

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS OF INDIA

Shadow of The Serpent Fort

324 BCE

Arti



Shadow of The Serpent Fort

1st Edition published in India by Vishwakarma Publications in June 2026

© **Arti**

ISBN - 978-93-47216-02-2

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by:

Vishwakarma Publications

34A/1, Suyog Center, 7th Floor, Gultekadi Marketyard Road, Giridhar Bhavan Chowk, Pune: 411037, Maharashtra, India.

Mob.: 9168 68 22 00

Email: info@vpindia.co.in

Website: www.vishwakarmapublications.com

Cover : **Arti**

Typeset and Layout : **Chaitali Nachnekar - Vishwakarma Publications**

Printed at : **Square Digital, Pune**

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

To my parents, my pillars of strength,
who filled my childhood with stories.
And to my children, Aditya and Gautam,
for whom this story was written.

हतौ वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं सित्वा वा भोक्ष्ये महीम्।
तोस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कौ० तोनिश्चयः॥३७
(Bhagavad Gita 2.37)

*hato vā prāpsyasi swargam jitvā vā bhokṣhyase mahīm |
tasmād uttiṣṭha kaunteya yuddhāya kṛita-niśchayaḥ ||*

If you fall in battle, heaven awaits you.
If you prevail, the earth shall be yours |
Therefore, stand up, O son of Kunti,
And fight with unwavering resolve | |

*Fight for what is right
For defeat brings honour,
and victory, its reward.
Either way, you do not lose.
So, you must fight.*

Note on Historical Terms and Titles

This story is set in 324 BCE, during a fascinating period in the history of the Indian subcontinent, shortly after the campaigns of Alexander the Great ended and just before the rise of the Mauryan Empire.

While writing this book, I spent several years researching how people may have lived during this era—their daily lives, clothing, social customs, and political structures. I have tried to portray the setting as faithfully as possible, drawing from a variety of historical sources listed in the bibliography. Works such as the *Arthashastra*, the ancient treatise on statecraft attributed to Chanakya (Kautilya), offered valuable insights into governance, the administration of forts, and the management of armies and spies. These ideas helped shape the political world of this story.

At times, however, I have simplified or adapted certain titles and terms for clarity. For example, I use the title *Sardar* for several noblemen in the story. While no exact equivalent of this term existed in the Mauryan period, it conveys a rank roughly similar to that of a regional lord or count. My aim has been to balance historical authenticity with readability for modern readers.

I also want to mention that no artificial intelligence (AI) has been used in writing the prose or plot of this novel.

Actual Historical Timeline



Malhar's Story - Timeline

327 BCE

Alexander The Great Invasion of India

Alexander the Great crossed the Hindu Kush into northwestern Indian subcontinent, initially conquering Achaemenid Persian satrapies in current Afghanistan and Pakistan, before facing fierce resistance from local rulers as he advanced into India.

326 BCE

Porus and Alexander - Battle at the Hydaspes River

A fierce clash between Alexander and King Porus near the current Jhelum river in present day Punjab in Pakistan. Porus' valiant resistance and formidable use of war elephants against the Greeks led to Alexander honoring Porus by reinstating him as the regional ruler.

325 BCE

Alexander leaves India

Alexander the Great, aiming to conquer the powerful Nanda Empire of Magadha, was forced to halt his campaign when his army, exhausted and fearing massive eastern armies, mutinied at the Hyphasis River (Beas), marking the easternmost extent of his conquests. Retreating through modern-day Gujarat, he left behind Greek mercenaries and Macedonian veterans to manage his Indian territories.

325 BCE

Peithon appointed as Greek Satrap of Indus (Western India)

Alexander the Great appointed Greek satraps (governor or viceroy) to manage conquered territories of the Western region of India. Peithon (Ancient Greek: Πειθων), son of Agenor (Ἀγνὼρ) was an officer in the expedition of Alexander the Great to India, who became satrap of the Indus from 325 to 316 BCE, and then satrap of Babylon, from 316 to 312 BCE, until he died at the Battle of Gaza in 312 BCE.

