



Chapter 10

The Gates of Branga

The waters were rising fast, flooding the small boat.

Shiva tried desperately to control the vessel, fighting the raging river with his oars, labouring to reach his friend.

Brahaspati was struggling. Suddenly his eyes opened wide in surprise. What seemed like a rope came out of nowhere and bound itself to his legs. He started getting pulled in rapidly.

'Shiva! Help! Please help me!'

Shiva was rowing hard. Desperately so. 'Hold on! I'm coming!'

Suddenly a massive three headed snake rose from the river. Shiva noticed the rope around Brahaspati slithering up and around him, crushing him ruthlessly. It was the serpent!

'Nooooo!'

Shiva woke up with a start. He looked around in a daze. His brow was throbbing hard, his throat intolerably cold. Everyone was asleep. He could feel the ground beneath him sway as the ship rocked gently, in tune with the Ganga waters. He walked up to the porthole of his cabin, letting the gentle breeze slow his heart rate down.

He curled his fist and rested it against the ship wall. 'I will get him, Brahaspati. That snake will pay.'



It had been two weeks since Shiva's entourage had left Kashi. Making good time since they were sailing downriver, they had just crossed the city of Magadh.

'We should be reaching Branga in another three weeks, My Lord,' said Parvateshwar.

Shiva, who was staring upriver, towards Kashi, turned around with a smile. 'Did you speak to Divodas?'

'Yes.'

'Where is he right now?'

'At the mast head, My Lord, trimming his sails to the prevailing wind. Obviously, he too wants to get to Branga quickly.'

Shiva looked at Parvateshwar. 'No, I don't think so. I think he yearns to play his role in my quest and then get back to his wife and daughter. He really misses them.'

'As you miss Sati and Kartik, My Lord.'

Shiva smiled and nodded, both of them leaning against the ship rail, looking at the tranquil Ganga. A school of dolphins emerged from the river and flew up into the air. Falling gracefully back into the waters, they jumped up once again, continuing this handsome dance, in graceful symphony. Shiva loved looking at the dolphins. They always seemed happy and carefree. 'Carefree fish in a capricious river! Poetic, isn't it?'

Parvateshwar smiled. 'Yes, My Lord.'

'Speaking of carefree and capricious, where is Anandmayi?'

'I think the Princess is with Uttanka, My Lord. She keeps going to the practice room with him. Perhaps they are perfecting some other dance moves.'

'Hmm.'

Parvateshwar kept looking at the river.

‘She does dance well, doesn’t she?’ asked Shiva.

‘Yes, My Lord.’

‘Exceptionally well, actually.’

‘That would be a fair comment to make, My Lord.’

‘What do you think of Uttanka’s dancing skills?’

Parvateshwar looked at Shiva and then towards the river once again. ‘I think there is scope for improvement, My Lord. But I’m sure Princess Anandmayi will teach him well.’

Shiva smiled at Parvateshwar and shook his head. ‘Yes, I’m sure she will.’



‘The Neelkanth and his entourage left for Branga a month back, Your Highness,’ said the Naga Lord of the People to the Queen.

They were sitting in her private chambers.

‘Good to see you focus once again. I’ll send a warning message to King Chandraketu.’

The Naga nodded. He was about to say something more, but kept silent. Instead, he looked out of the window. From this position in Panchavati, he could see the calm Godavari river in the distance.

‘And?’ asked the Queen.

‘I’d like your permission to go to Kashi.’

‘Why? Do you want to open trade relations with them?’ asked the Queen, highly tickled.

‘She did not go with the Neelkanth.’

The Queen stiffened.

‘Please, Your Highness. This is important to me.’

‘What do you hope to achieve, my child?’ asked the Queen. ‘This is a foolhardy quest.’

‘I want answers.’

‘What difference will that make?’

‘It will give me peace.’

The Queen sighed. ‘This quest will be your downfall.’

‘It will complete me, Your Highness.’

‘You are forgetting that you have duties towards your own people.’

‘I first have a duty unto myself, *Mausi*.’

The Queen shook her head. ‘Wait till the Rajya Sabha is over. I need you here to ensure that the motion to support the Brangas is not defeated. After that you can go.’

The Naga bent low and touched the Queen’s feet. ‘Thank you, *Mausi*.’

‘But you will not go alone. I don’t trust you to take care of yourself. I will come with you.’

The Naga smiled softly. ‘Thank you.’



Shiva’s entourage was just a week’s distance from the gates of Branga. The ships had maintained a punishing schedule. Parvateshwar and Divodas had taken a clipper to the lead boat in order to confer with Drapaku about the protocol on reaching the gates. Parvateshwar made it very clear that the Lord Neelkanth did not want any bloodshed. Divodas was to complete the negotiations necessary in order to enter the restricted Branga territory. He felt it would be impossible to enter without showing the Neelkanth, for the Brangas too believed in the legend. Parvateshwar advised him to try and enter without having to resort to that.

