participate in the ceremony.  
However, as the

yagna had been called, it had to be conducted or the gods would be  
offended. The

congregation went through the motions and the yagna was called to a close.

Tarak's famed fearsome

blows on his hapless

partners filled Brahaspati's

soul with

dread and he came to an immediate decision. 'I'll assassinate

him tonight. She will not

die tomorrow'

Shiva turned in stunned disbelief to the chief scientist. 'Brahaspati?

What are you



saying?'

'Sati is too noble to meet a fate such as this. I am willing to sacrifice my life  
and

reputation for her.'

'But you are a Brahmin. You are not supposed to kill.'

'I'll do it for you,' whispered Brahaspati,

emotions clouding his judgement. You will not  
lose her, my friend.'

Shiva came close to Brahaspati and hugged him. 'Don't corrupt your soul,  
my friend. I

am not worth such a big sacrifice.'

Brahaspati clung to Shiva.

Stepping back, Shiva whispered, 'In any case, your sacrifice is not required.  
For as sure as the sun rises in the east, Sati will defeat Tarak tomorrow.'

A few hours into the third prahar, Sati returned to the guest house. She did  
not go up to her room, but summoned Nandi and Veerbhadra

to the central courtyard, drew her

sword and began her practise with them.

A little later Parvateshwar

walked in, looking broken. His expression clearly conveyed

his fear that this might be the last time he would talk to Sati. She stopped  
practising,

sheathed

her sword and folded her hands into a respectful namaste.

'Pitratulya,' she

whispered.

Parvateshwar

came close to Sati, his face distraught. She could not be sure but it seemed as though he had been crying. She had never seen even a hint of a tear in his confident eyes.

‘My child,’ mumbled Parvateshwar.

‘I am doing what I think is right,’ said Sati. ‘I am happy’

Parvateshwar

couldn’t find the strength to say anything.

For a brief moment, he

considered assassinating

Tarak at night. But that would be illegal.

Just then, Shiva and Brahaspati walked in. Shiva noticed Parvateshwar’s

face. This was

the first time he had seen any sign of weakness

in the general.

While he could

understand Parvateshwar’s

predicament, he did not like the effect it was having on Sati.

‘I am sorry I am late,’ said Shiva cheerily.

Everyone turned to look at him.

‘Actually, Brahaspati and I had gone to the Lord Varun temple to pray for Tarak,’ said

Shiva. We prayed that the journey his soul would take to the other world would be

comfortable.’

Sati burst out laughing. So did the rest of the party in the courtyard.

‘Bhadra, you are not the right opponent for the practise,’ said Shiva. ‘You move too fast.

Nandi you duel with the princess. And control your agility.’

Turning to Sati, Shiva continued, ‘I saw Tarak practise. His blows have tremendous

power. But the force of the blows slows him down. Turn his strength into his weakness.

Use your agility against his movements.’

Sati nodded, absorbing every word. She resumed

her practise with Nandi. Moving

rapidly compared to Nandi’s slower movements,

Sati was able to succeed in a strike

that could be kill.

Suddenly,

an idea struck Shiva. Instructing Nandi to stop, he asked Sati, ‘Are you

allowed to choose the combat weapon?’

Yes. It's my prerogative as I threw the challenge.'

'Then choose the knife. It will reduce the reach of his strikes while you can move in and out much quicker.'

'That's brilliant!' concurred Parvateshwar,  
while Brahaspati nodded.

Sati signalled

her agreement

immediately.

Almost at the same instant, Veerbhadra



emerged with two knives. Giving one to Nandi, he gave the other to Sati.  
'Practise, my

Lady.'

Sati and Tarak stood at the centre of a circular stadium. This was not the main

Rangbhoomi of Karachapa, which was gargantuan in its proportions. This one had been

constructed

next to the main stadium, for music concerts that the Mesopotamian

immigrants in Karachapa loved. The arena was of the exact dimensions required for an

agnipariksha.

Not so big that a person could simply steer clear of the other contestant

and not too small so that the combat would end fast. There were stands around the

ground and a capacity crowd of over twenty thousand had come to watch the most

important duel in Karachapa for the last five hundred years.

There was a prayer on every lip. Let Father Manu cause a miracle so that Princess Sati

would win. Or at the very least, Eve. Both Tarak and Sati greeted each other with a

namaste, repeating an ancient pledge to fight with honour. Then, turning to the statue of Lord Varun at the top of the main stand they bowed, asking for blessings from the God

of the Water and the Seas. Jhoolshwar

had vacated his ceremonial seat right below

the statue of Lord Varun for Shiva. The governor sat to Shiva's left with Ayurvati and

Krittika to his left. Brahaspati

and Parvateshwar

sat to Shiva's

right. Nandi and

Veerbhadr were in their now familiar position, behind Shiva. A bird courier had been

sent to Daksha the previous day, informing him of the duel. However, there wasn't

enough time to expect a reply.

At long last, Jhoolleshwar

stood up. He was nervous about the agnipariksha,

but

appeared composed. As per custom, he raised a balled fist to his heart and boomed:

*'Satya! Dharma! Maan!'* An invocation to *Truth. Duty. Honour* .

The rest of the stadium rang in agreement. 'Satya! Dharma! Maan!'

Tarak and Sati echoed. 'Satya! Dharma! Maan!'

Jhoolleshwar

nodded to the stadium keeper who lit the ceremonial oil lamp with the holy

fire. The lamp spilled its fire on to the oil channel; the periphery of the central ground was aflame. The ring for the pariksha had been set.

Jhoolleshwar turned to Shiva. 'My Lord, your instructions to start the duel.'

Shiva looked at Sati with a confident smile. Then turning to the stadium, he declared

loudly, 'In the purifying fire of Lord Agni, truth will always triumph!'

Tarak and Sati immediately drew their knives. Tarak held his knife in front of him, like

most traditional fighters. He had chosen a strategy that played to his strengths. Keeping his knife in front of him allowed him to strike the moment Sati came close. He did not stir too much, allowing Sati to make her moves in front of him.

Sati, breaking all known rules of combat, held her knife behind her. She shifted the knife continuously

from one hand to the other, while keeping a safe distance

from her

opponent. The aim was to confuse Tarak about the direction of her attack. Tarak on the

other hand was watching Sati's movements like a hawk. He saw her right arm flex. The

knife was now in her right hand.

Suddenly Sati leapt to the left. Tarak remained stationary. He knew that with her right

hand holding the knife, the leftward movement was a feint. She would have to move to

the right to bring her knife into play. Sure enough, Sati quickly moved to the right and

brought in her arm up in a stabbing motion. Tarak was prepared.

Shifting his knife

quickly to his left arm, he slashed viciously, cutting Sati across her torso. It wasn't a deep cut, but it appeared to hurt. A collective gasp went out from the audience.



Sati retreated and rallied. She moved the knife to her back again, transferring it from

one hand to the other. Tarak kept a close eye on her arms. The knife was in her left

hand. He expected her to move to the right, which she did. He remained immobile,

waiting for her to swerve suddenly to her left. She did, swinging her left arm as she moved. Tarak acted before her arm could even come close enough to do any damage.

He swung ferociously with his right arm and cut her deep in the left shoulder. Sati

retreated rapidly as the congregation

moaned in horror. Some shut their eyes. They

could not bear to look anymore. Most were praying fervently. If it had to be done, let it be done swiftly and not in a slow painful manner.

‘What is she doing?’ whispered

a panic-stricken

Brahaspati

to Shiva. ‘Why is she

charging in so recklessly?’

Shiva turned to look at Brahaspati,

also noticing Parvateshwar’s

face. Parvateshwar

had a surprised, yet admiring grin on his face. Unlike Brahaspati,

he knew what was

going on. Turning back to look at the duel, Shiva whispered, 'She's laying a trap.'

At the centre, Sati was still transferring the knife between her hands behind her back.

She feigned a move from her right to the left, but this time did not transfer the knife. She flexed her left arm, keeping the right arm holding the knife loose and relaxed.

Tarak was watching Sati closely, confident that he was going to slowly bleed her to

death. He believed the knife was in her left hand. He waited for her to move right, then

left, which she did in a swift veer. Expecting her left arm to come in, he sliced with his right hand. Sati neatly pirouetted back. Before a surprised Tarak could react, Sati had

leapt to her right and brought her right hand in brutally onto Tarak's chest. The knife

pierced Tarak's lung. The shock of the blow immobilised Tarak. Blood spurted from his

mouth. He dropped his knife and staggered

back. Sati ruthlessly

maintained

the

pressure and dug the knife in deeper, right up to the hilt.

Tarak stumbled back and collapsed to the ground, motionless. The entire stadium was

stunned. Sati's face had the expression of the mother goddess in fury. Eighty-five years

of repressed anger had surfaced in that instant. She pulled the knife out, slowly twisting it to inflict maximum damage. Blood spewed out from Tarak's mouth at an alarming rate.

She raised the knife with both her hands. All she had to do was bring it down on his

heart and Tarak would meet his maker. Then suddenly, her expression became calm

again. It was almost as if someone had sucked out all the negative energy inside her.

She turned around. Shiva, the destroyer of evil, sat on his throne, staring at her with a slight smile.

Then she looked at Tarak, and whispered. 'I forgive you.'

The stadium erupted in joy. Even if Lord Varun had himself scripted the fight, it wouldn't have been as perfect. It had everything that the Suryavanshis

held dear. Defiant when

under pressure, yet magnanimous

in victory.

Sati raised her knife and shouted, 'Jai Shri Ram!'

The entire stadium repeated, ‘Jai Shri Ram!’

Sati turned towards Shiva and roared once again, ‘Jai Shri Ram!’

‘Jai...,’ Shiva’s words were clogged by the knot in his throat.

The Lord won’t mind this time if I don’t complete the cry.

Shiva glanced away from Sati, lest he show his tears to the woman he loved.

Regaining

control of himself, he looked back at her with a radiant smile. Sati continued to stare at Shiva. Emotions that had been dormant in her for too long rippled through her being as

she saw Shiva’s admiration. When she couldn’t bear it any longer, she shut her eyes.



## CHAPTER 16

### The Sun & Earth

There was an impromptu celebration that night in Karachapa. Their princess was safe.

The insufferable Tarak had been defeated.

Many people in Karachapa

believed that

even his own mother must have loathed the surly preacher. He had few supporters in

the liberal city. But there were rules for duels. Hence the moment Sati had forgiven

Tarak, paramedics had rushed in to take him to the hospital. Surgeons had laboured for

six hours to save his life. To much dismay for the town folk, they had succeeded.

‘Have you heard about the poem of the sun and the earth?’ Sati asked Shiva.

They were standing on the balcony of the governor’s palace while a boisterous party

raged inside.

‘No,’ said Shiva with a seductive grin, corning a little closer to her. ‘But I’d love to hear it’

‘Apparently the earth sometimes thinks of the possibility of coming closer to the sun,’

said Sati. 'But she can't do that. She is so base and his brilliance so searing, that she will cause destruction if she draws him closer.'

What now?

'I disagree,' said Shiva. 'I think the sun burns only as long as the earth is close to him. If the earth wasn't there, there would be no reason for the sun to exist.'

'The sun doesn't exist just for the earth. It exists for every single planet in the solar system.'

'Isn't it really the sun's choice for whom he chooses to exist?'

'No,' said Sati, looking at Shiva, melancholic.

'The moment he became the sun, his

calling became higher. He does not exist for himself. He exists for the greater good of

everyone. His luminosity is the lifeblood of the solar system. And if the earth has any

sense of responsibility, she will not do anything to destroy this balance.'

'So what should the sun do?' asked Shiva, his hurt and anger showing on his face. 'Just

waste his entire life burning away? Looking at the earth from a distance?'

'The earth isn't going away anywhere.

The sun and the earth can still share a warm

friendship. But anything more is against the laws. It is against the interests of others.'

Shiva turned away from Sati in anger. He looked north to seek solace from his holy

lake. Feeling nothing, he looked up at the skies, towards the gods he did not believe in.

Dammit!

He banged the balcony railing with his powerful fist, dislodging some bricks and stormed

off.

Outside the city walls, in a forested area, a few soldiers lay in wait. At a slight distance, two hooded figures were seated on large rocks. The captain of the platoon of soldiers

stood rigid in attention next to the duo. He could not believe that he was standing next

to the Queen herself. The privilege overwhelmed him.

One of the hooded figures raised his hand to motion for the captain to step closer. On

the hooded figure's wrist was a leather bracelet with the serpent Aum.  
'Vishwadyumna,

are you sure this is where we are supposed to meet him? He is late by nearly an hour.'

'Yes, my Lord,' replied Vishwadyumna

nervously. 'This is exactly where he had said he

would come.'



The other hooded figure turned and spoke in a commanding voice - a feminine one. A

voice used to being obeyed without question. 'That man makes the Queen of the Nagas

wait!' Turning to the other hooded figure, she continued, 'I trust you have worked this

out in detail. I hope I haven't entered this vile territory in vain.'

The other hooded figure moved his fleshy hands in a motion asking the Queen for

patience. 'Have faith, your Highness. This man is our key to giving the Suryavanshis

a

blow that they will never recover from.'

'Apparently, there was an Agnipariksha fight between the princess and a man in the city

yesterday,'

said Vishwadyumna

suddenly, trying to impress the Queen with his sharp

ear for local knowledge. 'I do not have the exact details. I just hope that our man was

not involved in it.'



The Queen turned swiftly to the other hooded figure. Then back to Vishwadyumna.

‘Please wait with the other soldiers.’

Vishwadyumna

sensed he had said something he shouldn’t have and quickly retreated

before his Lord’s stern gaze could reprimand him. This is why he had been told in

training school that a good soldier never speaks unless spoken to.

‘*She*’s here?’ asked the Queen with barely suppressed anger.

The other hooded figure nodded.

‘I thought I’d told you to forget about this,’ said the Queen sternly. There is nothing to be gained by this quest. Do you realise that your stupid attack on Mount Mandar may have

let them suspect that we have a mole in their midst?’

The male figure looked up in apology.

‘Did you come here for her?’

‘No, your Highness,’ said the hooded figure with a deeply respectful tone. This was the

place where he asked us to meet him.’

The Queen reached her hand out and gently patted the man’s shoulder. ‘Stay focussed,

my child,' said the Queen softly. 'If we pull this off, it will be our biggest victory ever. Like you just said, we will strike a blow that they will find very difficult to recover from.'

The man nodded.

'And yet,' continued the Queen, pulling her hand back into the shelter of her black

robes, 'your preoccupation with her, makes you take uncharacteristic

decisions. Do you

know he has sent a clear message

that she cannot be touched? Otherwise, the deal is

off.'

The hooded figure stared at the Queen in surprise. 'How did you...'

'I am the Queen of the Nagas, my child,' she interrupted. 'I have more than one piece

on the chessboard.'

The hooded figure continued to look at the Queen, ashamed

about his poor call at

Mount Mandar. The Queen's

next words added to his shame.

'You are making

surprising mistakes,

my child. You have the potential to be the greatest Naga ever.

Don't waste it.'

'Yes, your Highness.'

The Queen appeared to relax.

'I think when we are alone now,' said the Queen, 'maybe you can refer to me as *Mausi* .

After all I am *your mother's sister* '

'Of course, you are,' said the hooded figure as a smile reached his eyes.

'Whatever you

say, mausi.'

It had been two weeks since the Agnipariksha.

Sati had recovered sufficiently for the

convoy to continue its journey to its next destination.

Shiva,

Parvateshwar

and

Brahaspati sat together in Shiva's chambers at the guest-house.

'It's agreed then,' said Parvateshwar.

'I will make the arrangements

for us to commence

our journey a week from today. By that time, Sati should have recovered completely’

‘Yes, I think that is a suitable plan,’ agreed Shiva.

‘Parvateshwar,

I will not be coming along any further,’ said Brahaspati.

‘Why?’ asked Parvateshwar.

‘Well, the new chemicals I had ordered have come. I was considering going back with

the consignment

to Mount Mandar so that the experiments

can begin as soon as

possible. If we can get this right, the consumption of water for making the Somras will

reduce drastically.’

Shiva smiled sadly. ‘I am going to miss you my friend.’

‘And I you,’ said Brahaspati.

‘But I am not leaving the country. When you finish your

tour, come to Mount Mandar. I’ll show you around the sylvan forests near our facility’

‘Yes,’ said Shiva with a grin. ‘Perhaps you will reveal some of your scientific skills and discover a plausible cause for the blue throat!’

Both Shiva and Brahaspati burst out laughing. Parvateshwar,

who did not understand

the private joke, looked on politely.

‘Just one point, Brahaspati,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘I will not be able to divert any soldiers

from the royal entourage. I will speak with Governor Jhoolleshwar to send some soldiers

along for your return journey.’

‘Thank you, Parvateshwar.

But I am sure I will be fine. Why should a terrorist be interested in me?’

‘There was another terrorist attack yesterday

in a village some fifty kilometres from

Mohan Jo Daro,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘The entire temple was destroyed

and all the

Brahmins killed.’

‘Another one,’ said Shiva, angered. ‘That is the third attack this month!’

‘Yes,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘They are getting bolder. And as usual, they escaped before

any back-up could arrive to give them a real fight’

Shiva clenched his fists. He had no idea on how to counter the terror attacks. There was

no way to prepare for them since nobody knew where they would strike next. Was

attacking Swadweep,

the Chandravanshi's

own country, the only way to stop this?

Brahaspati

kept quiet, sensing

Shiva's inner turmoil. He knew there were no easy

answers.

Looking at Shiva,

Parvateshwar

continued,

'I will also get my people to make

preparations

for our journey. I'll meet you in the evening for dinner. I think Sati can

finally join us. I will send instructions for Nandi and Veerbhadra to join us. I know you like their company.'

Shiva looked startled at Parvateshwar's

uncharacteristic

thoughtfulness.

‘Thank you

Parvateshwar.

This is very kind of you. But I believe Kritika, Nandi and Veerbhadra are going to a flute recital tonight. That crazy Veerbhadra has even bought some jewels so

that he won’t look like a country bumpkin next to Nandi!’

Parvateshwar

smiled politely.

‘But it will be a pleasure to dine with you,’ said Shiva.

‘Thank you,’ said Parvateshwar

as he got up. After a few steps, he stopped and turned around. Overcoming his hesitation, he mumbled. ‘Shiva!’

‘Yes?’ Shiva got up.

‘I don’t think I ever told you this,’ said Parvateshwar, uncomfortable. ‘But I would like to thank you for helping Sati in her agnipariksha.

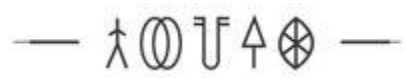
It was your clear thinking which led to victory’

‘No, no,’ said Shiva. ‘It was her brilliance.’

‘Of course it was,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘But you gave her the confidence and the strategy

to show her brilliance. If there is any person in the world that I look at with a feeling beyond a sense of duty, it is Sati. I thank you for helping her.’



‘You are welcome,’ smiled Shiva, with sense not to embarrass

Parvateshwar

further by

lengthening this conversation.

Parvateshwar

smiled and folded his hands into a namaste. While he had still not fallen

prey to the country-wide ‘Neelkanth fever’, he was beginning to respect Shiva. Earning

Parvateshwar’s

esteem was a long journey that Shiva had only just begun. The General

turned around and walked out of the room.

‘He is not a bad sort,’ said Brahaspati,

looking at Parvateshwar’s

retreating back. ‘He

may be a little surly. But he is one of the most honest Suryavanshis



I have ever met. A

true follower of Lord Ram. I hope you don't get too upset by the ill-tempered things he

says to you.'

'I don't,' said Shiva. 'In fact, I think very highly of Parvateshwar.

He is one man whose

respect I would certainly like to earn.'

Brahaspati smiled seeing yet another instance of Shiva's large heart. He leaned closer

and said, 'You are a good man.'

Shiva smiled back.

'I had not answered you the last time you had asked me, Shiva,' continued Brahaspati.

'Honestly, I have never believed in the legend of the Neelkanth. I still don't.'

Shiva's smile became a little broader.

'But I believe in you. If there is one person capable of sucking the negative energy out

of this land, I think it will be you. And I will do all I can to help you. In whatever way I can.'

'You are the brother I never had Brahaspati. Just your presence is all the help I need.'

Saying so Shiva embraced his friend. Brahaspati hugged Shiva back warmly, feeling a

sense of renewed energy course through him. He swore once again that he would

never back off from his mission. No matter what. It wasn't just for Meluha. It was also for Shiva. His friend.

It was over three weeks

after Sati's

agnipariksha

that the convoy set off from

Karachapa.

The usual seven carriages

travelled in a row. This time not five, but six

carriages

were dummies. Shiva sat with Sati in the third and they had been joined by

Parvateshwar

and Ayurvati as well. It was the first time that Parvateshwar

was travelling

in the same carriage as Shiva. Kritika had begged off the carriage and volunteered to

ride, claiming that she was missing the scenic beauty of the countryside. Veerbhadra

was more than pleased to ride along with her in Nandi's platoon.

They had journeyed just a few days away from Karachapa  
when the convoy was  
brought to a halt by a large caravan  
travelling hurriedly in the opposite direction.

Parvateshwar  
stepped  
out of the carriage  
to inquire. Brigadier Vraka came up to  
Parvateshwar  
and executed a military salute.

‘What is the matter?’

‘My Lord, they are refugees from the village of Koonj,’ said Vraka. ‘They  
are escaping a  
terrorist attack.’

‘Escap *ing* !’ asked a surprised Parvateshwar.

‘You mean the attack is still on?’

‘I think so, my Lord,’ said Vraka, his face filled with rage.

‘Goddamit!’ swore Parvateshwar.

Neither Meluha nor he had ever got an opportunity  
like this. To be present at the right time and right place with a thousand five  
hundred

soldiers while a terrorist attack was in progress. And yet, Parvateshwar's hands were

tied. He was not allowed to take on any mission except to protect the Neelkanth and the

Princess.

‘What nonsense?’

he thought to himself. ‘My orders forbid me from following my Kshatriya dharma!’

‘What’s the matter, Parvateshwar?’

Parvateshwar

turned to find Shiva right behind him. Sati and Ayurvati were getting out of the carriage as well. Before Parvateshwar

could answer, a horrible noise tore through

the quiet forest road. It was a sound Shiva had come to recognise. It declared the evil

intentions of the conch-shell bearer, loud and clear. It announced that an attack had

begun. A Naga attack had begun!



## CHAPTER 17

### The Battle of Koonj

‘Where are they?’ asked Parvateshwar.

‘They are in my village, my Lord,’ said the scared village headman. ‘It’s a short distance from here. Some five hundred Chandravanshi

soldiers, led by five Nagas. They gave us

thirty minutes to leave. But the Brahmins at the temple were detained.’

Parvateshwar

clenched his fists to regain his control despite his fury.

‘Our Panditji is a good man, my Lord,’ said the village headman. Tears spilled out of his eyes. Vraka put a comforting hand on the headman’s

shoulder. But the gesture only

made the headman more miserable. Not knowing the fate of the village priest added to

his guilt.

‘We wanted to stay and fight alongside our Pandit and the other Brahmins,’ sobbed the

headman. ‘They are men of god. They don’t even know how to raise a weapon. How

can they fight against this horde?’

Vraka let go off the headman as anger got the better of him.

‘But Panditji ordered us to leave. He told us to flee with our women and children. He

said he would face whatever Lord Brahma has written in his fate. But if anyone can be

saved, they should be.’

Parvateshwar’s

nails dug into his skin. He was livid at the cowardly Chandravanshis for

yet again attacking defenceless

Brahmins and not Kshatriyas who could retaliate. He

was incensed at his fate for having put him in a position where he could not take action.

A part of him wanted to ignore his orders. But he was bound not to break the law.

‘THIS NONSENSE HAS TO STOP!’

Parvateshwar

looked up to see which voice had echoed his thoughts. The expression on Shiva’s face almost threw him back for a moment. The intense fury visible in the

Neelkanth would have brought even a Deva to a standstill.

‘We are good people,’ raged Shiva. ‘We are not scared chicken who should turn and

flee! Those terrorists should be on the run. They should be the ones feeling the wrath of the Suryavanshis!’

A villager standing behind the headman said, ‘But they are terrorists! We cannot defeat

them. The Panditji knew that. That is why he ordered us to run.’

‘But we have a thousand five hundred soldiers,’ said Shiva, irritated at the display of

such cowardice. ‘And another five hundred of you. We outnumber them four to one. We

can crush them. Teach them a lesson they will remember.’

The headman

argued.

‘But they have Nagas!

They are supernatural,

blood-thirsty

killers! What chance do we have against such evil?’

Shiva had the presence

of mind to realise that superstition can only be countered by

another stronger belief. He climbed the carriage pedestal to stand tall. The villagers

stared at him. He ripped off his cravat and threw it away. He didn’t need it anymore.

‘I am the Neelkanth!’

All the soldiers looked up at the destroyer of evil mesmerised.

They were overjoyed to

see him truly accept his destiny. The villagers who did not know of the Neelkanth’s

arrival were stunned at seeing the legend come alive right before their eyes.

‘I am going to fight these terrorists,’ roared Shiva. ‘I am going to show them that we are not scared anymore. I am going to make them feel the pain we feel. I am going to let

them know that Meluha is not going to roll over and let them do what they want.’

Pure energy

coursed

through the huddled

mass

that stood in front of Shiva,

straightening their spines and inspiring their souls.

‘Who’s coming with me?’

‘I am,’ bellowed Parvateshwar,

feeling the suffocating restraints imposed on him fall

away by Shiva’s pronouncement.



‘I am,’ echoed Sati, Nandi, Veerbhadra and Vraka.

‘I am,’ echoed every single soul standing there.

Suddenly

the scared villagers and soldiers were turned into a righteous army. The

soldiers drew their swords. The villagers grabbed whatever weapons they could from

the travelling armoury.

‘To Koonj,’ yelled Shiva, mounting a horse and galloping ahead.

Parvateshwar

and Sati quickly unharnessed

the horses from the cart and raced behind

Shiva. The Suryavanshis

charged behind them, letting out a cry louder than any Naga

conch shell. As they stormed into Koonj, the horror of what had transpired hit them. The

Chandravanshis

had ignored the rest of the village and concentrated

on the area that

would distress the Meluhans most - their venerated temple. Decapitated bodies of the

Brahmins lay around the shrine. They had been clumped together and executed. The

temple itself was ruthlessly destroyed and aflame. The sight of the gruesome attack

enraged

the Suryavanshis

even

more.

They

charged

like crazed

bulls.

The

Chandravanshis

had no chance. They were completely outnumbered and overwhelmed.

They lost ground quickly. Some of the Chandravanshis

were beginning to retreat when

the five Nagas rallied them back. They fought on against the crushing odds, clashing

against the righteous Suryavanshis

with unexpected courage.

Parvateshwar

fought like a man possessed.

Shiva, who had never seen the General

battle, was awed by his skill and valour. Like Shiva, Parvateshwar

knew that the key to

victory were the Nagas. As long as they were alive, the Suryavanshis

would feel terrified

and the Chandravanshis

would draw inspiration from them. He attacked one of them

with frenzied aggression.

The Naga skilfully parried Parvateshwar's

attack with his shield. Bringing his sword

down, he tried to strike Parvateshwar's

exposed shoulder. What he didn't know was that

Parvateshwar

had deliberately left his flank exposed. Swinging to the side to avoid the

blow, Parvateshwar

let his shield clap to his back as he swiftly drew a knife held in a clip

behind. He hurled it at the Naga's exposed right shoulder. His cry let

Parvateshwar

know that the knife had penetrated deep.

The Naga roared in fury. But to Parvateshwar's

surprised admiration, he swung his

sword arm, with the knife buried in his shoulder, back into the battle.  
Parvateshwar

brought his shield back up and blocked the slightly weaker strike from the  
Naga. He

brought his sword up in a stab but the Naga was too quick and deflected it.  
Swerving

left, Parvateshwar

rammed his shield down hard on the knife still buried in the Naga's

shoulder. The knife chipped through the shoulder bone. The Naga snarled in  
pain and

stumbled. That was the opening that Parvateshwar

needed. Bringing his sword up in a

brutal upward stab, he pushed it ruthlessly through the Naga's heart. The  
Naga froze as

Parvateshwar's

sword ripped the life out of him. Parvateshwar

pushed his sword in

deeper, completing the kill. The Naga fell back motionless.

Parvateshwar

was not above the Meluhan fascination with a Naga face. He kneeled to tear the Naga's mask off to reveal a horrifying countenance.

The Naga's nose was pure

bone and had grown to almost form a bird-like beak. His ears were ridiculously large

while his mouth was grotesquely

constricted. He looked like a vulture in human form.

Parvateshwar

quickly whispered what every Suryavanshi

said when he brought down a

worthy opponent, 'Have a safe journey to the other side, brave warrior.'

One down four to go, thought Parvateshwar

rising. Correction, two down, three to go.

He saw Shiva bring down a gigantic Naga in the distance. Both Shiva and Parvateshwar

saw each other and nodded. Shiva pointed towards Parvateshwar's

back. Parvateshwar

turned to see a ferocious Naga fighting five Suryavanshis

singlehandedly.

He turned

back to look at Shiva and nodded. Shiva turned to charge

at another Naga as

Parvateshwar

turned to the one marked for him.

Shiva dashed through the pitched battle scene towards the Naga who had just killed a

Suryavanshi

soldier. He leapt high as he ran in close, with his shield in front to prevent

the standard swinging strike from the Naga. The Naga had brought his own shield up to

prevent what he expected from Shiva — the orthodox up to down swinging strike from a

good height. Shiva, however, surprised the Naga by thrusting in his sword sideward,

neatly circumventing the Naga's shield and gashing his arm. The Naga bellowed in pain

and fell back. He straightened

and held his shield high again, realising that Shiva was

going to be a much more formidably enemy than the previous Suryavanshi.

As Shiva grimly fought the fearless Naga, he did not notice another one at a distance.

This Naga could see that their assault was being progressively

pushed back. It was a

matter of time before the Nagas and the Chandravanshis

would have to retreat. This

Naga would have to face the ignominy of having led the first failed attack.  
And he could

see that it was Shiva who had led the counter-offensive.

