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THE KISHKINDHA CHRONICLES

SARASWATI'S INTELLIGENCE



VAMSEE JULURI

20



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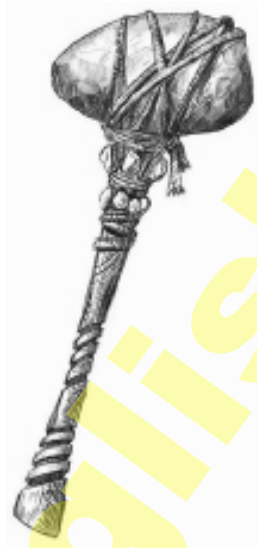
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*For all who have been here before us,
and for their good deeds that sustain us still.*

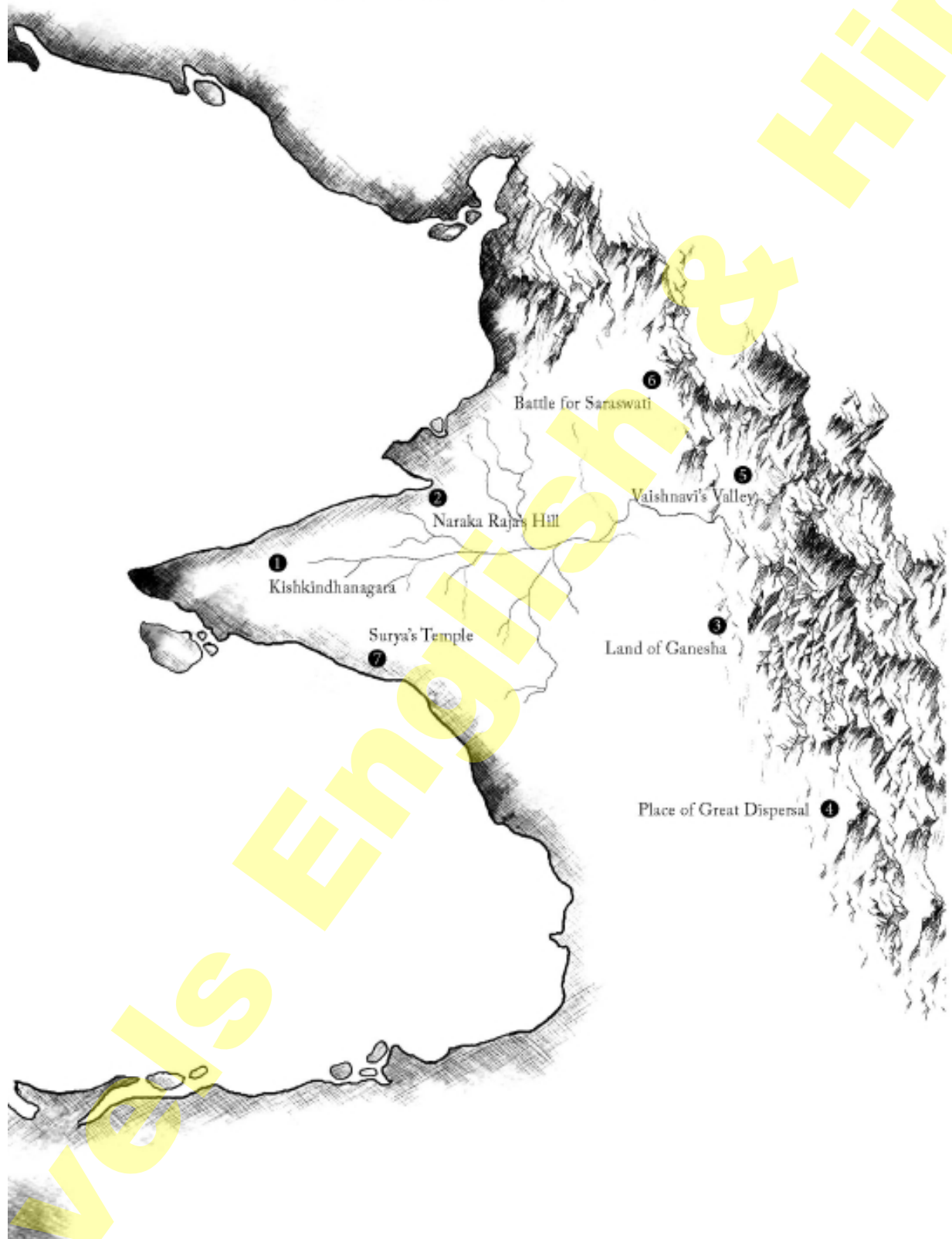
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Tvam asmin kaaryaniryoge pramaanam, harisattama!

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1

The Edge



Hanuman stopped abruptly when he saw the edge of the cliff. It was an unnatural hesitation, a recent thing, but this had been happening to him a lot of late. Slowly, he let his breath out. A sound emerged that he had hoped would not, a sound he had only recently started to make, or only recently gotten self-conscious about. It was the soft, confused sound of surrender. It felt like the remnant of a half-chewed leaf stuck in his throat. He knew it sprung from a memory.

He covered his face with his palms and wiped off the sweat. The blazing Kishkindhan sun pierced his skin through the gaps it found in the canopy of leaves above him. Sweat, breath, heat, a wave of fire, and a wave of energy passed through his stomach, and his legs. Slowly, careful not to lean forward any further, but determined not to retreat just yet, holding his thoughts carefully, he opened his eyes again.

The vertigo hit him like the sting of her words once had, across the face.

He shuffled back.

He could have made that jump.

He used to make that jump.

But now, even the thought was enough to trigger off that itchy-leaf feeling in his throat, that fear, that shame.

He felt his *balance* twitch, inadvertently knocking against a bush behind him. The sound startled him. The brief loss of control reminded him of the rude word some of the other youngsters used for the *balance*, a 'tail' they called it, as if it was something embarrassing.

Hanuman considered the abyss again. He tried to picture his father and his mother, the great and kind king and queen of Kishkindha, the ones who knew no fear. But he couldn't. Only her voice appeared. The mighty empress, the one like a mother to his father, the one who had given Hanuman his life, the one whose word still ran the kingdom. He could still hear the things she had said.

It is not me. But it is not me.

Parents.

Mata.

Pita.

And then her.

They all told him the same thing. *You must not do this, Hanuman. You must not do that, Hanuman.*

The boys will get hurt, Hanuman.

The rishis will get disturbed, Hanuman.

Parama dharma apachara, Hanuman. Violation of the prime duty.

And then, her words, the mighty empress Riksharaja, the mother-like elder who had held him close, and then never smiled again; her contemptuous declaration: *You are useless, Hanuman, everything you do is useless.*

And then the way she had smiled at Vali, cousin Vali, the hero of all the boys; Vali, who was almost as tall as Hanuman's father, the noble Kesari.

The trees behind him shook again. Hanuman snapped out of it, almost with a smile now. Vali was here, the winner of everything, the soon-to-be-winner of this race too.

Hanuman stepped aside to let Vali pass.

Vali confidently hurtled past, not even a glance at Hanuman now, and with a cheerful yell, and a quick pound of fists on his chest, leaped off the cliff.

'Jai Mata Saraswati,' Hanuman said, softly, and surely enough, Vali landed elegantly on a rocky ledge on the far side. He felt no resentment or envy, just a wistful sense of confusion. *How could it be? I used to be able to jump like that, and now, the very sight of height fills me with...*

‘Come on, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva panted up from behind with his usual friendly smile, ‘don’t stop now!’

Hanuman smiled. The race was not over yet. Even if it was a race he could not win. Sugreeva often reminded him that even if Hanuman could not or did not want to make the leaps anymore, he could still move across the ground quickly.

Sugreeva rubbed Hanuman’s head with his sweaty hands and hauled himself up a tree with a long branch reaching into the ravine. He liked doing that. Vali could leap directly across, but Sugreeva liked the rhythm of a swinging branch to get him started.

Hanuman, of course, had done both easily until the trouble with the empress began.

He waited for Sugreeva’s form to disappear into the foliage, smashing through the leaves, and then, relieved to be free suddenly of his sorrow, proceeded to take the safe, if winding, path down the side of the hill.

It would be like how it always was. He would take the lead in the safe, flat stretches, but his cousins would always get way ahead of him in doing what Kishkindhans were best at—the leaps and jumps from trees and across ravines. He would have liked to see Sugreeva win though, for once. He was so talented and just as strong and quick as Vali, but he always came second. Hanuman moved down fluidly, holding on to branches and rocks. He was still in a good place to come third, a spot that he had secured twice in the past few months. He was getting better, the rest of the boys were still quite far behind, perhaps seeking another route to the top of the Rishyamukha mountain.

Hanuman was about a third of the way down the slope when he heard Sugreeva’s shout.

‘Jai Mata Saraswati!’ The words carried like an eagle across the sky as Sugreeva leaped.

But then, it was not enough.

Hanuman watched in disbelief as Sugreeva fell short of the same rocky ledge Vali had caught a few moments ago, and like a horror with no precedence, like a world about to end, spun and went crashing straight down below, his balance limp. And then everything was a red blur.

A Matter of Some Concern



The good king Kesari could see that his friend, the sage Vishwamitra, was disturbed, though he had smiled and laughed with everyone, most of all their empress, who liked to be amused by such courtesies from visitors and citizens of the Rock City of Kishkindhanagara.

‘By your grace, O Mother Empress, by your grace alone, they frolic and they smile,’ Vishwamitra had said when Riksharaja asked him how his deer and squirrel were keeping. But there was an urgency in how he said it, a hint in the voice that indicated, ‘You won’t understand even if I tell you,’ but it was hidden, as it ought to have been so that it could not possibly upset the empress.

It had worked. Riksharaja returned to instructing her attendants on how to massage her feet precisely, satisfied that due respect had been accorded to her. The sage and Kesari could now step aside and speak about whatever temple matters they usually liked to discuss. Vishwamitra knew that Kesari’s admiration for Riksharaja was sincere. If there was harmony now, it was because of the peace that she had secured for them in her youth when she had led the armies to victory against the last great cold-blooded eaters of Goddess Saraswati’s children, establishing the truce that led to today’s tranquil *parama dharma*. And yet, there was something about her that always called for tact in how he approached her.

Kesari quickly led Vishwamitra outside, down a path around the hill on which the dwelling stood, towards a quiet place where one singular round-topped boulder loomed like a rocky metaphor for an ever-rising sun against the sky.