324 BCE

Malhar's Story Starts in the kingdom of Maha Shail

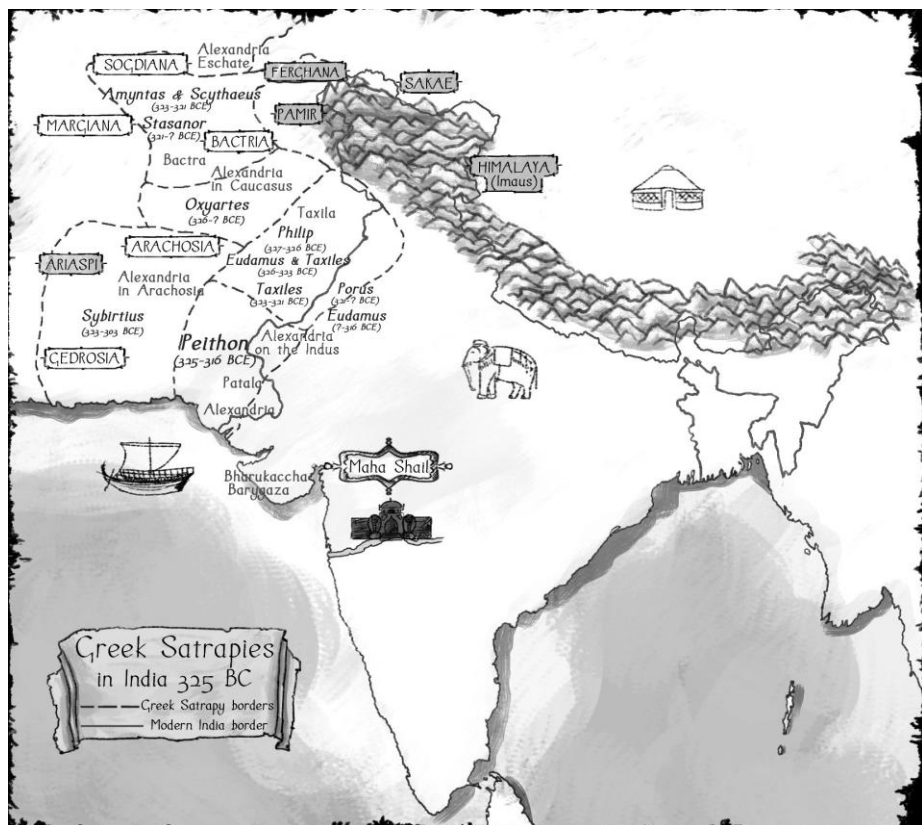
As Peithon schemes to capture Maha Shail, Malhar—an elite soldier bound by loyalty—finds his world unraveling. With the king dead and a newborn prince marked for death, a web of betrayal tightens, as ministers ally with the Greeks in a ruthless grab for power.

322 to
319 BCE

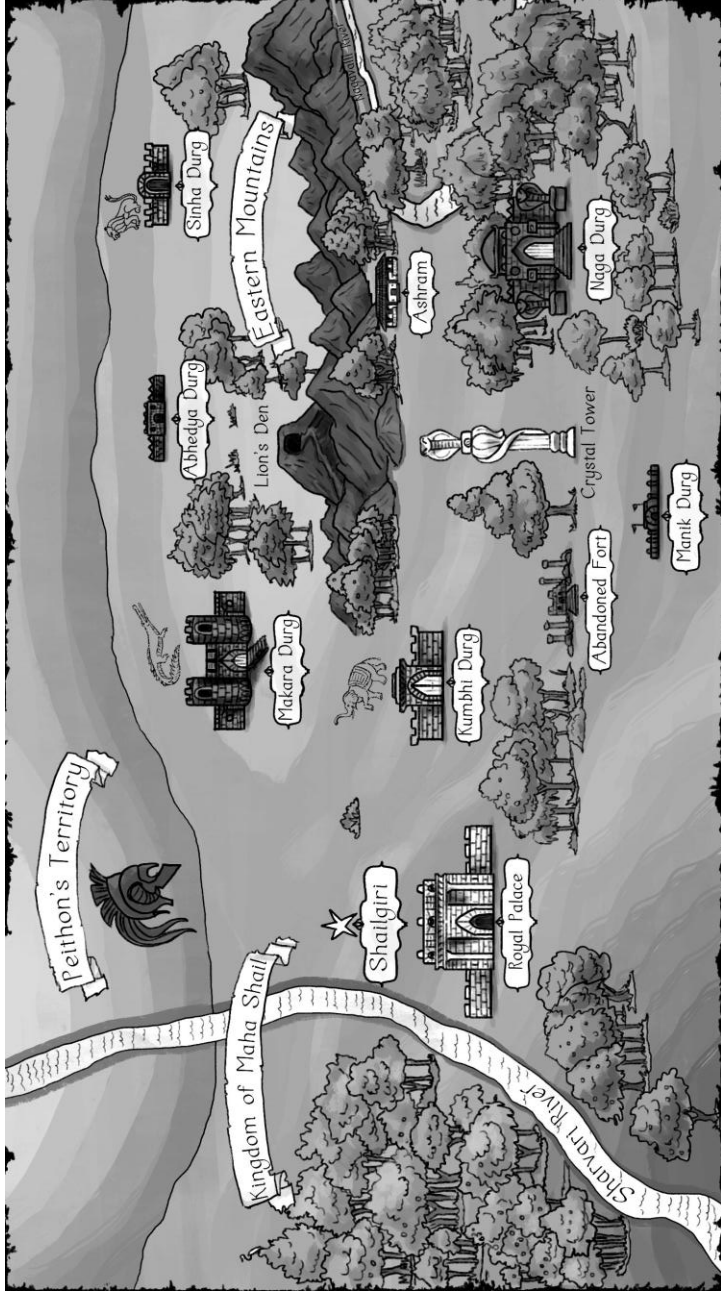
Chandragupta Maurya's reign starts

Chandragupta Maurya becomes emperor taking over from Nandas. Chandragupta, with the help of his mentor Chanakya (Kautilya), capitalized on the political vacuum left by Alexander's successors. He initially allied with the Greek satraps in the region, notably Seleucus I, one of Alexander's generals.