That man had to be destroyed

for the future of the mission. The Naga drew his bow forward.

Shiva meanwhile, unaware of the danger, had wedged his sword a little into  
the Naga's

stomach. The Naga grimly fought on, stepping back slowly while ramming  
Shiva with his

shield. He tried in vain to swing his sword down to slice Shiva, who kept his  
own shield

at the ready. He kept fending the Naga's blows while pressing ahead,  
pushing the

sword in deeper and deeper. It was a few more seconds before the Naga's  
soul gave

up. It slipped away as his body bled to death and collapsed. Shiva looked  
down at the

fallen Naga in awe.

These people maybe evil, but they are fearless soldiers.

Shiva looked to the left to find that Parvateshwar

too had killed the Naga he had

engaged. He continued to turn slowly, trying to find the last Naga. Then he heard a loud

shout from the person he had come to love beyond reason.

‘S-H-I-V-A.’

Shiva turned to his right to find Sati racing towards him. He looked behind her to see if anyone was chasing her. There was nobody. He frowned. Before he could react, Sati

leapt forward. A jump timed to perfection.

The Naga at the distance had released

the *agnibaan*

or the *fire arrow* , one of the

legendary poisoned arrows of their people. The venom on its tip burned its victim’s body

from the inside, causing a slow, painful death that would scar the soul for many births.

The arrow had been set straight at Shiva’s neck. It sped unerringly on its deadly

mission. However, the Naga had not calculated the possibility of someone obstructing

its path.

Sati twisted her body in mid-air as she leapt in front of Shiva. The arrow slammed into

her chest with brutal force, propelling her airborne body backward. She fell to Shiva’s



left, limp and motionless.

A stunned Shiva stared at Sati's prone body, his heart shattering.

The destroyer of evil roared in fury. He charged at the Naga like a wild elephant on the

brink of insanity, his sword raised.

The Naga was momentarily

staggered

by the

fearsome sight of the charging Neelkanth. But to his credit, he rallied. He swiftly drew

another arrow from his quiver, loaded it and let it fly. Shiva swung his sword to deflect the arrow, barely missing a step or decreasing

his manic speed. The increasingly panic

struck Naga loaded another arrow and shot again. Shiva swung his sword once more,

deflecting the arrow easily, picking up more speed. The Naga reached back to draw

another arrow. But it was too late. With a fierce yell, Shiva leapt high as he neared the Naga. He swung his sword viciously, decapitating the Naga with one swing of his sword.

The Naga's lifeless body fell in a heap as his severed head flew with the mighty blow, while his still pumping heart spewed blood through the gaping neck.

The Neelkanth's

vengeance

was not quenched.

Screaming,

Shiva bent and kept

hacking at the Naga's inert body, ruthlessly slashing it to bits. No assertion of reason, no articulation of sanity could have penetrated Shiva's enraged mind. Except for a soft,

muffled, injured voice that was barely audible in the din of battle, except to him.

'Shiva...'

He turned back to look at Sati lying in the distance, her head raised slightly.

'Sati!'

He sped towards her, bellowing, 'Parvateshwar!

Get Ayurvati! Sati has fallen!'

Ayurvati had already seen Sati's injured body. The Chandravanshis

were retreating in

haste. Ayurvati ran towards Sati, as did Parvateshwar

on hearing Shiva's call. Shiva

reached her first. She was motionless, but alive. She was breathing heavily as the arrow

had pierced her left lung, flooding her innards with her blood. She couldn't speak as the force of the blow had made the blood gush from her mouth. But she continued to stare

at Shiva. Her face had a strange smile, almost serene. She kept opening her mouth as

if trying to say something. Shiva desperately

wanted to hold her, but he kept his hands

locked together as he tried frantically to control his tears.

'O Lord Brahma!'

cried Ayurvati as she reached

Sati and recognised

the arrow.

'Mastrak! Dhruvini! Get a stretcher. Now!'

Parvateshwar,

Ayurvati, Mastrak and Dhruvini carried Sati to one of the village houses

with Shiva following closely Ayurvati's other assistants

had already begun cleaning the

hut and setting the instruments for the surgery.

'Wait outside, my Lord,' said Ayurvati to Shiva, raising her hand.

Shiva wanted to follow Ayurvati into the hut, but Parvateshwar

held him back by

touching his shoulder. 'Ayurvati is one of the best doctors in the world, Shiva. Let her do her job.'

Shiva turned to look at Parvateshwar,

who was doing an admirable job of controlling his

emotions. But it took one look in his eyes for Shiva to know that Parvateshwar

was as

afraid for Sati as he was. Probably more than he had been before Sati's agnipariksha.

Suddenly a thought hit Shiva. He turned and hurried to the closest Naga body. Bending

quickly, he checked the right wrist. Finding nothing there, he turned and rushed to the

other Naga dead body.

Meanwhile, Parvateshwar

had rallied his disturbed mind enough to realise the important

tasks that needed to be done. He called Vraka and ordered, 'Place guards over the

prisoners of war. Get doctors to attend to all the injured, including the Chandravanshis.'

'The injured Chandravanshis

have already taken their poison, my Lord,' said Vraka.

'You know they will never want to be caught alive.'

Parvateshwar

looked at Vraka with a withering look, clearly saying that he wasn't interested in the details and Vraka should get to the task at hand.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Vraka, acknowledging

Parvateshwar's

silent order.

‘Arrange

a

perimeter

for any

counter-attack,’

continued

Parvateshwar,

his

consciousness

already drawn back to Sati's condition in the house behind him. ‘And...’

Vraka looked up at Parvateshwar,

surprised by his Lord's hesitation. He had never seen

his Lord hesitate before. But Vraka had the good sense to not say anything. He waited

for his Lord to complete his statement.

‘And...’ continued Parvateshwar.

‘There should be some courier-pigeons

still alive in the

temple. Send a red coloured letter to Devagiri. To the Emperor. Tell him Princess Sati is seriously injured.’

Vraka looked up in disbelief. He had no news about Sati. But wisely, he did not say

anything.

‘Tell the Emperor,’ continued Parvateshwar,

‘that she has been shot by an agnibaan.’



‘O Lord Indra!’ blurted Vraka unable to control his shocked dismay.

‘Do it now, Brigadier!’ snarled Parvateshwar.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Vraka with a weak salute.

Shiva meanwhile had already checked the wrists of four of the Nagas. None of them

wore the leather bracelet with the serpent aum that Shiva had come to recognise.

He

reached the last one. The one who had shot Sati. The wretched one who Shiva had

hacked. Shiva kicked the Naga's torso with intense hatred before trying to find his right arm. It took him some time to find the severed limb. Locating it, he raised the remnants

of the robe to check the wrist. There was no leather bracelet. It wasn't him.

Shiva came back to the hut to find Parvateshwar

seated on a stool outside. Kritika was

standing beside the hut entrance, sobbing uncontrollably. Veerbhadra was holding her

gently comforting her. A distraught Nandi stood at Veerbhadra's

side, his face stunned

into a blank expression.

Parvateshwar

looked up at Shiva and pointed to the empty

stool next to him with a weak smile. He was making brave attempts to appear under

control. Shiva sat down slowly and looked into the distance, waiting for Ayurvati to come out.

'We have removed the arrow, my Lord,' said Ayurvati.

Shiva and Parvateshwar

were standing in the hut, looking at an unconscious

Sati.

Nobody else was allowed in. Ayurvati had clearly said that Sati did not need the risk of

increased

infection. And nobody dared argue with the formidable Ayurvati on medical matters. Mastrak and Dhruvini had already fanned out to support the other medical

officers treating the injured Suryavanshi soldiers.

Shiva turned to the right of the bed to see the bloodied tong that had been used to

stretch Sati's innards to pull the arrow out. That tong would never be used again. It had been infected with the agnibaan poison. No amount of heat or chemicals would make

the instrument sterile and safe again. Next to the tong lay the offending arrow, wrapped

in neem leaves, where it would stay for one full day, before being buried deep in a dry

grave to ensure it would not cause any more harm.

Shiva looked at Ayurvati, his eyes moist, unable to find the strength to ask the question that raged in his heart.

'I will not lie to you, my Lord,' said Ayurvati, in the detached manner that doctors will themselves

into, to find the strength in traumatic circumstances.

'It doesn't look good.



Nobody in history has survived an agnibaan

which has penetrated

one of the vital

organs. The poison will start causing an intense fever in some time, which will result in the failing of one organ after another.'

Shiva looked down at Sati and then up pleadingly. Ayurvati fought hard to rein in her

tears and keep her composure. She couldn't afford to lose control. She had many lives

to save in the next few hours.

'I am sorry, my Lord,' said Ayurvati. 'But there really is no cure. We can only give some medicines to make her end easier.'

Shiva glared angrily at Ayurvati. 'We are not giving up! Is that clear?'

Ayurvati looked at the ground, unable to meet Shiva's eye.

'If the fever is kept under control, then her organs will not be damaged, right?' asked

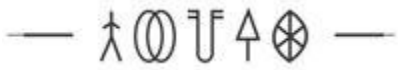
Shiva, as a glimmer of hope entered his being.

Ayurvati looked up and said, 'Yes, my Lord. But that is not a final solution. The fever

caused by an agnibaan can only be delayed, not broken. If we try and control the fever,

it will come back even stronger once the medicines are stopped.'

‘Then we will control the fever forever!’ cried Shiva. ‘I will sit by her side all my life if needed. The fever will not rise.’



Ayurvati was about to say something to Shiva, but thought better of it and kept silent.

She would come back to Shiva in a few hours. She knew that Sati could not be saved. It

was impossible.

Precious time was being wasted in this futile discussion.

Time that

could be used to save other lives.

‘Alright, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati, quickly administering the medicines to Sati to keep her fever down. ‘This should keep her fever down for a few hours.’

She looked up at Parvateshwar

standing at the back for an instant. Parvateshwar

knew

that keeping the fever down would only lengthen Sati’s agony. But he too felt the

glimmer of hope that Shiva felt.

Turning back towards Shiva, Ayurvati said, ‘My Lord, you too are injured. Let me dress

your wounds and I'll leave.'

'I am alright,' said Shiva, not taking his eyes off Sati for an instant.

'No, you are not, my Lord,' said Ayurvati firmly. 'Your wounds are deep. If they catch an infection, then it could be life threatening.'

Shiva did not answer. He just kept looking at Sati and waved his hand dismissively.

'Shiva!' shouted Ayurvati. Shiva looked up at her. 'You cannot help Sati if you yourself

become unwell!'

The harsh tone had the desired effect. While Shiva did not move from his place, he let

Ayurvati dress his wounds. Ayurvati then quickly tended to Parvateshwar's wounds and

left the hut.

Shiva looked at the prahar lamp in the hut. It had been three hours since Ayurvati had

removed the arrow. Parvateshwar

had left the hut to look after the other injured and

make the preparations for setting up camp, since the convoy was going to stay in Koonj

for some time. That was Parvateshwar's

way. If he was confronted with an ugly situation

that he could do nothing about, he did not wallow in his misery. He would drown himself

in his work so that he did not have to think about the crisis.

Shiva was different. Many years back, he had sworn that he would never run from a

difficult situation. Even if there was absolutely nothing he could do. He hadn't left Sati's side for a moment. He sat patiently by her bed, waiting for her to recover. Hoping for her to recover. Praying for her to recover.

'Shiva...' a barely audible whisper broke the silence.

Shiva looked at Sati's face. Her eyes

were slightly open. Her hand had moved

indiscernibly. He pulled his chair closer, careful not to touch her.

'I'm so sorry,' cried Shiva. 'I should never have got us into this fight.'

'No, no,' murmured Sati. 'You did the right thing. Someone had to make our stand. You

have come to Meluha to lead us and to destroy evil. You did your duty.'

Shiva continued to stare at Sati, overcome by grief. Sati widened her eyes a bit, she

was trying to take in as much of Shiva as she could, in what she knew were her last

moments. Death is the ultimate destroyer of a soul's aspirations. Ironically, it is usually the approach of this very destruction which gives a soul the courage to challenge every

constraint and express itself. Express even a long-denied dream.

‘It is my time to go, Shiva,’ whispered Sati. ‘But before I go, I want to tell you that the last few months have been the happiest in my life.’

Shiva continued to look at Sati with moist eyes. His hands developed a life of their own

and moved towards Sati. He checked himself in time.

‘I wish you had come into my life earlier,’ said Sati, letting out a secret that she hadn’t even acknowledged

to herself. ‘My life would have been so different.’

Shiva’s eyes tried frantically to restrain themselves,

struggling against the despair that

needed an outlet.

‘I wish I had told you earlier,’ murmured Sati. ‘Because the first time that I am telling you will also probably be the last.’

Shiva looked on at her, his voice choked.

Sati looked deeply into Shiva’s eyes, whispering softly, ‘I love you.’

The dam broke and tears poured down Shiva’s grief-stricken face.

‘You are going to repeat these words for at least another hundred years,’ sobbed Shiva.

‘You are not going anywhere. I will fight the god of death himself, if I have to. You are not going anywhere.’

Sati smiled sadly and put her hand in Shiva’s. Her hand was burning. The fever had

begun its assault.



## CHAPTER 18

### Sati and the Fire Arrow

‘Nothing can be done, my Lord,’ said a visibly uncomfortable Ayurvati.

She and Shiva were standing in a corner of the hut, at what they thought was a safe

distance beyond the range of Sati’s ears. Parvateshwar

was standing beside them,

holding his tears back.

‘Come on, Ayurvati,’ urged Shiva. ‘You are the best doctor in the land. All we have to do is break the fever.’

‘This fever cannot be broken,’ reasoned

Ayurvati. ‘There is no cure for the agnibaan

poison. We are only lengthening Sati’s agony by keeping the fever low. The moment the

medicines are stopped, the fever will recur with a vengeance.’

‘Let it go, Shiva,’ mumbled a frail voice from the bed. Everyone turned to stare at Sati.

Her face bore a smile that comes only with the acceptance

of the inevitable. ‘I have no

regrets. I have told you what I needed to. I am content. My time has come.’

‘Don’t give up on me, Sati,’ cried Shiva. ‘You are not gone yet. We will find a way. I will find a way. Just bear with me.’

Sati gave up. She didn’t have the strength. She also knew that Shiva had to find his own

peace with her death. And he wouldn’t find that unless he felt he had tried everything

possible to save her.

‘I can feel my fever rising,’ said Sati. ‘Please give me the medicines.’

Ayurvati glanced

at Sati uncomfortably.

All her medical training told her that she

shouldn’t do this. She knew that she was just increasing Sati’s suffering by giving her

medicines. Sati stared hard at Ayurvati. She couldn’t give up now. Not when Shiva had

asked her to hang on.

‘Give me the medicines, Ayurvati,’ repeated Sati. ‘I know what I am doing.’

Ayurvati gave Sati the medicines. She gazed into Sati’s eyes, expecting to find some

traces of fear or anguish. There were none. Ayurvati smiled gently and walked back to

Shiva and Parvateshwar.



‘I know!’ exclaimed Shiva. ‘Why don’t we give her the Somras?’

‘What effect will that have, my Lord?’ asked a surprised Ayurvati. ‘The Somras only

works on the oxidants and increases a person’s lifespan. It doesn’t work on injuries.’

‘Look Ayurvati, I don’t think anyone truly understands

everything about the Somras. I

know you know that. What you don’t know is that the Somras repaired a frostbitten toe

that I had lived with all my life. It also repaired my dislocated shoulder.’

‘What!’ said a visibly surprised Parvateshwar.

‘That’s impossible. The Somras does not

cure physical disabilities.’

‘It did in my case.’

‘But that could also be because

you are special, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati. ‘You are the

Neelkanth.’

‘I didn’t drop from the sky, Ayurvati. My body is as human as Sati’s. As human as yours.

Let’s just try it!’

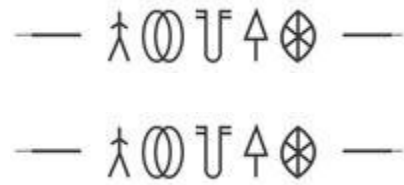
Parvateshwar

did not need any more convincing. He dashed out to find Vraka sitting on a stool. Vraka immediately rose and saluted his commander.

‘Vraka,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘The temple could still have some Somras powder. It was the main production centre of the area. I want that powder. Now’

‘You will have it in ten minutes, my Lord,’ boomed Vraka as he rushed off with his



guards.

‘There is nothing else to do but wait,’ said Ayurvati as Sati fell asleep. The Somras had been administered

— a stronger dose than usual. ‘Parvateshwar, you are tired. You

need to recover from your wounds. Please go and sleep.’

‘I don’t need sleep,’ said Parvateshwar

stubbornly. ‘I am staying on guard with my

soldiers at the perimeter. You can’t trust those Chandravanshis.

They may launch a

counterattack at night.’

A frustrated Ayurvati glared at Parvateshwar,  
her belief reinforced that the machismo of  
the Kshatriyas made them impossible patients.

‘Are you going to bed, my Lord?’ asked Ayurvati, turning towards Shiva,  
hoping that at

least he would listen. ‘There is nothing you can do now. We just have to  
wait. And you

need the rest.’

Shiva just shook his head. Wild horses could not drag him away from Sati.

‘We could arrange a bed in this hut,’ continued Ayurvati. ‘You could sleep  
here if you

wish so that you can keep an eye on Sati.’

‘Thank you, but I am not going to sleep,’ said Shiva, briefly looking at  
Ayurvati before

turning towards Sati. ‘I am staying here. You go to sleep. I will call you if  
there is any change.’

Ayurvati glared at Shiva and then whispered, ‘As you wish, my Lord.’

A tired Ayurvati walked towards her own hut. She needed to get some rest  
since the

next day would be busy. She would have to check the wounds of all the  
injured to

ensure that recovery was proceeding properly. The first twenty-four hours  
were crucial.

Her medical corps had been broken into groups to keep a staggered,  
all-night vigil for  
any emergencies.

‘I will be with the soldiers, Shiva,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘Nandi and Veerbhadra

are on

duty outside along with some of my personal guards.’

Shiva knew what Parvateshwar

actually wanted to say.

‘I will call you as soon as there is a change, Parvateshwar,’

said Shiva, looking up at the

General.

Parvateshwar

smiled weakly and nodded to Shiva. He rushed out before his feelings  
could cause him any embarrassment.

Parvateshwar

sat silently, his soldiers at a respectful distance. They could tell when  
their Lord wanted to be left alone. Parvateshwar  
was lost in thoughts of Sati. Why

should a person like her be put through so much suffering by the Almighty?  
He

remembered her childhood. The day when he decided that here was a girl he  
would be

proud to have as his goddaughter.

That fateful day, when for the first and only time, he regretted his vow to not  
have any

progeny of his own. Which foolish father would not want a child like Sati?

It was a lazy afternoon more than a hundred years ago. Sati had just  
returned from the

Gurukul at the tender age of sixteen. Full of verve and a passionate belief in  
Lord Ram's teachings.

Lord Brahmanayak

still reigned over the land of Meluha. His son, Prince

Daksha, was content being a family man, spending his days with his wife  
and daughter.

He showed absolutely no inclination to master the warrior ways of the  
Kshatriya. Neither

did he show the slightest ambition to succeed his father.

On that day, Daksha had settled down for a family picnic on the banks of the  
river

Saraswati,

a short distance from Devagiri. Parvateshwar

remembered well his duties as

the bodyguard to Daksha then. He sat near the Prince, close enough to protect him, but

far enough to give some privacy to the prince and his wife. Sati had wandered off into

the forest further in the distance, close to the river so that she was visible.

Suddenly

Sati's cry ripped through the silence.

Daksha, Veerini and Parvateshwar

looked up startled. They rushed to the edge of the bank to see Sati at the river bend,

ferociously battling a pack of wild dogs. She was blocking them to protect a severely

injured, fair woman. It could be seen even from the distance that the caste-unmarked

woman was a recent immigrant, who did not know that one never approached the banks

without a sword to protect oneself from wild animals. She must have been attacked by

the pack, which was large enough to bring down even a charging lion.

'Sati!' shouted Daksha in alarm.

Drawing his sword, he charged down the river to protect his daughter. Parvateshwar

followed Daksha, his sword drawn for battle. Within moments, they had jumped into the

fray. Parvateshwar

charged aggressively

into the pack, easily hacking many with quick

strikes. Sati, rejuvenated by the sudden support, fought back the four dogs charging her

all at once. Daksha, despite an obvious lack of martial skills, fought ferociously, with the passionate

protective spirit that comes only with being a parent. But the animals could

sense that Daksha was the weakest amongst their human enemies. Six dogs charged

at him at the same time.

Daksha drove his sword forward in a brutal jab at the dog in front of him. A mistake.

Even though Daksha felled the dog, his sword was stuck in the dead animal. That was

all the opening that the other dogs needed. One charged viciously from the side, seizing

Daksha's right forearm in its jaws. Daksha roared in pain, but held on to his sword as he tried to wrestle his arm free. Another dog bit Daksha's left leg, yanking some of his flesh out. Seeing his Lord in trouble, Parvateshwar

yelled in fury as he swung his sword at

the body of the dog clinging to Daksha's

arm, cleanly cutting the beast in half.

Parvateshwar

pirouetted around in the same smooth motion slashing

another dog

charging Daksha from the front. Sati moved in to protect Daksha's left flank as Daksha

angrily stabbed the dog clinging to his leg. Seeing their numbers rapidly depleting, the

remaining dogs retreated yelping.

'Daksha!' sobbed Veerini, as she rushed to hold up her collapsing husband. He was

losing blood at an alarming rate from his numerous wounds, especially the leg. The dog

must have bitten through a major artery. Parvateshwar

quickly blew his distress conch

shell. A cry for help reached the scouts at the closest crossing-house.

Soldiers and

paramedics

would be with them in a few minutes. Parvateshwar

bound his angvastram

tight around Daksha's thigh to stem the bleeding. Then he quickly helped the injured



foreign woman move closer to the royal party.

‘Father, are you alright?’ whispered Sati as she held her father’s hand.

‘Dammit, Sati!’ shouted Daksha. What do you think you were doing?’

Sati fell silent at the violent response from her doting father.

‘Who asked you to be a hero?’ harangued

Daksha, fuming at his daughter. ‘What if

something had happened to you? What would I do? Where would I go? And for whom

were you risking your life? What difference does the life of that woman make?’

Sati continued to look down, distraught at the scolding. She had been expecting praise.

The crossing-house

soldiers

and paramedics

rushed to the scene.

With efficient

movements, they quickly stemmed the flow of Daksha’s blood. Dressing Parvateshwar’s

and Sati’s minor wounds rapidly, they carried Daksha on a stretcher.

His wounds

needed attention from the royal physician.

As Sati saw her father being carried away, she stayed rooted, deeply guilty at the harm

her actions had caused. She was only trying to save a woman in distress. Wasn't it one

of Lord Ram's primary teachings that it is the duty of the strong to protect the weak?



She felt a soft touch on her shoulder. She turned to face Captain Parvateshwar,

her

father's severe bodyguard. Strangely though, his face sported a rare smile.

'I am proud of you, my child,' whispered Parvateshwar.

You are a true follower of Lord

Ram.'

Tears suddenly burst in Sati's eyes. She looked away quickly. Taking time to control

herself she looked up with a wan smile at the man she would grow to call Pitratulya.

She nodded softly.

Jolted back into the present by a bird call, Parvateshwar

scanned the perimeter, his

eyes moist at the ancient memory. He clutched his hands in a prayer and whispered,

‘She’s your true follower, Lord Ram. Fight for her.’

Shiva had lost track of time. Obviously, nobody had been assigned to reset the prahar

lamps when so many lives were still in danger. Looking out of the window, he could see

early signs of dawn. Shiva’s wounds burned, crying for relief. But he wasn’t going to

give in. He sat quietly on his chair, next to Sati’s bed, restraining himself from making any noise that would disturb her. Sati held his hand tightly. Despite the searing heat of her feverish body, Shiva did not move his hands away. His palms were sweaty due to

the intense heat.

He looked longingly at Sati and softly whispered, ‘Either you stay here or I leave this

world with you. The choice is yours.’

He felt a slight twitch. He looked down to see Sati’s hand move slightly, allowing the

sweat to slide from between their entwined palms. It was almost impossible to say

where the sweat came from.

Is it Sati’s or mine?

Shiva immediately

reached out with his other hand towards Sati's forehead. It was

burning even more strongly. But there were soft beads of perspiration on the temple. A

burst of elation shot through Shiva's being.

'By the great Lord Brahma,' whispered Ayurvati in awe. 'I have never seen anything like

this.'

She was standing besides Sati's bed. The still sleeping Sati was sweating profusely, her

garments and bed soaked. Parvateshwar

stood by her side, his face aglow with hope.

'The agnibaan fever never breaks,' continued a stunned Ayurvati. 'This is a miracle.'

Shiva looked up, his face shimmering with the ecstasy of a soul that had salvaged

its

reason for existence. 'May the Holy Lake bless the Somras.'

Parvateshwar

noticed Sati's hand clutched tightly in Shiva's but he did not comment.

The bliss of this moment had finally crowded out his instinctive drive to stop something

unacceptable

under the laws of the land.

‘My Lord,’ said Ayurvati softly. ‘We must bathe her quickly. The sweat must be removed.

However, considering that her wounds cannot get wet, my nurses will have to rub her

down.’

Shiva looked up at Ayurvati and nodded, not understanding the implication.

‘Umm, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati. ‘That means you will have to leave the room.’

‘Of course,’ said Shiva.

As he got up to leave, Ayurvati said, ‘My Lord, your hands would need to be washed as

well.’

Shiva looked down, noticing Sati’s sweat. He looked up at Ayurvati and nodded, ‘I will



do so immediately.’

‘This is a miracle, Sati. Nobody has ever recovered from an agnibaan!’

said Ayurvati,

beaming ear to ear. ‘I’ll be honest. I had given up hope. It was the Lord’s faith that has kept you alive.’

Sati was lying on her bed wearing a smile and freshly washed clothes. A new bed had

been brought in with freshly laundered and sterilised linen. All traces of the toxic sweat triggered by the Somras had been removed.

‘Oh no,’ said a self-conscious

Shiva. ‘I did nothing. It was Sati’s fighting spirit that saved her.’

‘No, Shiva. It was you. Not me,’ said Sati, holding Shiva’s hand without any hint of

tentativeness.

‘You have saved me at so many levels. I don’t know how I can even begin to repay you.’

‘By never saying again that you have to repay me.’

Sati smiled even more broadly and held Shiva’s hand tighter. Parvateshwar looked on

gloomily at both of them, now unhappy at the open display of their love.

‘All right,’ said Ayurvati, clapping her hands together as if to signal the end of an

episode. ‘Much as I would like to sit here and chitchat with all of you, I have work to do.’

‘What work?’ asked Shiva playfully. ‘You are a brilliant doctor. You have an exceptional

team. I know that every single injured person has been saved. There is nothing more for

you to do.'

'Oh there is, my Lord,' said Ayurvati with a smile. 'I have to put on record how the

Somras can cure an agnibaan wound. I will present this at the medical council as soon

as I return to Devagiri. This is big news. We must research the curative properties of the Somras. There is a lot of work to do!'

Shiva smiled fondly at Ayurvati.

Sati whispered, 'Thank you Ayurvati. Like thousands of others, I too owe my life to

you.'

'You owe me nothing, Sati. I only did my duty.'

Ayurvati bowed with a formal namaste and left the room.

'Well, even I..., ' mumbled Parvateshwar

awkwardly, as he walked out.

Parvateshwar

was surprised to find Ayurvati waiting for him outside. She was standing

at a safe distance from the guards. Whatever it was that she wanted to talk about, she

did not want the others to hear.

‘What is it, Ayurvati?’ asked Parvateshwar.

‘I know what’s bothering you Parvateshwar,’

said Ayurvati.

‘Then how can you just stand by and watch? I don’t think it is right. I know that this is not the correct time to say anything. But I will raise the issue when appropriate.’

‘No, you shouldn’t’

‘How can you say that?’ asked a shocked Parvateshwar.

‘You come from a rare family

which did not have even one renegade Brahmin during the rebellion. Lord Ram insisted

that the laws had to be followed strictly. He demonstrated

repeatedly

that even he

wasn’t above the law. Shiva is a good man. I won’t deny that But he cannot be above

the law. Nobody can be above the law. Otherwise our society will collapse. You above

all should know this.’

‘I know only one thing,’ said Ayurvati, determined. ‘If the Neelkanth feels it is right, then it *is* right.’

Parvateshwar



looked at Ayurvati as if he didn't recognise

her. This could not be the

woman he knew and admired, the woman who followed the law without exception.

Parvateshwar

had begun to respect

Shiva. But the respect

had not turned into



unquestioning faith. He did not believe that Shiva was the one who would complete Lord

Ram's work. In Parvateshwar's

eyes, only Lord Ram deserved

absolute obedience.

Nobody else.

'In any case,' said Ayurvati, 'I have to leave. I have a theory to think about.'

'Really?' asked Shiva. You mean it is not necessary

in Meluha that the Emperor's first-

born son succeed him?'

'Yes,' replied Sati smiling.

Shiva and Sati had spent many hours over the previous week talking about matters

important and mundane. Sati, while recovering quickly, was still bedridden. The convoy

had set up camp at Koonj till such time as the injured were ready to travel. The journey

to Lothal had been called off. Shiva and Parvateshwar

had decided that it was better to

return to Devagiri as soon as the wounded were able to.

Sati shifted slightly to relieve a bit of the soreness in her back. But she did not let go of Shiva's hand while doing so. Shiva leaned forward and pushed back a strand of hair

that had slipped onto Sati's face. She smiled lovingly at him and continued, 'You see, till around two hundred and fifty years back, the children of the kings were not his birth-children but were drawn from the Maika system. So there was no question of knowing

who the first-born was. We could only know his first-adopted.'

'Fair point.'

'But in addition, it was not necessary

that the first-adopted child would succeed.