Divodas was left with Drapaku so they could plan the

flag display as well, while Parvateshwar returned to the central vessel. He wanted to take the Lord Mahadev's advice on how he would like the Branga border guards handled. Parvateshwar did not want to let his guard down and yet, given the delicacy of the mission, it was imperative that the Brangas did not view the five ship fleet as a threat.

His rowers tied the cutter to the main ship and he climbed up to the aft section. He was taken aback to see Anandmayi there. She had her back to him. Six knives in her hand. The standard target board at the wall had been removed and the expert board, much smaller in size, had been hung up there. Bhagirath and Uttanka were standing a short distance away.

Uttanka turned towards Anandmayi. 'Remember what I've taught you, Princess. No breaks. A continuous shower of knives.'

Anandmayi rolled her eyes. 'Yeeesss Guruji. I heard you the first time. I'm not deaf.'

'I'm sorry, Your Highness.'

'Now stand aside.'

Uttanka moved away.

Parvateshwar standing at the back was dumbfounded by what he saw. Anandmayi was standing correctly. Like a trained warrior. With her feet slightly spread in a stable posture. Her right hand relaxed to her side. The left hand holding the six knives from the hilt, positioned close to her right shoulder. Her breathing, light and calm. Perfect.

Then she raised her right hand. And in a dramatically rapid action, pulled the first knife from her left hand and threw. Almost simultaneously, she reached for the second knife and released it. And then the third, fourth, fifth and sixth.

Anandmayi's movements were so flawless that Parvateshwar did not even see the target. He stood there admiring her action. His mouth open in awe. Then he heard Uttanka and Bhagirath applauding. He turned towards the board. Every knife had hit dead centre. Perfect.

'By the great Lord Ram!' marvelled Parvateshwar.

Anandmayi turned with a broad smile. 'Parva! When did you get here?'

Parvateshwar, meanwhile, had found something else to admire. He was staring at Anandmayi's bare legs. Or so it seemed.

Anandmayi shifted her weight, relaxing her hips to the side saucily. 'See something you like, Parva?'

Parvateshwar whispered softly, pointing with a bit of wonder at the scabbard hanging by Anandmayi's waist. 'That is a long sword.'

Anandmayi's face fell. 'You really know how to sweep a woman back onto her feet, don't you?'

'Sorry?' asked Parvateshwar.

Anandmayi just shook her head.

'But that is a long sword,' said Parvateshwar. 'When did you learn to wield that?'

Wielding a sword that was significantly longer than a warrior's arm length was a rare skill. Difficult to master. But those who mastered it, dramatically improved their chances of a kill.

Bhagirath and Uttanka had now walked up close.

Bhagirath answered, 'Uttanka has been teaching her for the last month, General. She is a quick student.'

Parvateshwar turned back to Anandmayi, bowed his head slightly. 'It would be my honour to duel with you, Princess.'

Anandmayi raised her eyebrows. ‘You want to duel with me? What the hell do you think you’re trying to prove?’

‘I’m not trying to prove anything, Your Highness,’ said Parvateshwar, surprised at Anandmayi’s belligerence. ‘It would just be a pleasure to duel with you and test your skills.’

‘Test my skills? You think that’s why I’m learning the art of warfare? So that you can test me and prove yourself superior? I already know you’re better. Don’t exert yourself.’

Parvateshwar breathed deeply, trying to control his rising temper. ‘My lady, that’s not what I was trying to imply. I was just...’

Anandmayi interrupted him. ‘For a sharp man, you can be remarkably stupid sometimes, General. I just don’t know what I was thinking.’

Bhagirath tried to step in. ‘Umm listen, I don’t think there is a need to...’

But Anandmayi had already turned and stormed off.



The sun had just risen over the Ganga, tinting it a stunning orange. Sati was standing at her chamber window, looking down at the river. Kartik was playing in the back with Krittika. Sati turned to look at her friend and son. She smiled.

Krittika is almost like a second mother to Kartik. My son is so lucky.

Sati turned back towards the river. She noticed a movement. Peering harder, she saw what was going on and frowned. Emperor Athithigva was off again to his mystery

palace. Apparently, for yet another puja for the future of Kashi. She found this odd.

The entire city of Kashi was celebrating *Rakshabandhan* that day. A day when each sister *tied a thread on her brother's wrist, seeking his protection in times of distress*. This festival was celebrated in Meluha as well. The only difference in Swadweep was that the sisters also demanded gifts from their brothers. And the brothers had no choice but to oblige.

Shouldn't he be spending his time in Kashi? In Meluha, women would come to tie a rakhi to the local governor. And, it was his duty to offer protection. This had been clearly established by Lord Ram. Why is King Athithigva not following this tradition and is instead going to his other palace? And why in Lord Ram's name is he carrying so many things? Are they part of some ritual to rid the eastern banks of bad fate? Or are they gifts?