Map of Indus Region in 324 BCE Including Regions ruled by Greeks (Satrapies)



Map of the (Fictional) Kingdom of Maha Shail



Prologue

The first few stars were shining in the night sky as the moon rose, large and silver, over ancient India, casting pale blue rays on the magnificent palace. It was complete with gilded pillars carved with gold vines and silver birds, whose reflections danced on the river Sharvari running through the city. This was the opulent Shailgiri, capital of Maharaja Vikranta Deva, the king, of ancient India's Maha Shail kingdom.

The city was alive with the movement of hundreds of people celebrating under the moonlight on the grand, central street, where towering sandstone pillars and ivory statues caught that light and reflected it upon the smiling faces of many dancing figures. Something special was happening that night.

Under the very same moonlight, a young woman rushed through the thick jungle of tall neem and ashoka trees on the other side of the Sharvari River, holding an infant tightly in her arms. Her face was smeared with dirt, and her clothes were torn from fighting her way through bushes and thorns.

She looked exhausted, as if she had been running for days, and her gaunt face betrayed the fact that she hadn't been eating. It was pale and lined with worry, but the unmistakable signature of beauty remained. Her eyes showed deep sadness and fear, and even though they looked dreadful, she glanced at the child in her arms with love and kindness. She held the baby close to her heart, just as a mother would.

Suddenly, the baby let out a piercing cry. The woman pulled back the dirty swaddling cloth from the little one's face and stared into its tearful eyes.

"Poor *bala!* What a sad state you are in! You don't deserve this. I promise you, I will find a way to have vengeance on that evil monster who did this to you..."

Her voice trailed off as she remembered the ordeal she had fled from, the betrayal she had witnessed. She had to find a safe place for the child, away from the brutality she had saved him from.

But where?

Dejected, unable to think of a path forward, she hugged the baby to her heart and collapsed onto a nearby rock.

It was midnight now. But the woman continued to sit on the rock holding the baby. The jungle was alive with the curious sounds of animals that stay hidden during the day. Leopards and tigers on their night-time prowl marked their territories, hyenas on the hunt scavenged, and elusive civet cats moved across tree branches, their eyes glowing deep in the bushes and trees. But she did not hear the low growls or the rustle in piles of dry leaves as she stared vacantly into the dark jungle, tears of grief and despair silently running down her face. Somehow, they stayed away from her as if they sensed her grief.

As time passed, the tears dried, and she shifted her gaze to the waters of the nearby river. Nearly hypnotized by its flow, she forgot her troubles for some time. Everything was silent now; the animals had finally quieted down, except for the occasional owl hooting into the night. She kept staring at the dark current highlighted by the moon, which was now high in the sky. And in this state of near hypnosis, the joyful sounds of the festivities from Shailgiri floated on the wind to the woman's ears. The celebrations interrupted her thoughts. It reminded her of what she had left behind.

Her figure perked up along with her ears. She peered into the darkness as far as she could. Finally, she got up and climbed higher

on a boulder beside her until she could see the lights from the festive city.

And something in her eyes changed.

What a glorious city was Shailgiri! As beautiful as the goddess it was named after. There were resplendent *praasads*, palaces and mansions with gilded windows; decorated with gold, precious jewels, marigold, and jasmine flowers. All the city and alleyways were lit with *diyas*, oil lamps made of clay. Within that diamond in a sea of darkness was a wedding party. The wedding, which had taken place in the main, grand palace of the city, had spilled out into the streets, and the whole town was celebrating.

The pair of newlyweds was now sitting in the *ranga gruha*, entertainment room, of one of the magnificent *praasads*, surrounded by friends and family, talking, singing, and laughing. All were dressed in rich silk, men wore jeweled turbans, and women donned elaborately styled braids and buns with strings of jasmine flowers and gold ornaments. Musicians' fingers plucked the *veena* strings and played the *mridanga*, a barrel shaped double-sided drum, with lively beats, and beautiful courtesans tapped their feet, with *ghungroos*, the small brass bells on their anklets making a pleasant tinkling sound, entertaining the prestigious gathering of *sardars*, counts, *mantris*, ministers, and noble men from all over the kingdom.

Amid these joyous celebrations, no one noticed a ragged figure leaving the newlywed couple's bedroom suite.

As the night wore on, the exhausted bride gave a small yawn, and everyone realized it was time to escort the newlyweds to their wedding suite for the night. The head housekeeper, an elderly woman, hurried to the suite to do one last check on the arrangements. Her eyes quickly but sharply scanned the room to make sure that the curtains were drawn, the bed was adorned with jasmine and marigold garlands as per tradition, and *kandils*, oil

lamps encased in tubular glass covers, cast a warm glow in the room.

With a satisfied smile on her face, she was about to leave when she noticed something under the bedcover. As she went closer and moved the bedcover away, she gasped and let out a cry of surprise. A baby lay in a tattered blanket on the wedding bed!

“Oh!” she said, moving to the little bundle. “Where did this beautiful baby come from?”

She looked around but did not see anyone. The baby cried out, and the woman then lifted it from the bed, her face melting into softness as she felt it in her arms. Gently rocking the baby in her arms to stop the crying, its sweet face seemed like a gift from the heavens, a child she herself could never have.

As the elderly woman gazed into the baby’s eyes, she began to fall in love.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

A Kingdom in Peril

Four men sat in deep unease brooding over dark happenings in their kingdom. Outside, the scent of approaching rain drifted across the night as its first drops touched the red Maha Shail soil. A storm was gathering, but it was not the only one.