This

was another one of the laws that Lord Ram instituted for stability and peace. You see, in the olden days there were many royal families, each with their own small kingdoms.'

‘All right,’ said Shiva, paying as much attention to Sati’s words as to the hypnotising

dimples that formed on her cheeks when she spoke. ‘These kings would probably be at

war all the time, so that one of them could be overlord for however short a period.’

‘Obviously,’ smiled Sati, shaking her head at the foolishness of the kings before Lord

Ram’s time.

‘Well, it is the same everywhere,’

said Shiva, remembering the constant warfare in his

part of the world.

‘Battles for supremacy

between the kings led to many unnecessary

and futile wars,

where the only ones who suffered were the common people,’ continued Sati.

‘Lord Ram

felt it was ridiculous for the people to suffer so that the egos of their kings were fed. He instituted a system where a *Rajya Sabha* , the *ruling council* , consisting of all Brahmins and Kshatriyas of a specific rank, was created.

Whenever the Emperor died or took

sanyas,

the council would meet and elect a new Emperor from amongst Kshatriyas of

the rank of brigadier or above. The decision could not be contested and was inviolate.'

'I have said it before and I'll say it again,' said Shiva with a broad smile.  
'Lord Ram was a genius.'

'Yes, he was,' said Sati, enthusiastically.

'Jai Shri Ram.'

'Jai Shri Ram,' repeated Shiva. 'But tell me, how come your father became the Emperor

after Lord Brahmanayak.

After all, his Highness

is the first born of the previous

Emperor, correct?'

'He was elected, just like every other Emperor of Meluha. Actually it was the first time in Meluhan history that a ruling emperor's son was elected Emperor,' said Sati proudly.

'Hmm. But your grandfather helped your father get elected?'

'I've never been sure about that. I know my grandfather would have liked it if my father

had become Emperor. But I also know that he was a great man who followed the rules

of Meluha and would not openly help his son. Lord Bhrigu, a great sage respected

across the land, helped my father a great deal in his election.'

Shiva smiled at her tenderly running his hand across the side of her face. Sati closed her eyes, exulting in the sensation. His hand glided along the side of her body to rest on her hand again. He squeezed it softly.

Shiva was about to ask more about the relationship between Daksha and Lord Bhrgu

when the door suddenly swung open. Daksha, looking deeply exhausted, stormed in.

Following him were Veerini and Kanakhala. Shiva immediately withdrew his hand before

Daksha could see where it was. But Daksha had noticed the movement.

‘Father!’ cried a surprised Sati.

‘Sati, my child,’ sighed Daksha, kneeling next to Sati’s bed. Veerini knelt next to Daksha and ran her hand lovingly over her daughter’s

face. She was crying. Kanakhala

remained

at the door and greeted

Shiva with a formal namaste.

Shiva returned

Kanakhala’s

namaste with a beaming smile. Parvateshwar

and Ayurvati waited next to

Kanakhala,

politely leaving the royal family alone in their private moment. Nandi,

Veerbhadra

and Krittika stood behind them. A discrete aide silently brought in two

chairs for the royal couple, placed them next to the bed and left just as quietly.

Daksha,

Veerini

and Kanakhala,

accompanied

by two thousand

soldiers,

had

immediately left Devagiri on hearing the news of Sati's injury. They had sailed down the

Saraswati

to the inland delta of the river and then had ridden night and day to reach

Koonj.

'I am alright, father,' said Sati, holding her mother's hand gently. Turning towards her

mother, she continued, 'Seriously, mother. I am feeling better than ever. Give me one

more week and I'll dance for you!'

Shiva smiled gently at Sati as Daksha and Veerini broke into a weak laugh.

Looking at her father, Sati continued, 'I am sorry to have caused so much trouble. I

know there are much more important tasks at hand and you had to rush here.'

'Trouble?' asked Daksha. 'My child, you are my life. You are nothing but a source of joy

for me. And at this point of time, you can't imagine how proud I am of you.'

Veerini bent over and kissed Sati's forehead tenderly.

'I am proud of all of you,' continued Daksha looking back at Parvateshwar and Ayurvati.

'Proud that you supported the Lord in what had to be done. We actually fought back a

terrorist attack! You can't imagine how much this has electrified the nation!'

Daksha soothingly continued to pat Sati's hand, as he turned to Shiva and said, 'Thank

you, my Lord. Thank you for fighting for us. We know now that we have put our faith in

the right man.'

Shiva could say nothing but smile awkwardly and acknowledge

Daksha's faith with a

slight nod and a courteous namaste.

Turning to Ayurvati, Daksha asked, 'How is she now? I was told she is on her way to a

total recovery.'

'Yes, your Highness,' said Ayurvati. 'She should be able to move in another week. And

in three weeks, the only memory of the wound would be a scar.'

'You are not just the best doctor of this generation, Ayurvati,' said Daksha proudly. 'You are in fact the best doctor of all time.'

'Oh no, your Highness,' cried a flabbergasted

Ayurvati, holding her ears gently to ward

off the evil spirits that might get angry at an undeserved

compliment. 'There are many

far greater than me. But in this case, the miracle was by the Lord Neelkanth, not me.'

Looking briefly towards a visibly embarrassed

Shiva before turning back to Daksha,

Ayurvati continued, 'I thought we had lost her. She got the terrible fever after we pulled the agnibaan out. You know that there are no medicines to cure the agnibaan fever,

your Highness.

But the Lord refused to lose hope. It was his idea to give her the



Somras.'

Daksha turned to Shiva with a grateful smile and said, 'I have one more thing to thank

you for, my Lord. My daughter is part of my soul. I wouldn't have been able to survive

without her.'

'Oh no, I did nothing,' said Shiva, self-conscious.

'It was Ayurvati who treated her.'

'It is nothing but your humility speaking, my Lord,' said Daksha. 'You truly are a worthy Neelkanth. In fact, you are a worthy Mahadev!'

An astounded

Shiva stared at Daksha, his expression

serious.

He knew who the

previous

*Mahadev* , the

*God of Gods* , was. He did not believe he deserved

to be

compared to Lord Rudra. His deeds did not qualify him for that.

'No, your Highness. You speak too highly of me. I am no Mahadev.'

'Oh yes you are, my Lord,' said Kanakhala

and Ayurvati almost simultaneously.

Parvateshwar

looked on, silent.

Not wanting to press the issue as Shiva disliked being called Mahadev, Daksha turned

towards Sati, What I don't understand is why you jumped in front of the Lord to take the

arrow. You have never believed

in the legend.

You have never had faith in the

Neelkanth like I have. Why then did you risk your own life for the Lord?'

Sati did not say anything. She looked down with an uncomfortable smile, embarrassed

and ill-at-ease.

Daksha turned to Shiva to see him wearing the very same sheepish

expression as Sati's. Veerini looked at her husband intently. She waited for him to rise

and speak to Shiva. Daksha suddenly stood up and walked around the bed towards

Shiva, holding his hands in a formal namaste.

A surprised Shiva got up and returned

Daksha's namaste formally, with a slight bow of his head.

‘My Lord, perhaps for the first time in her life, my daughter is tongue-tied in front of me,’

said Daksha. ‘And I have come to understand you over time. You will always give to

others but never ask anything for yourself. Hence I am going to make the first move

here.’

Shiva continued to stare at Daksha, frowning.

‘I will not lie to you, my Lord,’ continued Daksha. ‘The laws classify my daughter as a

vikarma, because she had given birth to a still-born decades back. It is not that serious a crime. It could have been due to the past life karma of the child’s father. But the law of the land is that both the father and mother be blamed for the tragedy. My darling

daughter was put in the category of a vikarma, because of this incident.’

Shiva looked at Daksha, but his expression was clear that he thought the vikarma law

unfair.

‘It is believed that vikarma people are carriers of bad fate,’ continued Daksha. ‘Hence if she marries again, she will pass on her bad fate to her husband and possibly her future

children.’

Veerini looked at her husband with inscrutable eyes.

‘I know my daughter, my Lord,’ continued Daksha. ‘I have never seen her do anything

even remotely wrong. She is a good woman. In my opinion, the law that condemns her

is unfair. But I am only the Emperor. I cannot change the law.'

Parvateshwar

glared angrily at Daksha, upset that he served an Emperor who held the law in such low esteem.

'It breaks my heart that I cannot give my daughter the happy life that she deserves,'

sobbed Daksha. 'That I cannot save her from the humiliation that a good soul like her

suffers daily. What I can do, though, is ask you for help.'

Sati looked at her father with loving eyes.

'You are the Neelkanth,' continued Daksha. 'In fact you are more than that. I genuinely

believe you are a Mahadev, even though I know you don't like to be called that. You are

above the law. You can change the law if you wish. You can override it if you want.'

An aghast Parvateshwar

glowered at Daksha. How could the Emperor be so dismissive of the law? Then his eyes fell on Shiva. His heart sank further.

Shiva was staring at Daksha with undisguised

delight. He had thought that he would

have to convince the Emperor about Sati. But here he was, quite sure that the Emperor

was about to offer his daughter's hand to him.

'If you decide to take my daughter's hand, my Lord, no power on earth can stop you,'

contended Daksha. 'The question is: do you want to?'

All the emotions in the universe surged through Shiva's being. His face bore an ecstatic

smile. He tried to speak but his voice was choked. He bent down, picked up Sati's hand

gently brought it to his lips and kissed it lovingly. He looked up at Daksha and

whispered, 'I will never let go of her. Never.'

A stunned Sati stared at Shiva. She had dared to love over the last week, but had not

dared to hope. And now her wildest dream was coming true. She was going to be his

wife.

An overjoyed Daksha hugged Shiva tightly and softly said, 'My Lord!'

Veerini was sobbing uncontrollably. The unfairness done to Sati all her life had been set right. She looked up at Daksha, almost willing to forgive him. Ayurvati and Kanakhala

entered the room and congratulated

the Emperor, the Queen, Shiva and Sati. Nandi,

Krittika and Veerbhadra,

who had heard the entire conversation,

expressed

their joy.

Parvateshwar

stood rooted near the door, furious at such disregard for Lord Ram's way.

Shiva, at long last, regained control of himself. Firmly gripping Sati's hand, he looked at Daksha, 'But your Highness, I have a condition.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'The vikarma law...'

'It doesn't need to be changed,

my Lord,' said Daksha. 'If you decide to marry my

daughter, then the law cannot stop you.'

'All the same,' said Shiva. 'That law must be changed.'

'Of course, it will be my Lord,' said a beaming Daksha. Turning towards Kanakhala, he

continued, 'Make a proclamation to be signed by the Neelkanth, saying that from now

on any noble woman who gives birth to a still-born child will not be classified

as

vikarma.’

‘No, your Highness,’

interrupted Shiva. ‘That is not what I asked. I want the entire

vikarma law scrapped.

Nobody will be a vikarma from now on. Bad fate can strike

anyone. It is ridiculous to blame their past lives for it.’

Parvateshwar

looked at Shiva in surprise. Though he did not like even a comma being

changed in any of Lord Ram’s laws, he appreciated

that Shiva was remaining true to a

fundamental cannon of Lord Ram’s principles — the same law applies to everybody,

equally and fairly, without exceptions.

Daksha however looked at Shiva in shock. This was unexpected.

Like all Meluhans, he

too was superstitious about the vikarma. His displeasure

was not with the vikarma law

itself but with his daughter being classified as one. But he quickly recovered and said,

‘Of course, my Lord. The proclamation will state that the entire vikarma law has been

scrapped. Once you sign it, it will become law.’

‘Thank you, your Highness,’ smiled Shiva.

‘My daughter’s happy days are starting again,’ exulted Daksha, turning to Kanakhala. ‘I

want a grand ceremony at Devagiri when we return. A wedding the likes of which the

world has not seen before. The most magnificent

wedding ever. Call in the best

organisers in the land. I want no expense spared.’

Daksha turned to look at Shiva for affirmation. Shiva looked at Sati to admire her joyous smile and glorious dimples.

Turning towards Daksha,

he said, ‘All I want, your

Highness, is to get married to Sati. I wouldn’t mind the simplest ceremony in the world

or the most magnificent. As long as all of you, Brahaspati and the Gunas are present, I

will be happy’

‘Excellent!’ rejoiced Daksha.





## CHAPTER 19

### Love Realised

There was an air of celebration in Devagiri when the royal caravan arrived three weeks

later. Kanakhala, who had arrived in Devagiri earlier, ensured that all the preparations

for the most-eagerly

awaited wedding in a millennium had been accomplished.

Her

arrangements,

as always, had been impeccable.

The various wedding ceremonies

and celebrations

had been spread over seven days,

each day with an exuberant

variety of events.

By the usually sober Suryavanshi

standards,

the city had been decorated extravagantly.

Colourful banners hung proudly

from the city walls, splashing festive beauty on the sober grey exteriors. The roads had

been freshly tiled in the sacred blue colour. All the restaurants

and shops served their

customers free of charge for the seven days of revelry, subsidised at state expense. All

the buildings had been freshly painted at government cost to make Devagiri appear like

a city that had settled the previous day.

A massive channel had been rapidly dug along the far side of the Saraswati

where a

part of the river had been diverted. The channel was in the open in some parts and went

underground in others. Filters injected a red dye into the water as soon as it entered the channel and removed it just as efficiently when the water flowed back into the river. The channel formed a giant *Swastika* , an ancient symbol which literally translates to ‘ *that which is associated*

*with well-being*

’ or very simply, a lucky charm. From any of the three

city platforms, a Meluhan could look in reverence

at the enormous impression of the

revered Swastika

in the royal red Suryavanshi

colour formed by the flow of the holy

Saraswati.

Some of the protective giant spikes around the entry drawbridges

of the

three platforms had been cleared. In their stead, giant rangolis, visible from miles away, had been drawn to welcome all into the capital. Kanakhala had wanted to clear all the

spikes surrounding Devagiri, but Parvateshwar

had vetoed it, citing security reasons.

Elite families from across the empire had been invited to attend the festivities. People of distinction ranging from governors to scientists, generals to artists and even sanyasis

had trooped into Devagiri to celebrate

the momentous

occasion.

Ambassadors

of

eminent countries, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, had been given permits for a rare

visit to the capital of Meluha. Jhoolshwar

had cannily used the distinctive honour

granted to ambassadors

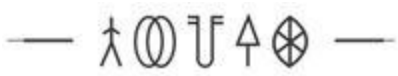
to wrangle some additional trade quotas. Brahaspati had come down from Mount Mandar with his retinue. Only a skeletal security staff of Arishtanemi soldiers had been left behind at the mountain. It was the first time in history that seven days would elapse at Mount Mandar without any experiments!

The first day had two pujas organised in the name of Lord Indra and Lord Agni. They were the main gods for the people of India and their blessings were sought before any event. And an event as momentous as the wedding of the millennium could only begin with their sanction. This particular puja, however, celebrated their warrior form. Daksha eloquently explained the reason. The Meluhans were not just celebrating the marriage between the Neelkanth and their princess.

They were also celebrating the massive defeat of the despised terrorists at Koonj. According to him, the echoes of Koonj would reverberate deep in the heart of Swadweep.

The Suryavanshi vengeance had begun!

This puja was followed by the formal marriage ceremonies of Shiva and Sati. Though some of the celebrations were still on, Shiva excused himself and tugged Sati along with him.



‘By the Holy Lake!’ exclaimed Shiva, shutting the door to their private chamber behind

him. ‘This is only the first day! Is every day going to be as long?’

‘It doesn’t seem to make a difference to you! You walked out when you pretty well

pleased!’ teased Sati.

‘I don’t care about those damn ceremonies!’

growled Shiva, ripping his ceremonial

turban off and flinging it aside. He stared at Sati fervently, slowly moving towards her, his breathing heavy.

‘Oh yes of course,’ mocked Sati, with a playfully theatrical expression.

‘The Neelkanth

gets to decide what is important and what is not. The Neelkanth can do anything he

wants.’

‘Oh yes he can!’

Sati laughed mischievously

and ran to the other side of the bed. Shiva dashed towards

her from the opposite side hurling his angvastram off in one smooth motion.

‘Oh yes he can...’

‘Remember what I told you to say,’ whispered Nandi to Veerbhadra.

‘Don’t worry. The

Lord will give his permission.’

‘What...’ whispered a groggy Shiva as he was woken up gently by Sati.

‘Wake up, Shiva,’ whispered Sati tenderly, her hair falling over his face, teasing his

cheeks. ‘Careful now,’ murmured Sati softly, as Shiva looked at her longingly. ‘Nandi,

Krittika and Veerbhadra are waiting at the door. They have something important to tell

you.’

‘Hmmm?’ growled Shiva, as he walked towards the door and glared at the trio. ‘What is

it Nandi? Isn’t there someone beautiful in your life that you would like to bother at this hour instead of troubling me?’

‘There’s nobody like you, my Lord,’ said Nandi, with a low bow and a chaste namaste.

‘Nandi, you better stop this nonsense or you are going to remain a bachelor all your life!’

joked Shiva.

As everybody laughed out loud, Kritika remained anxious about the task at hand.

‘Well, what did you want to talk about?’ asked Shiva.

Nandi nudged Veerbhadra roughly. Shiva turned to Veerbhadra with a quizzical look.

‘Bhadra, since when do you need the support of so many people to speak to me?’

asked Shiva.

‘Shiva...’ murmured Veerbhadra nervously.

‘Yes?’

‘It’s like this...’

‘It’s like what?’

‘Well, you see...’

‘I am seeing Bhadra.’

‘Shiva, please don’t make him more nervous than he is,’ said Sati. Looking towards

Veerbhadra,

she continued, ‘Veerbhadra,

speak fearlessly.

You haven't done anything

wrong.'

'Shiva,' whispered Veerbhadra timidly, his cheeks the colour of beetroot. 'I need your

permission.'

'Permission granted,' said Shiva, amused by now. 'Whatever it is that you want it for.'

'Actually, I am considering getting married.'

'A capital idea!' said Shiva. 'Now all you have to do is convince some blind woman to

marry you!'

'Shiva!' reprimanded Sati gently.

'Well, I've already found a woman,' said Veerbhadra,

before his courage could desert



him. 'And she's not blind...'

'Not blind?!' exclaimed Shiva, his eyebrows humorously arched in wide disbelief. 'Then

she is stupid enough to tie herself for the next seven births to a man who wants

someone else to determine his marriage!'

Veerbhadra



gazed at Shiva with an odd mixture of embarrassment,  
contrition and  
incomprehension.

‘I have told you before, Bhadra,’ said Shiva, ‘There are many customs of our tribe that I don’t like. And one of the primary ones amongst them is that the leader has to approve

the bride of any tribesman. Don’t you remember how we made fun of this ridiculous

tradition as children?’

Veerbhadra glanced at Shiva and immediately down again, still unsure.

‘For god’s sake man, if you are happy with her, then I am happy for you,’ said an

exasperated

Shiva. ‘You have my permission.’

Veerbhadra looked up in surprised ecstasy as Nandi nudged him again. Krittika looked

at Veerbhadra,

as a long held breath escaped

with massive relief. She turned to Sati

and silently mouthed the words, ‘Thank you.’

Shiva walked towards Krittika and hugged her warmly. A startled Krittika held back for

an instant, before the warmth of the Neelkanth conquered her Suryavanshi reserve. She

returned the embrace.

‘Welcome to the tribe,’ whispered Shiva. ‘We are quite mad, but at heart we are good

people!’

‘But how did you know,’ said Veerbhadra. ‘I never told you that I loved her.’

‘I am not blind, Bhadra,’ smiled Shiva.

‘Thank you,’ said Krittika to Shiva. ‘Thank you for accepting me.’

Shiva stepped back and said, ‘No. Thank *you*. I was always concerned about Bhadra.

He is a good, dependable

man, but too simple-minded

about women. I was worried

about how married life would treat him. But there is no reason to worry anymore.’

‘Well, I too want to tell you something,’ said Krittika. ‘I had never believed in the legend of the Neelkanth. But if you can do to Meluha what you have done to my lady, then you

are worthy of even being called the Mahadev!’

‘I don’t want to be called the Mahadev, Krittika. You know I love Meluha as much as I

love Sati. I will do all that I possibly can.’ Turning towards Veerbhadra,  
Shiva ordered,

‘Come here, you stupid oaf!’

Veerbhadra came forward, embraced Shiva affectionately and whispered,  
‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t be stupid. There’s no need for a “thank you“!’ said Shiva with a grin.

Veerbhadra smiled broadly.

‘And listen!’ snarled Shiva in mock anger. ‘You are going to answer to your  
best friend

over the next chillum we share on how you dared to love another woman for  
so long

without even speaking to me about it!’

Everybody laughed out loud.

‘Will a good batch of marijuana make up for it?’ asked Veerbhadra, smiling.

‘Well, I’ll think about it!’

‘Doesn’t she look tired?’ asked a concerned Ayurvati, looking at Sati.

Sati had just gotten up from the player platform as she and her mother had  
been

excused for this particular ceremony. This was only for the bridegroom and  
the father-

in-law. The pandits were preparing for the puja, which would take a few  
moments.

‘Well, it has been six days

of almost continuous

celebrations

and pujas,’

said

Kanakhala.

‘Though it is the custom that all this be done for a royal wedding, I can

understand her being tired.’



‘Oh, I wouldn’t say it has anything to do with the six *days*

of pujas,’ said Brahaspati.

‘No?’ asked Kanakhala.

‘No,’ answered Brahaspati, mischievously.

‘I think it has to do with the five *nights* ’

‘What?’ exclaimed Ayurvati, then blushed a deep red as the meaning of Brahaspati’s

words dawned on her.

Parvateshwar,

who was sitting next to Kanakhala,

glared at Brahaspati

for the highly

improper remark. Brahaspati guffawed as the ladies giggled quietly. An assistant pandit

turned around in irritation. But on seeing the seniority of the Brahmins sitting behind

him, he immediately swallowed his annoyance and returned to his preparations.

Parvateshwar

however

had no such compunctions.

‘I can’t believe

the kind of

conversation

I am being forced to endure!’

He rose to walk to the back of the

congregation.

This made even Kanakhala and Ayurvati to chortle. One of the senior pandits turned to

signal that the ceremony was about to begin, making them fall silent immediately.

The pandits resumed the invocations of the shlokas. Both Shiva and Daksha continued

to pour the ceremonial

ghee into the sacred fire at regular intervals while saying,

‘Swaha’.

In between two successive

swahas,

there was enough time for Shiva and Daksha to

talk softly to each other. They spoke of Sati. And only Sati. To any neutral observer, it would have been difficult to decide who loved the princess more. The pandit took a

momentary break in his recitation of the shlokas, the cue for Shiva and Daksha to pour

some more ghee into the sacred fire with a ‘Swaha.’ A little ghee spilled onto Daksha

hands. As Shiva immediately pulled the napkin on his side to wipe it off, he noticed the

chosen-tribe amulet on Daksha’s arm. He was stunned on seeing the animal there, but

had the good sense to not make a comment. Daksha meanwhile had also turned and

noticed Shiva’s gaze.

‘It wasn’t my choice. My father chose it for me,’ said Daksha, with a warm smile, while

wiping the ghee off his hands. There was not a hint of embarrassment

in his voice. If

one looked closely though, one could see just a hint of defiance in his eyes.

‘Oh no, your Highness,’ mumbled Shiva, a little mortified. ‘I didn’t mean to look. Please accept my apologies.’

‘Why should you apologise, my Lord?’ asked Daksha. ‘It is my chosen-tribe. It is worn

on the arm so that everyone can see it and classify me.’

‘But you are much beyond your chosen-tribe, your Highness,’ said Shiva politely. ‘You

are a far greater man than what that amulet symbolises.’

‘Yes,’ smiled Daksha. ‘I really showed the old man, didn’t I? The Neelkanth did not

choose to appear in his reign. He came in mine. The terrorists were not defeated in his

reign. They were defeated in mine. And the Chandravanshis

were not reformed in his

reign. They will be reformed in mine.’

Shiva smiled cautiously. Something about the conversation niggled at him. He took one

more glance at the amulet on Daksha’s arm. It represented

a humble goat, one of the

lowest chosen-tribes

amongst the Kshatriyas. In fact, some people considered the goat  
chosen-tribe to be so low that its wearer could not even be called a full  
Kshatriya. Shiva turned back towards the sacred  
fire on receiving the verbal cue from the pandit.

Scooping some more ghee, he poured it into the fire with a ‘Swaha’.

At nightfall, in the privacy of their chambers, Shiva had considered asking  
Sati about the relationship between Emperor Brahmanayak

and his son, Daksha. But for some reason,

his instincts told him that he would have to be careful in how he asks the  
questions.

‘How was the relationship between Lord Brahmanayak  
and your father?’

Sati stopped playing with Shiva’s flowing locks. She took a deep breath and  
whispered,

‘It was strained at times. They were very different characters. But Lord  
Bhrigu...’

The conversation was interrupted by knocking at the door.

‘What is it?’ growled Shiva.

‘My Lord,’ Taman,

the doorkeeper,

announced

nervously.



‘The Chief Scientist

Brahaspatiji has requested an audience with you. He insists that he must meet with you

tonight.’

Shiva was always happy to meet Brahaspati. But before answering the doorkeeper, he

looked at Sati with a raised eyebrow.

Sati smiled and nodded. She knew of the

importance that Shiva attached to his relationship with Brahaspati.

‘Let Brahaspatiji in, Taman.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘My friend,’ said Brahaspati. ‘My apologies for disturbing you so late.’

‘You never need to apologise to me, my friend,’ answered Shiva.

‘Namaste, Brahaspatiji,’ said Sati, bending to touch the Chief Scientist’s feet.

‘*Akhand*

*saubhagyavati*

*bhav* ,’ said Brahaspati,

blessing

Sati with the traditional

invocation that may *her husband*

*always*

*be alive and by her side .*

‘Well,’ said Shiva to Brahaspati, ‘what is so important that you had to pull yourself out of bed so late at night?’

‘Actually, I didn’t get the chance to speak to you earlier.’

‘I know,’ said Shiva, smiling towards Sati. ‘Our days have been full with one ceremony

after another.’

‘I know,’ said Brahaspati

nodding. ‘We Suryavanshis

love ceremonies!

In any case, I

wanted to come and speak with you personally, since I have to leave for Mount Mandar

tomorrow morning’

‘What?’ asked a surprised Shiva. ‘You have survived all this for the last six days. Surely you can survive one more?’

‘I know,’ said Brahaspati,

crinkling his eyes apologetically.

‘I would have loved to stay

but there is an experiment that had already been scheduled.

The preparations

have

been going on for months. The Mesopotamian

material required for it has already been

prepared. We are going to test the stability of the Somras with lesser quantities of water.

I have to go early to check that the experiment starts correctly. My other scientists will remain here to keep you company!’

‘Right,’ said Shiva sarcastically.

‘I really do love their constant

theorising

about

everything under the sun.’

Brahaspati laughed. ‘I really do have to go, Shiva. I am sorry’

‘No need to apologise,

my friend,’ said Shiva smiling. ‘Life is long. And the road to

Mount Mandar short. You are not going to get rid of me that easily.’

Brahaspati

smiled, his eyes full of love towards a man he had come to consider his

brother. He stepped forward and hugged Shiva tightly. Shiva was a little surprised. It

was usually Shiva who would move to embrace Brahaspati first, and Brahaspati would

normally respond later, a little tentatively.

‘My brother,’ whispered Brahaspati.

‘Ditto,’ mumbled Shiva.

Stepping

slightly back but still holding Shiva’s

arms, Brahaspati

said, ‘I would go

anywhere for you. Even into Patallok if it would help you.’

‘I would never take you there, my friend,’ answered Shiva with a grin, thinking that he

himself wasn’t about to venture into *Patallok*, the *land of the demons*

.

Brahaspati smiled warmly at Shiva. ‘I hope to see you soon, Shiva.’

‘You can count on it!’

Turning to Sati, Brahaspati said, ‘Take care, my child. It is so good to see you finally get the life you deserve.’

‘Thank you, Brahaspatiji.’



## CHAPTER 20

### Attack on Mandar

‘How are you, my friend?’

‘What the hell am I doing here?’ asked a startled Shiva.

He found himself sitting in the Brahma temple in Meru. Sitting in front of him was the

Pandit whom he had met during his first visit to Meru, many months back.

‘You called me here,’ said the Pandit smiling.

‘But how and when did I get here?’ asked Shiva, astounded.

‘As soon as you went to sleep,’ replied the Pandit. ‘This is a dream.’

‘I’ll be damned!’

‘Why do you swear so much?’ asked the Pandit frowning.

‘I only swear when the occasion demands,’

grinned Shiva. ‘And what’s wrong with

swearing?’

‘Well, I think it reflects poor manners. It shows, perhaps, a slight deficiency in character.’

‘On the contrary, I think it shows tremendous character. It shows you have the strength

and passion to speak your mind.’

The Pandit guffawed, shaking his head slightly.

‘In any case,’ continued Shiva. ‘Since you are here, why don’t you tell me what your

people are called? I was promised I would be told the next time I met one of you.’

‘But you haven’t met one of us again. This is a dream. I can only tell you what you

already know,’ said the Pandit, smiling mysteriously. ‘Or something that already exists in your consciousness

that you haven’t chosen to listen to as yet.’

‘So that’s what this is about! You are here to help me find something I already know!’

‘Yes,’ said the Pandit, his smile growing more enigmatic.

‘Well, what is it that we are supposed to talk about?’

‘The colour of that leaf,’ beamed the Pandit, pointing towards the many trees that could

be seen from the temple, through its ostentatiously carved pillars.

‘The colour of that leaf?!’

‘Yes.’

Frowning strongly, Shiva sighed, ‘Why, in the name of the Holy Lake, is the colour of

that leaf important?’

‘Many times a good conversational

journey to find knowledge makes attaining it that

much more satisfying,' said the Pandit. 'And more importantly, it helps you understand

the context of the knowledge much more easily.'

'Context of the knowledge?'

'Yes. All knowledge

has its context. Unless you know the context, you may not

understand the point.'

'And I'll know all that by talking about the colour of that leaf?'

'Yes.'

'By the Holy Lake, man!' groaned Shiva. 'Let's talk about the leaf then.'