All the way up, Vishwamitra continued to speak about the important Second Ceremony for the three princes. *Vali did so well! Sugreeva too! Hanuman, of course, is still a small boy inside and some day we will do his ceremony too.*

Kesari walked along silently. He had a feeling Vishwamitra had not meant that as a judgment, and was most likely merely ensuring that the empress remained secure about her own sons' perceived superiority over Hanuman.

Once they were atop the boulder, Kesari looked again, purposefully, into Vishwamitra's eyes. He had never seen fear in them. Vishwamitra did not use the silence to change the subject. Once again he started, loudly, excitedly, about the boys, the upcoming Second Ceremony, the coconuts, the mangoes, and Goddess Saraswati.

'Rishi ,' Kesari interrupted gently, reminding him of what he had briefly said earlier, 'the fish?'

'Why, the young purple ones have learned to swim beyond the turn of the river too, you should see ...' he went on in the same excited and cheerful voice.

'What was that *thing* you saw with the fish?' Kesari interrupted, feeling a little more anxious now; a protector's instinct. It had to have been serious, though with Vishwamitra, everything seemed as if it was happening as he wanted it; an act, a play.

Vishwamitra's pinkish face twitched beneath its distinguished white whiskers, and Kesari noticed that look of concern surfacing again. It was a revelation, a tiny flash of how the ordinary Kishkindhan Vishwamitra must have been before he conquered his senses and became a *rishi* . A tiny flash of fear. It was in the way his mouth twitched, and his white whiskers seemed to extend back.

'Oh, that,' Vishwamitra exclaimed, and then his mastery over his emotions returned, once again, as mirth. 'So I jumped, Kesari, I jumped, I jumped, I jumped!'

He stood up suddenly on the boulder and demonstrated his action again, and they both had to laugh. It was funny. The wisest and most venerable

being anyone in Kishkindhanagara knew, and he could be so funny, and active, at his age!

Vishwamitra looked around him now, lifting his *balance* dramatically, 'And the boys? Where are they hiding?' He laughed, an elder's love apparent in his questions about Hanuman and the brothers.

'Rishyamukha, I am sure,' Kesari replied, 'though they must be avoiding the north face after the scolding they got.'

'Hanuman is young, my friend,' Vishwamitra said, 'but I am sure he will do well in the Second Ceremony.'

Kesari smiled. There was something about his son that few others had noticed, but Vishwamitra had. Hanuman hadn't been quite himself of late, withdrawing by himself into shadowy ledges and crevices, happy only when Sugreeva cheered him on. Anjana insisted it was because he was not eating enough bananas from her mother's side of the mountains. Kesari agreed. He was that sort of leader, and husband; always amicable. Hanuman's behaviour wasn't uncommon. It happened sometimes, when children reached the age of the Second Ceremony, when they dedicated themselves to Goddess Saraswati and prepared for the adult life ahead of them.

Kesari gazed at the stony plains far below them for a sign of the boys. There were a few groups of children by the river. The fragments of a song interrupted by the wind floated up from the side of the river where a group of girls sat in a row, practising for their Second Ceremony.

Kesari's eyes followed the river's course past the coconut trees and rocks to the distance where it disappeared around the Rishyamukha mountain. Its peak seemed to flash in the midday sun like a distant jewel. For a moment, Kesari felt as if he were far away. The peace in Kishkindha was so deep, so fulfilling. Not one child in his kingdom had known strife; not even he had heard tales of trouble beyond an occasional argument over a banana tree. A hint of breeze brought to them the smell of flowers and fruits from somewhere by the river. Smiling, forgetting the brief concern he had allowed himself to feel when Vishwamitra narrated his vague 'I jumped' anecdote, he let his eyes follow the fragrance, idly curious about who was bringing a new crop up the hill.

'I jumped, my friend,' Vishwamitra said, suddenly and sharply, in a voice that said that reality would unfold all too darkly from now on, 'because

what wrapped itself around my feet during my morning prayers in the river was not a thing that should have been there at all.'

Kesari felt his *balance* turn swiftly up and hard behind his back, in a way that he had not felt in a long time. A ball of hot fire seemed to run up and down from its very tip all the way to the space between his eyes. He felt his ears go red. For a king and a self-mastered man, he was disturbed now. He covered his ears and then looked around quickly to make sure no one else could see his reaction.

He looked down at Vishwamitra's shin, where he said it had happened. Was it his imagination or was there now something dark and splotchy about it? No, in any case, as Vishwamitra had said, it was heavy, and it did not move at all as a fish ought to.

It had merely floated about in the water, and it knocked against his legs with the current, again and again.

Vishwamitra, the sage with a fierce command over his mind and senses, with great knowledge and mighty powers, had unceremoniously leaped out of the river like a frightened little boy when he realized what it meant.

3

Blood



Hanuman could still see the red blur. It was as if the sun had exploded, and one fragment of it was hanging low, like an eternal sunset over the great Kishkindhan landscape. The sound in his ears began to fade, and yet the memory of Sugreeva's scream as he fell remained. For a second, Hanuman was disoriented, and then his thoughts shifted. The birds that had rushed from the disturbed branches were cawing noisily. Far below, under the cover of the bushes, Hanuman could detect something like a twitch, a sudden surge of something bad in nature; something there that did not belong. He could feel a dull pain forming between his eyes. He remembered his father holding his hand and chanting the names of the Goddess, and took a breath that cleared the feeling.

'Sugreeva!' he shouted, though his voice now seemed to echo too noisily for the silence of the ravine. There was no answer, just the sound the birds circling and rising from the bushes into which Sugreeva had fallen.

Hanuman descended the mountain quickly and ran across the rocky bed and the streams. The waters too seemed to hint at that red blur. He called Sugreeva's name again, reassuring him that he was on his way, and then clambered up the far slope towards the bushes where he had fallen.

For a moment, the redness seemed to leave his eyes, as if it were an illusion.

Then, Hanuman saw his friend, as he had not seen anyone.

The redness returned like a storm.

‘Mata!’ Hanuman gasped and rushed to lift his bloodied friend from the ground. He was limp and motionless. He smelled different. Hanuman coughed and then knelt close to Sugreeva. He was breathing, and a faint groan emerged from between his lips. His eyes remained shut, though.

Hanuman whispered his name, but Sugreeva did not answer. Slowly, Hanuman reached out and touched his face, covered in blood. He drew back suddenly, as if he had touched fire. Then, slowly, he touched Sugreeva’s cheek with his palm, and then lifted his head gently.

There was an ugly gash, and a thin trickle of blood continued to flow through the matted hair.

What was it that his father used to say? What had to be done? Would it pollute the water? Was this what everyone had warned him about? But he had not done this. And Sugreeva ... in pain ...

As if to answer his question, voices came from above him.

‘Apachara ! Offence!’ A wave of angry and fearful shouts rained down on Hanuman.

Hanuman looked up, Sugreeva’s head still in his palm. One by one, the rest of the boys came up to the edge above them. Their faces were full of anger, or something unusual that Hanuman could not really decipher.

Two different thoughts ran through his mind. *Apachara! Avoid the bloodshed!* But it seemed outlandish, an unthinkable possibility to abandon his friend and brother to his fate just because he had hurt himself. On the contrary, *this was duty*, this was Mother Saraswati’s way of supporting dharma . *Take him home! Lift him up!*

Hanuman knelt down, slid his arms under Sugreeva, and picked him up. ‘Do not worry, Sugreeva,’ he said in his most detached and calm voice, ‘I will take you home to Mother Empress and you will become well.’

‘Apachara !’ the boys on the cliff shrieked again, as if Hanuman was not Hanuman anymore. Hanuman could see the look on their faces, the way in which they covered them with their hands, the frenzied way in which they slapped their cheeks, right hand across left cheek, left hand across right cheek. He took one step towards the bottom of the cliff wall, hoping someone would run down to help him.

But that scared them even more. They charged up to the top of the trees and shook the branches loudly. The birds flew away at once, without

turning back.

Sugreeva moaned slightly. A warm, sticky liquid spread from his rib cage to Hanuman's abdomen. Hanuman kept reassuring him as he moved forward over the boulders that protruded from the river. The smell of blood and sweat rose in waves in the Kishkindha heat.

Hanuman could see the boys on the trees above him, gesticulating at him, imploring him not to come closer. He could understand their agitation; the careful way in which they had learned to play, even as children, and their urge to avoid bloodshed. Each drop of blood contained the sunlight of one hundred and eight leaves, and Mother Saraswati herself poured each drop into a child's body on the night before his birth, the only time the sight of blood was not considered an outrage. But still, *this was Sugreeva. He was in pain. Someone had to do something to help him...*

Suddenly, the chattering in the trees above stopped.

Hanuman knew that silence. He looked up to the top of the cliff on the other side of the ravine and saw Vali. *Good. Your brother is here, Sugreeva, he will take care of you, he always knows what to do.*

Hanuman smiled in relief. 'Cousin Vali—' he began.

But Vali raised his palm to silence him. He looked up and straight ahead at his followers across the ravine. Hanuman wondered what he was going to do. His thoughts flashed here and there. Perhaps they should follow the river up to Vishwamitra's ashram; that might be even better. Vali could order some of the boys to help, and between four people, they could run and get Sugreeva to Vishwamitra quickly enough.

Vali leaped swiftly over their heads and returned to the side where everyone stood. They retreated a few feet, respectfully. Hanuman too moved back, so he could see him. The cool river embraced his ankles. He hesitated for a second about blood falling in the water, but everything was different now, everything was in a place where no one had been, in their young lifetimes at least.

A slow realization began to arise, like an irritation, a ball of liquid in his throat. His stomach seemed to withdraw inside. *Surely, Vali wouldn't be doing this to... This is Sugreeva! Our Sugreeva!*

Hanuman saw Vali raise his hands high above his head to command his youthful followers to listen. His back was to the ravine. His balance flicked this way and that over the side of the cliff, and then settled into a commanding raised position.

His words were loud, clear, and remorseless: '*Parama. Dharma . APACHARA !*' he shouted.

Violation of the paramount duty!

A cloud of dust and birds and Kishkindhan voices erupted all over again. Everyone, all of their friends, all of their cousins, brothers, rushed headlong back into the forest in the direction of Kishkindhanagara in a mad panic.

Hanuman stared at Vali's back. With one more twitch of his *balance* , Vali was gone too.

It was just him and Sugreeva and their total *surrender* to Mother Saraswati now.

4

Nightfall



Kesari sat silently on the boulder long after Vishwamitra left. It was a resplendent sunset. The chants of the evening birds assured him all was still well.

Below him, the mountain and rocks seemed alive and vibrant, even in the spreading darkness. It looked as if nothing could harm their world, not in a million years. The river, their giver of life, shimmered, and then quietly receded into darkness as well.