The wind steadily intensified, its piercing howl echoing through the night as the men spoke in low, steady voices within the magnificent *doot-gar*, the envoy chamber, surrounded by thick pale gold walls of Kumbhi Durg. The *durg*, fort, a formidable stronghold loomed large with the quiet strength of its namesake, the elephant, just a few miles outside the capital of the kingdom of Maha Shail, Shailgiri.

Sardar Satya Mitra, the oldest of the group, exhaled slowly. “I still cannot believe he is gone, a king so kind and just. Maharaja Vikranta Deva... taken by an illness that showed no mercy. I worry about our queen, Rohini Devi and the infant *raj कुमार*, the prince,” he said, in a voice thick with emotions. “Even this storm feels as though it mourns with us.”

“The storm feels like a bad omen to me, like that Greek invader Peithon! He has been lingering near our borders like a jackal for months,” grunted Ishaan Chandra, the youngest of the men sitting beside him.

As the men spoke, none of them spared a glance at the praasad's almost otherworldly beauty, ignoring the delicate lily carvings along the walls and the vaulted ceilings painted with scenes from the ancient epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana. The praasad, carved from perfectly cut sandstone, sat amid smaller outbuildings and courtyards, all enclosed by a fifty-foot pale-gold wall, its colour echoing the elephant statues around the fort.

The men fell silent when the pounding of a galloping horse echoed through the courtyard, stopping beneath the high-arched gate of the fort. Moments later, a knock at the chamber door announced the arrival of an attendant. It was Viveka, tall and graceful with the mannerisms of a tiger. Honesty leapt from his eyes, but it was edged by steel, showing he would use his last breath to defend his masters.

As he entered the envoy chamber, he closed the large, arched door behind him softly. He walked in his wooden sandals across the room, bowed and waited with his hands behind his back for his master, Sardar Satya to beckon him forward.

"Viveka! Who has arrived at the fort at this late hour?" Sardar Satya's booming voice asked. Satya Mitra was a tall, dark, and handsome middle-aged man, with a neat beard almost entirely charcoal grey and long hair that flowed to his shoulders. The few remaining strands of black were fortunately placed to highlight the strong shape of his jaw, making his face naturally imposing.

His figure matched his face, large and impressive, the strength of his body visible through a rich silk *uttariya*, the upper body garment that elegantly draped over his strong shoulders, and the *antariya* that draped his lower body, tied around the waist and legs, still allowing movement. A richly embroidered *kayabandh*, a broad waistband, kept the antariya in place. His wide chest was adorned with a tasteful yet intricate pearl and ruby necklace, as well as another gold medallion-like necklace that flared out like a bib across his broad chest, with medals of valour attached to it. Bejewelled

armlets clasped his strong upper arms. Yet beneath all that finery, the scars he had acquired with bloodshed and battles, revealed a life of hardship far removed from comfort and luxury.

“A messenger from Shailgiri, my lord.” Viveka, the attendant, removed a parchment roll sealed with red wax from his *kayabandh*, and handed it to the Sardar before leaving the room.

Satya’s brows furrowed as he broke the seal and opened the parchment roll to read its contents. His jaws tightened with each passing line.

“What is it, father?” asked Ishaan Chandra, a younger version of Satya, with all the ink still in his hair. He had the same build as his father but was a hair smaller and less imposing in his manner at just seventeen years old. He retained the slightly lean and lithe mannerisms of a young man just starting to shed the vestiges of youth. His attire was similarly rich but lacked the medals of valour. The look in his eye was proud, but hungry, like he knew he had a lot to live up to. “Who would send a message this late?” asked Ishaan, with a touch of annoyance in his voice.

“The *Mantri Sangha*, Ministers’ Syndicate,” Satya let the letter fall to his side as he turned to his son. “They’re...” He paused here, his voice heavy with restrained fury, then continued, “Banishing me. I knew they would not remain silent after Maharaja Vikranta Deva’s death—may his soul attain *moksha*, eternal peace.”

“Banishing us? They can’t do this! We must fight!” cried Ishaan. “This isn’t a time for reckless decisions, Ishaan. Do you think I don’t feel the same? But we cannot strike now. Not while our queen is vulnerable, and the heir is a mere infant. The people would rise for us, but without a strong figurehead to rally behind, we would be crushed.”

The older man sitting next to Satya beckoned him with a scarred, gold-bedecked hand. He was a large man, wearing the lines of his face like trophies from the many battles he had survived. Lifting a curiously long fingernail, he traced the words on the

parchment Satya handed him. Every movement revealed a life far removed from labour, yet housed in a body still powerful, still dangerous. That vitality made his appearance all the more jarring, with a gaudy purple silk antariya and uttariya, a heavy necklace resting on his chest, and a turban weighed down with diamonds and strings of pearls.

His dark eyes roved across the parchment, and the lines in his face deepened. This was Sardar Rudra Varma, one of the most powerful sardars in the kingdom, whose immense wealth and cunning made him a formidable adversary.

Ishaan looked impatient but checked himself from speaking.