'All right,' laughed the Pandit. 'Tell me. What is the colour of that leaf?'

'The colour? It's green.'

'Is it?'

'Isn't it?'

'Why do you think it appears green to you?'

'Because,' said Shiva, amused, 'it *is* green.'

'No. That wasn't what I was trying to ask. You had a conversation

with one of

Brahaspati's

scientists about how the eyes see. Didn't you?'

'Oh that, right,' said Shiva slapping his forehead. 'Light falls on an object. And when it reflects back from that object to your eyes, you see that object.'

'Exactly! And you had another conversation

with another scientist about what normal

white sunlight is made of.'

'Yes, I did. White light is nothing but the confluence of seven different colours. That is why the rainbow is made up of seven colours since it is formed when raindrops disperse

sunlight.'

'Correct! Now put these two theories together and answer my question. Why does that

leaf appear green to you?'

Shiva frowned as his mind worked the problem out. White sunlight falls on that leaf. The

leaf's physical properties are such that it *absorbs*

the colours violet, indigo, blue,

yellow, orange and red. It doesn't absorb the colour green, which is then reflected back

to my eyes. Hence I see the leaf as green.'

'Exactly!' beamed the Pandit. 'So think about the colour of that leaf from the perspective of the leaf itself. What colour it absorbs and what it rejects. Is its colour green? Or is it every single colour in the world, *except*



green?’

Shiva was stunned into silence by the simplicity of the argument being presented

to

him.

‘There are many realities.

There are many versions of what may appear obvious,’

continued the Pandit. ‘Whatever appears as the unshakeable

truth, the exact opposite

may also be true in another context. It is the context or perspective that you’re looking from that moulds which particular reality you see.’

Shiva turned slowly towards the leaf again. Its lustrous green colour shone through in

the glorious sunlight.

‘Are your eyes capable of seeing another reality?’ asked the Pandit.

Shiva continued to stare at the leaf as it gradually altered its appearance.

The colour

seemed to be dissolving out of the leaf as its bright green hue gradually grew lighter and lighter. It slowly reduced itself to a shade of grey. As a stunned Shiva continued to

stare, even the grey seemed to dissolve slowly, till the leaf was almost transparent. Only its outline could be discerned.

There appeared

to be numerous curved lines of two

colours, black and white, moving in and out of the outline of the leaf. It almost appeared as if the leaf was nothing but a carrier, which the black and white curved lines used as a temporary stop on their eternal journey.

It took some time for Shiva to realise that the surrounding leaves

had also been

transformed into their outlines. As his eyes panned, he noticed that the entire tree had

magically transformed into an outline, with the black and white curved lines flowing in

and out, easily and smoothly. He turned his head to soak in the panorama.

Every

object, from the squirrels

on the trees to the pillars of the temple had all been

transformed

into outlines of their selves.

The same black and white curved lines

streamed in and out of them.

Turning to the Pandit to ask for an explanation, he was stunned to see that the priest

himself was also transformed into an outline of his former self. White curved lines were

flooding out of him with frightening intensity. Strangely though, there were no black lines around him.

‘What the...’

Shiva’s words were stopped by the outline of the Pandit pointing back at him. ‘Look at

yourself, my Karmasaafhi,’ advised the Pandit.

Shiva looked down. ‘I’ll be damned!’

His body too had been transformed

into an outline, completely

transparent

inside.

Torrents of black curved lines were gushing furiously into him. He looked at the lines

closely to notice that that they were not lines at all. They were, in fact, tiny waves which were jet black in colour. The waves were so tiny that from even a slight distance, they

appeared

like lines. There wasn’t even a hint of the white waves close to Shiva’s

outlined body. ‘What the hell is going on?’

‘The white waves are positive energy and the black negative,’ said the Pandit’s outline.

‘They are both important. Their balance crucial. If they fall out of sync, cataclysm

will

occur.’

Shiva looked up at the Pandit, puzzled. ‘So why is there no positive energy around me?

And no negative energy around you?’

‘Because

we balance each other. The Vishnu’s role is to transmit positive energy’ said

the Pandit. The white lines pouring feverishly out of the Pandit seemed to flutter a bit

whenever he spoke. ‘And the Mahadev’s role is to absorb the negative. Search for it.

Search for negative energy and you will fulfil your destiny as a Mahadev.’

‘But I am no Mahadev. My deeds till now don’t make me deserve that tide.’

‘It doesn’t work that way, my friend. You don’t earn a tide *after*

you have done your

deeds. You do your deeds because

of and only after you believe that you already are

the Mahadev. It doesn’t matter what others think. It’s about what you believe. Believe

you are the Mahadev, and you will be one.’

Shiva frowned.

‘Believe!’ repeated the Pandit.

BOOM! A distant reverberation  
echoed through the ambience.

Shiva turned his eyes  
towards the horizon.

‘It sounds like an explosion,’ whispered the Pandit’s outline.

The distant, insistent voice of Sati came riding in. ‘S-H-I-V-A...’

BOOM! Another explosion.

‘S-H-I-V-A...’

‘It looks like your wife needs you, my friend.’

Shiva looked in astonishment at the outline of the Pandit, unable to decipher  
where the  
sound came from.

‘Maybe you should wake up,’ advised the Pandit’s disembodied voice.

‘S-H-I-V-A’

A groggy Shiva woke up to find Sati staring at him with concern. He was  
still a little

bleary from the outlandishly strange dream state that he had just been  
yanked out of.

‘Shiva!’

BOOM!

‘What the hell was that?’ cried Shiva, alert now.

‘Someone is using daivi astras!’

‘What? What are *daivi astras*? ’

A clearly stunned Sati spoke agitatedly, ‘ *Divine weapons*

! But Lord Rudra destroyed all

the daivi astras! Nobody has access to them anymore!’

Shiva was completely alert by now, his battle instincts primed. ‘Sati, get ready. Wear

your armour. Bind your weapons.’

Sati responded swiftly. Shiva slipped on his armour, coupled his shield to it and tied his sword to his waist. He slipped on his quiver smoothly and picked up his bow. Noting that

Sati was ready, he kicked the door open. Taman and eight other guards had their

swords drawn, ready to defend their Neelkanth against any attack.

‘My Lord, you should wait inside,’ said Taman. ‘We will hold the attackers here.’

Shiva stared hard at Taman, his eyes frowning at Taman’s well–intentioned words.

Taman immediately stepped aside. ‘I am sorry, my Lord. We will follow you.’

Before Shiva

could react,

they heard footsteps

rushing

in their hallway.

Shiva

immediately drew his sword. He strained his ears to assess the threat.

Four footsteps. Just two men to attack a royal hallway! This didn't make sense.

One pair of footsteps dragged

slightly. The terrorist was clearly a large man using

considerable willpower to make his feet move faster than his girth allowed.

'Stand down, soldiers,' ordered Shiva suddenly. 'They are friends.'

Nandi and Veerbhadra emerged around the corner, running hard, with their swords at

the ready.

'Are you alright, my Lord?' asked Nandi, admirably not out of breath.

'Yes. We are all safe. Did the two of you face any attacks?'

'No,' answered Veerbhadra, frowning. 'What the hell is going on?'

'I don't know,' said Shiva. 'But we're going to find out.'

'Where's Kritika?' asked Sati.

‘Safe in her room,’ answered Veerbhadra. ‘There are five soldiers with her. The room is

barred from the inside.’

Sati nodded, before turning to Shiva. ‘What now?’

‘I want to check on the Emperor first. Everybody, files of two. Keep your shields up for

cover. Sati at my side. Nandi in the middle. Taman, Veerbhadra, at the rear. Don’t light

any torches. We know the way. Our enemies don’t.’

The platoon moved with considerable

speed and stealth, mindful of possible surprise

attacks from the terrorists. Shiva was troubled by what he had heard. Or rather, what he

didn’t. Apart from the repeated explosions, there was absolutely no other sound from

the palace. No screams of terror. No sound of panicked footsteps. No clash of steel.

Nothing. Either the terrorists had not begun their real attack as yet. Or, Shiva was late and the attack was already over. Shiva frowned as a third alternative occurred to him.

Maybe there were no terrorists in the palace itself. Maybe the attack was being mounted

from a distance, with the daivi astras that Sati spoke of.



Shiva's platoon reached Daksha's chambers to find his guards at the door tense and

ready for battle.

'Where is the Emperor?' asked Shiva.

'He is inside, my Lord,' said the royal guard captain, recognising

the Neelkanth's

silhouette immediately.

'Where are they, my Lord? We've been waiting for an attack

since the first explosion.'

'I don't know, Captain,' replied Shiva. 'Stay here and block the doorway.

Taman, support

the captain here with your men. And remain alert'

Shiva opened the Emperor's door. 'Your Highness?'

'My Lord? Is Sati all right?' asked Daksha.

'Yes, she is, your Highness,' said Shiva, as Sati, Nandi and Veerbhadra

followed him

into the chamber. 'And the Queen?'

'Shaken. But not too scared.'

'What was that?'

'I don't know,' answered Daksha. 'I would suggest that you and Sati stay here for now

till we know what's going on.'

'Perhaps it maybe advisable for you to stay here, your Highness. We cannot risk any

harm coming to you. I am going out to help Parvateshwar.

If there's a terrorist attack on,

we need all the strength we have.'

'You don't have to go, my Lord. This is Devagiri. Our soldiers will slay all the terrorists dim-witted enough to attack our capital.'

Before Shiva could respond, there was a loud insistent knocking on the door.

'Your Highness? Request permission to enter.'

*' Parvateshwar*

!' thought Daksha. *' Observing*

*protocol*

*even at a time like this !'*

'Come in!' growled Daksha. As Parvateshwar

entered, Daksha let fly. 'How in Lord

Indra's name can this happen, General? An attack on Devagiri? How dare they?'

'Your Highness,' intercepted Shiva. Sati, Nandi and Veerbhadra were in the chambers

now. He could not allow Parvateshwar

to be insulted in front of them, especially in front

of Sati. 'Let us find out what is going on first.'

'The attack is not on Devagiri, your Highness,' glared Parvateshwar,

his impatience with

his Emperor on edge. 'My scouts saw massive

plumes of smoke coming from the

direction of Mount Mandar. I believe it is under attack. I have already given orders for

my troops and the station Arishtanemi to be ready. We leave in an hour. I need your

approval to depart.'

'The explosions were in Mandar, Pitratulya?'

asked Sati incredulously.

'How powerful

were they to be heard in Devagiri.'

Parvateshwar

looked gloomily at Sati, his silence conveying his deepest

fears. He

turned towards Daksha. 'Your Highness?'

Daksha seemed stunned into silence. Or was that a frown on his eyes.

Parvateshwar

could not be sure in the dim light.

‘Guards, light the torches!’ ordered Parvateshwar.

‘There is no attack on Devagiri!’

As the torches

spread

their radiance,

Parvateshwar

repeated,

‘Do I have your

permission, my Lord?’

Daksha nodded softly.

Parvateshwar

turned to see Shiva looking shocked. ‘What happened, Shiva?’

‘Brahapati left for Mount Mandar yesterday.’

‘What?’ asked

a startled Parvateshwar,

who had not noticed the chief scientist’s

absence in the celebrations of the previous day. ‘O Lord Agni!’

Shiva turned slowly towards Sati, drawing strength from her presence.

‘I will find him, Shiva,’ consoled Parvateshwar.

‘I am sure he is alive. I will find him.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ said Shiva.

‘And so am I,’ said Sati.

‘What?’ asked Daksha, the light making his agonised expression clear. ‘You both don’t

need to go.’

Shiva turned to Daksha,  
frowning. ‘My apologies,  
your Highness.

But I must go.

Brahhaspati needs me.’

As Parvateshwar

and Shiva turned to leave the royal chambers, Sati bent down to touch  
her father’s feet. Daksha seemed too dazed to bless her and Sati did not want  
to remain

too far behind her husband. She quickly turned to touch her mother’s feet.

‘ *Ayushman*

*bhav* ’ said Veerini.

Sati frowned at the odd blessing — ‘ *May you live long* ’. She was going into  
a battle. She wanted victory, not a long life! But there was little time to  
argue. Sati turned and raced behind Shiva as Nandi and Veerbhadra  
followed closely.



— 天 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 —

## CHAPTER 21

### Preparation for War

The noise of the explosions stopped within an hour of the first. It wasn't much later that Shiva, Parvateshwar,

Sati, Nandi and Veerbhadra,

accompanied

by a brigade of one

thousand five hundred cavalry,

were on their way to Mount Mandar. Brahaspati's

scientists rode with the brigade, sick with worry over their leader's fate.

They rode hard and hoped to cover the day—long distance to the mountain in fewer than eight hours. It

was almost at the end of the second prahar, with the sun directly overhead that the

brigade turned the last corner of the road where the forest cover cleared to give them

their first glimpse of the mountain.

A furious cry arose as they got their first sight of what was the heart of their empire.

Mandar had been ruthlessly destroyed. The mountain had a colossal crater at its centre.

It was almost as if a giant Asura had struck his massive hands right through the core of

the mountain and scooped out its core. The enormous buildings of science were in

ruins, their remnants scattered

across the plains below. The giant churners at the

bottom of mountain were still functioning, their eerie sound making the gruesome

picture even more macabre.

‘Brahapati!’ roared Shiva, as he rode hard, right into the heart of the mountain, where

the pathway, miraculously, still stood strong.

‘Wait Shiva,’ called out Parvateshwar.

‘It could be a trap.’

Shiva, unmindful of any danger,

continued to gallop up the pathway through the

devastated

heart of the mountain. The brigade, with Parvateshwar

and Sati in the lead,

rode fast, trying to keep up with their Neelkanth. They reached the top to be horrified by the sight they saw. Parts of the buildings hung limply on broken foundations, some

structures still smouldering. Scorched and unrecognisable

body parts, ripped apart by



the repeated explosions, were strewn all over. It was impossible to even identify the

dead.

Shiva tumbled off his horse, his face devoid of even a ray of hope. Nobody could have

survived such a lethal attack. 'Brahaspati...'

'How did the terrorists get their hands on the daivi astras?'

asked

an agitated

Parvateshwar,

the fire of vengeance

blazing within him.

The soldiers had been ordered to collect all the body parts and cremate them in

separate

pyres, to help the departed on their onward journey. A manifest was being

drawn up of the names of those believed dead. The first name on the list was that of

Brahaspati,

Chief Scientist of Meluha, Sarayupaari

Brahmin, Swan chosen-tribe.

The

others were mostly Arishtanemi, assigned

to the task of protecting Mandar. It was a

small consolation

that the casualties

were minimal since most of the mountain's

residents were in Devagiri for the Neelkanth's marriage. The list was going to be sent to the great sanyasis

in Kashmir, whose powers over the spiritual force were considered

second to none. If the sanyasis

could be cajoled into reciting prayers for these departed

souls, it was hoped that their grisly death in this birth would not mar their subsequent

births.

'It could have also been the Somras, general,' said Panini, one of Brahaspati's

assistant



chief scientists, offering another plausible cause.

Shiva looked up suddenly on hearing Panini's words.

'The Somras did this! How?' asked a disbelieving Sati.

‘The Somras is very unstable during its manufacturing process,’ continued Panini. ‘It is

kept stable by using copious quantities of the Saraswati

waters. One of our main

projects was to determine whether we could stabilise the Somras using less water.

Much lesser than at present.’

Shiva remembered

Brahaspati

talking about this. He leaned over to listen intently to

Panini.

‘It was one of the dream projects of...’ Panini found it hard to complete the statement.

The thought that Brahaspati, the greatest scientist of his generation, the father-figure to all the learned men at Mount Mandar, was gone, was too much for Panini to bear. He

was too choked to release the intense pain he felt inside. He stopped talking, shut his

eyes and hoped the terrible moment would pass. Regaining a semblance of control over

himself, he continued, ‘It was one of Brahaspati’s

dream projects. He had come back

to organise the experiment that was to begin today. He didn't want us to miss the last

day of the celebrations. So he came alone.'

Parvateshwar

was numb. '*You* mean this could have been an accident.'

'Yes,' replied Panini. 'We all knew the experiment

was risky. Maybe that is why

Brahaspatiji decided to begin without us.'

The entire room was stunned into silence

by this unexpected

information. Panini

retreated

into his private hell. Parvateshwar

continued to gaze into the distance,

shocked by the turn of events. Sad stared at Shiva, holding his hand, deeply worried

about how her husband was taking the death of his friend. And that it may all have been

just a senseless

mishap!

It was late into the first hour of the fourth prahar. It had been decided that the brigade would set up camp at the bottom of the ruined mountain. They would leave the next

day, only after all the ceremonies for the departed had been completed. Two riders had

been dispatched to Devagiri with the news about Mandar. Parvateshwar

and Sati sat at

the edge of the mountain peak, whispering

to each other. The drone of Brahmin

scientists reciting Sanskrit shlokas at the bottom of the mountain floated up to create an ethereal

atmosphere

of pathos. Nandi and Veerbhadra

stood at attention, a polite

distance from Parvateshwar

and Sati, looking at their Lord.

Shiva was walking around the ruins of the Mandar buildings, lost in thought. It was

tearing him apart that he hadn't even seen any recognisable

part of Brahaspati.

Everybody in Mandar had been destroyed beyond recognition. He desperately

searched

for some sign of his friend. Something he could keep with himself.  
Something he could

cling on to. Something to soothe his tortured soul for the years of mourning  
he would go

through. He walked at a snail's pace; his eyes combing the ground. They  
suddenly fell

upon an object he recognised only too well.

He slowly bent down to pick it up. It was a bracelet of leather, burnt at the  
edges, its

back-hold destroyed. The heat of the fiery explosions had scarred its brown  
colour into

black at most places.

The centre

however,

with an embroidered

design,

lay

astonishingly unblemished. Shiva brought it close to his eyes.

The crimson hue of the setting sun caused the Aum symbol to glow. At the  
meeting

point of the top and bottom curve of the Aum were two serpent heads. The  
third curve,

surging out to the east, ended in a sharp serpent head, with its fork tongue struck out

threateningly.



It was him! He killed Brahaspati!

Shiva swung around, eyes desperately

scanning the limbs scattered about, hoping to

find the owner of the bracelet or some part of him there. But there was nothing. Shiva

screamed

silently. A scream audible only to him and Brahaspati's

wounded soul. He

clutched the bracelet in his fist till its still burning embers burnt into his palms. Claspng it even more firmly, he swore a terrible vengeance.

He vowed to bring upon the Naga a

death that would scar him for his next seven births. That Naga, and his entire army of

vice, would be annihilated. Piece by bloody piece.

'Shiva! Shiva!' The insistent call yanked him back to reality.

Sati was standing in front of him, gently touching his hand. Parvateshwar stood next to

her, disturbed. Nandi and Veerbhadra stood to the other side.

‘Let it go, Shiva,’ said Sati.

Shiva continued to stare at her, blank.

‘Let it go, Shiva,’ repeated Sati softly. ‘It’s singeing your hand.’

Shiva opened his palm. Nandi immediately

lunged forward to pull the bracelet out.

Screaming in surprised agony, Nandi dropped the bracelet as it scalded his hand. How

did the Lord hold it for so long?

Shiva immediately bent down and picked up the bracelet. This time carefully. His fingers

were holding the less charred edge, the part with the Aum symbol. He turned to

Parvateshwar.

‘It was not an accident.’

‘What?’ cried a startled Parvateshwar.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Sati.

Shiva looked towards Sati and raised the bracelet, the serpent Aum clearly in view. Sati



let out a gasp of shock. Parvateshwar,

Nandi and Veerbhadra immediately closed in to

stare intently at the bracelet.

‘Naga...,’ whispered Nandi.

‘The same bastard who attacked Sati in Meru,’ growled Shiva. ‘The same Naga who

attacked us on our return from Mandar. The very, bloody, same, son of a bitch.’

‘He will pay for this Shiva,’ said Veerbhadra.

Turning towards Parvateshwar,

Shiva said, ‘We ride to Devagiri tonight. We declare war.’

Parvateshwar

nodded.

The Meluhan war council sat quietly, observing five minutes of silence in honour of the

martyrs of Mandar. General Parvateshwar

and his twenty-five brigadiers sat to the right

of Emperor Daksha. To Daksha’s left sat the Neelkanth, the administrative Brahmins led

by Prime Minister Kanakhala and the governors of the fifteen provinces.

‘The decision of the council is a given,’ said Daksha, beginning the proceedings.

‘The

question is when do we attack?’ ‘It will take us at the most a month to be ready to

march, your Highness,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘You know that there are no roads between

Meluha and Swadweep.

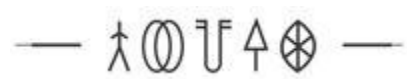
Our army would have to travel through dense, impenetrable

forests. So even if we begin the march in a month, we will not be in Swadweep

before

three months from today. So time is of the essence.’

‘Then let the preparations begin.’



‘Your Highness,’ said Kanakhala, adding a Brahmin voice of reason to the battle cry of

the Kshatriyas. ‘May I suggest an alternate?’

‘An alternate?’ asked a surprised Daksha.

‘Please don’t get me wrong,’ said Kanakhala. ‘I understand the rage of the entire nation

over Mandar. But we want vengeance

against the perpetrators of the crime, not all of

Swadweep.

Could we try and see whether a scalpel might work before we bring out the mighty war sword?’

‘The path you suggest is one of cowardice, Kanakhala,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘No Parvateshwar,

I am not suggesting

that we sit like cowards and do nothing,’ said

Kanakhala

politely. ‘I am only suggesting

a way to see whether we can get our

vengeance

without sacrificing the lives of our soldiers and other innocents.’

‘My soldiers are willing to shed their blood for the country, Madam Prime Minister.’

‘I know they are,’ said Kanakhala, maintaining her composure. ‘And I know that you too

are willing to shed your blood for Meluha. My point is that can we send an emissary to

Emperor Dilipa and request him to surrender the terrorists who perpetrated this attack?

We can threaten that if he doesn't, we will attack with all the might at our disposal.'

His eyes scowling with impatience, Parvateshwar

said, '*Request*

him? And why would

he listen? For decades,

the Swadweepans

have got away with their nefarious activities

because they think we don't have the stomach for fight. And if we talk about this "scalpel approach" after an outrage like Mount Mandar, they will be convinced that they can

mount any attack at will and we will not respond.'

'I disagree,

Parvateshwar,'

said Kanakhala.

'They have mounted terrorist attacks

because

they are scared that they cannot take us on in a direct fight. They are afraid that they cannot withstand our superior technology and war-machines.

I am only looking

from the standpoint of what Lord Shiva had said when he had first come here. Can we

try talking to them before we fight? This may be an opportunity to get them to admit that there are sections in their society who are terrorists. If they hand them over, we may

even find ways of coexisting.'

'I don't think Shiva thinks like that anymore,' said Parvateshwar,

pointing towards the

Neelkanth. 'He too wants vengeance.'

Shiva sat silently, his face expressionless.

Only his eyes glowered with the terrible

anger seething inside.

'My Lord,' said Kanakhala looking towards Shiva, her hands folded in a namaste.

'I

hope that at least you understand what I am trying to say. Even Brahaspati would have

wanted us to avoid violence, if possible.'

The last sentence had an effect on Shiva similar to a torrential downpour on a raging

fire. He turned towards Kanakhala

and gazed into her eyes, before turning towards

Daksha. ‘Your Highness, perhaps what Kanakhala says is right. Maybe we can send an

emissary to Swadweep

to give them an opportunity to repent. If we can avoid the killing

of innocents, only good will come from it. However, I would still suggest that we begin

war preparations.

We should be prepared for the possibility that the Chandravanshis

may reject our offer.’

‘The Mahadev has spoken,’ said Daksha. ‘I propose that this be the decision of the war

council. All in favour, raise your hands.’

Every hand in the room was raised. The die had been cast. There would be an attempt

for peace. If that didn’t work, the Meluhans would attack.

‘I have failed again, Bhadra,’ cried Shiva. ‘I can’t protect anyone in need.’

Shiva was sitting next to Veerbhadra,

in a private section of his palace courtyard. A

deeply worried Sati had invited Veerbhadra to try and bring Shiva out of his mourning.



Shiva had retreated into a shell, not speaking,

not crying. She hoped her husband's

childhood friend would succeed where she had failed.

'How can you blame yourself, Shiva?' asked Veerbhadra,

handing over the chillum to

his friend. 'How can this be your fault?'

Shiva picked up the chillum and took a deep drag. The marijuana coursed through his

body, but did not help. The pain was too intense. Shiva snorted in disgust and threw the

chillum away. As tears flooded his eyes, he looked up to the sky and swore, 'I will

avenge you, my brother. If it is the last thing I do. If I have to spend every moment of the rest of my life. If I have to come back to this world again and again. I will avenge you!'

Veerbhadra turned towards Sati sitting in the distance, a worried look on his face. Sati

got up and walked towards them. She came up to Shiva and held him tight, resting his

tired head against her bosom, hoping to soothe Shiva's tortured soul. To Sati's surprise, Shiva did not raise his arms to wrap them around her. He just sat motionless. Breathing

intermittently.

'My Lord,' cried a surprised Vraka, as he stood to attention. So did the other twenty-four brigadiers, with respect to the Neelkanth who had just been announced into the war

room.

Parvateshwar

rose slowly. He spoke kindly as he knew the pain Shiva still carried about  
Brahhaspati's

grisly death. 'How are you, Shiva?'

'I am alright, thank you.'

'We were discussing battle plans.'

'I know,' said Shiva. 'I was wondering if I could join in.'

'Of course,' said Parvateshwar,

as he moved his chair to the side.

'The essential

problem for us,' said Parvateshwar,

trying to quickly bring Shiva up to

date, 'is the transport links between Meluha and Swadweep.'

'There aren't any, right?'

'Right,' answered Parvateshwar.

'The Chandravanshis

followed a "broken earth" policy

after their last defeat at our hands a hundred years back. They destroyed the  
entire



infrastructure

that existed between Meluha and Swadweep.

They depopulated

their

border cities and moved them deeper into their empire. Forests grew where cities and

roads used to be. There is no river that flows from our territory to theirs. Basically, there is no way for our huge, technologically

superior, war-machines

to be transported to the

borders of Swadweep.'

'That was their aim, obviously,'

said Shiva. 'Your superiority is technology.

Their

superiority is their numbers. They have negated your strength.'

'Exatly. And if our war-machines

are taken out of the equation,

our one hundred

thousand strong army may get inundated by their million soldiers.'

'They have a million strong army?' asked Shiva, incredulous.

'Yes, my Lord,' said Vraka. 'We can't be absolutely

sure, but that is our estimate.

However, we also estimate that the regulars in that army would not be more than a

hundred thousand. The rest would be part-timers. Essentially,

people such as small

traders, artisans,

farmers and any other without influence. They would be forcibly

conscripted and used as cannon fodder.'

'Disgusting,' said Parvateshwar.

'Risking the lives of Shudras and Vaishyas for a job

that should be done by Kshatriyas. Their Kshatriyas have no honour.'

Shiva looked towards

Parvateshwar

and nodded.

'Can't we dismantle

our war-

machines, carry them to Swadweep and reassemble

them?'

'Yes we can,' said Parvateshwar.

'But that is technically possible only for a few. Our

most devastating machines which would give us the edge, like the long-range catapult,

cannot be assembled

outside a factory’

‘The long-range catapult?’

‘Yes,’ answered Parvateshwar.

‘It can hurl huge boulders and smouldering barrels over

distances of over a kilometre. If used effectively, they can soften, even devastate,

the

enemy lines before our cavalry and infantry charge. Basically, the role that elephants

used to play earlier.’

‘Then why not use elephants?’

‘They are unpredictable. No matter how long you train them, an army often loses control

over them in the heat of battle. In fact, in the previous war with the Swadweepans,

it

was their own elephants who were their downfall.’

‘Really?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes,’ answered

Parvateshwar.

‘Our ploy of firing at the mahouts and generating tremendous noise with our war drums worked. The Chandravanshi elephants panicked and ran into their own army, shattering their lines, especially the ones composed of irregulars. All we had to do was charge in and finish the job.’

‘No elephants then.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘So we need something that we can take with us and which can be used to soften their irregulars in order to negate their numerical superiority.’

Parvateshwar

nodded. Shiva looked into the distance, towards the window, where a stiff morning breeze caused the leaves to flutter. The leaves were green. Shiva stared harder. They remained green.

‘I know,’ said Shiva, looking at Parvateshwar suddenly, his face luminescent. ‘Why don’t we use arrows?’

‘Arrows?’ asked a surprised Parvateshwar.

Archery was the battle art of the most elite Kshatriyas,  
used for one-on-one duels.

However, since one-on-one

duels could only be fought between warriors of equal  
chosen-tribes,

this skill was reduced to only a demonstration

art of the crème de la

crème. Archers earned huge respect for their rare skill, but they were not  
decisive in

battles. There was a time when bows and arrows were crucial in war  
strategies

as

weapons of mass destruction. That was the time of the daivi astras. Many of  
these

astras were usually released

through arrows. However, with the ban on daivi astras

many thousands of years ago by Lord Rudra, the effectiveness

of archery units in large-

scale battles had reduced drastically.

‘How can that reduce their numerical superiority, my Lord?’ asked Vraka.  
‘Even the

most skilled of archers will take at least five seconds to aim, fire and execute a kill. He will not be able to kill more than twelve a minute. We have only one hundred Kshatriyas

who are of the gold order of archers. The rest can shoot, but their aim cannot be relied

upon. So we will not be able to kill more than one thousand two hundred of our enemies

per minute. Certainly not enough against the Chandravanshis.’

‘I am not talking about using arrows for one-on-one shooting,’ said Shiva. ‘I am talking

about using them for softening the enemy, as weapons of mass destruction.’

Disregarding

the confused

expressions

of his audience,

Shiva continued, ‘Let me

explain. Suppose we create a corps of archers of the lower Kshatriya chosen-tribes.’

‘But their aim wouldn’t be good,’ said Vraka.

‘That doesn’t matter. Let us say we have at least five thousand of those archers.