The night's chorus of insects and the occasional night bird began. It meant Kesari could rest. There were other kings and chiefs looking after their world now. The *parama dharma* was rarely violated and a chief didn't need to do much to secure it. Most conflicts, such as there were, got quickly settled by appeals to reason and displays of persuasive emotion rather than anything more damaging. It was indeed rare to see blood in Kishkindha, which was what made the sage's words so disturbing. Twilight had been peaceful for nearly a whole lifetime now. But there were nightmarish times that Kesari remembered from his childhood: red skies, whole villages fleeing, screams of fear and pain erupting from those who had fallen to predators.

What could Vishwamitra have seen? A decayed fruit? Even a Kishkindhan child would recognize that, let alone Vishwamitra, though the

sage could still be like a Kishkindhan child sometimes. A *naaga kavacham*? Discarded skins of serpents could also look like what he had described. But Vishwamitra had ruled that out. The words he had used were peculiar, striking. *Like the praana had been forced cruelly out of it, he had said. Dukham*, he had said, sorrow.

Kesari's eyes moved towards an edge of the boulder. Vishwamitra had leaned over it and spat out something after he spoke. His body was still shaken by the memory of what he had seen. He had seen the aftermath of violence, and it was disturbing him still.

Kesari thought of Riksharaja for some reason. His aunt, his sons' grand-aunt, matriarch of many names and forms, and how sometimes she could say and do things that caused sorrow. In a time when there were not too many reasons to be sorrowful, it seemed strange that sorrow existed. The last occasion such sorrow had come was long ago now, in the days when Riksharaja had been young and fierce, and had fought like a king, thereby earning her name. But even the battles they had heard of seemed to pale before the kind of sorrow Vishwamitra was describing now. No one tore out limbs in Kishkindha, if indeed that was what—

'Maharaja!' A voice called out from the dark. Kesari turned and slid down from the boulder, the way he'd liked doing with Hanuman when he was smaller.

It was good to leave that unpleasant conversation and memory behind. He would ask about it, he would not forget; but he would do so later, confidently, with full faith in Mother Saraswati.

The smile was already back on his face when he reached his queen.

*

'They want to talk,' she said.

Kesari's smile dropped slightly. He was looking forward to walking down to the river with Anjana and waiting for Hanuman to return. He hadn't counted on more meetings, and at the end of the day at that.

Anjana led him on, past the cave where they liked to receive visitors, to another room in the back, around the curve of the cliff. Kesari knew who would be there. This had happened before. Anjana's relatives from the far side of the river. They felt this room ensured they were far away from Riksharaja's earshot.

‘Maharaja, we must address this soon,’ Anjana’s grandaunt said sharply. ‘No more hesitations about what Riksharaja will think or anyone else will think. She will know—more than everyone else here—what is good for Kishkindha. After all, we changed our customs from following a king to following a queen for her sake and then back again, as the *desa and kala*, time and place, demanded of us. We are Kishkindhans. We follow Goddess Saraswati, and not some moribund law or fleeting fashion about what a leader is supposed to look like or sound like.’

Those were strong and clear words. Kesari sat down heavily. As always, at times like these, he wondered why he had to be the only male in important gatherings. Granted, none of these things mattered in the carrying out of Goddess Saraswati’s guidelines and in the administration of the people, but there were times he felt having a brother on the council would have been good. At least, he would not have felt as if the world was on his shoulders every time he went out to feast with the brothers and saw their monumental indifference to matters of life and living. Sometimes he wished he could let it simply slip away, drink his honeycombs, leave everything to Anjana’s capable hands, and play with Hanuman and his friends. Sometimes, responsible decisions were best made by others, especially when they concerned one’s own family. He could not, for example, decide on Hanuman’s education after his Second Ceremony. Hanuman’s peers had already left to the *gurukulas* here and there, run by one of Vishwamitra’s many alumni, studying philosophy, astronomy, nutrition, aesthetics and natural economy. But there was no curriculum for a leader. No one, it seemed, wanted to be one, and yet it had to be done.

‘Kesari!’ his grandaunt-in-law shouted. He had been staring, and leaning down towards the long, steep slope again.

He pulled his *balance* back up suddenly, and became stiff. ‘Yes, grandmother, yes.’

Unlike Kesari, Anjana was quick, and realistic, and also knew her husband well. ‘Yes to what? Have you listened?’ she asked, half-seriously and half-affectionately.

‘Yes. Hanuman. He is a good boy,’ he mumbled.

‘That he is, but are you willing?’

‘Willing?’

‘You must say what is on everyone’s minds, Kesari. Your son is the one everyone would like to see as the chief of Kishkindha in the years ahead.’

He has a phenomenal memory, and can chant every name of Mata Saraswati already, even though he has not even had his formal Second Ceremony. He is stronger, and yet kinder than anyone else. He would make an excellent chief.'

'Unlike Va—' another grandaunt who had only been nodding until now spoke up, but then cut herself off.

'But Vali is likeable too,' Kesari said, earnestly. 'And he *wants to* be the leader. Hanuman is happy just being, well, a whirlwind. He will always be a good brother and ally to Vali.'

'He is the best,' someone else shouted, smacking her lips as well.

Kesari was delighted, naturally, but he could not take it seriously; in fact, there were too many things about this leader business he could not take seriously. Vishwamitra's words still haunted his mind, but he took a breath and decided not to take responsibility away from Goddess Saraswati for their well-being. He smiled and turned to this unexpected leadership issue he had been thrust into.

'Mother,' he addressed his son's supporter with good cheer and conviction in his voice, 'by Goddess Saraswati's grace, we have not had to face a crisis of any great import in a long time. The children may have got a few bruises while playing, but even that—through timely medicine and patient forgiveness—is never allowed to violate our *parama dharma*. The border arguments that people have about coconuts and mangoes, ah, I agree, those mangoes have always brought out a less dignified streak in us, but never so low as to cloud one's reason permanently.'

Everyone shook their heads and made approving sounds. Whether it was for his deft handling of the occasional fruit tree disputes, or for the wholly approvable mango fruit itself, he wasn't sure.

It wasn't really his intention, but in any case, the meeting drifted off into an informal adjournment as everyone began to discuss the merits of mangoes and whose trees had done well this season. Kesari silently thanked Goddess Saraswati for having made Kishkindhans as easily defusable as they were passionate, and as easily distractible as they were intelligent.

The meeting had ended exactly as Kesari had hoped it would, without any commitment or plan. Sometimes, especially on things like this, it was best to let things be. Hanuman was not even interested in leaping across valleys these days, where would he sit down for a talk on responsibility and leadership...

Only Anjana continued to think about the conversation and what it meant. Maybe it was a feeling she had that Hanuman ought to have returned by now, and something was not quite right. Maybe it was the very skilful way she had found her due place in Kesari's cave palace under the shadow of the Mother Empress.

She would have to break an extra big coconut soon to take away the psychic energies smothered on her dear son, and then feed it to an army of ants heading away from Kishkindhanagara. All this praise could have bad effects. Riksharaja had already severely scolded Hanuman once before, for just a childish game.

As much as Anjana saw only the good in people, and as much as she sincerely saw only the good in Riksharaja too, she knew the effect she could have on people, even Kesari, and she knew it was not always for the good. Kesari's *balance* never stayed balanced when Riksharaja brought something up to agitate him.

Anyway, thought Anjana, even if Riksharaja came to learn about the peoples' support for Hanuman, it would not matter. Kesari had clearly spoken in favour of Vali, and that was how everyone had assumed it would be from the time he was born. And Hanuman was much too young to even think about things like being a ruler one day. And he had to get over this new thing he had about clambering down slopes instead of simply leaping across as he used to.

Kesari was just sitting there now, thinking. It was time to get moving. She embraced him with a laugh, and thanked the Goddess silently for keeping the world just the way it had to be.

'The boys seem to be returning, look,' Kesari said, happy that this day of too-much responsibility was ending. It would be good to just be with Hanuman, even if he was not speaking as much he used to when he was younger. He would be happy to listen to tales of Vishwamitra.

Anjana let go of him. She could see the shadowy silhouettes of the group far below by the river. But there was something different about the way they were walking today. They did not look like friends and cousins and brothers. They were purposeful, quick, almost like they were marching.

Vali was in front.

And Sugreeva and Hanuman weren't behind him.

5

Sugreeva Wakes Up



It was almost dark when Sugreeva finally woke up. Hanuman broke open a coconut and bathed Sugreeva's face in the water. The familiar smell of their life-giving fruit dampened the smell of the blood that had bothered him all afternoon.

Hanuman felt relieved. 'Jai Mata Saraswati,' he said, and gently helped Sugreeva sit up.

'Vali?' Sugreeva slowly asked. 'Where is my brother?'

For a moment, Hanuman wondered what he should say. Vali had not come back, obviously. 'Vali has gone for help, Sugreeva, though it has been a long time,' Hanuman said finally.

Sugreeva groaned. It almost sounded like resignation. It was understandable though. Sugreeva was in pain. And that hot, wet smell had turned into something more dull, but was still fetid.

Hanuman wished his father would come here soon, and his mother, and Riksharaja most of all. She knew more than anyone else in the village, except Vishwamitra perhaps, about sacred medicine leaves. Vishwamitra! If only Vishwamitra would come, if only he would fall from a tree where the right leaves grew.

Hanuman prayed, fervently, to Goddess Saraswati, to tell him what to do. He understood something significant that he had never quite considered

before. Sugreeva's wounds, and his utter helplessness, revealed to him what his elders could not have taught him with words alone. How tender, how easily breakable they all were. How alone and vulnerable they were now, just the two of them on a vast stone mountain, unable to even walk home in the condition Sugreeva was in. Only the Goddess, and the knowledge she gave them to guide their actions, could ever keep them safe.

'Can you walk, Sugreeva?' Hanuman asked. 'If we reach the top of the hill, at least they may be able to see us from the river.'

Sugreeva moaned in answer, but slowly tried to move anyway. Hanuman draped his arm around his cousin's shoulders and helped him to his feet. Slowly, painfully, limping with every step, Sugreeva moved forward, mumbling prayers as best as he could.

*

They were near where they had started their race earlier in the day. But now the sun was almost setting.

'We are almost there, Sugreeva,' Hanuman said, encouragingly. 'We are halfway home now. I am sure we will see the elders coming to receive us any moment now.' He felt strange saying those words, but that did seem like what was expected. When had his parents not come when he needed them?

Sugreeva sighed. 'I hope you will forgive me, Hanumantha, my dear, dear, little cousin.'

Hanuman was surprised. 'What are you talking about, Sugreeva?'