“Your father is right, Ishaan. This is not the moment to bare our swords. If we defy them openly, we will play into their hands,” said Rudra as the scar across his forehead furrowed deeply, becoming redder.

He tapped the parchment. “Think of the timing. Alexander has only just left the northern lands, abandoning his infamous eastern campaign. The man would have marched all the way to the river Ganga, the very edge of the world as the Greeks believe, if his own soldiers hadn’t rebelled.” Rudra’s lips curled. “Even conquerors can be forced to retreat.”

Satya leaned forward, “And now Peithon, that brute left behind by Alexander, is hungry to expand Greek rule further south of the Indus Valley down into our kingdom. He has aligned himself with those traitors in our ministers’ syndicate. They won’t dare kill me outright; that would turn the people into a fire they cannot contain. So, this exile....” He exhaled sharply. “This is their way of testing the waters.” Ishaan could hold back no longer. “But what else does it say?” he burst out.

Through all of this, the fourth man was silent. Eighteen years old, he was only slightly older than Ishaan, although taller, and dressed far more simply. His attire was plain linen, devoid of the

jewellery and silks the nobles wore. But his dark handsome face, sinewy physique, and poise were as noble, if not more than Ishaan. With that calm thoughtful manner of his, he watched his younger companion and listened. This young man was Malhar Ketu.

“It orders us,” Satya responded to his son, “to leave our fort.” He waved a hand at the magnificent surroundings. “It orders us,” he paused again on the word to highlight his sense of indignation, “to move away more than fifty miles from the capital.”

“Never!” cried Ishaan, now looking to Malhar to read his feelings. “Father! We can’t run!”

Satya gazed sternly at his son. “Not run. Strategize. These aren’t empty threats. The letter ends by stating that there are 6,000-armed men two days away from Shailgiri, near Sardar Durjaya’s fort. If we are here when they arrive, we will be killed.” The nobleman now stood from his silk-covered chair and walked to a tall and narrow, arched window, staring out at the starry sky above.

Ishaan held back a sigh as he foresaw an impending lecture. But Malhar turned his full attention to Sardar Satya Mitra with an air approaching reverence for the man.

“It is up to us, people in our position, to never be shortsighted. It’s what all of the games of your youth have groomed you for. *Ashtapada*, for example,” Satya said, naming the ancient board game that existed long before *Chaturanga*, the early precursor to chess, “is designed to help you think beyond man’s primal emotions of joy, sadness, rage, and revenge. Hunting beasts like tigers teaches you courage and to think quickly when death looms. It’s to help you forget the silk slippers into which you were born.” At that, Satya turned to his son. “Because the weight of protecting our honourable late Maharaja Vikranta Deva’s kingdom lies heavily upon us. The queen, Rohini Devi and the heir need us now more than ever, as their enemies will surely leap at this chance to destroy us and secede our kingdom to Peithon.”

Ishaan looked up at his father. His mouth opened, but when he saw the glint in his father's eyes, he closed it and listened on.

"Just as in Ashtapada, Ishaan, we must bide our time. If we rush our pieces forward at the first throw of the dice, we land on the wrong squares and become vulnerable to a counterattack. Sometimes we must give ground, wait for the right square to strike, while preparing for it. Only then can we hope to secure the kingdom." Satya turned back to the window and lowered his voice. "The only question is, where do we go to plan?"

"Naga Durg." Sardar Rudra stood up and padded across the marble floors to join Satya at the window. As he stepped into the light, the sharp intensity of his dark eyes flickered beneath the jewels of his turban. "My friend," he began. "I've invited you before to visit me at my fort, Naga Durg, and the offer stands. At sixty miles away, it is just beyond the syndicate's imposed limit, and you would maintain the opulent living to which your family is accustomed. It will give us time to regroup and plan a counterattack."

Satya nodded at the man with gratitude in his eyes.

At that moment, Viveka returned with another parchment. He stood just outside the loosely knit circle of men, who had migrated from the seats in the centre of the room to the arched window nestled between two enormous, gold-laced bookshelves.

As Satya read its contents, his shoulders sagged.

"It's worse than I feared. Two loyal sardars have been arrested. The syndicate is moving faster than we anticipated."

"Then it's open war. We cannot retreat to Fort Naga Durg." Ishaan almost spat the word.

Satya turned to his son with a look that silenced him instantly. "This isn't about us, Ishaan. It's about the kingdom and the rightful heir. We must protect them at all costs."

He turned to Malhar, the quiet man who had been listening intently.

“Malhar, you, too, have been playing Ashtapada with Ishaan. You, too, have learned military planning and statecraft. As my trusted lieutenant, will you stand by me?”

His voice was steady and his resolve unshakable. “Until my last breath, Sardar Satya!”

“Sardar Rudra.” Satya turned toward the older man. “How could we ever repay you for your gracious offer to stay at Fort Naga Durg!”

Before Sardar Rudra could respond, the door opened again, revealing a figure more pleasing than Viveka’s. It was of a young woman at the very peak of beauty—lips full, dusky, glowing skin—like a lily that stands proud and full of the flush of youth.