Suppose we train them to just get the range right. Forget about the aim.  
Suppose their

job is to just keep firing arrows in the general direction of the  
Chandravanshi

army. If

they don't have to aim, they can fire a lot more quickly. Maybe one arrow  
every two or

three seconds.'

Parvateshwar

narrowed his eyes as the brilliance of the idea struck him. The rest of his  
brigadiers were still trying to gather their thoughts.



'Think about it,' said Shiva. 'We would have five thousand arrows raining  
down on the

Chandravanshis

every two seconds. Suppose we keep this attack on for ten minutes.

An almost continuous shower of arrows. Their irregulars would break. The  
arrows would

have the same effect like that of the elephants in the last war!'

'Brilliant!' cried Vraka.

'And maybe,' said Parvateshwar.

'If the aim doesn't matter, we could train these archers

to lie on their back, hold the bow on their feet and pull the string back nearly up to their necks and then release. As long as their feet are pointed in the right direction, it would work.'

'Excellent!' exclaimed

Shiva. 'Because

then the bows can be bigger. And the range

longer.'

'And the arrows bigger and thicker, almost like small spears,' continued Parvateshwar.

'Strong enough to even penetrate leather and thick wood shields. Only the soldiers with

metal shields, like the regulars, would be safe from this.'

'Do we have our answer?' asked Shiva.

'Yes, we do,' answered

Parvateshwar

with a smile. He turned towards Vraka. 'Create

this corps. I want five thousand men ready within two weeks.'

'It will be done, my Lord,' said Vraka.

'What do you want to talk about, Shiva?'

asked Parvateshwar,

as he entered the



metallurgy

factory. He was accompanied

by Vraka and Prasanjit,

as per Shiva's

request. Vraka had reluctantly left the archery corps he had been training over the past

week. However, he had been motivated to attend with the expectation of another

brilliant idea from the Neelkanth. He was not disappointed.

'I was thinking,' said Shiva, 'we would still need an equivalent of your stabbing ram to

break their centre. The centre is where I assume

their general

would place their

regulars. As long as they hold, our victory cannot be guaranteed.'

'Right,' said Parvateshwar.

'And we have to assume

that these soldiers would be

disciplined enough to stay in formation despite the barrage of arrows.'

'Exactly,' said Shiva. 'We can't transport the ram, right?'

'No we can't, my Lord' said Vraka.

‘How about if we try to create a human ram?’

‘Go ahead,’ said Parvateshwar

slowly, listening intently.

‘Say we align the soldiers into a square of twenty men by twenty men,’ said Shiva. ‘Say

we have each one use his shield to cover the left half of his own body and the right half of the soldier to the left of him.’

‘That will allow them to push their spear

through between

the shields,’

said

Parvateshwar.

‘Exactly,’ said Shiva. ‘And the soldiers behind use their shields as a lid to cover

themselves

and the soldier in front. This formation would be like a tortoise. With the shields holding against any attack, much like a tortoise’s shell, the enemy will not be

able to break through, but our spears will cut into them.’

‘And we could have the strongest and most experienced

soldiers at the front to make

sure the tortoise is well led,’ said Prasanjit.

‘No,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘Have the most experienced

at the back and the sides. To

make sure that the square doesn’t break in case the younger soldiers panic.

This entire

formation works only if the team stays together.’

‘Right,’ said Shiva, smiling at Parvateshwar’s

quick insight. ‘And what if, instead of the

usual spears, they carried this?’

Shiva raised a weapon that he had designed and the army metallurgy team had quickly



assembled.

Parvateshwar

marvelled at the simple brilliance of it. It had the body of a

spear. But its head had been broadened. On to the broadened head, two more spikes

had been added, to the left and right of the main spear spike. Assaulting an enemy with

this weapon would be like striking him with three spears at the same time.

‘Absolutely brilliant Shiva,’ marvelled Parvateshwar.

‘What do you call it?’ ‘I call it a trishui.’

‘Prasanjit,’ said Parvateshwar. ‘*You site*

in charge of creating this corps. I want at least

five tortoise formations ready by the time we march. I will assign two thousand men to

you for this.’

‘It will be done, my Lord,’ said Prasanjit with a military salute.

Parvateshwar

gazed at Shiva with respect. He thought Shiva’s ideas were brilliant. And

the fact that he had come up with these tactics despite his profound personal grief was

worthy of admiration. Maybe what the others say about Shiva could be true. Maybe he

is the man who will finish Lord Ram’s task. Parvateshwar

hoped that Shiva would not

prove him wrong.

Shiva sat in the royal meeting room, with Daksha and Parvateshwar

at his side. Two

legendary Arishtanemi brigadiers, Vidyunmali and Mayashrenik,

sat a distance away. A

muscular and once proud man stood in front of Shiva, his hands together, pleading.

‘Give me a chance, my Lord,’ said Drapaku. ‘If the law has been changed, then why

can’t we fight?’

Drapaku was the man whose blind father had blessed Shiva in Kotdwaar. He had been

a brigadier in the Meluhan army before the disease which blinded his father also killed

his wife and unborn child. He had been declared a vikarma along with his father.

‘First, how is your father?’ asked Shiva. ‘He is well, my Lord. And he will disown me if I don’t support you in this dharmayudh.’

Shiva smiled softly. He too believed this was a *dharmayudh*,

a *holy war*. ‘But Drapaku,

who will take care of him if something were to happen to you?’

‘Meluha will take care of him, my Lord. But he would die a thousand deaths if I didn’t go to batde with you. What kind of a son would I be if I didn’t fight for my father’s honour?

For my country’s honour?’

Shiva still seemed a little unsure. He could sense the discomfort of the others in the

room with this conversation. It had not escaped his notice that despite the repeal of the vikarma law, nobody had touched Drapaku when he had entered.

‘My Lord, we are outnumbered heavily by the Chandravanshis,’

continued Drapaku. ‘We

need every trained warrior we have. There are at least five thousand soldiers who can’t

battle since they had been declared vikarma. I can bring them together. We are willing,

and eager, to die for our country’

‘I don’t want you to die for Meluha, brave Drapaku,’ said Shiva. Drapaku’s face fell

instantly. He thought he would be returning home to Kotdwaar. ‘However,’ continued

Shiva. ‘I would like it if you killed for Meluha.’

Drapaku looked up.

‘Raise your brigade, Drapaku,’ ordered Shiva. Turning towards Daksha, he continued,

‘We will call it the Vikarma Brigade.’

‘How can we have vikarmas in our army? This is ridiculous!’ glared Vidyunmali.

Vidyunmali and Mayashrenik were in their private gym, preparing for their regular sword

training.

‘Vidyu...,’ cajoled Mayashrenik.

‘Don’t “*Vidyu*” me, Maya. You know this is wrong.’

The usually calm Mayashrenik  
just nodded and let his impetuous  
friend vent his  
frustration.

‘How will I face my ancestors  
if I die in this battle?’ asked Vidyunmali. ‘What will I  
answer if they ask me how I let a non-Kshatriya fight a battle that only we  
Kshatriyas  
should have fought? It is *our* duty to protect the weak. We are not supposed  
to use the weak to fight for us.’

‘Vidyu, I don’t think Drapaku is weak. Have you forgotten his valour in the  
previous  
Chandravanshi  
war?’

‘He is a vikarma! That makes him weak!’

‘Lord Shiva has ordered that there are no vikarmas anymore.’

‘I don’t think the Neelkanfh truly knows right from wrong!’

‘VIDYU!’ shouted Mayashrenik.

Vidyunmali was surprised by the outburst.

‘If the Neelkanth says it is right,’ continued Mayashrenik, ‘then it *is* right!’





## CHAPTER 22

### [Empire of Evil](#)

‘This is the military formation I think ideal for the battle,’ said Parvateshwar.

Vraka and Parvateshwar

were sitting in the general’s private office. The formation was

that of a bow. The soldiers would be arranged

in a wide semi-circular

pattern. The

slower corps, like the tortoises, would be placed at the centre. The flanks would

comprise quicker units such as the light infantry. The cavalry would be at both the ends

of the bow, ready to be quickly deployed anywhere on the front or to ride along the

sides of the bow for protection. The bow formation was ideal for a smaller army. It

provided flexibility without sacrificing strength.

‘It is ideal, my Lord,’ said Vraka. ‘What does the Mahadev have to say?’

‘Shiva thinks it suits our requirements perfectly’

Vraka did not like it when Parvateshwar

referred to the Neelkanth by his name. But who was he to correct his general? 'I agree, my Lord.'

'I will lead the left flank,' said Parvateshwar.

'And you will lead the right. That is why I need your opinion on some things.'

'Me, my Lord?' asked an astonished Vraka. 'I thought the Mahadev would lead the other flank.'

'Shiva? No, I don't think he would be fighting this war, Vraka.'

Vraka looked up in surprise. But he remained silent.

Parvateshwar

probably felt the need to explain, for he continued speaking. 'He is a good and capable man, no doubt. But the uppermost desire in his mind is retribution, not

justice for Meluha. We will help him wreak vengeance

when we throw the guilty Naga at

his feet. He won't be putting his own life at risk in a war just to find one Naga.'

Vraka kept his eyes low, lest they betray the fact that he disagreed with his chief.

'To be fair,' said Parvateshwar.

‘We can’t impose on him just because

he has a blue

throat. I respect him a lot. But I don’t expect him to fight. What reason would there be for him to do that?’

Vraka looked up for a brief instant at Parvateshwar’s

eyes. Why was his general

refusing to accept what was so obvious to everyone?

Was he so attached to Lord Ram

that he couldn’t believe that another saviour had arrived on earth? Did he actually

believe that Lord Ram could be the *only one*?

Hadn’t Lord Ram himself said that he is

replaceable,

only dharma is irreplaceable?

‘Furthermore,’ continued Parvateshwar,

‘he is married now. He is obviously in love. He

is not going to risk Sati being bereaved

again. Why should he? It’s unfair of us to

demand this of him.’

‘Vraka thought, not daring to voice his opinion. *The Mahadev*

*will fight for all of us,*

*General.*

*He will battle to protect*

*us. Why? Because*

*that is what Mahadevs*

*do.'*

Vraka was not aware that Parvateshwar

was hoping something similar in his mind. He

too wished that Shiva would rise to be a Mahadev and lead them to victory against the

Chandravanshis.

However, Parvateshwar

had learned through long years of experience

that while many men tried to rise up to Lord Ram's level, none had ever succeeded.

Parvateshwar

had laid hopes on a few such men in his youth. And he had always been

disillusioned at the end. He was simply preparing himself for another such expected

disappointment from Shiva. He didn't plan to be left without a backup if Shiva refused to fight the battle against the Chandravanshis.





The war council sat silently as Daksha read the letter that had come back from

Swadweep

— from the court of Emperor Dilipa. Daksha's reaction upon reading the letter left no doubt as to the message

it contained. He shut his eyes, his face contorted

in rage, his fist clenched tight. He handed the letter over to Kanakhala and sneered,

'Read it. Read it out loud so that the whole world may be sickened by the repugnance of

the Chandravanshis.'

Kanakhala frowned slightly before taking the letter and reading it out loud. 'Emperor

Daksha, Suryavanshi

liege, protector of Meluha. Please accept my deep condolences

for the dastardly

attack on Mount Mandar. Such a senseless

assault

on peaceful

Brahmins cannot but be condemned in the strongest of terms. We are shocked that any

denizen of India would stoop to such levels. It is, therefore, with surprise and sadness

that I read your letter. I assure you that neither me nor anyone in my command has

anything to do with this devious attack. Hence I have to inform you, with regret, that

there is nobody I can hand over to you. I hope that you understand the sincerity of this

letter and will not make a hasty decision, which may have regrettable consequences

for

you. I assure you of my empire's full support in the investigation of this outrage. Please do inform us of how we can be of assistance

to you in bringing the criminals to justice.'

Kanakhala

took a deep breath to compose

herself. The anger over the typically

Chandravanshi

doubletalk was washing right through her, making her regret her earlier stand.

'It's personally signed by the Emperor Dilipa,' said Kanakhala, completing her reading of the letter.

'Not *Emperor*

Dilipa,' growled a fuming Daksha. '*Terrorist*

Dilipa of the Empire of Evil!'

'War!' arose a cry from the council, unanimous in its rage.

Daksha looked over at a scowling Shiva who nodded imperceptibly.

'War it is!' bellowed Daksha. 'We march in two weeks!'

The bracelet

seemed

to develop a life of its own. It had swelled

to enormous

proportions, dwarfing Shiva. Its edges were engulfed in gigantic flames. The three

colossal serpents,

which formed the Aum, separated

from each other and slithered

towards Shiva. The one in the centre, while nodding to the snake on its left, hissed, 'He got your brother. And the other one will soon get your wife.'

The serpents to the left and right scowled eerily.

Shiva pointed his finger menacingly at the serpent in the centre. 'You dare touch even a

hair on her and I will rip your soul out of...'

'But I...' continued the serpent, not even acknowledging

Shiva's threat. 'I'm saving  
myself. I'm saving myself for you.'

Shiva stared at the serpent with impotent rage.

'I will get you,' said the serpent as its mouth opened wide, ready to swallow him whole.

Shiva's eyes suddenly opened wide. He was sweating hard. He looked around, but

couldn't see a thing. It was extraordinarily dark. He reached out for Sati, to check if she was safe. She wasn't there. He was up in a flash, feeling a chill in his heart, almost

expecting that the serpents had escaped his dreams and transformed into reality.

'Shiva,' said Sati, looking at him.

She was sitting at the edge of the bed. The tiny military tent they slept in could not

afford the luxury of chairs. This tent had been their travelling home for the last one



month as the Meluhan army marched towards Swadweep.

'What is it, Sati?' asked Shiva, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. He slipped the

offending bracelet that he held tightly in his hands, back into his pouch.

When had I taken it out?



‘Shiva,’ continued Sati. She had tried to talk about this for the last two weeks. Ever

since she had been sure of the news, but had never found an opportune moment. She

always managed to convince herself that this was minor news and it would not be right

for her to trouble her husband with this, especially

when he was going through one of

the worst phases of his life. But it was too late now. He had to learn from her and not

somebody else. News like this did not remain secret in an army camp for long. ‘I have

something to tell you.’

‘Yes,’ said Shiva, though his dream still rankled. ‘What is it?’

‘I don’t think I will be able to fight in the war.’

‘What? Why?’ asked a startled Shiva. He knew that cowardice was a word that did not

exist in Sati’s dictionary. Then why was she telling him so? And why now, when the

army had already marched for nearly a month through the dense forests that separated

Meluha from Swadweep?

They were already in enemy territory. There was no turning

back. 'Sati, this is not like you.'

'Umm, Shiva,' said an embarrassed

Sati. Such discussions

were always difficult for the

somewhat prudish Suryavanshis.

'I have my reasons.'

'Reasons?'

asked Shiva. 'What...'

Suddenly the reason smacked Shiva like a silent thunderbolt.

'My god! Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said Sati, bashfully.

'By the Holy Lake! I am going to be a father?'

Seeing the ecstasy

on Shiva's face, Sati felt a pang of guilt that she hadn't told him

before.

'Wow!' whooped a thrilled Shiva as he swirled her in his arms. 'This is the best news I

have heard in a long time!'

Sati smiled warmly and rested her head on his tired but strong shoulders.

'We will name our daughter after the one who has comforted you through the last two

months, when I have been of no help,' said Shiva. 'We will name her Krittika!'

Sati looked up in surprise. She didn't believe that it was possible to love him even more.

But it was. She smiled. 'It could be a son, you know'

'Nah,' grinned Shiva. 'It will be a daughter. And I'll spoil her to high heavens!'

Sati laughed heartily. Shiva joined in. His first spirited laugh in over two months. He

embraced Sati, feeling the negative energy dissipate from his being. 'I love you, Sati.'

'I love you too,' she whispered.

Shiva raised the curtain to come out of the tent that Sati was ensconced in. Krittika and Ayurvati were with her. A retinue of nurses attended to her every need. Shiva had been

obsessive

about the health of his unborn child, questioning Ayurvati incessantly

about

every aspect of Sati's well-being for the last two months of the march to Swadweep.

The Suryavanshis

had moved valiantly for nearly three months. The path had been

much more challenging than expected. The forest had reclaimed its original habitat with

alarming ferocity. The army was invaded by wild animals and disease at every turn.

They had lost two thousand men. And not one to the enemy. After weeks of hacking

and marching, the scouts had finally managed

to lead the Suryavanshi

army to the

Chandravanshis.

The Chandravanshis

were camped on a sweeping

plain called Dharmakhet.

Their

choice was clever. A substantial and uncluttered field, it had enough room to allow the Chandravanshis

to manoeuvre

their million strong army. The full weight of their

numerical superiority would come into play. The Suryavanshi

army had tried to wait out

the Chandravanshis,

to test if they would lose patience

and attack

in a less

advantageous

area. But the Chandravanshis

had held firm. Finally, the Suryavanshis

moved camp to an easily defensible valley close to Dharmakhet.

Shiva looked up at the clear sky. A lone eagle flew overhead, circling the royal camp,

while five pigeons flew lower, unafraid of the eagle. A strange sign. His Guna shaman

would have probably said that it's a bad time for batde, for the pigeons clearly have a

hidden advantage.

Don't think about it. It is all nonsense in any case.

Breathing in the fresh morning air deeply, he turned right, towards Emperor Daksha's

tent. Nandi was walking towards him.

'What is it Nandi?'

'I was just coming towards your tent, my Lord. The Emperor requests your presence.

There's been a troubling development'

Shiva and Nandi hurried towards Daksha's tastefully appointed royal tent. They entered

to find Daksha and Parvateshwar

engrossed

in a discussion.

Vraka, Mayashrenik

and

Drapaku sat at a distance. Drapaku was a little further away from the rest.

‘This is a disaster,’ groaned Daksha.

‘Your Highness?’ asked Shiva.

‘My Lord! I’m glad you’re here. We face complete disaster.’

‘Let’s not use

words

like that, your Highness,’

said

Shiva.

Turning towards

Parvateshwar,

he asked, ‘So your suspicions were correct?’

‘Yes,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘The scouts just returned a few minutes ago. There was a

reason

the Chandravanshis

were refusing to mobilise.

They have despatched

a

hundred thousand soldiers in a great arc around our position. They will enter our valley

by tomorrow morning. We will be sandwiched between their main force ahead of us and

another hundred thousand at the back.'

'We can't fight on two fronts, my Lord,' cried Daksha.

'What do we do?'

'Was it Veerbhadra's

scouts who returned with the news?' asked Shiva.

Parvateshwar

nodded. Shiva turned towards Nandi, who rushed out immediately.

Moments later, Veerbhadra stood before them.

'What route is the Chandravanshi

detachment taking, Bhadra?' asked Shiva.

'Up the east, along the steep mountains on our side. I think they intend to enter our

valley some fifty kilometres up north.'

‘Did you take a cartographer with you as Parvateshwar  
had instructed?’

Veerbhadrha nodded, moved to the centre table and laid out the map on it.  
Shiva and

Parvateshwar

leaned across. Pointing to the route with his fingers, Veerbhadrha  
said,

‘This way’.

Shiva suddenly started as he noticed the ideal defensive position on the map,  
deep

north of the Suryavanshi

camp. He looked up at Parvateshwar.

The same thought had

occurred to the General.

‘How many men do you think, Parvateshwar?’

‘Difficult to say. It will be tough. But the pass looks defensible.

It will need a sizeable

contingent though. At least thirty thousand.’

‘But we can’t spare too many men. I am sure the battle with the main  
Chandravanshi



army to the south will also happen tomorrow. It would be the best time for them to take

up positions.’

Parvateshwar

nodded grimly. The Meluhans might just have to retreat and manoeuvre

for a battle on another, more advantageous

position, he thought unhappily.



‘I think five thousand men ought to do it, my Lords.’

Shiva and Parvateshwar

had not noticed Drapaku move to the table. He was examining

the pass that Shiva had just pointed out.

‘Look here,’ continued Drapaku, as Shiva and Parvateshwar

peered.

‘The mountains ahead constrict rapidly to this pass, which is not more than fifty metres

across. It doesn’t matter how big their army is, each charge by the enemy into the pass

cannot comprise of more than a few hundred men.’

‘But Drapaku, with a hundred thousand men, they can launch one charge after another,

almost continuously,' said Mayashrenik.

'And with the mountains so steep on the sides,

you can't use any of our missiles. Victory is almost impossible.'

'It's not about victory,' said Drapaku. 'It's about holding them for a day so that our main army can fight.'

'I will do it,' said Parvateshwar.

'No, my Lord,' said Vraka. 'You are required for the main charge.' Shiva looked up at

Parvateshwar.

I need to be here as well.

'I can't do it either,' said Shiva, shaking his head.

Parvateshwar

looked up at Shiva, disillusionment writ large on his face. While he had

prepared his heart for disappointment, he had hoped that Shiva would prove him wrong.

But it appeared

clear to Parvateshwar

that Shiva too would be simply watching the

battle from the viewing platform being made for Daksha.

'Give me the honour, my Lord,' said Drapaku.

‘Drapaku...,’ whispered Mayashrenik, not putting in words what everyone else knew.

With only five thousand

soldiers,

the battle at the northern pass

against

the

Chandravanshi

detachment was a suicide mission.

‘Drapaku,’ said Shiva. ‘I don’t know if...’

‘I know, my Lord,’ interrupted Drapaku. ‘It is my destiny. I will hold them for one day. If Lord Indra supports me, I’ll even try for two. Get us victory by then.’

Daksha

suddenly

interjected.

‘Wonderful.

Drapaku,

make

preparations

to leave

immediately’

Drapaku saluted smartly and rushed out before any second thoughts were voiced.

It took less than an hour before the vikarma brigade was marching out of the camp. The

sun was high up in the sky and practically the entire camp was awake, watching the

soldiers set out on their mission. Everyone knew the terrible odds the vikarmas were

going to face. They knew that it was unlikely that any of these soldiers would be seen

alive again. The soldiers, though, did not exhibit the slightest hesitation or hint of fear, as they walked on. The camp stood in silent awe. One thought reverberated

through all

of them.

How could the vikarmas be so magnificent? They are supposed to be weak.

Drapaku was at the lead, his handsome

face smeared

with war paint. On top of his

armour, he wore a saffron angvastram.

The colour of the Parmatma. The colour worn

for the final journey. He didn’t expect to return.

He stopped suddenly as Vidyunmali darted in front of him. Drapaku frowned. Before he

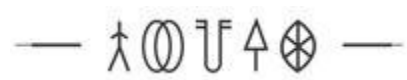
could react, Vidyunmali had drawn his knife. Drapaku reached for his side arm. But

Vidyunmali was quicker. He sliced his own thumb across the blade, and brought it up to

Drapaku's forehead. In the tradition of the great brother-warriors of yore, Vidyunmali ran his blood across Drapaku's brow, signifying that his blood will protect him.

'You're a better man than me, Drapaku,' whispered Vidyunmali.

Drapaku stood silent, astonished by Vidyunmali's uncharacteristic behaviour.



Raising his balled fist high, Vidyunmali roared, 'Give them hell, vikarma!'

'Give them hell, vikarma!' bellowed the Suryavanshis, repeating it again and again.

Drapaku and his soldiers looked around the camp, absorbing the respect that they had

been denied so long. Way too long.

'Give them hell, vikarma!'

Drapaku nodded, turned and marched on before his emotions spoiled the moment. His

soldiers followed.

‘Give them hell, vikarma!’

It was an uncharacteristically  
warm morning for that time of the year.

The Chandravanshi

detachment

had been surprised to find Meluhan soldiers at the  
northern pass the previous night. They had immediately attacked. The  
vikarmas had  
held them through the night, buying precious time for the main Suryavanshi  
army.

This *had to be* the day for the main battle. Shiva was prepared.

Sati stood resplendent,

looping the aarti thali in small circles around Shiva’s face. She  
stopped after seven turns, took some vermilion on her thumb and smeared it  
up Shiva’s

forehead in a long tilak. ‘Come back victorious or don’t come back at all.’

Shiva raised one eyebrow and grimaced. ‘What kind of a send off is that?!’

‘What? No, it’s just...’ stammered Sati.

‘I know, I know,’ smiled Shiva as he embraced

Sati. ‘It’s the traditional Suryavanshi

send off before a war, right?’

Sati looked up, her eyes moist. Her love for Shiva was overcoming

decades

of

Suryavanshi

training. ‘Just come back safe and sound.’

‘I will, my love,’ whispered Shiva. ‘You won’t get rid of me that easily.’

Sati smiled weakly. ‘I’ll be waiting.’

Sati stood on her toes and kissed Shiva lightly. Shiva kissed her back and turned

quickly, before his heart would overcome his head with second thoughts. Lifting the tent

curtain, he walked out. He looked up at the skies, in case there were some other

omens. There were none.

Bloody good!

The distant droning of Sanskrit shlokas, accompanied

by the beating of war drums in a

smooth rhythmic pulse, wafted in over the dry winter breeze. Shiva had thought this

particular Suryavanshi

custom odd. But maybe there was something to the Brahmin

‘Call for Indra and Agni’, as this particular puja was called. The drums and the shlokas

somehow grafted together to rouse a fierce warrior spirit in whoever heard them. The

beats would quicken as the battle began. Shiva was eager to throw himself into the

battle. He turned and strode towards Daksha’s tent.

‘Greetings, your Highness,’ said Shiva as he raised the curtain to enter the royal tent,

where

Parvateshwar

was

explaining

the

plans

to the

Emperor.

‘Namaste,

Parvateshwar.’

Parvateshwar



smiled and folded his hands.

‘What news of Drapaku, Parvateshwar?’

asked Shiva. The last despatch I heard is at  
least three hours old.’

‘The vikarma battle is on. Drapaku still leads them. He has bought us  
invaluable time.

May Lord Ram bless him.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Shiva. ‘May Lord Ram bless him. He just has to hold on to the  
end of this  
day.’

‘My Lord,’ said Daksha, hands in a formal namaste,  
head bowed. ‘It is an auspicious  
beginning. We will have a good day. Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes it does seem so,’ smiled Shiva. The news of Drapaku is very welcome.  
‘But

perhaps this question may be better suited for the fourth prahar, your  
Highness.’

‘I am sure the answer would be the same, my Lord. By the fourth prahar  
today, Emperor

Dilipa will be standing in front of us, in chains, waiting for justice to be  
done.’

‘Careful, your Highness,’ said Shiva with a smile. ‘Let us not tempt fate. We  
still have to win the war!’

‘We will face no problems. We have the Neelkanth with us. We just need to attack.

Victory is guaranteed.’

‘I think a little bit more than a blue throat will be required to beat the Chandravanshis, your Highness,’ said Shiva, his smile even broader. ‘We shouldn’t underestimate

our

enemy.’

‘I don’t underestimate

them, my Lord. But I will not make the mistake of underestimating

you either.’

Shiva gave up. He had learned some time back that it was impossible to win a debate

against Daksha’s unquestioning conviction.

‘Perhaps I should leave, your Highness,’ said Parvateshwar.

The time has come. With

your permission.’

‘Of course, Parvateshwar. *Vijayibhavl*,’ said Daksha. Turning towards Shiva, Daksha continued, ‘My Lord, they have built a viewing platform for us on the hill at the back.’

‘Viewing platform?’ asked Shiva, perplexed.

‘Yes. Why don’t we watch the battle from there? You would also be in a better position

to direct the battle from there.’

Shiva narrowed his eyes in surprise. ‘Your Highness, my position is with the soldiers.

On the battlefield.’

Parvateshwar

stopped in his tracks. Startled and delighted at having been proved wrong.

‘My Lord, this is a job for butchers, not the Neelkanfh,’ said a concerned Daksha. ‘You

don’t need to sully your hands with Chandravanshi

blood. Parvateshwar

will arrest that

Naga and throw him at your feet. You can extract such a terrible retribution from him

that his entire tribe would dread your justice for aeons.’

‘This is not about *my*

revenge, your Highness. It is about the vengeance

of Meluha. It

would be petty of me to think that an entire war is being fought just for me. This is a war between good and evil. A batde in which one has to choose a side. And fight. There are

no bystanders in a *dharmayudh*

— it is *a holy war*.’

Parvateshwar

watched Shiva intently, his eyes blazing with admiration. These were

Lord Ram’s words. *There are no bystanders*

*in a dharmayudh.*

‘My Lord, we can’t afford to risk your life,’ pleaded Daksha. You are too important. I am sure that we can win this war without taking that gamble. Your presence

has inspired

us. There are many who are willing to shed their blood for you.’

‘If they are willing to shed their blood for me, then I must be willing to shed my blood for them.’

Parvateshwar’s

heart was swamped by the greatest joy an accomplished

Suryavanshi

could feel. The joy of finally finding a man worth following. The joy of finding a man

worth being inspired by. The joy of finding a man, deserving of being spoken of in the

same breath, as Lord Ram himself.

A worried Daksha came closer to Shiva. He realised that if he had to stop the Neelkanth

from this foolhardiness,

he would have to speak his mind. He whispered softly, 'My

Lord, you are my daughter's

husband. If something happened to you, she would be

bereaved twice in one life. I can't let that happen to her.'

'Nothing will happen,' whispered Shiva. 'And Sati would die a thousand deaths if she

saw her husband stay away from a *dharmayudh*.

She would lose respect for me. If she

weren't pregnant, she would have been fighting alongside me, shoulder to shoulder.

You know that.'

Daksha stared at Shiva, broken, troubled and apprehensive.

Shiva smiled warmly. 'Nothing will happen, your Highness.'

'And what if it does?'

'Then it should be remembered that it happened for a good cause. Sati would be proud

of me.'

Daksha continued to stare at Shiva, his face a portrait of agonised distress.

'Forgive me, your Highness, but I must go,' said Shiva with a formal namaste, turning to

leave.

Parvateshwar

followed distracted, as if commanded by a higher force. As Shiva walked briskly out of the tent towards his horse, he heard Parvateshwar's

booming voice. 'My

Lord!'

Shiva continued walking.

'My Lord,' bellowed Parvateshwar

again, more insistent.