'I am going to be the start of many sorrows now. For you, and for Kesari Uncle, and for Anjana Aunty,' Sugreeva said. Then, his voice cracked. 'Anjana Aunty, for whose coconut and jaggery balls we leapt high as the sky.'

Hanuman realized that Sugreeva was crying. And he was not making sense. They were now teenagers and almost as tall as the elders. They did not need to leap up anymore to get the sweets from the ledge where his mother stored them. The shock and pain must have disoriented Sugreeva.

'Look, don't lose hope. You can see the top of our homes right there, and the tops of the trees with your favourite coconuts. You can surely have some sweets from my mother when we reach home.'

Sugreeva stopped sniffing. In a voice that suddenly seemed confident, though still sad, he asked Hanuman to stop and let him sit down.

In the dark, Sugreeva's eyes seemed to glow with a dark sorrow. That lurking feeling of strangeness Hanuman had been feeling since Vali and the others had screamed at them returned. Something was happening, though he didn't know exactly what it was and what it meant. Something bad.

'We are not going home, Hanuman,' Sugreeva said quietly. 'We cannot. We have breached the *parama dharma*. We are worthy of no more than becoming Jatayu food now. But even that is an honour one must earn through great deeds over a long life. But here we are, doomed to wander till the Jatayus come, with nothing to our name. And you ... you have not even seen your Second Ceremony...' Sugreeva's voice cracked again.

Hanuman understood, and yet did not understand.

What could stop them from going home? Hanuman had never seen anyone forbidden from returning to their home or to their mother.

He touched Sugreeva's shoulder fondly. 'Don't despair just yet. We are with each other, no? I can lift you up and carry you on my back across the river. It is not too dark to cross yet.'

But Sugreeva shook his head firmly. He seemed to have moved from despair to determination now. 'No, Hanuman. Kishkindhanagara will be tarnished if we enter. Let us wait here for now. It is better than moving about in the night.'

Hanuman agreed, and started to look around for a good resting spot.

'And maybe, maybe, you are right, Hanuman,' Sugreeva continued, a little more cheerful now at the prospect of rest, 'maybe our elders will come for us in the morning, and maybe they will say that this was not really an act of *adharma*, maybe this is not what violating the *parama dharma* is about. Maybe Vali will convince them it was an accident.'

Hanuman exhaled with some relief and pleasure. He was happy that his friend was cheering up. He brought his palms together and turned towards the last streak of reddish light in the sky. It was the first time he had chanted his evening prayers away from his parents. He huddled next to Sugreeva, and drifted into a semi-sleep as the evening chorus of insects and night birds began. For a few minutes, he could discern conversations from where they had left off the previous night; the voices of the little Kishkindhan beings who lived on the forest floor. Some of the creatures, he even recognized by their sounds; he had seen them too, a snail, a cricket, a moth.

He wondered if anyone was talking about their strange misadventure today at the Rishyamukha. He strained his ears in that direction, but could not make out anything. Sometimes, it seemed as if there was perfect communication between creatures, at other times there wasn't, everyone just doing their own thing. The languages of the smaller ones were especially like that. They seemed coherent when one was not listening, but became difficult to decipher when one paid attention.

Hanuman drifted slowly into sleep. He half-imagined, and half-dreamt, his parents catching his arms and making him wash before dinner. Sugreeva would laugh and shout, 'Aata-Paata-Takataka-Shuk,' the children's usual chant which meant that playtime, or pretend-time, was now over. That was a distant memory too, from childhood. No one had played that game in years, and yet, all this felt like a game—a strange one!

Darkness in Kishkindhanagara



Kesari walked away from the group of elders and slowly raised himself up to his boulder. It felt stark, almost cold, even in the warm night, without his Hanuman. He liked sitting there after his prayers sometimes, watching the stars rise. He wondered if his little Hanuman was watching the stars too, or if he was fast asleep already. Looking towards Rishyamukha Peak, he imagined where Hanuman could be and raised his palm in blessing.

‘This is not at all what it seems to be, Kesari,’ Anjana said quietly, coming up behind him.

‘How could she say things like that about my son?’ he mumbled, angrily.

‘If not this, it would have been something else. Riksharaja has been waiting to find fault with Hanuman ever since the elders started speaking for him over Vali.’

‘But, he is just a little boy still. A miracle of a little boy, Anjana. Have you seen him pull a banana from a tree, how careful, how precise, and how gentle he is? Has he ever broken one leaf more than necessary? Would a boy who measured every gesture of his before he could even stand up on his own be so careless as to hurt his own cousin, who he looks up to like an older brother?’

Anjana was quiet. At times like these, Kesari would think that Goddess Saraswati was centring herself on his wife’s tongue. She spoke clearly at

last, and with confidence. 'That is why you must not fear for our Hanumantha. You must not feel bad for whatever the elders have said or might say tomorrow. The Goddess wants this to happen, and wants him to do something now.'

'But his Second Ceremony? I wish we had not waited so long. If he was in the *gurukula* none of this would have happened. Now, I do not know what he will do. Or what I must...' he trailed off.

Anjana could have endorsed his grief. But the Goddess was still close to her words, or so thought Kesari. She would help him see it the right way.

'The Goddess will give him the knowledge to do the right thing now,' Anjana said, echoing Kesari's thoughts. 'There is no other way. If Hanuman is to find the Goddess' grace in another way, without the Ceremony and the usual customs for our boys, then that is what will happen. And let's not forget that Vishwamitra will not be pushed so easily by all this talk about *apacharam* and *maha-apacharam*. No "sins" and "big sins" for him. He is still our *guru*. And he knows you, and he knows Hanuman and, most of all, he knows the Goddess's heart.'

Kesari almost smiled for the first time since that terrible moment a few hours ago when Vali had come marching home with an air of exaggerated solemnity. The first thing Kesari had thought was that there was not a spot of blood on him, even though he had said that his brother and Hanuman were fully in violation. *Did he not help?* Kesari had thought. *His mother wants him to lead the people, and he wants so much to be a leader. And yet, he is here alone, with no sign of remorse or concern that a fellow living being is in pain. All he cares about is some rule that was never meant to punish the innocent, only protect them from harm.* Then, Kesari had checked his thoughts. His nephew was young too. As the king, he had to be tolerant and forgiving.

He had called Anjana, Riksharaja, the elders, and they had all heard the story again, straight from Vali's mouth. No one knew what to say. The elders who had pleaded with Kesari to anoint Hanuman seemed more upset than anyone else. Riksharaja was stoic and did not once look at Kesari. Whatever had to be said would have to be said in the morning, after the prayers. They had not decreed banishment on anyone in many years. Kesari did not even recall the words that he would have to utter, as the king. Now, it was a possibility.

‘Vishwamitra will have an *upaayam* , a creative solution,’ Kesari suddenly said to Anjana. ‘He will know how to bring my Hanumantha home, regardless of what these fools are all saying.’

‘What will you ask? “Make an exception for my son, O Guru”? Will it be worthy of a just ruler to do that?’ Anjana reminded him.

Kesari stood up. ‘Why even ask then,’ he said angrily. ‘I will throw them down from the mountain. I will throw them down the thorn face of the mountain. I will live in *apachara* in the forests along with my son. And if I see them ever again I will beat them and do even more *apachara* !’

Anjana seemed to agree with him with her eyes, but then she also tapped her cheeks in repentance to offset any offence to the Goddess and the primal doctrine. She knew Kesari did not mean it. It was all a test. It had to be. Nothing more.

Kesari slid off the boulder the way Hanuman liked him to do as he rode on his back when he was younger. His shoulders were tense and his *balance* was stiff, as if he was ready to go and carry out his threat immediately.

To be safe, Anjana asked, ‘Where are you going?’

In a tone that suggested his outrage but in a whisper that affirmed that he was sensible too, he just mumbled, ‘Vishwamitra. Message. Will send. Now.’

7

Naraka Raja, the King of Hell



Hanuman woke up suddenly. He had been dreaming. But the warmth he had associated with his mother in the dream now seemed different. The breath hovering over him was hot and smelled foul. He remembered the previous afternoon and the way Sugreeva had smelled, but this was worse. It seemed to have the trace of many different kinds of *apacharas* in it. He ran his hand over Sugreeva, but he seemed mostly dry. His wounds were healing well.

The smell was not from Sugreeva. Something else had come very close to them.

Hanuman got to his feet in a flash. The shapes and shadows around him started to gain focus in the dark. A cool breeze was setting in too. The breeze seemed to clear the smell of whatever presence had been close to them. He still could not see or hear anything.

It had been a strange day. Hanuman wondered when the sun would rise, and looked for the set of stars his father had showed him each night. They were low on the horizon. It wouldn't be long now.

He settled back down to sleep.

This time, there was no warning when the Jatayu came; quickly, stealthier than an approaching dream, it swooped down from the night and plucked Sugreeva away in its talons.

‘Hanuman!’ Sugreeva called out in alarm. His wounds stung as the Jatayu’s talons held him tight around his ribs.

Hanuman jerked awake and sprang to his feet. He could see the Jatayu rising higher with each beat of her wings and began to chase it. He felt something wet on his head even as he ran. *Sugreeva’s wounds! They had opened again.*

‘Grab my hand! Pull me down from here!’ Sugreeva shouted desperately. He had only one hand free and it dangled helplessly.

Hanuman crouched to position himself for a leap. But he knew it would not work. The bird was too high already, and he had not jumped to catch even a branch in many seasons. He scanned the rocks quickly for a path. And there it was, just one overhanging rock. It would be a difficult leap, sideways, at an angle, but if Goddess Saraswati’s swan blessed him with enough wind from her wings, he might just about make it.

Without a second’s hesitation, Hanuman bounded up the rock and jumped off the cliff.

He didn’t think about what might happen if he didn’t make it. By the time he realized how truly dangerous it was, Hanuman’s hands were holding tight to the giant bird’s neck.

*

The Jatayu shuddered as Hanuman collided with her from above. As the bird raised her head, Hanuman threw his arms around her neck. The muscles tightened under his hands and she emitted a fierce, powerful shriek, as if pebbles were being ground together. Hanuman understood—though he had never seen a Jatayu, much less heard its language before. She was asking him who or what he was, and not without some fear.

‘I am Hanuman, son of Kesari and Anjana,’ Hanuman announced, even as he tightened his hold on her. ‘Why have you seized my friend and cousin Sugreeva?’

The Jatayu then steadied herself. Hanuman could see the outline of her eyes as she tried to look back at him. She did not seem to know what to say.

‘We are Hanuman and Sugreeva, princes from Kishkindhanagara. Where are you taking us?’ Hanuman asked again.