She was dressed in a cream silk *uttariya* that modestly covered her bosom but showed off graceful shoulders and a dainty waist. An *antariya*, worn like a tubular skirt, draped her lower body, also in cream silk. The few gold bangles on her wrists tinkled as she walked. The only other adornment she wore was a ring on her delicate nose, which paled in comparison to the captivating allure of her face. The young woman’s eyes were soulful, with a brown hue and brows that mirrored every feeling that stirred in her heart. This was Lalita Gauri, Sardar Satya Mitra’s beloved daughter.

And as his daughter, she held a noble title of Kumari, and, oh, how she wished it actually *meant* something. But for all its prestige, it held no real power, no choices, other than the expectation to take a man’s hand in marriage. She sighed, hoping that at least she could have a man who would give her greater freedom than was allowed to women...But no! Such dreams were foolish! Lalita shook her head, admonishing herself. She should be grateful! She was in a better position than many others. Yet the truth remained: Her fate as a woman was sealed.

Across the room, Sardar Rudra looked at her with the rest of the men, the corner of his mouth turning up into the faintest smile before it vanished. The fleeting gesture made her stomach churn with unease. As this intimidating man smiled at Lalita, so did Malhar. Only his smile was tender, and his eyes were dark, shrouded by long lashes that tried to hide the weight of what this girl meant to him.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” said the girl from beneath long lashes of her own, stealing a glance at Malhar.

“Not at all, my child. Our noble Sardar Rudra Varma has just offered us his magnificent fort as a respite from the crowded capital.”

“Oh, thank you, Sardar Rudra Varma,” said the girl, glancing at Rudra with kind eyes, but her brows couldn’t help but express concern.

“Is something wrong, Lalita?” asked Sardar Rudra. “We can all tell from your expression that the idea frightens you.” “Oh, they are just some rumours,” said Lalita.

“You’ll find no more intrigued an audience than us here.”

“Since you ask, I will tell you,” she said, and her neck curved toward Rudra like a swan. “My attendant, Malini, told me stories of Fort Naga Durg. They are a bit...scary. But I am sure they aren’t true. Besides, we will all be there together. And of course, Sardar Rudra, you will be there, too, and must know the ins and outs of your own home.”

“He won’t be there,” said Ishaan. “He lives here in Shailgiri now. He doesn’t even live in Fort Naga Durg anymore.” At that, Satya glared at the young man, who lowered his eyes to the floor.

“It is, of course, more convenient to be in the capital city for business,” said Sardar Rudra, and if a proud man could show embarrassment, this was the nearest he’d ever gotten. “So, I’ve left my family estate for the time being.”

“Of course. Forgive my foolishness.” Lalita lowered her gaze, twirling traces of her lustrous black hair between her fingers.

Silence followed for a moment, until Sardar Rudra cleared his throat and said, “Yes, of course, they are all rumours...” His voice began to trail off. “But then again, since my brother...” His voice trailed off again.

Eager to hear what he said next, everyone waited for Rudra to continue.

“There have been a few strange incidents, I’ll admit, since my brother passed away, may God give his soul moksha.” Now Rudra’s composition returned to normal, as did his default expression of near haughty self-assurance. “But there’s nothing at all to worry about. It’s only the painful memory of my brother that keeps me away.”

“Of course,” said Satya, coming to his guest’s rescue. “We humbly accept your most kind offer in our time of need. Malhar, ask the attendants to begin packing our things.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Malhar bowed and held the door open for Lalita and Ishaan as they followed. Once the younger three departed, the two older men exchanged a candid glance.

“It is no small thing to offer your magnificent fort to my family,” Satya remarked. “It’s renown precedes it.”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure, my dear friend! If we don’t take care of each other in these times of unrest, who will?” Rudra replied warmly.

Satya nodded. “I will then get my affairs in order.” He turned toward the door but paused. “I have heard about the fort and your brother’s tragic death. Are they true?”

“Mostly nonsense,” Rudra said with a faint smile. “Still, the Naga Kula’s history is as challenging as it is illustrious. You needn’t worry.”

Satya paused his stride at the door. “Naga Kula? I wasn’t aware you belonged to such a prestigious clan.”

“Yes. I thought you knew. And...” He paused. “If you accept my proposal from a few weeks ago, to marry your most graceful daughter, then your family will join our line.”

Satya turned back to the man with a smile true and honest. “Thank you for sharing this, Sardar Rudra. I apologize that I have been preoccupied, but this eases a father’s concerns. I will gladly consider your offer on our way to Fort Naga Durg.”

With that, Sardar Satya nodded and left the room. Rudra turned back to the window, looking out into the night.

CHAPTER 2

The Serpent Fort - Naga Durg

Less than a week later, Sardar Satya and his family rode up to the front gates of the impressive Fort Naga Durg, situated on a hilltop in their chariots, with an entourage of attendants on horses. *Naga*, the Sanskrit word for “king of snakes” or “king cobra,” was a befitting name.

When the gate came into view, Malhar noticed a flash of shock cross Lalita’s face as two colossal king cobra statues came into view. The cobras jutted out on either side of the massive, arched gate, leaning in towards all visitors, staring with cold, stone eyes—their heads the size of elephants’. Their cold, white fangs glistened in the afternoon sun.