Shiva stopped

abruptly. He turned, a surprised

frown on his face. 'I am sorry

Parvateshwar.

I thought you were calling out to his Highness.'

'No, my Lord,' said Parvateshwar,

reaching up to Shiva. 'It was you I called.'

His frown deeper, Shiva asked, 'What is the matter, brave General?'

Parvateshwar

came to a halt in rigid military attention. He kept a polite distance from

Shiva. He could not stand on the hallowed ground that cradled the Mahadev.  
As if in a

daze, Parvateshwar

slowly curled his fist and brought it up to his chest. And then,

completing the formal Meluhan salute, he bowed low. Lower than he had  
ever bowed

before a living man. As low as he bowed before Lord Ram's idol during his  
regular

morning pujas. Shiva continued to stare at Parvateshwar,

his face an odd mixture of

surprise

and embarrassment.

Shiva

respected

Parvateshwar

too much to be

comfortable with such open idolisation from him.

Rising, but with his head still bent, Parvateshwar

whispered, 'I will be honoured to shed

my blood with you, my Lord.' Raising his head, he repeated, 'Honoured.'

Shiva smiled and touched Parvateshwar's

arm. ‘Well, if our plans are good my friend,  
hopefully we won’t have to shed too much of it!’





## CHAPTER 23

### [Dharmayudh, the Holy War](#)

The Suryavanshis

were arranged like a bow. Strong, yet flexible. The recently raised

tortoise regiments had been placed at the centre. The light infantry formed the flanks,

while the cavalry, in turn, bordered them. The chariots had been abandoned due to the

unseasonal

rain the previous night. They couldn't risk the wheels getting stuck in the

slush. The newly reared archer regiments

remained stationed at the back. Skilfully

designed back rests had been fabricated for them, which allowed the archers to lie and

guide their feet with an ingenious system of gears. The bows could be stretched across

their feet and the strings drawn back up to their chins, releasing powerfully built arrows, almost the size of small spears. As they were at the back of the Suryavanshi

infantry,

their presence was hidden from the Chandravanshis.

The Chandravanshis

had placed their army as per their strength in a standard offensive

formation. Their massive infantry was in squads of five thousand. There were fifty such,

comprising a full legion in a straight line. They stretched as far as the eye could see.

There were three more such legions behind the first one, ready to finish off the job. This formation allowed a direct assault onto a numerically inferior enemy, giving the offence

tremendous strength and solidity, but also making it rigid. The squads left spaces

in

between

them, to allow the cavalry

to charge

through if required.

Seeing

the

Suryavanshi

formation, the Chandravanshi

cavalry from the rear had been moved to the

flanks. This would enable a quicker charge at the flanks of the Suryavanshi

formation

and disrupt enemy lines. The Chandravanshi  
general clearly had a copy of the ancient  
war manuals and was playing it religiously, page by page. It would have  
been a perfect  
move against an enemy who also followed standard tactics. Unfortunately,  
he was up  
against  
a Tibetan tribal chief whose innovations had transformed  
the Suryavanshi  
attack.

As Shiva rode towards the hillock at the edge of the main battlefield, the  
Brahmins

picked up the tempo of their shlokas while the war drums pumped the  
energy to a

higher level. Despite being outnumbered

on a vast scale, the Suryavanshis

did not

exhibit even the slightest hint of nervousness.

They had buried their fear deep.

The war cries of the clan-gods of the various brigades rent the air.

‘Indra dev Id jail’

‘Agni dev ki jai!’

‘Jai Shakti devi Id!’

‘Varun dev ki jai!’

‘Jai Pawan dev Id!’

But these cries were forgotten in an instant as the soldiers saw a magnificent white

steed canter in over the hillock carrying a handsome,

muscular figure. A thunderous

roar pierced the sky, loud enough to force the gods out of their cloud palaces to peer at the events

unfolding below. The Neelkanth

raised

his hand in acknowledgment.

Following him was General Parvateshwar,

accompanied

by Nandi and Veerbhadra.

Vraka was off his horse in a flash as Shiva approached him. Parvateshwar

dismounted

equally rapidly and was next to Vraka before Shiva could reach him.

‘The Lord will lead the right flank, Brigadier,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘I hope that is alright’

‘It will be my honour to fight under his command, my Lord,’ said a beaming Vraka. He

immediately pulled out his Field Commander baton from the grip on his side, went down

on one knee and raised his hand high, to handover the charge to Shiva.

‘You people have to stop doing this,’ said Shiva laughing. ‘You embarrass me!’

Pulling Vraka up on his feet, Shiva embraced him tightly. ‘I am your friend, not your

Lord.’

A stardled Vraka stepped back, his soul unable to handle the gush of positive energy

flowing in. He mumbled, ‘Yes, my Lord.’

Shaking his head softly, Shiva smiled. He gently took the baton from Vraka’s extended

hand and raised it high, for the entire Suryavanshi

army to see. An ear-splitting cry

ripped through the ranks.

‘Mahadev! Mahadev! Mahadev!’

Shiva vaulted onto his horse in one smooth arc. Holding the baton high, he rode up and

down the line. The Suryavanshi

roar got louder and louder.

‘Mahadev!’

‘Mahadev!’

‘Mahadev!’

‘Suryavanshis!’

bellowed Shiva, raising his hand. ‘Meluhans! Hear me!’

The army quietened down to hear their living god.

‘Who is a Mahadev?’ roared Shiva.

They listened in rapt attention, hanging on his every word.

‘Does he sit on a sad height and look on idly while ordinary men do what should be *his* job? No!’

Some soldiers were praying inaudibly.

‘Does he just lazily bestow his blessings while others fight for the good?  
Does he stand

by nonchalantly and count the dead while the living sacrifice themselves to  
destroy evil?

No!’

There was pin-drop silence as the Suryavanshis

absorbed their Neelkanth’s message.

‘A man *becomes*

a Mahadev only when he fights for good. A Mahadev is not born from

his mother's womb. He is forged in the heat of battle, when he wages a war to destroy

evil!'

The army stood hushed, feeling a flood of positive energy.

'I am a Mahadev!' bellowed Shiva.

A resounding

roar arose from the Suryavanshis.

They were led by the *Mahadev*.

The *God of Gods*.

The Chandravanshis

did not stand a chance.

'But I am not the only one!'

A shocked silence descended

on the Suryavanshis.

What did the Mahadev mean? He

is not the only one? Do the Chandravanshis

have a god too?

'I am not the only one! For I see a hundred thousand Mahadevs in front of me! I see a

hundred thousand men willing to fight on the side of good! I see a hundred thousand

men willing to battle evil! I see a hundred thousand men capable of destroying evil!’

The stunned Suryavanshis

gaped

at their Neelkanth as the import of his words

permeated their minds. They dared not ask the question: Are we gods?

Shiva had the answer: ‘*Har Ek Hal Mahadev!*’

The Meluhans stood astounded. *Every single one a Mahadev?*

‘*Har Har Mahadev?*

’ bellowed Shiva.

The Meluhans roared. *All of us are Mahadevs!*

Pure primal energy coursed through the veins of each Suryavanshi.

They were gods! It

didn’t matter that the Chandravanshis

outnumbered them ten to one. They were gods!

Even if the evil Chandravanshis

outnumbered

them a hundred to one, victory was

assured. They were gods!

‘Har Har Mahadev!’ cried the Suryavanshi



army.

‘Har Har Mahadev!’ yelled Shiva. ‘All of us are gods! Gods on a mission!’

Drawing his sword, he pulled the reins of his horse. Rising on its hind legs with a

ferocious neigh, the horse pirouetted smartly to face the Chandravanshis.

Shiva pointed

his sword at his enemies. ‘On a mission to destroy evil!’

The Suryavanshis

bellowed after their Lord. Har Har Mahadev!

The cry rent the air. Har Har Mahadev!

Victory would not be denied. Har Har Mahadev!

The long spell of evil would end today. Har Har Mahadev!

As the army roared like the gods that they were, Shiva rode on towards a beaming

Parvateshwar

who was flanked by Nandi, Veerbhadra and Vraka.

‘Nice speech,’ grinned Veerbhadra.

Shiva winked at him. He then turned his horse towards Parvateshwar.

‘General, I think

it’s time we start our own rainfall.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ nodded Parvateshwar.

Turning his horse around, he gave the orders to

his flag bearer. 'The archers.'

The flag bearer raised the coded flag. It was red with a vicious black  
lightening darning

on it. The message

was repeated by flag bearers across the lines. The Suryavanshi

infantry immediately hunched down on its knees. Shiva, Parvateshwar,

Vraka, Nandi

and Veerbhadra dismounted rapidly, pulling their horses down to their  
knees. And the

arrows flew in a deadly shower.

The archers had been placed in a semi-circular formation, to cover as wide a  
range of

the Chandravanshi

army as possible.

Five thousand

archers

rained death on the

Chandravanshis

as the sky turned black with a curtain of arrows. The hapless

Swadweepans

were easy prey in their tight formations. The arrows, nearly as powerful  
as short spears,  
easily  
penetrated  
the leather and wood shields  
of the irregular  
Chandravanshi  
soldiers. Only the regulars held metal shields. It had been just a few  
minutes of the ruthless massacre  
with arrows raining down onto the squads of the first  
legion that the Chandravanshi  
lines started breaking. The first legion was taking too  
many casualties to hold on to their position. The irregulars started running  
back, causing chaos. Confusion reigned in the legions behind.

Parvateshwar  
turned towards Shiva. 'I think we should lengthen the range, my Lord.'  
Shiva nodded in reply. Parvateshwar  
nodded to his flag bearer who relayed  
the  
message.

The archers stopped shooting for just a few moments. Turning their wheels right, they rapidly raised the height of their foot rests. With the longer range quickly set, they drew their arrows.

And let fly. The arrows hit the second

legion of the

Chandravanshis

now. The pincer attack of the retreating first Chandravanshi

legion and

the concurrent hail of arrows created bedlam in the second legion.

Shiva noticed the Chandravanshi

cavalry moving into position to attack. He turned to

Parvateshwar.

‘General, their cavalry is moving out. They would aim to flank us and attack the archers. Our cavalry needs to meet them midfield.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘I had expected this move from the Chandravanshis.

That’s why I had positioned

two cavalries,

comprising

the Arishtanemi,

led by

Mayashrenik and Vidyunmali, on the flanks.'

'Perfect! But General, our cavalry must not move too far ahead or our arrows will injure

our own men. Nor must they retreat. They have to hold their position. At least for

another five minutes.'

'I agree. Our archers need that much time to finish their job.'

Parvateshwar

turned to his flag bearer with detailed instructions. Two couriers set off

rapidly to the left and right. Within moments, the eastern and western Arishtanemi, led

by Mayashrenik and Vidyunmali respectively,

thundered out to meet the Chandravanshi

counter-attack.

Meanwhile, the disarray in the second legion of the Chandravanshi

army only increased

as the unrelenting and ruthless wall of arrows pounded down on them. The Suryavanshi

archers,

unmindful of their tiring limbs or bleeding hands, bravely continued their

unremitted assault. The second legion line started breaking as the Chandravanshis tried

desperately

to escape the ruthless carnage.

‘Higher range,

my Lord?’ asked

Parvateshwar,

pre-empting

Shiva’s

words. Shiva

nodded in reply.

Meanwhile

the Suryavanshi

and Chandravanshi

cavalries

were engaged

in fierce

combat on the eastern and western ends of the battlefield. The Chandravanshis

knew

they had to break through. A few more minutes of the Suryavanshi

archers' assault and

the battle would be all but lost. They fought desperately,

like wounded tigers. Swords

cut through flesh and bone. Spears pierced body armour. Soldiers, with limbs hanging

half-severed,

continued to battle away. Horses, with their riders missing, attacked as if

their own lives depended on it. The Chandravanshis

were throwing all their might into

breaking through the line that protected the archers. But to their misfortune, they had

run into the fiercest brigadiers amongst the Suryavanshis.

Mayashrenik and Vidyumali

fought ferociously, holding the mammoth Chandravanshi

force at bay.

The archers

meanwhile

had begun

their onslaught

on the third legion of the

Chandravanshis.

Their legions were bleeding to death or deserting in great numbers.

Some of them, however, grimly and courageously,

held on. When their shields were not

strong enough to block the arrows, they used the bodies of their dead comrades.

But

they held the line.

‘Do we stop now and charge, my Lord?’ asked Parvateshwar.

‘No. I want the third legion devastated as well. Let it go on for a few more minutes.’

‘Yes, my Lord. We should also let half the archers raise their range a bit more. We can

get the weaker sections in the fourth legion as well. If their lines are also broken,

confusion would rein right into the heart of their troops.’

‘You are right, Parvateshwar.

Let’s do that.’

Meanwhile, the Chandravanshi

cavalry on the western flank, sensing the hopelessness

of their charge, began to retreat. Some Arishtanemi riders moved to give chase but

Vidyunmali stopped them. As the Chandravanshis



retreated,

Vidyunmali ordered his

troops to wait at their present positions, lest the Chandravanshis

launch a counter-

attack. Seeing

their enemy ride rapidly back to their lines, Vidyunmali ordered a

withdrawal to their initial position on the flank of the bow formation.

The Chandravanshis

facing Mayashrenik,

however, were made of sterner stuff. Despite

taking severe casualties,

they fought grimly, refusing to retreat. Mayashrenik

and his

men fought fiercely, holding their enemy. Suddenly,

the hail of arrows stopped. The

archers had been ordered to stand down. Now that their mission was accomplished

without their intervention, the Chandravanshi

brigadier ordered a retreat of his cavalry.

Mayashrenik,

in turn, withdrew his troops quickly to his earlier position to prepare for the main charge, which he knew was just a few moments away.

‘General, shall we?’ asked Shiva, nodding towards the left flank.

‘Yes, my Lord,’ replied Parvateshwar.

As Parvateshwar

turned to mount his horse, Shiva called out, ‘Parvateshwar?’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Race you to the last line of the Chandravanshis!’

Parvateshwar

raised his eyebrows in surprise, smiling broadly. ‘I will win, my Lord.’

‘We’ll see,’ grinned Shiva, his eyes narrowed in a playful challenge.

Parvateshwar

rapidly mounted his horse and rode to his command on the left. Shiva,

followed by Vraka, Nandi and Veerbhadra rode to the right. Prasanjit geared his tortoise

corps in the centre for the attack.

‘Meluhans!’ roared Shiva, dismounting smoothly. ‘They lie in front of you! Waiting to be

slaughtered!

It ends today! Evil ends today!’

‘Har Har Mahadev!’ bellowed the soldiers as the Meluhan conch shell, announcing the

Suryavanshi

attack, was blown.

With an ear-shattering

yell, the infantry charged

towards the Chandravanshis.

The

tortoise corps moved in their slow, yet unyielding pace towards the Chandravanshi

centre. The sides of the bow formation moved quicker than the centre. The cavalry

cantered along the flanks, protecting the infantry from an enemy charge. Courageous

remnants of the third and fourth legions of the Chandravanshis

meanwhile were rapidly

reforming their lines to face the Suryavanshi

onslaught. But the mass of dead bodies of

their fallen comrades

did not allow them the space needed to form their traditional

Chaturanga

formation, which could have allowed some lateral movement. They were huddled together in a tight but thin line before the Suryavanshis were upon them.

The battle was going almost exactly as per plan for the Suryavanshis.

By the time they

reached the Chandravanshi

line, they were in a tight, faintly curved line of trained and

vicious soldiers, with their flanking line of light infantry being slightly behind the level of the slower moving tortoise corps at the centre. The unstoppable

tortoise corps tore

ruthlessly into the Chandravanshi

centre. The shields provided protection for the corps

against the best Chandravanshi

swordsmen,

while their trishuls ripped through the

Swadweepans.

The Chandravanshis

had but two choices. Either fall to the trishul, or be

pushed towards the sides where the Suryavanshis

were now bearing down hard on

them. As the centre of the Chandravanshi

army broke under the unrelenting assault, the

Suryavanshi

flanks tore through their sides.

Shiva was leading his flank ferociously into the Chandravanshis,

decimating all in front

of him. To his surprise, he found the enemy lines thinning. Letting his fellow soldiers

charge ahead of him, he rose to his full height to observe the movements.

He was

shocked to see the Chandravanshi

line opposing him, moving towards the centre. They

were attacking the only exposed flank of the tortoise corps, their right side, which could not be protected by shields. Someone in the Chandravanshi

army was using his brains.

If any of the tortoises broke, the Chandravanshis

would swarm through the centre in a

tight line, devastating the Suryavanshis.

‘Meluhans!’ roared Shiva. ‘Follow me!’

Shiva’s flag bearer raised his pennant. The soldiers followed. The Neelkanth charged

into the sides of the Chandravanshi

lines bearing down on the tortoises. Caught in a

pincer attack between the trishuls and the charge from Shiva's flank, the spirit of the

Chandravanshis

finally broke.

What was a mighty Chandravanshi

army was now reduced to independent stragglers

fighting valiantly for a losing cause. Shiva and Parvateshwar

led their respective sides

to complete the job. The victory was absolute.

The Chandravanshi

army had been

comprehensively

routed.



## CHAPTER 24

### [A Stunning Revelation](#)

Sati rushed out of her tent, followed by Krittika and Ayurvati.

‘A little slowly, Sati,’ cried Ayurvati, running to keep up. ‘In your condition...’

Sati turned and grinned back at Ayurvati, but did not reduce her pace. She sprinted to

the royal tent where she had been informed Shiva and Parvateshwar had reached after

the declaration of victory. Nandi and Veerbhadra

stood guard at the entrance. They

moved aside to let Sati in, but barred Ayurvati and Krittika.

‘I am sorry, Lady Ayurvati,’ said Nandi apologetically,

his head bowed. ‘I have strict

instructions not to let anybody in.’

‘Why?’ asked a surprised Ayurvati.

‘I don’t know, my Lady. I am very sorry’

‘That’s alright,’ said Ayurvati. ‘You’re only doing your job.’

Veerbhadra looked at Krittika. ‘I’m sorry darling.’

‘Please don’t call me that in public,’ whispered Krittika, embarrassed.

Sati pulled the curtain aside and entered the tent.

‘I don’t know, my Lord,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘It doesn’t make sense.’

Sati was surprised at Parvateshwar

calling Shiva ‘My Lord’.

But her joy at seeing Shiva safe brushed these thoughts aside. ‘Shiva!’

‘Sati?’ mumbled Shiva, turning towards her.

Sati froze. He didn’t smile when he saw her. He didn’t have the flush of victory on his

face. He hadn’t even got his wounds dressed.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Sati.

Shiva

stared

at her. His expression

worried her deeply.

She

turned towards

Parvateshwar.

He looked at her for an instant with an obviously forced smile. The way

he usually smiled when he tried to shield her from some bad news. ‘What is it,



Pitratulya?’

Parvateshwar

looked at Shiva, who spoke at last. ‘Something about this war troubles us.’

‘What could trouble you?’ asked a surprised Sati. ‘You have delivered the greatest

victory ever to the Suryavanshis.

This defeat of the Chandravanshis

is even more

comprehensive

than what my grandfather achieved. You should be proud!’

‘I didn’t see any Nagas with the Chandravanshis,’

said Shiva.

‘The Nagas weren’t there?’ asked Sati. ‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘Yes,’ said Shiva, his eyes carrying a hint of foreboding. ‘If they are so thick with the Chandravanshis,

then they would have been there in the battlefield. If they were being

used by the Chandravanshis

against us, then their skills would have been even more

useful in the battle. But where were they?’

‘Maybe they’ve fallen out with each other,’ suggested

Sati.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘This war was triggered by their joint attack on  
Mandar! Why would they not be here?’

‘Shiva, I am sure you’ll figure it out,’ said Sati. ‘Don’t trouble yourself.’

‘Dammit Sati!’ yelled Shiva. ‘I can’t figure it out! That’s why I am worried!’

A startled Sati stepped back. His uncharacteristic

vehemence

stunned her. He wasn’t

like this. Shiva realised what he had done. He immediately reached his  
bloodied hand

out. ‘I’m sorry Sati. It’s just that I...’

The conversation

was interrupted as Daksha, accompanied

by an aide, raised the

curtain and swaggered

into the room.

‘My Lord!’ cried Daksha as he hugged Shiva tight.

Shiva flinched. His wounds hurt. Daksha immediately stepped back.

‘I’m so sorry, my Lord,’ said Daksha. Turning to his aide he continued,  
‘Why is Ayurvati

outside? Bring her in. Let her tend to the Lord's wounds.'

'No wait,' said Shiva to the aide. 'I had said I didn't want to be disturbed. There is

always

time to address

the wounds later.' Shiva turned towards Daksha.

'Your

Highness, I need to speak about something...'

'My Lord, if you will allow me first,' said Daksha, as enthusiastic as a little boy who had just been given a long denied sweet. 'I wanted to thank you for what you have done for

me. For Meluha. We have done what even my father couldn't! This is an absolute

victory!'

Shiva and Parvateshwar

looked briefly at each other before Daksha garnered

their

attention again.

'Emperor Dilipa is being brought here even as we speak,' said Daksha.

'What?' asked Parvateshwar

taken aback. 'But we had sent some of our soldiers to their

camp just a little while back. They couldn't possibly have arrested him so soon.'

'No Parvateshwar,'

said Daksha. 'I had sent my personal guards much earlier. We could

tell from the viewing platform that the Chandravanshis

had already lost by the time the

Lord and you began the third charge. That is the benefit of the perspective you get from

a distance. I was worried that Dilipa might escape like the coward he is. So I sent off my personal guards to arrest him.'

'But, your Highness,' said Parvateshwar,

'shouldn't we discuss the terms of surrender

before we bring him in? What are we going to offer?'

'Offer?' asked Daksha, his eyes twinkling with the euphoria of triumph.

'Frankly, we

don't really need to offer anything considering how he was routed. He is being brought

here as a common criminal. However, we will show him how kind Meluha can be. We

will make him such an offer that his next seven generations will be singing our praises!'

Before a surprised Shiva could ask what exactly Daksha had in mind, the crier of the

Royal Guard announced the presence of Dilipa outside the tent.  
Accompanying him was

his son, Crown Prince Bhagirath.

‘Just a minute, Kaustav,’ said Daksha, as he went into a tizzy, organising the room

exactly as he would like it. He sat down on a chair placed in the centre of the room.

Daksha requested Shiva to sit to his right. As Shiva sat, Sati turned to leave the tent.

Shiva reached out to hold her hand. She turned, saw his need and walked behind his

seat to sit down on a chair there. Parvateshwar

sat to the Emperor’s left.

Daksha then called out loudly, ‘Let him in.’

Shiva was anxious to see the face of evil. Despite his misgivings about the absence of

the Nagas, he genuinely believed he had fought a righteous war on the right side. Only

seeing the defeated face of the evil king of the Chandravanshis

would complete the

victory.

Dilipa walked in. Shiva straightened

up in surprise. Dilipa was nothing like what he

expected.

He had the appearance

of an old man, a sight rare in Meluha due to the

Somras. Despite his age, Dilipa had a rakishly handsome bearing. He was of medium

height, had dark skin and a slightly muscular build. His clothes were radically different from the sober Meluhan fare. A bright pink dhoti, gleaming violet angvastram

and a

profusion of gold jewellery adorning most parts of his body, combined to give him the

look of a dandy. His face had the crowfeet of a life lived well. A trimmed salt and pepper beard, accompanied

by thick white hair under his extravagandy

coloured crown,

completed the effete look while adding an intellectual air.

‘Where’s the Crown Prince Bhagirath?’ asked Daksha.

‘I have asked him to wait outside since he can be a little hotheaded,’

said Dilipa. He

looked only at Daksha, refusing to acknowledge

the presence of the others in the room.

‘Don’t you Meluhans have any custom of offering a seat to your guests?’

‘You are not a guest, Emperor Dilipa,’ said Daksha. ‘You are a prisoner.’

‘Yes. Yes. I know. Can’t you get a joke?’ asked Dilipa superciliously.

‘So what is it that

you people want this time?’

Daksha stared at Dilipa quizzically.

‘You have already stolen the Yamuna waters a hundred years back,’ continued Dilipa.

‘What else do you want?’

Shiva turned in surprise towards Daksha.

‘We did not steal the Yamuna waters,’ yelled Daksha angrily.

‘They were ours and we took them back!’

‘Yes whatever,’ dismissed Dilipa with a wave of his hand.

‘What are your demands this time?’

Shiva was astonished at how the conversation was going. They had just defeated this

evil man. He should be repentant. But here he was, being condescending and self-

righteous.

Daksha looked at Dilipa with wide eyes and a kindly smile. ‘I don’t want to take

anything. Instead, I want to give you something.’

Dilipa raised his eyebrows warily. ‘*Give* us something?’

‘Yes, I intend to give you the benefit of our way of life.’

Dilipa continued to stare at Daksha with suspicion.

‘We are going to bring you up to our superior way of life,’ continued Daksha, his eyes

marvelling at his own generosity. ‘We are going to reform you.’

Dilipa said with half a snigger, ‘*R eform* us?’

‘Yes. My general,

Parvateshwar,

will run your empire from now on as Viceroy of

Swadweep.

You will continue to be the titular head. Parvateshwar

will ensure that your

corrupt people are brought in line with the Meluhan way of life. We will live together as brothers now.’

Parvateshwar

turned towards Daksha, stunned. He did not expect to be despatched to

Swadweep.

Dilipa appeared



to have difficulty in controlling his laughter. ‘You actually think your  
straight-laced

men can run Swadweep?

My people are mercurial. They are not going to  
listen to your moralising!’

‘Oh, they will,’ sneered Daksha. ‘They will listen to everything we say.  
Because

you

don’t know where the actual voice comes from.’

‘Really? Where does it come from? Do enlighten me.’

Daksha motioned towards Shiva and said, ‘Look who sits with us.’

Dilipa turned to Daksha’s

right and asked incredulously,

‘Who’s he? What in Lord

Indra’s name is so special about him?’

Shiva squirmed, feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

Daksha spoke a little louder. ‘Look at his throat, Oh king of the  
Chandravanshis.’

Dilipa looked again

with the same

arrogance

towards

Shiva.

Despite the dried

smattering of blood and gore, the blue throat blazed. Suddenly, Dilipa's  
haughty smile

disappeared.

He looked shocked. He tried to say something, but he was at a loss of  
words.

‘Yes, oh corrupt Chandravanshi,’

scoffed Daksha, moving his hands for dramatic effect.

‘We have the Neelkanth.’

Dilipa's eyes had the dazed look of a child who had just discovered that the  
hand that

brutally knifed his back belonged to his beloved father. Shiva's heart was  
disturbed with increased apprehension.

This was not the way this meeting was supposed to occur.

Daksha

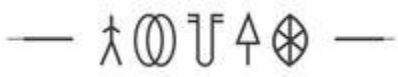
continued

his hectoring.

‘The Neelkanth

has sworn to destroy

the evil



Chandravanshi

way of life. You HAVE to listen.'

A bewildered Dilipa stared at Shiva for what seemed like an eternity. At long last, he

recovered enough to softly whisper, 'Whatever you say.'

Before Daksha could bluster further, Dilipa turned and staggered towards the tent

curtain. At the exit, he turned around to look at Shiva once again. Shiva swore that he

could see a few tears in those proud, haughty eyes.

As soon as Dilipa left the tent, Daksha got up and hugged Shiva, lightly, so as to not

hurt the Neelkanth. 'My Lord, did you see the look on his face. It was precious!'

Turning towards Parvateshwar,

he continued, 'Parvateshwar,

Dilipa is broken. You will

have no trouble controlling the Swadweepans

and bringing them around to our way of

life. We will go down in history as the men who found a permanent solution to this

problem!’

Shiva wasn’t paying attention. His troubled heart desperately

searched

for answers.

How could a struggle that appeared so righteous, just a few hours back, now suddenly

appear wrong? He turned towards Sati, forlorn. She gently touched his shoulder.

‘What are you thinking, my Lord?’ asked

Daksha,

intruding into Shiva’s

troubled

thoughts.

Shiva just shook his head.

‘I just asked if you would like to travel in Dilipa’s carriage to Ayodhya?’ asked Daksha.

‘You deserve the honour, my Lord. You have led us to this glorious day’

This conversation did not appear important to Shiva at this point. He did not have the

energy to think of an answer. He just nodded in an absentminded

manner.

‘Wonderful. I’ll make all the arrangements,’

said Daksha. Turning towards his aide, he

continued, ‘Send Ayurvati in to immediately dress the Lord’s wounds. We need to leave

by tomorrow morning to make sure that we have control over Ayodhya, before chaos

reigns in the aftermath of Dilipa’s defeat.’

With a namaste

towards Shiva, Daksha turned to leave. ‘Parvateshwar,

aren’t you

coming?’

Parvateshwar

gazed at Shiva, his face creased with concern.

‘Parvateshwar?’

repeated Daksha.

Taking a quick look at Sati, Parvateshwar

turned to leave. Sati moved forward, holding

Shiva’s face gently. Shiva’s eyes seemed to droop with the heavy weight of tiredness.

Ayurvati lifted the curtain carefully. ‘How are you, my Lord?’

Shiva looked up, his eyes half shut. He was descending into a strange sleep.  
He yelled

suddenly, 'Nandi!'

Nandi came rushing in.

'Nandi, can you find me a cravat?'

'Cravat, my Lord?' asked Nandi.

'Yes.'

'Umm. But why, my Lord?'

'BECAUSE I NEED IT!' shouted Shiva.

Nandi, shocked at the violence of his Lord's reply, hurried out. Sati and  
Ayurvati looked at Shiva

in surprise.

Before they could say

anything,

he suddenly

collapsed.

Unconscious.

He was running hard, the menacing forest closing in on him. He was  
desperate

to get

beyond the trees before they laid their ravenous

claws on him. Suddenly,  
a loud  
insistent cry pierced through the silence.

*‘Help! Please*

*help!’*

He stopped. No. He wouldn’t run away this time. He would fight that monster. He was

the Mahadev. It was his duty. Shiva turned around slowly, his sword drawn, his shield held high.

‘Jai Shri Ram!’ he yelled, as he raced back to the clearing. The bushy thorns slashed

his legs. Bleeding and terrified, he ran hard.