The Jatayu made a series of confused sounds. It seemed to Hanuman that she was saying something about flies, but he could not be sure. When he

went to Vishwamitra after his Second Ceremony, when Mother Saraswati blessed him to formally begin his learning, he would learn all these things. Wait . That is what the Jatayu is saying, something about parama dharma...

‘Parama dharma !’ Hanuman shouted. ‘Parama dharma !’ That might be understood. Vishwamitra used to say that this was the one thing every living creature in Kishkindha knew. He had taught them the word himself, walking whole seasons without rest, talking to the chiefs of every clan he could find. That is how Vishwamitra had got his name *Friend to All*.

The Jatayu made another sound now. It sounded more like the seed of a fruit being tossed down a rain-swept sheet of rock. It sounded hopeful. But slightly remorseful. Whatever it was, Hanuman knew the Jatayu was saying *parama dharma* too. She was not going to harm them.

But she did not descend. The river flashed silver somewhere far below them.

‘Sugreeva, are you all right?’ Hanuman shouted.

Sugreeva moaned, loudly, in answer. He was holding on. Or, the Jatayu was holding him, tight enough not to fall, but not so hard as to further injure him. This was like no creature Hanuman had ever seen. It did not feel as if the Jatayu was breaching dharma. Was this the way it was meant to be?

Was this what happened when, long ago, an elderly grandmother walked away early one evening towards a distant mountain peak on the Great Walk, never to be seen again?

Were the Jatayus meant to do this?

*

Through the wind rushing on the Jatayu’s back, Hanuman tried to figure out in which direction they were headed. They were moving through thicker patches of cloud now and that made it hard to see the stars. There was still no hint of their destination anywhere on the horizon.

Occasionally, Sugreeva’s voice broke through the sound of air and feathers. ‘Hanuman! Are you still here?’

Mmmm , Hanuman said, and again, Mmmm . The way, he realized, his father did when people came to him with problems, advice, or when he had too many things to think about in general. It sounded as if he was unconcerned, but it could also be reassuring, he knew.

This reassurance would be important. Even if the Jatayu did not seem like an unreasonable sort, there was something repulsive about it. Though the wind was blowing its smell away from Hanuman, he knew where the stench came from; he realized that the strange stories children sometimes told each other about Jatayus was probably true. The elders always hushed them if they overheard them. But that only made them laugh more.

There was a consistent theme in all the stories Hanuman had heard about these creatures.

Jatayus drained you of your life.

*

‘Hanuman, look. Below us,’ Sugreeva suddenly called out.

Hanuman leaned over and looked down the gap between the Jatayu’s wing and body. As the feathers rose and fell, he saw a whole cluster of tiny shapes below them, moving through the white and black patterns of the cloudy sky.

‘There are six of them—no, seven,’ Sugreeva said confidently, as if that sort of precision was exactly what was needed now to help them.

‘Eight, counting this one too,’ Hanuman said. ‘And they seem to be coming from all the eight directions.’

The Jatayus began to converge and move in the direction of what looked like a mountain peak jutting up through the mist. As they descended, Hanuman called out to Sugreeva, ‘Four peaks, and five ridges surrounding them below.’

‘Four lakes,’ Sugreeva added. ‘But I cannot tell the directions.’

The Jatayu made some kind of a noise again, as if she had been listening. Hanuman wondered if she was telling him the name of the place in her language. It looked well-organized, with paths and trees planted along patterned lines on the flat spaces between the mountains. The other Jatayus began to land in a large circle. Some of them seemed to drop things from their talons in the middle of the circle before they did so.

Hanuman wondered if they were coconuts. But they seemed soft. And limp.

The Jatayu spread her wings and glided down for a landing.

*

Hanuman slid off the back of the bird and rolled towards Sugreeva the moment they neared land. The Jatayu let go of Sugreeva too at the same moment. He nearly fell on Hanuman, and the two of them rolled together down a gentle slope and stopped.

‘Hanuman!’ Sugreeva hugged his cousin tightly, with so much relief that one might have thought they were back home in Kishkindhanagara after nothing more than a bad dream.

‘I wonder where we are, Sugreeva,’ Hanuman said, relieved that Sugreeva was not any worse off from the ride. He pressed his palm gently on the wound above Sugreeva’s ribs to soothe him.

The Jatayu seemed to make the same sound again as she flew away from them to a vacant spot on the perimeter of the circle of birds.

Sugreeva’s voice suddenly lost the hope it had when he’d said Hanuman’s name. ‘Mother Saraswati!’ he whispered in fear. ‘This place ... this is ...’

The same smell that Hanuman had first detected near the Jatayu was now back in the air, but much more intense.

Suddenly, a harsh voice called out from the rockface nearest to them. ‘Welcome to Naraka.’

Hanuman and Sugreeva spun around instantly. A big slab of rock tore away from the mountain and fell towards them like certain disaster. At the last moment, though, the rock unfurled its wings and slowed down.

The king of the Jatayus was enormous, even larger than the Jatayu on whose expansive back Hanuman had travelled.

He glided down and perched himself on a pile of rocks that Hanuman realized was probably his throne. His neck and his head soared high above them. The clouds were clearing, and the stars were visible again.

For a second, Hanuman thought of his parents and their walk down the hill at dawn to the river where they prayed to the sun. How much had changed in a day. How much and how easily this world could change.

Now fate was watching them in the form of the king of the Jatayus, his great, sharp beak as big as a boulder on Rishyamukha Peak, hovering over their heads.

That beak, Sugreeva realized, could just as easily crush them with its weight; it did not even need to open up to disembowel them. ‘Naraka Raja,’ he said, almost in disbelief. *The King of Hell.*

*

Naraka Raja's eyes locked into Hanuman's. He stared quietly and then raised his head up like a palm tree frond that has just been released from a great weight. 'Who brought them here?'

A voice called out from behind them.

'You? A seasoned gatherer?' Naraka Raja exclaimed.

The Jatayu shrieked something again.

'I see,' replied Naraka Raja. His head slowly turned towards Hanuman now. 'The son of Kesari and Anjana is here with us. At last!'

'Let peace prevail, O Naraka Raja,' Sugreeva called out desperately, remembering that he was still like an elder brother to Hanuman and had to take care of him. 'Hanuman should not be here at all. I was the one who violated the *parama dharma*, even if upon my own self. I am the unfortunate one.'

Naraka Raja raised one wing slightly. Sugreeva felt as if he was presenting a list of all his misdeeds from the time of his birth, which he would now have to account for. It seemed as if every strange story he had heard from every talkative grandmother was about to come true.

'That is honest of you, son of Riksharaja, and, indeed, you are now here,' Naraka Raja said. 'And, it seems, from the tone of your voice, you are aware of what our unfortunate duty here in Naraka happens to be.'

Sugreeva bowed his head mournfully.

Hanuman remained calm. Despite Sugreeva's growing apprehensiveness, Hanuman figured that anyone who knew who his parents were could not really mean to harm them. Yet, he could not be sure. Sugreeva's injury had opened up more bizarre consequences for him than anything he had imagined so far. 'When will you let us go home, O Raja?' he asked in a clear voice.

A murmur of voices and ruffled feathers ran through the assembly behind them.

'He is young. And innocent,' Naraka Raja declared firmly. His birds fell silent. 'Now, listen, young Hanumantha. This is Naraka. This is the most wretched place on this earth. And we, O happy prince, are the most wretched race the Goddess has conjured up in all of her creation. We feed on the residues of those who have left the world of the living.'

Sugreeva placed his hand protectively on Hanuman's shoulder, though Hanuman seemed to be taking it all in without any judgment.

'We travel at night, swiftly and quietly, and take our offerings. When the sun rises, none of Kishkindha notices that we exist because we return here. We keep your feet and hands clean, O young prince, and we help keep your *parama dharma* too.'

Hanuman wondered if the Naraka Raja was sad, or if he was merely stating a fact. 'Is this why you have brought us here? The *parama dharma apachara* ?'

Naraka Raja answered slowly, 'I really do not know, my strange princes, what the Goddess has planned for you. The Blue Mother, from whose long tongue originates all our lives, gives you to us and then keeps you from us too. We came for you, Hanuman, on the night of your birth, for you were born without a breath. We knew. We were told by our oracle that your mother would come to give you to us, that very night of your birth, that she would walk up the mountain in grief and tears, ah, we know the taste of that too, young prince, so we waited, flying in circles high above, for her to finish her sorrow and leave you there for us. And yet, you were not to come to us. The Blue Mother gave you life even without your breath, and then your breath came too. You lived. And now you come back to us, with no life less in you at all.'

'What is it that we can do for you, O Raja?' Hanuman asked. He had never heard this story of his birth before.

'Nobly spoken, as befits a son of your parents,' exclaimed Naraka Raja. 'It is not very often that those who have been brought here for *parama dharma apacharas* manage to even stand on their own feet. If not their strength, then their spirit leaves them no sooner than they realize where they are. But you, young Hanuman, seem either to not know that you are meant to be food for our hungry beaks, or you do, and have accepted that fate as the Goddess's gift to you, just as the *sthithaprajnas* , those unshakeably enlightened ones on their Great Walks, do.'

'Naraka Raja,' Sugreeva began, a bit plaintively now. 'I alone was the one who failed. Hanuman merely stayed behind to help me. He did not cause the *apachara* . He has a full and long life ahead of him, even if his home will now be beyond his reach forever. May I ask, humbly, that you release him?'

‘What was the cause of your sorry state, O considerate prince?’ Naraka Raja sounded sincere and curious now, even if a bit perplexed that one would be so bold as to make such a request.

‘My brother Vali challenged us to a race. Up Rishyamukha Peak. And I fell.’

‘That is the saddest way of all,’ Naraka Raja said kindly. ‘We come with some regret for most *apacharas* . But these, the play of boys who have barely stopped being children, are truly painful for us too.’

‘Why is your duty a painful one?’ Hanuman asked suddenly. ‘And if it is painful, why do you still do it?’

‘No one here has asked me this question in a long time, young Hanuman. I asked it though, when I was young, of my father, and of the wise ones who work to make our Kishkindha what it is.’

‘What did they say?’

‘They said we were the Goddess’s own chosen people. We were given appetites and tastes few other creatures have so we could keep this world from despair. We do our duty so order prevails. So the world of the living can go on without fear of the world of the dying.’

‘What is fear?’ Hanuman asked.

Fire on the Mountain



As if to answer Hanuman's question, a piercing scream suddenly broke out from somewhere in the mountains. It sparked off a series of cries from here and there; some sounded feeble and battered; others carried an unbearable energy. All the cries were addressed to one person and one person only.