If a visitor could have seen the fort from a bird’s-eye view, he would have noticed four gates, one for each direction of the compass. All were protected by these slithering guardians. But the guests couldn’t know that three of the four doors had been closed for years, and the fort had been running on a bare-bones staff, since Rudra now lived in the capital city, Shailgiri. The cobwebs and dust had been thoroughly cleaned for their arrival by Bajji, the fort’s chief caretaker and Rudra’s trusted confidant. He was notified days earlier via a fast-riding messenger about the group’s impending arrival.

This man of fifty, Bajji, stood within the gates in the path of the entourage. His large, bald head shone in the sun; along with his thick neck, adding to his overpowering presence. To make the man more intimidating, a deep scar bisected his left cheek through his lips and

chin, causing an unfortunate twist to the mouth. Bajji stood silent with his hands behind his back as the caravan came to a halt. Once he had the attention of Satya and his family, he raised his left hand high above his head, the palm towards the sky.

A hundred *shankhas*, conch shells, blasted in unison, their deep, powerful sound reverberating through the air, followed by thunderous trumpeting calls of a dozen elephants. Soon, the colossal animals came into view, guards riding atop. The elephants and dozens of mounted horses lined the sides of the pathway as the guests looked on. Once all were in place, Bajji lowered his hand, bowing low to the ground.

“Please allow me to welcome you to Fort Naga Durg,” he said. “Everything you see is at your disposal. Treat it as your own.” He began to approach the group as he spoke, and his eyes stared hard into those of Sardar Satya, with a deep intensity that would have frightened a lesser man. “There are exquisite gardens, *grubas* (rooms), for everything you can think of, *shastra* (weapons), *chitra* (art), and *ranga* (entertainment), and various *mandirs* (temples) here. They are full of ancient statues and priceless artefacts. The main courtyard can hold ten thousand soldiers and a hundred elephants. Let this”— he turned toward the fort’s interior for a moment, and his arms opened in a sweeping gesture— “be your home.”

Bajji then beckoned them to follow him and pointed out some of the highlights as they made their way to their own private *praasad*. They passed a colossal black granite temple of Shiva, a principal Hindu deity. The imposing Shiva idol depicted the god in the traditional form, with *Vasuki Naga*, the serpent king cobra, coiled around his neck, the holy river Ganga flowing from the crescent moon adorning the hair piled high on top of his head, his third eye on the forehead, and a *trishula*, trident, his favourite weapon in his hand.

Bajji told the guests that Shiva was the *Kul Daivat*, the ancestral family deity, of Sardar Rudra’s clan, and since Shiva carried Vasuki, the serpent king, the carved cobras at the gate were fitting protectors

30 | Shadow of The Serpent Fort of the fort. The temple had many carved pillars with scenes from the Mahabharata, the ancient epic.

Behind the temple, there was an area with dense thickets that held a few *samadhis*, stone shrines dedicated to the noble family's ancestors. The guests were awestruck at the vastness of the fort. Even though they came from one of the wealthiest noble families, they had not seen a fort of this size before. And just as they thought they could take in no more, Baji guided the guests to their quarters and promptly disappeared with a bow.

The group looked at one another, smiling at the splendid amenities. "It's not quite as big as I was expecting, but I suppose it will do," said Malhar, and everyone burst out with laughter, helping disperse the fatigue of the journey.



Several days later, Sardar Satya and his family were beginning to feel right at home in the almost overwhelmingly enormous fort. Sardar Satya spent most of his time dictating correspondence to the other sardars still loyal to Maharaja Vikranta Deva's widow, queen Rohini Devi. He was immersed in organizing a defence of the queen until her offspring could be crowned as the ruler.

The difficulty was knowing whom to trust.

Only spies working for Peithon could have caught the sardars that were recently rounded up and imprisoned. And only spies working for Peithon could have bribed the Ministers' Syndicate to banish Satya himself. If Peithon seized the kingdom, he'd kill Satya and his family for his famed loyalty to the late King. Satya felt like a blind military captain, trying to manoeuvre in the dark.

The beautiful Lalita would occasionally come to see her father at work. She would sometimes see his face racked with concentration. Seeing his handsome features and broad forehead, which looked almost terrifying with intensity in these moments, she would come in and hug him. His tense face would melt into a joyful smile. He had been her idol as she grew up: strong, steady,

supportive. He'd allowed her little freedoms; she knew how to hunt and played with Malhar and Ishaan in the forest as a child.

Now, though, when she wasn't keeping her father company, Lalita spent most of her time with her attendant, Malini, an attractive older woman, who had looked after Lalita since she was a child. Together, they endlessly explored the fort's vast libraries, museums, and gardens and stared at its soaring, ivory-coloured minarets that jutted high into the sky. Fiercely intelligent, she devoured books on everything— from history and mathematics to literature with remarkable ease. As for Malhar and Ishaan, they had hundreds of miles of deep forest to use as their hunting ground. After exploring the armoury with its vast supply of weapons, the two young men spent most of their time in the woods, as they had done for almost two decades.

It was during one such excursion that the young men encountered a strange woman, who would forever change the course of their lives. They had spent the morning tempting a hawk down from the trees, and Ishaan was finally successful in catching it.

But since the main purpose of the day was to bag a deer, the two continued through the woods, bows slung across their backs and the hawk dangling from Ishaan's hand in a golden cage. It had finally stopped flapping about and allowed them to begin tracking the fresh prints of what looked to be a large stag.