*I will reach her in time.*

*I will not fail her again.*

*My blood will wash away my sin .*

He sprang through the last clump of shrubs, letting the thorns cut greedily at his flesh, and leapt into the clearing.

His shield held defensively,

his sword gripped low to

retaliate.

But nobody attacked.

It was a strange

laughter

that finally broke his

concentration. He lowered his shield. Slowly.

‘Oh Lord!’ he shrieked in agony.

The woman lay stricken on the ground, a short sword buried into her heart. The little boy stood on her side. Stunned. His hand bloodied with the struggle of his kill. The hairy

monster sat on the rocky ledge, pointing at the little boy. Laughing.

‘NO!’ screamed Shiva, as he jerked himself awake.

‘What happened, Shiva?’ asked a worried Sati, darting to hold his hand.

Shiva looked around the room, startled. A worried Parvateshwar

and Ayurvati got up

too. ‘My Lord?’

‘Shiva, it’s alright. It’s alright,’ whispered Sati, gently running her hand along Shiva’s face.

‘You were poisoned, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati. ‘We think that some of the Chandravanshi

soldiers may have had poisoned weapons. It has affected many others as well.’

Shiva slowly regained his composure. He got off his bed. Sati tried to help him up, but



he insisted on doing it himself. His throat felt excruciatingly parched. He stumbled over to the ewer, followed closely by Sati. He reached over and gulped down some water.

‘It seems like I have been asleep for many hours,’ said Shiva, finally noticing the lamps and dark sky beyond.

‘Yes,’ said a worried Ayurvati. ‘Close to thirty-six hours.’

‘Thirty-six hours!’ cried a surprised Shiva, before collapsing on to a comfortable chair.

He noticed a forbidding figure sitting at the back, his right eye covered in a bandage, his amputated left hand in a sling. ‘Drapaku?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Drapaku, as he tried to get up and salute.

‘My God, Drapaku! It’s so good to see you. Please sit down!’

‘It is heavenly to see you, my Lord,’

‘How was your end of the battle?’

‘I lost too many men, my Lord. Almost half of them. And this arm and eye,’ whispered

Drapaku. ‘But by your grace, we held them till the main battle was won.’

‘It wasn’t my grace, my friend. It was your bravery,’ said Shiva. ‘I am proud of you.’

‘Thank you, my Lord.’

Sati stood next to her husband, gently caressing his hair. ‘Are you sure you want to sit, Shiva? You can lie down for a while.’

‘I have slouched around enough, Sati,’ said Shiva with a weak smile.

Ayurvati smiled. ‘Well, the poison certainly didn’t affect your sense of humour, my Lord.’

‘Really? Is it still that bad?’ grinned Shiva.

Parvateshwar,

Drapaku and Ayurvati laughed weakly. Sati didn’t. She was watching

Shiva intently. He was trying too hard. He was trying to forget, trying to get others to

focus on something other than himself. Was this dream much worse than the others?

‘Where is his Highness?’ asked Shiva.

‘Father left for Ayodhya this morning,’ said Sati.

‘My Lord,’ said Parvateshwar,

‘His Highness felt it would not be right to keep Swadweep

without a sovereign for so long, considering the circumstances.

He felt it important that



the Suryavanshi

army be marched across the empire immediately, with Emperor Dilipa

as prisoner, so that the Swadweepans

know and accept the new dispensation.’

‘So we’re not going to Ayodhya?’

‘We will, my Lord,’ said Ayurvati. ‘But in a few days when you are strong enough.’

‘Some twelve thousand of our soldiers remain with us,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘We will

march to Ayodhya when you are ready. His Highness insisted that Emperor Dilipa leave

behind one of his family members

with our unit as hostage

to ensure

that no

Swadweepan

attacks our much smaller force.’

‘So we have one of Emperor Dilipa’s family members in our camp?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘His daughter, Princess Anandmayi.’

Ayurvati smiled, shaking her head slightly.

‘What?’ asked Shiva.

Ayurvati looked sheepishly

at Parvateshwar

and then grinned at Sati. Parvateshwar

glared back at Ayurvati.

‘What happened?’

asked Shiva again.

‘Nothing

that

important,

my

Lord,’

clarified

Parvateshwar,

looking

strangely

embarrassed.

‘It’s just that she is quite a handful.’

‘Well, I’ll ensure that I remain out of her way then,’ said Shiva, smiling.

‘So this route seems to make the most sense,’ said Parvateshwar,

pointing at the map.

Shiva, and the other poisoned soldiers, had recovered completely over the previous five

days. The march to Ayodhya was scheduled the next day.

‘I think you are right,’ said Shiva, his mind going back to the meeting with the Emperor

of Swadweep.

No point in thinking about Dilipa. I'm sure he was acting during the meeting. The

Chandravanshis

are evil. They are capable of any deception. Our war was righteous.

'We plan to leave tomorrow morning, my Lord,' said Parvateshwar.

Turning towards

Sati, he continued, 'You can finally see the birthplace of Lord Ram, my child.'

'Yes Pitratulya,' smiled Sati. 'But I don't know if these people would have kept his

temple unharmed. They may have destroyed it in their hatred.'

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud commotion.

Parvateshwar

turned with a frown. 'What is going on out there, Nandi?'

'My Lord,' said Nandi from the other side of the curtain. 'The Princess Anandmayi is

here. She has some demands. But we can't fulfil them. She insists on meeting you.'

'Please tell her Highness to wait in her tent,' growled Parvateshwar.

'I will be over in a

few minutes.'

‘I cannot wait General!’ screamed a strong, yet feminine voice from across the curtain.

Shiva signalled to Parvateshwar

to let her in. Parvateshwar

turned towards the curtain.

‘Nandi, Veerbhadra, bring her in. But check her first for any weapons.’

In a few moments, Anandmayi, flanked by Nandi and Veerbhadra, entered Shiva’s tent.

Shiva raised his eyebrow

at her presence.

She was taller than her father. And

distractingly beautiful. A deep walnut coloured complexion complemented a body that

was bountifully voluptuous, yet healthy. Her doe-shaped

eyes were in a seductive half-

stare, while her lips were in a perpetual pout that was sensual yet intimidating. She was provocatively clothed, with a dhoti that had been tied dangerously

low at the waist and

ended

many inches

above her knees,

while being tied agonizingly

tight at her

curvaceous

hips. It was just a little longer than the loincloth that the Meluhan men tied

during their ceremonial baths. Her blouse was similar to the cloth piece that Meluhan

women tied, except that it had been cut raunchily on the top to the shape of her ample

breasts, affording a full view of her generous cleavage.

She stood with her hips tilted to

the side, exuding raw passion.

‘You really think I can hide some weapons in this?’ charged Anandmayi, pointing at her

clothes.

A startled Nandi and Sati glared at her, while Shiva and Veerbhadra sported a surprised

smile. Parvateshwar

shook his head slightly.

‘How are you doing, Parvateshwar?’

asked Anandmayi, flashing a smile while scanning

him from top to bottom, her eyebrows raised lasciviously.

Shiva couldn't help smiling as he saw Parvateshwar

blush slightly.

‘What is it you desire, Princess?’

barked Parvateshwar.

‘We are in the middle of an

important meeting’

‘Will you really give me what I desire, General?’ sighed Anandmayi.

Parvateshwar

blushed even deeper. ‘Princess, we have no time for nonsensical talk!’

‘Yes,’ groaned Anandmayi. ‘Most unfortunate. Then perhaps you can help me get some

milk and rose petals in this sorry little camp you are running.’

Parvateshwar

turned towards Nandi in surprise. Nandi blabbered, ‘My Lord, she doesn’t

want just a glass, but fifty litres of milk. We can’t allow that with our rations.’

‘You are going to drink fifty litres of milk?’ cried Parvateshwar,

his eyes wide in

astonishment.



‘I need it for my beauty bath, General!’ glowered Anandmayi. ‘You are going to take us

on a long march from tomorrow. I cannot go unprepared.’

‘I will try and see what I can do,’ said Parvateshwar.

‘Don’t *try*, General. *Do it*,’ admonished Anandmayi.

Shiva couldn’t control himself any longer. He burst out laughing.

‘What the hell do you think you are laughing at?’ glared Anandmayi, turning towards

Shiva.

‘You will speak to the Lord with respect, Princess,’ yelled Parvateshwar.

‘The *Lord*?’

grinned Anandmayi. ‘So he is the one in charge? The one Daksha was allegedly showing off?’

She turned back towards Shiva. ‘What did you say to trouble my father so much that he

isn’t even talking anymore? You don’t look that threatening to me.’

‘Be careful about what you say, Princess,’

advised Parvateshwar

fiercely. ‘You don’t

know whom you are speaking with.’

Shiva raised his hand at Parvateshwar,

signalling him to calm down. But Anandmayi

was the one who required soothing.

‘Whoever you are, you will all be smashed when our Lord comes. When he descends to

Swadweep and destroys the evil of your kind.’

*What?!*

‘Take her out of here, Nandi,’ yelled Parvateshwar.

‘No wait,’ said Shiva. Turning towards Anandmayi, he asked, ‘What did you mean by

saying “*when your Lord will descend*

*to Swadweep*

*and destroy*

*the evil of our kind”?*’

‘Why should I answer you, *Parvateshwar’s*

*Lord?*’

Parvateshwar

moved rapidly, drawing his sword and pointing it close to Anandmayi’s

neck. ‘When the Lord asks something, you will answer!’

‘Do you always move that fast?’ asked Anandmayi, her eyebrows raised saucily. ‘Or can

you take it slow sometimes?’

Bringing his sword threateningly

closer, Parvateshwar

repeated,

‘Answer the Lord,

Princess.’

Shaking her head, Anandmayi turned towards Shiva. ‘We wait for our Lord who will

come to Swadweep and destroy the evil Suryavanshis.’

Strong lines of worry began creasing Shiva’s handsome face. ‘Who is your Lord?’

‘I don’t know. He hasn’t shown himself as yet.’

An unfathomable foreboding sunk deep into Shiva’s heart. He was profoundly afraid of

his next question. But something inside told him that he had to ask it. ‘How will you know he is your Lord?’

‘Why are you so interested in this?’

‘I need to know!’ snarled Shiva.

Anandmayi frowned at Shiva as if he was mad. ‘He will not be from the Sapt-Sindhu.

Neither a Suryavanshi

nor a Chandravanshi.

But when he comes, he will come on our

side.'

Shiva's inner voice whispered miserably that there was more. Clutching the armrest of

his chair, he asked, 'And?'

'And,' continued Anandmayi, 'his throat will turn blue when he drinks the Somras.'

An audible gasp escaped

Shiva as his body stiffened. The world seemed to spin.

Anandmayi frowned, even more confused about the strange conversation.

Parvateshwar

glowered fiercely at Anandmayi. 'You are lying, woman! Admit it! You are lying!'

'Why would I...'

Anandmayi stopped in mid-sentence

as she noticed Shiva's cravat covered throat. The

arrogance suddenly vanished from her face. She found her knees buckling under her.

Pointing weakly with her hands, she asked, 'Why is your throat covered?'

'Take her out, Nandi!' ordered Parvateshwar.

'Who are you?' shouted Anandmayi.

Nandi and Veerbhadra

tried to pull Anandmayi

out. With surprising

strength, she

struggled against them. 'Show me your throat!'

They held on to her arms and dragged her backwards.

She kicked Veerbhadra in the

groin, causing him to fall back in pain as she turned towards Shiva once again. 'Who the

hell are you?'

Shiva stared down at the table unable to find the strength to even glance at Anandmayi.

He held his armrest tightly. It seemed to be the only stable thing in a world spinning

desperately

out of control.

Veerbhadra staggered

back, held her arms tightly and pulled her back as Nandi held

her by the neck. Anandmayi bit Nandi's arm brutally. As a howling Nandi pulled his arm

back, she screamed again, 'Answer me, dammit! Who are you?'

Shiva looked up for one brief instant at Anandmayi's

tormented eyes. The pain they

conveyed lashed his soul. The flames of agony burned his conscience.

A shocked Anandmayi suddenly became immobile. The misery in her eyes would have

stunned the bravest of Meluhan soldiers. In a broken voice, she whispered, 'You are

supposed to be on our side...'

She allowed herself to be hauled out by Nandi and Veerbhadra. Parvateshwar

kept his

eyes down. He dared not look at Shiva. He was a good Suryavanshi.

He would not

humiliate his Lord by looking at him at his weakest. Sati, on the other hand, would not

leave her husband to suffer alone, by not looking at him when he was at his weakest.

She came to his side, touching his face.

Shiva looked up, his eyes devastated with the tears of sorrow. 'What have I done?'

Sati held Shiva tightly, holding his throbbing head against

her bosom. There was

nothing she could say to alleviate the pain. She could just hold him.

An agonized whisper suffused the tent with its resonant grief. 'What have I done?'



## CHAPTER 25

### Island of the Individual

It was another three weeks before Shiva's entourage reached Ayodhya, the capital of

the Swadweepans.

They had travelled along a decrepit, long-winding road to the

Ganga, and then sailed eastward to the point where the mighty, yet capricious, river

passionately

welcomed the waters of the Sarayu. Then they had cruised north, up the

Sarayu, to the city of Lord Ram's birth. It was a long circuitous route, but the quickest possible considering

the terrible road conditions in

*Swadweep*

, the

*island*

*of the*

*individual* .

The excitement in the hearts of the Meluhan soldiers was beyond compare. They had



only heard legends about Lord Ram's city. None had ever seen it. *Ayodhya* ,  
literally *the impregnable*

*city* , was the land first blessed

by Lord Ram's sacred feet. They

expected

a gleaming

city beyond compare,

even if it had been devastated

by the

Chandravanshi

presence.

They expected the city to be an oasis of order and harmony

even if all the surrounding land had been rendered chaotic by the  
Chandravanshis.

They were disappointed.

Ayodhya was nothing like Devagiri. At first glance, it promised much. The  
outer walls

were thick and looked astonishingly powerful. Unlike the sober grey  
Meluhan walls, the

exterior of Ayodhya had been extravagantly

painted with every colour in god's universe.

Each alternate brick, however, was painted in pristine white, the royal colour of the

Chandravanshis.

Numerous banners, tinted in pink and blue, had been festooned down

the city towers. The banners weren't put up for a special occasion, but were permanent

fixtures, adorning the city.

The empire road curved suddenly along the fort wall to the main entrance, so as to

prevent elephants and battering rams from getting a straight run to the mighty doors. At

the top of the main gates, a wonderfully ornate, horizontal crescent moon had been

sculpted into the walls. Below it was the Chandravanshi

motto. '*Shringar*.

*Saundarya*.

*Swatantrata*.'

*Passion*.

*Beauty*.

*Freedom*

.

It was only when one entered the city that it delivered a blow to the precision and order loving Meluhans.

Krittika described

the city's organisation

best as 'functioning

pandemonium'.

Unlike all Meluhan cities, Ayodhya was not built on a platform — so it

was obvious that if the Sarayu river ever flooded in the manner that the temperamental

Indus did, the city would be inundated.

The numerous

city walls, built in seven

concentric circles, were surprisingly thick and strong. However, it didn't take a general's strategic

eye to see that the concentric walls had not been planned by a military

mastermind. They were in fact added in a haphazard manner, one by one, after the city

had burst its seams and extended beyond the previous perimeter. That is why there

were many weak points along each wall, which an enemy laying siege could easily

exploit. Perhaps that's why the Chandravanshis

preferred to take wars outside to a far  
away battleground rather than defend their city.

The infrastructure was a sorry indictment of the Chandravanshi  
penchant for debate as  
an excuse

for action. The roads were nothing better than dirt tracks. There was,  
however, one notable exception — the neatly paved and strikingly smooth  
*Rajpath* , the *royal road* , which led straight from the outer walls through to  
the opulent royal palace.

The Swadweepans

joked that instead of finding potholes on their road, they actually had  
to search for some stretch of road amongst the potholes! This was a far cry  
from the

exceptionally

well-planned,

sign-posted,

paved

and tediously

standard

roads

of

Meluhan cities.

There were, what can only be called 'encroachments',

all over the city. Some open

grounds had been converted into giant slums as illegal immigrants simply pitched their

tents on public areas. The already narrow roads had been made even narrower by the

intrusion of the cloth tents of the homeless.

There was constant tension between the

richer home owning class and the poor landless who lived in slums. The emperor had

legalised all encroachments

established before 1910 BC. That meant that slum dwellers

could not be removed unless the government

created alternate accommodation

for

them. The minor problem was that the Chandravanshi

government was so hideously

inefficient that they hadn't managed to build even one new house for slum dwellers in

the last twelve years. Now there was talk about extending the deadline further. The

encroachments,

the bad roads, the poor construction combined to give an impression of a city in a state of terminal decline.

The Meluhans were outraged. What had these people done to Lord Ram's great city?

Or was it always like this? Is that why Lord Ram had crossed the Sarayu river to

establish his capital at far away Devagiri on the Saraswati?

And yet, as the initial shock of the ugliness

and frenzied disorder wore away, the

Meluhans started finding strange and unexpected

charm about this city in constant

chaos. None of the Ayodhyan houses were similar, unlike the Meluhan cities where

even the royal palace was built to a standard design. Here each house had its own

individual allure. The Swadweepans,

unencumbered

by strict rules and building codes,

created houses that were expressions

of passion and elegance.

Some structures were

so grand that even the Meluhans couldn't imagine what divine engineering talent could

create them. The Swadweepans

had none of the restraint of the Meluhans. Everything

was painted bright — from orange buildings to parrot green ceilings to shocking pink

windows! Civic-minded rich Swadweepans

had created grand public gardens, temples,

theatres and libraries, naming them after their family members, since they had received

no help from the government. The Meluhans, despite finding it strange that a public

building should be named after a private family, were awed by the grandeur of these

structures.

A vibrant city, with exquisite

beauty existing side by side with hideous

ugliness, Ayodhya disgusted and yet fascinated the Meluhans.

The people were living embodiments

of the Chandravanshi

way of life. The women

wore skimpy clothes, brazen and confident about their sexuality.

The men were as

fashion and beauty conscious as their women — what Meluhans would call dandies.

The relationship between the men and women could only be characterised

as one

teetering on extremes.

Extreme love coexisting

with extreme hate, expressed

with

extreme loudness, all built on the foundations of extreme passion. Nothing was done in

small measure in Ayodhya. Moderation was a word that did not exist in their dictionary.

Therefore, it was no surprise that the emotional, mercurial and uncontrollable rabble of

Ayodhya scoffed at Daksha's proclaimed intention to 'reform' them. Daksha entered a

sullen city, as its populace

stood quietly on the sides of the Rajpath, refusing to

welcome the conquering force. Daksha, who had expected the Ayodhya residents to



welcome him with showers of flowers since they had finally been freed from their evil

rulers, was surprised at the cold reception he got. He put it down to enforcement by the

Chandravanshi

royalty.

Shiva, who arrived a week later, was under no such illusions. He had expected far

worse than just a quiet greeting. He expected to be attacked. He expected to be vilified

for not standing up for the Swadweepans,

who also believed in the legend of the

Neelkanth. He expected to be hated for choosing the so-called wrong side. But while he

had come to suspect that the Chandravanshis

were not quite evil, he was not prepared

to classify the Suryavanshis

as the 'wrong side' either. In his opinion, the Meluhans



were almost without exception

honest, decent,

law-abiding

people who could be

unvaryingly trusted. Shiva was deeply confused about his karma and his future course

of action. He missed Brahaspati's

keen wit and advice.

His thoughts weighing heavy on him, Shiva quickly disembarked from the curtained cart

and turned towards the Chandravanshi

palace. For a moment, he was startled by the

grandeur of Dilipa's abode. But he quickly gathered his wits, reached out for Sati's

hand, and began

climbing the hundred steps towards the main palace

platform.

Parvateshwar

trudged slowly behind. Shiva glanced

briefly beyond

Sati, to find

Anandmayi ascending the steps quietly. She had not spoken to Shiva since that terrible

encounter when she realised who Shiva was. She kept climbing with an impassive face,

devoid of any expression, her eyes set on her father.

‘Who the hell is that man?’ asked an incredulous Swadweepan

carpenter, held back at

the edge of the palace courtyard by Chandravanshi

soldiers.

‘Why are our Emperor and the sincere madman waiting for him on the royal platform,

and that too in full imperial regalia?’

‘Sincere madman?’ asked his friend.

‘Oh, haven’t you heard? That is the new nickname for that fool Daksha!’

The friends burst out laughing.

‘Shush!’ hissed an old man, standing next to them. ‘Don’t you young people have any

sense? Ayodhya is being humiliated and you are joking around.’

Meanwhile, Shiva had reached the royal platform. Daksha bent low with a namaste as

Shiva smiled weakly and returned the greeting.

Dilipa, his eyes moist, bent low towards Shiva. He cried in a soft whisper, ‘I am not evil, my Lord. We are not evil.’

‘What was that?’ asked Daksha, his ears straining to hear Dilipa’s whispered words.

Shiva's choked throat refused to utter a sound. Not hearing anything from Dilipa either,

Daksha shook his head and whispered, 'My Lord, perhaps this is an opportune time to

introduce you to the people of Ayodhya. I am sure it will galvanize them into action once they know that the Neelkanth has come to their rescue.'

Before an anguished Shiva could answer, his caring wife spoke, 'Father, Shiva is very

tired. It has been a long journey. May he rest for some time?'

'Yes, of course,' mumbled Daksha apologetically.

Turning towards Shiva, he said, 'I am

sorry, my Lord. Sometimes

my enthusiasm

gets the better of me. Why don't you rest

today? We can always introduce you at the court tomorrow.'

Shiva looked up at Dilipa's angst ridden eyes. Unable to bear the tormented gaze any

longer, Shiva

looked beyond

the Chandravanshi

emperor,

towards

his courtiers

standing at the back. Only one pair of eyes did not have a look of incomprehension.

It

was at that moment that Shiva realised that except for Anandmayi,

nobody else in

Dilipa's court knew of his identity. Not even Dilipa's son, Bhagirath. Dilipa had not

spoken to a soul. Clearly, neither had Daksha. Possibly in the hope of a grand unveiling

of the secret, in the presence of Shiva himself.

'My Lord.'

Shiva turned towards Parvateshwar.

'Yes,' he said in a, barely audible whisper.

'I will lead the army out since the ceremonial march is over,' said Parvateshwar.

'They

will be stationed outside the city in the camp for the earlier contingent. I will be back at your service within two hours.'

Shiva nodded faintly.

It had been a few hours since their arrival in Ayodhya. Shiva had not spoken a word. He

stood quietly at the window of his chamber, staring out at the city as the afternoon sun

bore down in its dazzling glory. Sati sat silently to his side, holding his hand, drawing all the energy that she had and passing it to him. He continued to stare out, towards a

grand structure right in the heart of the city. The structure, from this distance, appeared to be built of white marble. For an unfathomable reason, looking at it seemed to soothe

Shiva's soul. It was built upon the highest point in the city, on a gently sloping hill,

clearly visible from every part of Ayodhya. Shiva thought it odd. Why was that building

so important that it occupied the highest point in the city, instead of the royal palace?

A loud insistent knocking disturbed his thoughts.

'Who is it?' growled Parvateshwar,

rising from his chair at the back of the chamber.

'My Lord,' answered Nandi. 'It is the Princess Anandmayi.'

Parvateshwar

groaned softly before turning towards Shiva. The Neelkanth nodded.

'Let her in, Nandi,' ordered Parvateshwar.

Anandmayi entered, her smiling demeanour

startling Parvateshwar

who frowned in

suspicious surprise. 'How may I help you, your Highness?'

'I have told you so many times how you can help me, Parvateshwar,'

teased

Anandmayi. 'Perhaps if you listened to the answer rather than repeating the question

again and again, we may actually get somewhere.'

Parvateshwar's

reaction was a combination of embarrassment

and anger. Shiva smiled

weakly, for the first time in three weeks. For some reason, the fact that Anandmayi

seemed to have returned to her original self made Shiva happy.

Anandmayi turned towards Shiva with a low bow. 'The truth has just come to me, my

Lord. I am sorry about my sullenness

earlier. But I was deeply troubled at the time. Your

being on the side of the Suryavanshis

can have only one of two explanations.

Either we

are evil. Or you are not who we think you are and the legend is false.  
Accepting either of these explanations would destroy my soul.'

Shiva looked at Anandmayi attentively.

'But I realised only now,' continued Anandmayi. The legend is not false.  
And we are

obviously not evil. It is just that you are too naive. You have been misled by  
the evil

Suryavanshis.

I will set it right. I will show you the goodness of our path.'

'We are not evil,' glowered Parvateshwar.

'Parvateshwar,'

sighed Anandmayi. 'I have told you before. That lovely mouth of yours

has much better uses than talking. You shouldn't waste your breath  
unnecessarily.'

'Stop your impudence, woman!' cried Parvateshwar.

You think we are evil? Have you

seen the way you treat your own people. Hungry eyes have stared at me all  
through our

journey. Children lie abandoned

on the side of potholed highways.

Old desperate



women beg for alms all through your “impregnable city”, while the Swadweepan

rich

lead lives better than a Meluhan emperor. We have a perfect society in Meluha. I may

agree with the Lord and accept that maybe you are not evil. But you certainly don't

know how to take care of your people. Come to Meluha to see how citizens should be

treated. All your lives will improve with our way of governance.'

'Improve?' argued an agitated Anandmayi. 'We are not perfect, I agree. There are many

things that our empire could do better, I agree. But at least we give our people freedom.

They are not forced to follow some stupid laws mandated by an out of touch elite.'

'Give them freedom? Freedom to do what? Loot, steal, beg, kill?'

'I don't need to argue with you on our culture. Your puny mind will not be able to

understand the benefit of our ways.'

'I don't want to! It disgusts me to see the way this empire has been managed. You have

no norms. No control. No laws. It is no wonder that despite not being evil, you have

contaminated

your hands by allying with the Nagas. By fighting like coward terrorists and not brave Kshatriyas. You may not be evil, but your deeds certainly are!’

‘Nagas? What the bloody hell are you talking about? Do you think we are mad that we

will ally with the Nagas? You think we don’t know how that will pollute our souls for the

next seven lives? And terrorism?

We have never resorted to terrorism. We have

strained against our natural instincts to avoid a war with your cursed people for the last hundred years. Hence we have retreated from the border provinces. We have cut all

ties with you. We have even learned to live with the lower flow of the Ganga since you

stole the Yamuna from us. My father told you that we had nothing to do with the attack

on Mount Mandar! But you did not believe us. And why should you? You needed an

excuse to attack us again!’

‘Don’t lie to me. At least not in front of the Mahadev! Chandravanshi

terrorists have

been found with the Nagas.’

‘My father told you that nobody under our control had anything to do with the attack on

Mandar.

We have

nothing

to do with the Nagas.

It’s possible

that some

Chandravanshis,

just like some Suryavanshis,

could have helped the terrorists. If you

had worked with us, we may have even found the criminals!’

‘What rubbish is this? No Suryavanshi

would ally with those monsters. As for some

Chandravanshis

assisting

the terrorists, you’ll have to answer for that. Swadweep

is

under your control!’

‘If you had kept diplomatic relations with Swadweep,

you would have known that we are  
a confederacy,  
not authoritarian like you. Ayodhya is only the overlord. Other kings  
within Swadweep  
pay us tribute for protection during war. Otherwise, they have the  
freedom to run their kingdoms any way they choose.'

'How is that possible?

You're saying the Emperor of Swadweep  
doesn't run his own  
empire?'

'Please,' begged Shiva, stopping the argument which reflected the debate  
raging in his

mind. He did not want to be troubled by questions for which he had no  
answers. At least

not yet.

Parvateshwar

and Anandmayi immediately fell silent.

Turning slowly towards the window again, he asked, 'What is that building,  
Anandmayi?'

'That, my Lord,' said Anandmayi,

smiling happily at being spoken to first, 'is the

*Ramjanmabhoomi*

temple, built at the site of *Lord Ram's birthplace*

.'

'You have built a temple to Lord Ram?' asked a startled Parvateshwar.

'But he was a

Suryavanshi.

Your sworn enemy.'

'We did not build the temple,' said Anandmayi, raising her eyes in exasperation.

'But we

have refurbished and maintained it lovingly. And furthermore, what makes you think

Lord Ram was our sworn enemy. He may have been misled to follow a different path,

but he did a lot of good for the Chandravanshis

as well. He is respected as a God in

Ayodhya.'

Parvateshwar's

eyes

widened

in shock.

‘But he had

sworn

to destroy

the

Chandravanshis.’

‘If he had vowed to destroy us, we wouldn’t exist today, would we? He left us unharmed

because he believed that we were good. That our way of life deserved to survive.’

Parvateshwar

was perturbed, out of arguments.

‘You know what Lord Ram’s full ceremonial name is?’ asked Anandmayi, pressing home

her advantage.

‘Of course I do,’ scoffed Parvateshwar.

‘Lord Ram, Suryavanshi

Kshatriya of the

Ikshvaku clan. Son of Dashrath and Kaushalya.

Husband of Sita. Honoured and

respected with the tide of the seventh Vishnu.’

‘Perfect,’ beamed Anandmayi. ‘Except for one minor mistake. You have missed one

small word, General. You have missed the word *Chandra* . His full name was Lord *Ram Chandra*.’

Parvateshwar

frowned.

‘Yes, General,’ continued Anandmayi. ‘His name meant “*the face of the moon*” . He was more Chandravanshi

than you know’



‘This is typical Chandravanshi

double talk,’ argued Parvateshwar,

gathering his wits.

‘You are lost in words and names rather than deeds. Lord Ram said that only a person’s

karma determines his identity. The fact that his name had the word moon in it means

nothing. His deeds were worthy of the sun. He was a Suryavanshi,

through and

through.’

‘Why couldn’t he have been both Suryavanshi

and Chandravanshi?’

‘What nonsense is that? It’s not possible. It’s contradictory.’

‘It appears

impossible

to you only because

your puny mind cannot understand

it.

Contradictions are a part of nature.’