'Mother. They all cry for mother here,' Naraka Raja said sadly. 'I know the word for "mother" in every language spoken by every race that has ever lived in Kishkindha, O young princes. That is the end of every life, the name and memory of the one who caused its beginning. I wish, too, that I did not have to hear these cries. But, sometimes, those who have not yet left their body come here too, unprepared for what pain is. They think their spirits have conquered the flesh, but...'

He turned sharply to a bird perching near him on the right, a little behind the circle. 'Go see to it. Tell them to be quick. Our visitors must not let these memories intrude into their *parama-dharma purna-shanthi* —full-of-peace lives.'

The bird took off instantly. But Naraka Raja continued in a tirade that sounded as if he was trying to calm himself and also have some fun. 'All right, my young princes of Kishkindhanagara, I know you are wondering why I don't set them free if they are not ready for dissolution, but can we afford to have them go back to their families and tell stories about Naraka to

everyone? Do you know what will happen if everyone talks? They will say we are old monkeys' tales. We will become jokes for the children of Kishkindha. Then, they will get curious, and they will start coming here, with fistfuls of peanuts and relatives by the dozen to come and watch us as we eat. What are we? Guardians of the *dharma* or just entertainers? Get on! Get on!'

The assembly was obviously being dissolved now. The birds in the circle began to flutter and argue and move about in various directions. 'Go! Go!' Naraka Raja exhorted his followers. 'Your children and grandparents are starting without you obviously. Leave it to me to attend to our guests from the world of the living, we seem to have just so many of them these days, pity we can't offer them more hospitality...'

Whatever that sound was now, it must be laughter, thought Hanuman.

'Listen, young princes from great Kishkindhanagara, the Goddess's Seat of Wisdom itself, the time is now no longer for mirth, or sadness, but action.' Naraka Raja sounded kind. 'You must leave before the sun rises, and the night no longer conceals that which has no necessity at all to be revealed to the world of living just yet.'

Hanuman and Sugreeva now bowed and offered their salutations to him.

'Walk quickly in the direction of that blue light coming from the cave up there to the east. Then turn and find the lone tree that stands like an old watchman who refuses to leave the gate he is guarding. Just past that is the path that we Jatayus call the One Path. It is meant for those who walk up here on their own to give us our food, those who are one with the Mother and feel no pain or fear anymore, and have no attachment at all. The *sthithaprajnas*, and those who think they are *sthithaprajnas*, as you have no doubt heard. But sometimes, not often, but sometimes, one without wings can go down that way too.'

Hanuman and Sugreeva understood the gift Naraka Raja was giving them, though they could not fathom the reason behind this act of generosity. With grateful smiles they turned and started to walk away. But Naraka Raja was obviously not finished; it was as if his own nephews were going away to the *gurukula* and had to be told every little thing.

'Take the blessings from the blue light you will see as you go; it is our Goddess herself. But do not look back, princes, not till you reach the bottom of the hill on the other side, and are far from the smell of our abode. Our Goddess turns red at the first break of sunlight, and no living creature

can withstand such a sight. Go, go now, quickly, and if you are lucky, you will catch up with the one I think you were meant to find so far from your home today. It is not every day that two sets of visitors come and go from here on their own feet, but things are no longer like they used to be.'

Hanuman wondered what that remark meant, and would have asked, but Sugreeva spoke up for them first. 'Till we meet again, O Good King!' Sugreeva said, as if he were leaving a kind relative after a visit. Then, he suddenly realized the implications of what he was saying, and decided to lower his head and *balance* and just walk quickly away without any complications.

'I think we will, Sugreeva,' Hanuman said, softly anyway, as if it would not be a bad thing really.

*

As Hanuman and Sugreeva passed the lone tree Naraka Raja had mentioned, they could see the bluish glow lingering like a mist over the ground and on the rocks. It was not the light of dawn, though daylight would be here soon. It was blue, like a falling star. And yet, it came not from the skies but from inside the mountain, from inside a crack between them.

'That must be the cave of the Blue Goddess,' said Sugreeva.

Hanuman stopped and bowed low towards the cave with a *pranam*. He stood up to realize that Sugreeva had already gone a few paces ahead and was gesturing frantically.

'Look,' he said, pointing below as Hanuman caught up. 'The path is steep and there are no trees to hold along the way. We must be careful.'

'But quick,' said Hanuman, taking the lead now. 'The light is changing already, Sugreeva.'

It was true. After just a few steps down the path, they could see that the blue half-light was now becoming something else. A different kind of smell was starting to make its presence felt.

'Faster,' Hanuman urged. With a deep breath, and a prayer to Goddess Saraswati, he began to run down now, saying one of her many names with each hard step, and without any thought about what they might be running over. Whatever was under their soles, it felt hard, uneven, full of too many twists and turns to be merely stone.

Far ahead, a band of red appeared on the horizon. The sun would rise any moment now.

‘Sugreeva, look,’ Hanuman shouted, ‘just a little more, and we will reach the bottom.’

The light was now enough to see the ground beneath them, as well as the textures of the rockface looming above them. It was black, clear, shiny, oily, as if a wave of water had been frozen in time. Beneath the surface were stones and twigs of the strangest forms that also looked oddly familiar, as if Hanuman had seen some of their shapes in the dark. They reminded him of something, something obvious, and yet he couldn’t place it.

But there was more.

‘Sugreeva,’ Hanuman asked suddenly, ‘do you smell that?’

‘What?’ Sugreeva asked, panting.

‘Fire.’

Sugreeva turned to look. High above them, from the part of the rockface where the cave with the Blue Goddess might have been, a plume of sparks and smoke was sputtering. Below it, the surface of the mountain looked like a solemn, grey elder’s face. Hot ash and dust was swirling all about it. Suddenly, a dull pain began to form in Sugreeva’s head. He turned his head away and tried to speed up again. A red glaze had set in his eyes. He closed them and opened them again, but it lingered. He should not have looked. There was something ominous and funereal about that sight.

Suddenly, just as the sun appeared on the far horizon, a rumbling vibration rose from the ground beneath them. Sugreeva fell, landing on the same wound on the lower left side of his body again.

‘Hanuman!’ he shouted.

Hanuman staggered, but regained his footing. He turned around to help Sugreeva get up.

‘It has a mouth! It has a red mouth and it will eat us!’ Sugreeva screamed as Hanuman lifted him up.

A series of low thunderous sounds echoed all around them. The fire shot down the mountain’s side like a river in full force.

*

‘Move!’ shouted Hanuman, setting Sugreeva down ahead of him now. They needed to reach a tree, any tree. But what could grow in a place like this?

‘Hanuman,’ Sugreeva yelled now, once again falling behind Hanuman. ‘The fire seems to have grown feet.’

The flat ground was within reach, but that seemed to be a disadvantage now. They would have to keep going further along the plain. There were trees around them, but not very useful ones, thought Hanuman, and kept going.

Suddenly, Sugreeva called out, ‘Hanuman, come back, I have found a tree.’

With an aching realization, Hanuman turned around to find Sugreeva climbing one of the shrivelled stumps he had ignored. From behind him, the fire was slithering down, viciously, like a many-mouthed beast of anger, rearing its head up in splattering fury wherever its flow hit resistance.

‘No!’ Hanuman shouted. ‘Jump!’

Sugreeva hesitated. It felt safe up there.

‘Sugreeva, the fire will reach you in no time. If the tree doesn’t fall, you will surely remain stuck there till night, and the Jatayus will come and take you again.’

Sugreeva jumped, as long and far away as he could. The rock was already hot. Hanuman caught his hand and pulled him forward.

Quickly, they set off again, across the vast, deceptive plain, their hearts rising and falling at the sight of each passing tree.

‘Goddess Saraswati, grant us direction,’ Hanuman said to himself quietly.

Almost in response, Sugreeva announced, ‘Hanuman, I think there is fire coming from the front of us too, there, a little to the left. Maybe we should turn right instead.’

‘There?’

‘Yes, I saw white smoke on the horizon from the tree.’

Hanuman turned right. Then suddenly, he turned back to the left. ‘Sugreeva, that is where we must go.’

*

Hanuman’s hunch was right. The smoke on the horizon was not fire, but steam. A swift and broad river flowed in front of them. Here and there, little pools of water gathered in the rocks, turning into steam.

‘Jump!’ Hanuman shouted, and leaped into the river.

The waters were forceful and spun them around for a few moments. Hanuman quickly found a boulder to hold on to, and then caught Sugreeva. Slowly, they made their way across to the far side, swimming, wading, walking, tumbling.

‘Mother Saraswati!’ Sugreeva called out in relief, and quickly fell asleep.

Hanuman oriented himself, and said a quiet prayer to the sun that had given them life, and to the river that had helped them hold on to it today. In the clear light, the memories of the night before now seemed like a dream. Yet, it had all happened. He and his cousin had been carried off to the most terrible place in all Kishkindha. They had heard and seen the most terrible things.

But Mother Saraswati was still here with them. She wanted them to learn something from all this.

But what? And why this way?

Hanuman looked up and down the river. For the first time he recognized the immensity of what this new day with its young sun meant to them. They were lost, alone, somewhere without direction in this vast land of Kishkindha.

The mountain of Naraka slowly faded from view. A thin white haze covered it ominously. Here and there, wisps of smoke rose from the ground, and then vanished as well.

Which way had the Jatayu come from when it had brought them to Naraka? If they walked with the river, which direction would take them home and which would lead them further away?

Exhausted, Hanuman fell asleep on the wet stone-banks of the river that had given them another day to live.

*

When Hanuman woke up, he saw a pair of eyes looking into his. They were not Sugreeva’s.

He sat up with a start. His curious visitor, obviously startled, made a funny noise and disappeared behind a rock. Hanuman could not believe his eyes. It looked familiar, almost like a long-lost relative on his mother’s side, but it also looked smaller, as if it had been living for too long in a tiny crevice or something equally narrow and small.

It did not look like it could harm them, but Hanuman had to check.

‘Sugreeva, wake up,’ he shook him gently.

Sugreeva woke up slowly with a groan.

‘Look,’ Hanuman pointed towards the creature.

It stood up now, on its rear legs, and was the same height as a Kishkindhan child sitting down. Its forelegs seemed gracefully placed together in a *pranam*. Its long eyebrows were wet and brushed back.

‘Jai Mata Saraswati!’ Hanuman said, folding his own hands in a *pranam*.

The creature said something like ‘Urr, Kurr, Turr, Aaa,’ which, presumably, was their name for the Goddess.