"Maybe one hundred and sixty masas," said Malhar, guessing the weight of the deer as he stood and held his finger, wet with mud to the first knuckle, up for Ishaan to see.

"I'd say one hundred and sixty-five," said Ishaan, and Malhar chuckled. Malhar removed his bow and notched an arrow, and they were about to continue when a flash of brown burst from the underbrush. Malhar's quick reflexes made him do what he had done hundreds of times before, and he shot an arrow with a loud *twang*.

"You got it," said Ishaan, staring after the disappearing deer. "I think."

But Malhar was already on the move. Ishaan chased after the disappearing deer and his vanishing friend. They tore through the dense jungle, only pausing to spot the blood trail the wounded animal left behind, through the greenery.

As the two men parted a wall of foliage into an open clearing, they saw the wounded animal, lying on its side, gasping its last breaths.

But it wasn't alone.

The dark figure of a ragged woman was hunched over the deer. Her hair was matted, her face was dirty, and her clothes barely held together. She was either eating the animal raw, like a rabid wolf, or she was trying to resuscitate it.

The young men, after their initial shock, began to approach the woman. Ishaan fumbled to get his bow out and into his hands. He glanced at the taller Malhar to see how close they should get.

"Hello there," said Malhar, responding to Ishaan's silent question.

The woman looked up at them, and they tried to make out if there was blood around her mouth or if it was only frown lines. Her eyes were wild and wide and bore into the boys' eyes, as if piercing their very souls.

"You!" she croaked, her voice sounding like a hardly used garden gate, opening for the first time since winter. She pointed at Malhar. "Are you the visitors at the fort?" "Yes," said Malhar, standing bravely.

The woman's eyes rolled back in her head, and the whites stared at them as she shrieked, "Beware, young warriors! The dead still walk here, and they are hungry for revenge!" The hawk thrashed in its cage, wings beating furiously, its cries echoing hers. Both young men stepped back in shock, Malhar's heart pounding as he wondered what horror she was speaking of.

With that, the woman released an almost inhuman scream, lifted the deer to her shoulders like it weighed nothing, and added, “Generous one, you wouldn’t begrudge an old woman some meat, would you?”

And without awaiting a response, she disappeared into the deep foliage at the edge of the clearing.

Ishaan looked at Malhar, who raised his eyebrows and looked back at his friend.

“How much meat can we get off of that guy?” he asked, pointing at the bird.

Ishaan laughed at his friend and punched him in the arm, as the tension eased. They turned to head back to the fort.

After dinner, when Lalita went off to bed, the two young men stayed and explained the strange encounter to Sardar Satya.

Satya released a breath he’d been holding throughout and said, “How incredibly peculiar!” He stood up from the low wooden seat covered with cushions and began to pace the room. “Perhaps we should tell Baji about this ‘True Lord and Master of Fort Naga Durg’ to see if he has any idea who she is and what she’s talking about.” Satya repeated her words.

“She’s just a mad old woman in the woods, trying to distract us to get the venison, father,” said Ishaan.

Satya twisted his mouth and stayed silent for several moments, then nodded. “Perhaps. Let’s forget about it for now and see if she comes back. You two go to bed. It’s getting late. I can already see the moon through one of the towers.”

The two young men nodded and left the room.



Contents

Prologue	15
PART I	19
1. A Kingdom in Peril	19
2. The Serpent Fort - Naga Durg	28
3. Inhuman	34
4. Forbidden	41
5. A Tragic Past	48
6. Consequences	53
7. Spectre in the Dark	57
8. Heartbroken	64
9. Fight	71
10. Redeemed	76
11. Spring New Year Festival	82
12. Satya's Encounter	86
13. A Secret Meeting	89
14. Murderer	94
15. Charan's Warning	98
16. The Eerie Storm	103
17. Lalita Takes Action	107
18. The Confrontation	111
19. Lamb in the Lion's Den	115
20. The Trial	121

21.	Malhar's Account	127
22.	Lalita's Journey	132
23.	Satya's Discovery	137
24.	Tricky Charan	141
25.	A Crooked Pair	147
26.	Back in the Lion's Den	152
27.	In the Dungeon	157
28.	The Execution Commences	165
29.	The Lever Pulled	169
30.	Reunion	173
31.	A Promise Made	177

PART II **181**

32.	The Confrontation	181
33.	Respite at the Ashram	186
34.	Peithon Becomes Patron	192
35.	Race to the Queen	198
36.	Run	203
37.	Durjaya Tells a Story	208
38.	Allies	214
39.	Saving The Prince!	220
40.	Action and Reaction	225
41.	The Execution	232
42.	From Fire into the Blaze	238

43.	Roads to Destiny	244
44.	Into the Blaze	251
45.	Utter Defeat?	259
46.	Resurrection	264
47.	Preparing for War	272
48.	Waiting	279
49.	Sinha Durg	286
50.	The Turning	295
51.	The Hero	302
52.	Assault on Naga Durg	312
53.	Duels to Death	321
54.	The End	326
	Cast of Characters	331
	Places in the story	333
	Bibliography	335
	Glossary	337
	Author's Note	340
	Acknowledgments	342
	About the author	343