‘No, they aren’t. It is impossible that one thing be true and the opposite not be false. The universe cannot accept that. One scabbard can have only one sword!’

‘That is only if the scabbard is small. Are you saying that Lord Ram was not big enough

to have two identities?’

‘You are just playing with words!’ glared Parvateshwar.

Shiva had stopped listening. He turned towards the window. Towards the temple. He

could feel it in every pore of his body. He could feel it in his soul. He could hear the soft whisper of his inner voice.

Lard Ram will help you. He will guide you. He will soothe you. Go to him.

It was the third hour of the third prahar when Shiva stole into the chaotic Ayodhya

streets by himself. He was on his way to meet Lord Ram. Sati had not offered to come



along. She knew that he needed to be alone. Wearing a cravat and a loose shawl for

protection, with a sword and shield for abundant precaution, Shiva ambled along, taking

in the strange sights and smells of the Chandravanshi

capital. Nobody recognised him.

He liked it that way.

The Ayodhyans seemed to live their life without even the slightest hint of self-control.

Loud emotional voices assaulted

Shiva's ears as if a hideous orchestra was trying to

overpower the senses. The common people either laughed like they had just gulped an

entire bottle of wine or fought like their lives depended on it. Shiva was pushed and

barged on several occasions by people rushing around, hurling obscenities and calling

him blind. There were manic shoppers bargaining

with agitated shopkeepers

at the

bazaar and it almost seemed

like they would come to blows over ridiculously small

amounts of money. For both the shoppers and shopkeepers,

the harried negotiation

wasn't about the cash itself. It was about their honour in having struck a good bargain.

Shiva noticed a large number of couples crowded into a small garden on the side of the

road doing unspeakable

things to each other. They seemed to brazenly disregard the

presence of voyeuristic eyes on the street or in the park itself. He noticed with surprise that the eyes staring from the street were not judgemental, but excited. Shiva noted the

glaring contrast with the Meluhans who would not even embrace each other in public.

Shiva suddenly started in surprise as he felt a feminine hand brush lightly against his

backside. He turned sharply to notice a young woman grin back at him and wink. Before

Shiva could react, he spotted a much older woman walking right behind. Thinking of her

to be the younger woman's mother, Shiva decided to let the indiscretion pass for fear of

causing any embarrassment.

As he turned, he felt a hand on his backside again, this

time more insistent and aggressive.

He turned around and was shocked to find the  
mother smiling sensuously  
at him. A flabbergasted  
Shiva hurried down the road,  
escaping the bazaar before any more passes could stun his composure.  
He continued walking in the direction of the towering Ramjanmabhoomi  
temple. As he  
approached,  
the unassailable  
jangle of Ayodhya dimmed significantly. This was a quiet  
residential area of the city. Probably for the rich, judging by the exquisite  
mansions and  
the avenues. Turning to the right, he came upon the road which led to his  
destination. It curved smoothly up the hill, caressing its sides in a sensuous  
arc. This was probably the only road in Ayodhya,  
besides  
the Rajpath,  
not pitted with potholes. Magnificent  
gulmohur trees rose brilliantly along the flanks of the road, their dazzling  
orange leaves lighting the path for the weary and the lost. The path leading  
towards their answers. The path to Lord Ram.

Shiva closed his eyes and took a deep breath as anxiety gnawed at his heart.  
What

would he find? Would he find peace? Would he find answers?

Would he, as he hoped,

find that he had done some good? Good that wasn't visible to him right now.  
Or would

he be told that he had made a terrible mistake and thousands had died a  
senseless

death?

Shiva opened his eyes

slowly, steeled

himself and began walking, softly

repeating the name of the Lord.

Ram. Ram. Ram. Ram.

A little distance up, Shiva's chant was disturbed. At an arched twist of the  
road, he saw an old, shrivelled man, who appeared like he hadn't eaten in  
weeks. He had a wound on

his ankle which had festered because of the humidity and neglect. He was  
dressed in a

torn jute sack, tied precariously at his waist and hung from his shoulders  
with a hemp

rope. Sitting on the sidewalk, his sinewy right hand scratched vigorously at  
his head,

disturbing the lice going about their job diligently.

With his weak left hand, he

precariously

balanced a banana leaf which held a piece of bread and gruel. It looked

like the kind of food distributed at cheap restaurants on the donations of a few kindly or guilty souls. The kind of food that would not even be fed to animals in Meluha.

Intense anger surged through Shiva. This old man was begging, nay suffering, at the

doors of Lord Ram's abode and nobody seemed

to care. What kind of government

would treat its people like this? In Meluha, the government assiduously

nurtured all its

citizens. There was enough food for everyone. Nobody was homeless. The government

actually worked. This old man would not have had to endure this humiliation if he lived

in Devagiri!

The anger in Shiva gave way to a flood of positive energy, as he realised that he had

found his answer.

He knew

now that Parvateshwar

was

right. Maybe

the

Chandravanshis

were not evil, but they led a wretched existence.

The Suryavanshi

system

would improve their lives dramatically.

There would be abundance

and

prosperity

all around

when

Parvateshwar

honed

the moribund

Chandravanshi

administration. There *will* be some good that will come out of this war.

Maybe he had not made such a terrible mistake. He thanked Lord Ram. He thought he had found his

answer.

Fate, however, conspired to deny Shiva this small consolation. The old beggar noticed

Shiva staring at him. Shiva's sympathetic

eyes and compassionate

smile caused the

beggar's haggard cheeks to spring to life, as he smiled in return. However, it wasn't the smile of a broken man begging for alms. It was the warm welcoming smile of a man at

peace with himself. Shiva was taken aback.

The old man smiled even more warmly while raising his weak hand with great effort.

'Would you like some food, my son?'

Shiva was stunned. He felt small against the mighty heart of the wretched man he had

thought was deserving of pity and kindness.

Seeing Shiva gaping, the old man repeated, 'Would you like to eat with me, son? There

is enough for both.'

An overwhelmed Shiva could not find the strength to speak. There wasn't enough food

for even one man. Why was this man offering to share what little food he had? It didn't

make sense.

Thinking Shiva to be hard of hearing, the old man spoke a little louder. 'My son, sit with me. Eat.'

Shiva struggled to find the strength to shake his head slightly. 'No thank you, sir.'

The old man's face fell immediately. 'This is good food,' he said, his eyes showing the

hurt he felt. 'I would not offer it to you otherwise.'

Shiva realised that he had insulted the old man's pride. He had just treated him like a

beggar. 'No, no, that's not what I meant. I know it's good food. It's just that I...'

The old man interrupted Shiva's words with a warm grin. 'Then sit with me, my son.'

Shiva nodded quietly. He sat down on the pavement. The old man turned towards Shiva

and placed the banana leaf on the ground, in between the two of them. Shiva looked at

the bread and watery gruel, which until moments back appeared unfit for humans. The

old man looked up at Shiva, his half blind eyes beaming. 'Eat.'

Shiva picked up a small morsel of the bread, dipped it in the gruel and swallowed. It

slipped into his body easily,



but weighed

heavy on his soul. He could feel his

righteousness

being squeezed out of him as the poor, old man beamed generously.

‘Come on, my son. If you are going to eat so little, how will you maintain your big

muscular body?’

A startled Shiva glanced up at the old man; the circumference

of those shrunken arms

would have been smaller than Shiva’s wrist. The old man was taking ridiculously small

bites, moving larger portions of the bread towards Shiva. Shiva could not find the heart

to look up any more. As his heart sank deeper and his tears rose, he ate the portion the

old man gave him quickly. The food was over in no time.

Freedom. Freedom for the wretched to also have dignity. Something

impossible in

Meluha’s system of governance.

‘Are you full now, my son?’

Shiva nodded slowly, still not daring to look into the old man’s eyes.

‘Good. Go. It’s a long walk to the temple.’

Shiva looked up, bewildered at the astounding generosity being shown to him. The old

man’s sunken cheeks were spread wide as he smiled affectionately.

He was on the

verge of starvation, and yet he had given practically all his food to a stranger. Shiva

cursed his own heart for the blasphemy he had committed. The blasphemy of thinking

that he could actually ‘save’ such a man. Shiva found himself bending forward, as if in

the volition of a greater power. He extended his arms and touched the feet of the old

man.

The old man raised his hand and touched Shiva’s head tenderly, blessing him. ‘May you

find what you are looking for, my son.’

Shiva got up, his heart heavy with tears of guilt, his throat choked with the cry of

remorse,

his soul leaden

and its self-righteousness

crushed

by the old man's

munificence. He knew his answer. What he had done was wrong. He had committed a

terrible mistake. These people were not evil.



## CHAPTER 26

### [The Question of Questions](#)

The road to the Ramjanmabhoomi

temple clung to the sides of a gently sloping hill,

before ending its journey at Lord Ram's abode. It afforded a breathtaking view of the

city below. But Shiva did not see it. Neither did he see the magnificent construction of

the gigantic temple or the gorgeously

landscaped

gardens around it. The temple was

sheer poetry, written in white marble, composed

by the architect of the gods. The

architect had designed a grand staircase leading up to the main temple platform, which

appeared awe-inspiring,

yet inviting. Colossal and ornate marble statues in sober blue

and grey had been engraved on the platform. Elaborately carved pillars supported an

ostentatious yet tasteful ceiling of blue marble. The architect obviously knew that Lord

Ram's favourite time of the day was the morning. For on the ceiling, the morning sky, as

it would have been seen in the absence of the temple roof, had been lovingly painted.

On top of the ceiling, the temple spire shot upwards to a height of almost one hundred

metres, like a giant namaste to the gods. The Swadweepans,

to their credit, had not

forced their garish sensibilities on the temple. Its restrained beauty was in keeping with the way the sober Lord Ram would have liked it.

Shiva did not notice any of this. Nor did he look at the intricately carved statues in the inner sanctum. Lord Ram's idol at the centre was surrounded by his beloveds. To the

right was his loving wife, Sita, and to the left was his devoted brother, Lakshman. At

their feet, on his knees, was Lord Ram's most fervent and favourite disciple, Hanuman,

of the *Vayuputra*

tribe, *the sons of the Wind God* .

Shiva could not find the strength to meet Lord Ram's eyes. He feared the verdict he

would receive.

He crouched behind a pillar, resting against

it, grieving. When he

couldn't control his intense feelings of guilt anymore, his eyes released the tears they had been holding back. Shiva made desperate attempts to control his tears, but they kept flowing as though a dam had burst. He bit into his balled fist, overcome by remorse. He curled his legs up against his chest and rested his head on his knees.

Drowning in his sorrow, Shiva did not feel the compassionate hand on his shoulder.

Seeing no reaction, the hand squeezed

his shoulder lightly. Shiva recognised the touch

but kept his head low. He did not want to appear weak, be seen with tears in his eyes.

The gentle hand, old and worn with age, withdrew quietly, while its owner waited

patiently until Shiva composed himself. When the time was right, he came forward and

sat down in front of him. A sombre Shiva did a formal namaste

to the Pandit, who

looked almost exactly like the Pandits that Shiva had met at the Brahma temple at Meru

and the Mohan temple at Mohan Jo Daro. He sported a similar extensively flowing white

beard and a white mane. He wore a saffron dhoti and angvastram,

just like the other

pandits. The wizened face had the same calm, welcoming smile. The only difference

was that this Pandit bore a considerably more generous waist.

‘Is it really so bad?’ asked the Pandit, his eyes narrowed and head tilted slightly, in the typically Indian empathetic look.

Shiva shut his eyes and lowered his head again. The Pandit waited patiently for Shiva’s

reply. ‘You don’t know what I have done!’

‘I do know.’

Shiva looked up at the Pandit, his eyes full of surprise and shame.

‘I know what you have done, Oh Neelkanth,’ said the Pandit. ‘And I ask again, is it really

so bad?’

‘Don’t call me the Neelkanth,’ glared Shiva. ‘I don’t deserve the title. I have the blood of thousands on my hands.’

‘Many more than thousands

have died,’ said the Pandit. ‘Probably

hundreds

of

thousands. But you really think they wouldn't have died if you hadn't been around? Is

the blood really on your hands?'

'Of course it is! It was my stupidity that led to this war. I had no idea what I was doing. A responsibility was thrust upon me and I wasn't worthy of it! Hundreds of thousands have

perished as a result!'

Shiva curled up his fist and pounded his forehead, desperately

trying to soothe the

throbbing heat on his brow. The Pandit stared in mild surprise at the deep red blotch on

Shiva's forehead, right between his eyes. It didn't bear the colour of a blood clot. It was a much deeper hue, almost black. The Pandit controlled his surprise and remained

silent. Now was not the correct time.

'And it's all because of me,' moaned Shiva, his eyes moistening again. 'It's all my fault.'

'Soldiers are Kshatriyas, my friend,' said the Pandit, a picture of calm.

'Nobody forces

them to die. They choose their path, knowing the risks.

*And* the possible glory that

comes with it. The Neelkanth is not the kind of person on whom responsibility can be



thrust against his will. You *chose*

this. You were *born* for it.'

Shiva looked at the Pandit starded. His eyes seemed to ask, 'Born for it?'

The Pandit ignored the question in Shiva's eyes. 'Everything happens for a reason. If

you are going through this turmoil, there is a divine plan behind it.'

'What bloody divine reason can there be for so many deaths?'

'The destruction of evil? Wouldn't you say that is a very important reason?'

'But I did not destroy evil!' yelled Shiva. 'These people aren't evil. *They're just different* .

Being different isn't evil.'

The Pandit's face broke into his typically enigmatic smile. 'Exactly. They are not evil.

They are just different. You have realised it very quickly, my friend, a lot earlier than the previous Mahadev.'

Shiva was perplexed by the Pandit's words for an instant. 'Lord Rudra?'

'Yes! Lord Rudra.'

'But he did destroy evil. He destroyed the Asuras.'

'And, who said the Asuras were evil?'

'I read it...' Shiva stopped mid—sentence.

He finally understood.

‘Yes,’ smiled the Pandit. ‘You have guessed it correctly. Just like the Suryavanshis

and

the Chandravanshis

see each other as evil, so did the Devas and the Asuras. So if you

are going to read a book written by the Devas, what do you think the Asuras are going

to be portrayed as?’

‘You mean they were just like today’s Suryavanshis

and Chandravanshis?’

‘More so than you can

imagine.

The Devas

and the Asuras,

just like the

Chandravanshis

and the Suryavanshis,

represent two balancing life forces — a duality’

‘Duality?’

‘Yes, a duality that is one of the many perspectives

of the universe — the masculine and

the feminine. The Asuras and the Suryavanshis  
stand for the masculine. The Devas and  
the Chandravanshis  
speak for the feminine. The names change, but the life forces they  
embody remain the same. They will always exist. There is no way that either  
can be  
destroyed. Otherwise the universe will implode.’  
‘And they see their fight with the other as the eternal struggle between good  
and evil.’  
‘Exactly,’ beamed the Pandit, marvelling at Shiva’s keen mind even in this  
time of  
distress. ‘But they haven’t been fighting all the time. Sometimes,  
there have been long  
periods of cooperation as well. In times of strife, which usually happens  
when there is  
evil, it is easiest to blame each other. A difference of opinion between two  
dissimilar  
ways of life gets portrayed as a fight between  
good and evil. Just because  
the  
Chandravanshis  
are different from the Suryavanshis

doesn't mean that they are evil.

Why do you think the Neelkanth had to be an outsider?’

‘So that he would not be biased towards any one point of view,’ said Shiva,  
as a veil

lifted before his eyes.

‘Exactly! The Neelkanth has to be above all this. He has to be devoid of any  
bias.’

‘But I was not beyond biases. I was convinced that the Chandravanshis  
are evil. Maybe

what Anandmayi says is right. Maybe I am naive, easily misled.’

‘Don't be so hard on yourself, my friend. You cannot drop from the sky  
knowing

everything, can you? You would have to enter from any one side. And  
whichever side

you entered the equation from, you would obviously be coloured by their  
viewpoint,

seeing the other side as evil. You realized your error early. Lord Rudra did  
not recognise it till it was almost too late. He had nearly destroyed the  
Asuras before he grasped the

simple fact that they were not evil, just different.’

‘*Nearly* destroyed them? You mean some Asuras still exist?’

The Pandit smiled mysteriously.

‘That conversation is for another time my friend. The

point you need to understand is that you are not the first Mahadev who was misled. And

you will not be the last. Imagine, if you will, what Lord Rudra's feelings of guilt must

have been?'

Shiva kept quiet, his eyes downcast.

The knowledge

of Lord Rudra's guilt did not

reduce the shame that racked his soul. Reading his thoughts, the Pandit continued.

'You took the best decision you could take under the circumstances.

I know this will be

cold comfort, but being the Neelkanth isn't easy. You will have to bear the burden of this guilt. I know the kind of person you are. It *will* be a heavy burden. Your challenge is not to ignore the guilt or the pain. You have too good a heart to be able to do that. Your

challenge is to stay true to your karma, to your duty, *in spite*

of the pain. That is the

fate and the duty of a Mahadev.'

'But what kind of a Mahadev am I? Why am I required? How am I to destroy evil if I

don't know what evil is?'

'Who said your job is to destroy evil?'

A startled Shiva glared at the Pandit. He hated the irritating word games that these

pandits seemed to love.

Glimpsing the anger in Shiva's eyes, the Pandit clarified immediately. 'The strength that evil has is overestimated,

my friend. It is not so difficult to annihilate. All it takes is for a

few good men to decide that they will fight it. At practically all the times that evil has raised its head, it has met the same fate. It has been destroyed.'

'Then why am I required?'

'You are required for the most crucial task: To answer that most important question.'

'What?'

' *What is evil?* '

' *What is evil?* '

'Yes. Many wars have been fought between men,' said the Pandit. 'And many more will

be fought in the future. That is the way of the world. But it is only a Mahadev who

converts one of those wars into a battle between good and evil. It is only the Mahadev

who can recognise evil and lead men against it. Before evil raises its ugly head and

extinguishes all life.'

‘But how do I recognise evil?’

‘I can’t help you there my friend. I am not the Mahadev. This is a question you must find the answer to. But you have the heart. You have the mind. Keep them open and evil will

appear before you.’

*‘Appear?’*

‘Yes,’ explained the Pandit. ‘Evil has a relationship with you. It will come to you. You

have to keep your mind and your heart open so that you recognise it when it appears. I have only one suggestion.

Don’t be hasty in trying to recognise evil. Wait for it. It *will* come to you.’

Shiva frowned. He looked down, trying to absorb the strange conversation.

He turned

towards Lord Ram’s idol, seeking some direction. He did not find the judgemental eyes

he expected to see. Instead, he saw a warm, encouraging smile.

‘Your journey is not over, my friend. Not by a long shot. It has just begun. You have to

keep walking. Otherwise evil will triumph.’

Shiva’s eyes dried up a bit. His burden didn’t feel any lighter, but he felt strong enough to carry it. He had to keep walking to the very end.

Shiva looked up at the Pandit and smiled weakly. ‘Who are you?’

The Pandit smiled. 'I know the answer had been promised to you. And a vow by any of

us is a collective vow. I will not break it.'

Shiva gazed at the Pandit, waiting for the answer.

'We are the Vasudevs.'

'The Vasudevs?'

'Yes. Each Vishnu leaves a tribe behind entrusted with two missions.'

Shiva continued to watch the Pandit intently.

'The first mission is to help the next Mahadev, if and when he comes.'

'And the second?'

'The second is that one of us will become the next Vishnu, whenever we are required to

do so. The seventh Vishnu, Lord Ram, entrusted this task to his trusted lieutenant, Lord

Vasudev. We are his followers. We are the tribe of Vasudev.'

Shiva stared at the Pandit, absorbing the implications of this information. He frowned as one inference suddenly occurred to him. 'Did the Mahadevs

also leave some tribes

behind? Did Lord Rudra?'

The Pandit smiled, deeply impressed by Shiva's intellect. The Mohan Jo Daro Secretary

was correct. *This man is capable*



*of being a Mahadev .*

‘Yes. Lord Rudra did leave behind a tribe. The tribe of Vayuputra.’

‘Vayuputra?’ asked Shiva. The name sounded oddly familiar.

The Pandit placed his hand on Shiva’s shoulder. ‘Leave this for another time, my friend.

I think we have spoken enough for today. Go home. You need your good wife’s

comforting embrace. Tomorrow is another day. And your mission can wait till then. For

now, go home.’

Shiva smiled. An enigmatic smile. Out of character with his simple Tibetan ways. But he

had become an Indian now. He leaned forward to touch the Pandit’s feet. The Pandit

placed his hand on his head to bless him, speaking

gently, ‘Vijayibhav. Jai Guru

Vishwamitra. Jai Guru Vashishta.’

Shiva nodded, accepting

the blessings

with grace. He got up, turned and walked

towards the temple steps. At the edge of the platform, he turned around to look at the

Pandit once again. The Pandit sat on his haunches,

touching his head reverentially to

the ground that Shiva had just vacated.

Shiva smiled and shook his head slightly.

Looking beyond the Pandit, he gazed intently at the idol of Lord Ram. He put his hands

together in a namaste and paid his respects to the Lord.

His burden didn't feel any tighter. But he felt strong enough to carry it.

He turned and started climbing down. At the bottom, he was surprised to find Sati

leaning against the statue of an apsara in the middle of the compound. He smiled.

There was nobody in the world whom he would rather see at this time.

Walking towards her, he teased, 'Are you always going to follow me around?'

'I know when you need to be alone,' smiled Sati. 'And when you need me.'

Shiva froze suddenly. He could see a robe flapping behind the trees, a short distance

from Sati. The light evening breeze gave away the position of the skulking man. Sati

followed Shiva's gaze and turned around. A robed figure, wearing a Holi mask, emerged from behind the trees.

It is him!

Shiva's heart started beating faster. He was still a considerable distance away from

Sati. The Naga was too close for comfort. The three stood rooted to their spots,

assessing

the situation, evaluating the others next move. It was Sati who moved first.

Shifting quickly, she pulled a knife from her side-hold and flung it at the Naga. The Naga barely stirred. The knife missed him narrowly, slamming hard into the tree behind him,

burying deep into the wood.

Shiva moved his hand slowly towards his sword.

The Naga reached behind, pulled the knife out of the tree and in a strange act, tied it

tightly to his right wrist with a cloth band. Then he moved, quickly.

'Sati!' screamed

Shiva, as he drew his sword and started sprinting towards his wife,

pulling his shield forward as he ran.

...to be continued



[Glossary.](#)



Episode from The Secret of the Nagas

The Gates of Branga

‘Why are you back so soon? You have enough medicines for a year.’

Divodas was shocked at the manner in which Major Uma was speaking.

She was

always strict. But never rude. He had been delighted that she had been posted on the

gates. Though he hadn’t met her in years, they had been friends a long time back. He

had thought he could use his friendship with her to gain easy passage into Branga.

‘What is the matter, Uma?’ asked Divodas.

‘It is Major Uma. I am on duty.’

‘I’m sorry Major. I meant no disrespect.’

‘I can’t let you go back unless you give me a good reason.’

‘Why would I need a reason to enter my own country?’

‘This is not your country anymore. You chose to abandon it. Kashi is your land. Go back

there.'

'Major Uma, you know I had no choice. You know the risks to the life of my child in

Branga.'

'You think those who live in Branga don't? You think we don't love our children? Yet we

choose to live in our own land. You suffer the consequences

of your choice.'

Divodas realised this was getting nowhere. 'I have to meet the King on a matter of

national importance.'

Uma narrowed her eyes.

'Really?

I guess

the King has some important business

dealings with Kashi, right?'

Divodas breathed in deeply. 'Major Uma, it is very important that I meet the King. You

must trust me.'

'Unless you are carrying the Queen of the Nagas herself on one of your ships, I can't

see anything important enough to let you through!'

‘I’m carrying someone far more important than the Queen of the Nagas.’

‘Kashi has really improved your sense of humour, Divodas,’ sneered Uma. ‘I suggest

you turn back and shine your supreme light somewhere else.’

The snide pun on Kashi’s name convinced Divodas that he was facing a changed Uma.

An angry and bitter Uma, incapable of listening to reason. He had no choice. He had to

get the Neelkanth. He knew Uma used to believe in the legend.

‘I’ll come back with the person more important than the Queen of the Nagas herself,’

said Divodas, turning to leave.

The small cutter had just docked at the Branga office. Divodas alit first. Followed by

Shiva, Parvateshwar,

Bhagirath, Drapaku and Purvaka.

Uma, standing outside her office, sighed. ‘You really don’t give up, do you?’

‘This is very important, Major Uma,’ said Divodas.

Uma recognised Bhagirath. ‘Is this the person? You think I should break the rules for the Prince of Ayodhya?’

‘He is the Prince of Swadweep,

Major Uma. Don’t forget that. We send tribute to



Ayodhya.’

‘So you are more loyal to Ayodhya as well now? How many times will you abandon

Branga?’

‘Major, in the name of Ayodhya, I respectfully ask you to let us pass,’ said Bhagirath,

trying hard not to lose his temper. He knew the Neelkanth did not want any bloodshed.

‘Our terms of the Ashwamedh treaty were very clear, Prince. We send you a tribute

annually.

And Ayodhya never enters Branga. We have maintained

our part of the

agreement. The orders to me are to help you maintain your part of the bargain.’

Shiva stepped forward. ‘If I may...’

Uma was at the end of her patience. She stepped forward and pushed Shiva.

‘Get out

of here.’

‘UMA!’ Divodas pulled out his sword.

Bhagirath, Parvateshwar,

Drapaku and Purvaka too drew out their swords instantly.

‘I will kill your entire family for this blasphemy,’ swore Drapaku.

‘Wait!’ said Shiva, his arms spread wide, stopping his men.

Shiva turned towards Uma. She was staring at him. Shocked. The angvastram

that he

had wrapped around his body for warmth had come undone, revealing his *nee/ kanth*,

the prophesied blue throat. The Branga soldiers around Uma immediately went down on

their knees, heads bowed in respect, tears flooding their eyes. Uma continued to stare,

her mouth half open.

Shiva cleared his throat. ‘I really need to pass through, Major Uma. May I request your

cooperation?’

Uma’s face turned mottled red. ‘Where the hell have you been?’

Shiva frowned.

Uma bent forward, tears in her eyes, banging her small fists on Shiva’s well-honed

chest. ‘Where the hell have you been? We have been waiting! We have been suffering!

Where the hell have you been?’



Shiva tried to hold Uma, to comfort her. But she sank down holding Shiva's leg, wailing.

‘Where the hell have you been?’

A concerned Divodas turned to another Branga friend also posted at the border. His

friend whispered, ‘Last month, Major Uma lost her only child to the plague. Her husband

and she had conceived after years of trying. She was devastated.’

Divodas looked at Uma with empathy, understanding

her angst. He couldn't even begin

to imagine what would happen to him if he lost his baby.

Shiva, who had heard the entire conversation, squatted. He cradled Uma in the shelter

of his arms, as though trying to give her his strength.

‘Why didn't you come earlier?’ Uma kept crying, inconsolable.

The entire crew on all five ships was crowded on the port and starboard side, watching

the operation in awe and wonder. Shiva's men were totally astounded by the Branga

gates. They had seen the platform close in on their ship with frightening force. Then the hooks were secured to the chains. The Brangas,

after the go-ahead

from respective

ship captains, began towing the fleet.

Shiva was standing aft. Looking at the office at the gate entrance.

Every Branga not working on the gate machinery was on his knees, paying obeisance

to the Neelkanth. But Shiva was staring at a broken woman curled up against the wall in

foetal position. She was still crying.

Shiva had tears in his eyes. He knew Uma believed that fate had cheated her daughter.

She believed that if the Neelkanth had arrived a month earlier, her child would still be

alive. But the Neelkanth himself was not so sure.

*What could I have done?*

He continued to stare at Uma.

*Holy Lake, give me strength.*

*I will fight this plague.*

The ground staff got the signal. They released

the accumulator

machines

and the

pulleys began turning, moving the ship rapidly forward.

Seeing the vision of Uma retreating swiftly, Shiva whispered, 'I'm sorry.'

Amish is a 36-year-old, IIM (Kolkata) educated boring banker turned happy author. The success

of his debut novel, *The Immortals*

*of Meluha*

(Book 1 of the Shiva Trilogy),

encouraged

him to give up a fourteen-year-old

career in financial services to focus on

writing. He is passionate

about history, mythology and philosophy. He believes that

there is beauty and meaning in all world cultures and religions.

Amish lives in Mumbai with his wife Preeti and son Neel.

The second book of the Shiva Trilogy, *The Secret*

*of the Nagas*,

released

in 2011.

Amish is presently working on the third book of the Shiva Trilogy, *The Oath of the*

*Vajuputras*.

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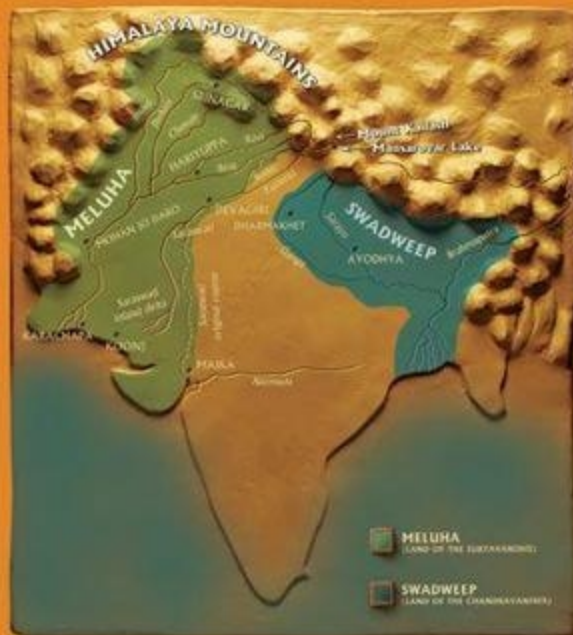
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## INDIA, 1900 BC

In ancient times, North India was called  
the Sapt Sindhu or  
the Land of the Seven Rivers.  
This map details some of the places  
visited by Shiva during the events  
described in this book.