‘Wait, I know,’ Sugreeva stood up purposefully, ‘the language of the river people, the Uttaras. Vali and I argued with them once about our coconut fortress. He is asking us who we are and where we have come from.’

Sugreeva then proceeded to communicate with the Uttara. The creature seemed to ask a lot of questions, and then squeaked in alarm once, when Sugreeva obviously said ‘Naraka’ in their language. He looked up nervously, and then down at them, seemingly with admiration.

Then, he got up, pounded his balance purposefully, and went off somewhere along the river’s edge.

‘Are we anywhere close to home?’ Hanuman asked Sugreeva.

‘He says we are. But I am not sure,’ Sugreeva answered. ‘The Uttaras are very helpful, and try to answer all your questions.’

‘But?’

‘But they have one favourite answer more than any other.’

‘Which is?’

Sugreeva paused for effect. He looked old in the late morning sun, much older than the young man who had boldly declared the name of Goddess Saraswati and leaped across a ravine in an ill-fated race just a day ago. ‘They say, “Uttara”!’

Now Sugreeva started to laugh. ‘I asked him, “Where are we”, he said “Uttara”. I asked him, “What is your name”, he said, “Uttara”. And I asked him, where is Kishkindhanagara? And he said “Uttara”.’

Hanuman laughed. Now the sun was high and it was hard to say what was where. But if he recalled correctly, they were most likely far to the north of Kishkindhanagara now.

‘Anyway,’ Sugreeva continued, ‘our friend asked us to wait. He will come back with instructions for us from his leader, and hopefully, with some tasty Uttaras too, hanging on a stick.’

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‘I hope you mean bananas, cousin,’ Hanuman said with a look of sincere concern.

‘What else?’ Sugreeva laughed.

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I Hereby Banish



An unusual silence set in on the valley as the morning prayers ended. Kesari announced in a calm tone that there would be a *burnasabha* soon afterwards, a full assembly meeting. There had been whispers in the night, and sometimes even anxious chatter, but most of all the sad, resigned, clicking sound of the teeth Kishkindhans made when they wanted to talk about that strange thing that ruled their lives which they all called fate.

Neither Kesari nor Anjana made that sound though, not once, through the long night in which they did not rest. Kesari had sent his message to Vishwamitra, asking him to come. Then he had sat quietly, thinking about his responsibilities. He was now ready.

The Kishkindhans gathered near the great banyan tree. All great decisions, they believed, were stored now as memories in its roots. Even whispers, it was said, became promises, because the sounds were carried downward by the tree into the bosom of the earth, and all of Kishkindha became a witness to those promises.

In the past, *gurus* of each lineage could send and receive messages across the land by merely listening to the wind in their banyan trees. Now, that was no longer reliable. There was too much idle talk and gossip everywhere.

Kesari stood up and spoke. 'Our *burnasabha* must decide on an important question today. After a very long and merciful reign with no

calamity, our Goddess has decided to test us. The *parama dharma* was breached yesterday.'

Everyone made clicking sounds.

'We must therefore act today to impose our silence upon two of Kishkindha's dear sons. The two cousins, Sugreeva and Hanuman, have not returned. We must now formally act to renounce our ties to them.'

Kesari did not mean to pause for effect, for he had already resolved to execute his duty without any remorse or delay. But something happened. It was a *purnasabha*, and no one needed to follow protocols and niceties about speaking.

'Vali did it! Vali did it!' a group of small boys unexpectedly stood up and shouted.

Waves of bodies and voices rose from left and right, from here and there. In seconds, the *sabha* was arguing riotously, without, it seemed to Kesari, making any clear point. He looked at Anjana for clarity. She too was stoic, her palms folded together, back erect, looking in no particular direction, but obviously observing everything. The anger was clearly in the boys' favour—the crowd was against Vali—but Kesari did not let the thought dwell in his mind. Here was this man-boy, barely fully grown, and he had presumed to present what really might have been a child's playful mistake as an enormous breach of dharma. It did not feel right. But it was not for him to decide. *Where was Vishwamitra?*

'Children! Children! Please!' one of the elders shouted. Then, she moved around quickly in a circle, tapping every leaping boy and girl with her hands, feet and *balance*, imposing order in chaos. Finally, when they settled, she spoke. 'Kesari, you are always clear in your duties as our king. But you should also weigh in all the obligations we have here, as mothers, aunts, fathers, uncles. We have not even seen Hanuman go through his Second Ceremony. As for Sugreeva, he has hardly seen life either.'

She had their attention now.

'And both Vali and Sugreeva are on the threshold of the Third Ceremony. I have seen them both chanting the appropriate *mantras* to the conjugal constellations in the hours before dawn. They are ready.' She turned back and addressed her sister. 'Tell them. Tell them, sister.'

'My daughters Tara and Ruma have spoken the *mantras* too. They have spoken them for the brothers,' she said.

Tara and Ruma stood up and offered a respectful *pranam* to the assembly. They did not lower their palms again. It was a gesture that was meant to be a statement. They had declared their love, and now it was their prayer that the violation be forgiven.

For a moment, Kesari nearly forgot the gravity of the fate that was looming over their lives now. The sight of the two delightful young women proclaiming their love in the assembly made him think that the Goddess had not abandoned them yet. Perhaps, just perhaps, there might be a way to soften the blow without disregarding *dharma* altogether. Perhaps Vishwamitra would appear. He had always appeared when he was needed. But the swan had not returned. There had not even been a message.

‘*Shubhamastu* ,’ Kesari said diplomatically, but sincerely. *All my good wishes to you .*

‘*Shubhamastu* ,’ echoed the elders.

Distracted by happiness, the people in the assembly once again fell into conversation between themselves. Despite having seen this many, many times, Kesari could not believe his eyes or ears. *How easily they forgot their troubles* . How tempting it was to imagine that he could really forget things too, instead of only pretending to. But perhaps that was why he was their king, and had been for so long: he could always keep his mind on trouble even before it came; a word sent out to the other chiefs in time, a personal appearance at other assemblies, a careful study and accounting of all the trees and their fruits, the moods of the river, and the approach of rainclouds. He saw trouble before anyone could, and then offered his apprehensions about it to Goddess *Saraswati*. And she always ensured that the trouble never really came.

He had spoken happy words now on an unhappy occasion. He had to continue to soften the situation. He had to at least keep the brothers and the sisters united.

‘Vali, my child,’ Kesari suddenly asked, ‘would you say the *apachara* was equally committed by Hanuman and Sugreeva?’

Vali looked pleased to be called upon, and then tried to make his voice seem less eager. He usually did not like being called a child. ‘Yes,’ he said. Then added, ‘Uncle.’ He did not like to call him ‘maharaja’, though the youngsters were often encouraged to do so.

‘They both fell, you said, as you all leaped across the ravine.’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was in the lead at that time?’

‘I was, of course,’ Vali boasted, looking at Riksharaja. She had edged forward once Vali started to speak. She looked proud of him for a second, and then her face turned down in a grim and dry expression.

‘Between Hanuman and Sugreeva, that is,’ Kesari clarified. ‘Was Hanuman ahead, or Sugreeva?’

Vali conceded this quite cordially. ‘Hanuman, of course.’ He would have been quite happy if it had been the case that Sugreeva was faster and stronger than Hanuman. But this was not the reality. For once, he was happy to admit that Hanuman was ahead of Sugreeva.

‘Hanuman was ahead. Now, I know my son, and I know he would never knowingly risk an affront to the *parama dharma*,’ Kesari began. ‘But I also know, that he is sometimes more vigorous than he understands.’ A vague suspicion gnawed at Kesari. Hanuman had not leaped or jumped in ages. Why would he suddenly do this?

‘He is a child, O Kesari,’ someone shouted. ‘How else do you expect him to be? He has not even taken his Second Ceremony!’

The chattering broke out again. There were too many stories everyone had about Hanuman.

‘Do you remember how he lifted the whole banana tree out along with her roots when you shooed him away?’ a happy elder got up and asked, much to everyone’s delight.

Kesari remembered. He was happier still that Hanuman had placed the tree back again safely, in a better place, and watered her daily for days afterwards. He realized Anjana was looking at him, as if she was remembering the same thing too. Hanuman would say he would take the fruit from that tree to Goddess Saraswati’s temple at his ceremony.

‘Aunty! Aunty!’ One of Hanuman’s smaller cousins now began to jump up and down. ‘Hanuman tied your *balance* together with Uncle once when you were sleeping and you didn’t even know it!’

The aunty concerned leaped at him with her arm raised. He ducked behind his mother. Everyone was happy again.

Even Kesari. He was hoping to gently propose a new idea, something that had not really been done before, a temporary punishment of sorts. It would take ingenuity, and authority, and ultimately Vishwamitra would have to do it. But it was an idea worth pursuing.

‘Let Kesari speak,’ Riksharaja suddenly barked. A quick and fearful order returned to the assembly.

*

Kesari exhaled slowly. His sober, weary mood returned. He had to put aside thoughts of his son for now. He thought of the Goddess and spoke. ‘I believe that my son Hanuman bears a greater responsibility for this misdeed than Riksharaja’s son Sugreeva.’

For once, there was silence.

‘Riksharaja, you are like our father and our mother. You fought like a king in the old days and you nurtured us like a queen mother in the peace that followed. You have guarded us and guided us for so long. You have lived to see your sons grow, and grow well, they have. You should not want for anything now. You should see these two sisters, and the two brothers, all together, here. You should see your grandchildren playing together, and not lose the one eye for the lack of the other.’

There were some sounds of gentle agreement.

But Riksharaja remained motionless, the same grave look on her face.

‘Your sacrifices for dharma should not go on endlessly. I think it is best for us to ask Vishwamitra *muni* to perform the necessary purification ceremony for Sugreeva and bring him home.’

Everyone looked more pleased now. Some of the children in the back started to jump and shout, ‘Hanuman! Hanuman!’

Kesari took a long breath. He made many, many decisions in his mind before he uttered his next few words, decisions that made him feel as if his stomach had an infinitely deep abyss inside it, and he would fall into it now, with no return, no hope, save for one last prayer to the Goddess to forgive him and to watch over his son. ‘As for my son, Hanuman,’ his voice now faltered. ‘I can think of no reason to test the codes of *dharma*.’

Anjana’s hand went up to cover her mouth. Her eyes closed, and her forehead knotted up in the way it often did when she prayed. Kesari wanted suddenly to hold her, lift her now, take her up and away into the skies, become substanceless, like clouds that form and unform and go wherever the winds of fate take them.

‘But Kesari...’ Riksharaja suddenly spoke.