'What are you thinking, Your Highness?'

Sati turned around to find Krittika staring at her. 'I must find an answer to the mystery of this Eastern palace.'

'But nobody is allowed in there. You know that. The king even made some strange excuses to not take the Neelkanth there.'

'I know. But something is not right. And why is the King taking so many gifts there today?'

'I don't know, Your Highness.'

Sati turned towards Krittika. 'I'm going there.'

Krittika stared at Sati in alarm. 'My Lady, you cannot. There are lookouts at the palace heights. It is surrounded by walls. They will see any boat approaching.'

'That's why I intend to swim across.'

Krittika was now in panic. The Ganga was too broad to swim across. 'My Lady...'

‘I’ve been planning this for weeks, Krittika. I’ve practised many times. There’s a sand bank in the middle of the river where I can rest, unseen.’

‘But how will you enter the palace?’

‘I can hazard a guess about the structural layout from the terrace of our chamber. The Eastern palace is guarded heavily only at the entrance. I have also noticed that guards are not allowed into the main palace. There is a water drain at the far end of the palace. I can swim in through it, without leaving anyone the wiser.’

‘But...’

‘I’m going. Take care of Kartik. If all goes well, I will be back by nightfall.’



The ships turned the last meander of the Ganga to emerge a short distance from the legendary gates of Branga.

‘By the Holy Lake!’ whispered Shiva in awe.

Even the Meluhans, used to their own renowned engineering skills and celebrated monuments, were dumbstruck.

The gates gleamed in the midday sun, having been built almost entirely of the newly discovered metal, iron. The barrier was spread across the river, and it extended additionally into fort walls along the banks which ran a further hundred kilometres inland. This was to prevent anyone from dismantling a smaller ship, carrying it across land and then reassembling it on the other side. There were no roads at the Branga border. The Ganga was the only way in. And anyone stupid enough to go deep into

the jungle would probably be killed by wild animals and disease before meeting any Branga man.

The barrier's base was a cage built of iron, which allowed the waters of the mighty Ganga to flow through, but prevented any person or large fish from swimming through underwater. The barrier had, oddly enough, five open spaces in between, to allow five ships to sail through simultaneously. It seemed odd at first sight because it appeared that a fast cutter could just race through the gap before any Branga could attack it.

'That seems bizarre,' said Bhagirath. 'Why build a barrier and then leave openings through it?'

'Those aren't openings, Bhagirath,' said Shiva. 'They are traps.'

Shiva pointed at a Branga ship that had just entered the gates. At the beginning of the opening was a deep pool of water with a base made of water-proofed teak, into which the ship had sailed in. There was a cleverly designed pump system that allowed the waters of the Ganga to come into the pool. This raised the ship to the correct height. And then, they saw the fearsome magic of the gates of Branga. Two thick iron platforms rapidly extended from both sides of the pool onto the ship, fitting onto the groove on the extended iron base at the bottom of the hull. The platform had rollers on its edge which fit snugly within the channel of the iron base of the ship.

Shiva looked at Parvateshwar. 'So that's why Divodas built the base at the bottom of our hulls.'

Parvateshwar nodded in awe. 'The platforms extended with such rapid force. If we didn't have the iron base at the bottom, it would just crush the hull of our ship.'

Iron chains were being fitted onto the hooks on the hull

of the ship. The chains were then attached to a strange looking machine which appeared to be like a medley of pulleys.

‘But what animal did they use to make the platform move so fast?’ asked Bhagirath. ‘This force is beyond any animal’s capability. Even a herd of elephants!’

Shiva pointed to the Branga ship. The pulleys had started moving with rapid force, extending the chains, pulling the vessel forward. The rollers on the platform permitted the ship to move with minimum friction, allowing it to maintain its amazing speed.

‘My God!’ whispered Bhagirath again. ‘Look at that! What animal can make the pulleys move so quickly?’

‘It’s a machine,’ said Shiva. ‘Divodas had told me about some accumulator machines, which store the energy of various animals over hours and then release them in seconds.’

Bhagirath frowned.

‘Look,’ said Shiva.

A massive cylinder of rock was coming down rapidly. Next to it was another similar cylinder, being slowly pushed up by pulleys, as twenty bulls, yoked to the machine, gradually went around it in circles.

‘The bulls are charging the machine with hours of labour,’ said Shiva. ‘The massive rock is locked at a height. When the platform is to be extended or a ship pulled, they remove the lock on the rock. It comes crashing down, the momentum releasing a tremendous force that propels the platforms.’

‘By the great Lord Indra,’ said Bhagirath. ‘A simple design. But so brilliant!’

Shiva nodded. He turned towards the Branga office at the entry gates.

Their ships had anchored close to the gates. Divodas had already stepped off to negotiate with the Branga Officer in-charge.



‘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 at 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 who is 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 *neel 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.