‘Tell him, Granny,’ someone whispered, someone too young, too naïve in the ways of the world.

His mother quietened him.

Kesari folded his arms across his chest and bowed slightly. His mind raced ahead with expectation. He could anticipate what everyone was thinking. There was a chance still, that his collapse, that the infinite abyss that was tearing open his gut, would be arrested. There was a chance the eldest member of the village would out-rule him, as she had done once or twice before. But she shouldn’t. It was *dharma*. It was the way it should be.

Please do not say Hanuman should come home too. Please say it. Please do not say it.

Kesari surrendered the confusion in his mind to Goddess Saraswati. He did what was right. He could only pray now.

‘Kesari ... Maharajah ... you are kind to remember me, a woman who has been so long on this earth that sometimes I wonder if the earth herself is starting to pray to the Goddess to send me somewhere else. You are also kind to think of my sons, and my two daughters-to-be here, Ruma and Tara. But you are the king. You have been a king with your own son. Why will you not give the same honour to me?’

A slew of whispers spread through the crowd now, or as close to a whisper as chatter could get.

‘Please forgive. I know you are going to forgive Hanuman!’ Ruma spoke out, a little more loudly than the others.

Tara hushed her. She knew what Vali’s mother could do. She had to protect her little sister.

But that comment led to a general mood of relief now. It was a nice Kishkindhan way of taking care of each other. Usually, it was on small matters, and not a *parama dharma* violation. But all the same, this would make for a happy resolution. Kesari pardons Sugreeva, and Riksharaja forgives Hanuman. All would be well.

‘Will you not give me the honour of sacrificing my son for *dharma* too?’ Riksharaja asked.

The ice in her voice cut through the moment’s optimism with a terrible finality.

In her heart, Anjana knew. But she would not say it, maybe never, maybe someday, if Kesari pressed her to it, perhaps only then.

Riksharaja was unlike any Kishkindhan she had known. She was ruthless, and she would not be upstaged.

‘Sugreeva must be banished too, O King,’ Riksharaja declared, with that gesture, that hand sweeping upwards and sideways, a fierce gesture of a much-feared monarch.

She will abandon one son just so she can watch the other one rule.

She will let many suffer so just one can rejoice.

She can ease the pain of others so easily now, and yet she will not.

She can grant her own self so much pain, just so she can see others go through it too.

Anjana felt sorry for Sugreeva, and for Ruma too. She could see Ruma now bury her face in Tara’s shoulders.

Just then, Anjana saw the swan at the edge of the forest. It was back from Vishwamitra’s hermitage. Anjana withdrew discreetly, letting Riksharaja eat her audience alive, declaiming powerfully on *dharma*, sacrifice, and kingship.

She went through the branches and raised herself up until the swan saw her. ‘Is he coming?’ she asked frantically.

The swan spoke softly, and mostly incoherently, but enough for Anjana to understand.

Vishwamitra was gone. Even his pupils did not know where. *Despair, much despair, reigns at the gurukulam.*

An Unexpected Reunion



The Uttara returned with company. From a distance, Hanuman could see that he was bringing what seemed like his whole village with him. A squirming mass of many, many bobbing heads, some in the water, and some running along the water's edge, was moving quickly towards them.

But one head seemed bigger, much bigger.

'Sugreeva, look there,' Hanuman said, unable to believe his eyes.

'Do you think that is the chief of the Uttaras? He seems much bigger than them,' Sugreeva replied matter-of-factly.

'No, no,' Hanuman said, a faint smile appearing on his face now. 'Do you see the white hair, and the beard, and that funny, purposeful walk? Who else can it be?'

Hanuman raised his hand to wave. Then, he stopped, as if suddenly unsure of himself. His *balance* knocked Sugreeva's face, and rather than move away, Sugreeva now reluctantly decided to stand up too.

'It is !' Hanuman yelled, and jumped like a hungry child on a banana tree.

It was Vishwamitra.

The pack of Uttaras scattered into the water as Hanuman and Sugreeva ran up and embraced Vishwamitra. 'Children! My dear children!' he shouted, running his soft palms over their heads and their cheeks. 'What on earth brought you here, so far from home?'

'Praise be to Goddess Saraswati,' Hanuman said calmly. Then, he buried his face in the Rishi's warm and furry chest.

'Jai Mata Saraswati,' Sugreeva agreed, a little more sadly now. He tried to step back from Vishwamitra's embrace and show him his wounds. 'Apacha —' he began, but Vishwamitra caught his head and pulled him close too.

'Jai Mata Saraswati,' he shouted, and laughed uproariously.

The Uttaras, who had until then been busy arguing amongst themselves whether Vishwamitra was happy to see the two young men or not, now found reason to celebrate with complete abandon. 'Uttara!' they squeaked, and leaped into the water again, right on the heads of other Uttaras still trying to climb out. They swam circles, and they whipped up furious drumbeats of froth on the surface with their *balances*.

Their chief though, stood by Vishwamitra's side, glaring at all of them until they finally got the message. One by one the Uttaras came out of the water under his hot stare, controlling the temptation to shake themselves vigorously, and settling into a slow drip-dry instead.

'This is a happy day,' Vishwamitra said, turning to the Uttara king with a kind smile.

*

After they had feasted on a heap of mangoes that the Uttaras had brought, Vishwamitra finally found himself alone with Hanuman and Sugreeva. The late afternoon sun stretched the shadows into long lines on the ground. The sticky remains of the mangoes caught the attention of a couple of flies, and made Sugreeva's rest even more difficult.

Finally, with a sigh, he got up and walked down to the water's edge to cleanse himself.

Vishwamitra laughed softly. 'Cleanliness. There is no way around it, Hanuman.'

Hanuman sensed correctly that the topic had not been casually raised. Vishwamitra had obviously seen Sugreeva's injuries, and got some sense of

what had happened.

‘What is the path for us to go home now, O Rishi’ Hanuman asked. ‘Is there some way to cleanse us of the sin of *parama dharma apachara* now? Even the Naraka Raja seemed inclined to let us go. Why would my father, the kind and just Kesari, refuse us entry home? That is what Sugreeva seems to think anyway.’

‘I meant a different sort of cleanliness, little Hanuman, but since you have asked, I will try to answer.’ Vishwamitra’s eyebrows seemed to close in on his eyes now. A seed fell from the branches of the shady tree above them and got caught in his white beard. He picked it up and put it down carefully beside him. He was never not alert.

‘The *parama dharma* is what keeps Kishkindha peaceful,’ Vishwamitra began. ‘It was Goddess Saraswati’s first and oldest law of civilization. In the old days, when much of the world was covered with fire, they say the Goddess herself appeared in the form of a river, and she cooled the fire down slowly, into steam, into water, into earth, and then, into our ancestors, Shiva and Vishnu. Then, from them, came all the creatures of the world. The trees, the fishes, everyone, Hanuman and Sugreeva included.’

Vishwamitra gestured to Sugreeva who had returned from the river to sit down beside them, and then continued.

‘The Goddess, in short, brought order to Her creation. She showed every creature how to live, what to eat, how much to eat, and how to go on in a way that would bring them happiness and—this is where the *parama dharma* comes in—to pursue happiness in a way that would do the least harm.’

‘We harm no one, O Rishi,’ Sugreeva said, almost in complaint.

‘That is true, Sugreeva, and now you have only harmed yourself with your misadventure. We do not know yet what the consequences of that will be on others. Usually, it is not good. But you won the Jatayus’ grace, and let us hope that your elders back in Kishkindhanagara too will show you the same grace.’

‘If what we did is not really harmful, then why this punishment?’ Hanuman asked.

‘The rule was really meant at first to make sure that none of Mata Saraswati’s creations would turn on each other. You must remember that the Goddess witnessed what few of us have. She was there, at first, when there was nothing, and great Energy came out of that nothing, becoming stars,

sun, moon, the world. She tamed that Energy, but we are talking about the fires of existence itself. Their nature is beyond our understanding. From time to time, they come out of the Goddess's bosom, and shake up the earth.'

'The mountain of Naraka, is that it?' Hanuman asked.

'Yes. That is one of the places where the world began, and the world begs to end itself too. But each day the Goddess prevails; "No, not yet," she tells the fire without reason, "my children are still young, and learning their prayers and the names of their mothers and fathers and relatives, and finding their faces in the water, and their laughter among friends." Each day, the fire retreats.'

'Just one day ago, I would not have understood what you are saying, O Guru,' chuckled Sugreeva, 'but after nearly being tasted by the fires this morning, I know not to trod heavily on this ground ever again lest I wake something up.'

'I am sure you will not, young prince, you will not,' Vishwamitra assured him. 'I too felt at times long ago that the Goddess might not prevail, that the fires within the earth will rise, for they used to say that when the fire mountain in the Eastern sea speaks, all our world will end. But we are here, for the Goddess does prevail, every day, and has done so for the hundreds of seasons that have passed since our *loka* began.'

Vishwamitra fell silent. His expression seemed to lag behind the optimism of his words.

'But...' he said, at last, 'but there are other ways in which the fire appears too. It appears in the lives of the earth's creatures, in their words, their actions, in their thoughts and desires. Sometimes, it finds its containment in Goddess Saraswati's grace, in wisdom, and it becomes something good. Sometimes, it does not. It explodes. It engulfs. It destroys and leaves great sorrow in its wake.'

'Anger is that fire,' Sugreeva declared. He had heard it said, obviously.

'What is anger?' asked Hanuman.

Vishwamitra looked peacefully at him as if it was not worth answering that question.

'It must be like fear, then,' Hanuman surmised, 'that is what Naraka Raja said.'

'Anger and fear are not good, children. These must be avoided. Without a way to keep them in check, they grow to devour everything. So the Goddess

taught the sages, a long, long time ago, that there was a way to keep everything in order, in *dharma*. It was to know exactly how much force to use upon others, and for what purpose. She knew that children will play, and sometimes fight, and so will their parents. But what she did was brilliant. She forbade the spilling of blood. That was it. The integrity of her creations would not ever be violated. Not a drop of blood would be shed recklessly in Kishkindha.'

'But what about the Jatayus? The terrible screams...' Sugreeva began.

'The Jatayus are necessary. They, like the Mosalis, are races that carry the fire in them. They are fierce creatures. But they too keep to the laws of *dharma*. That is what pleases Goddess Saraswati. For the most part, they only take the matter that is left behind after life returns the waters of the Goddess to the sky, from where it came. But their presence, and I do not like to say this, but their reputation, has a very strong effect on keeping the *dharma* among all the other creatures.'

'But why do they come? Is the rule of our kings not enough?' Hanuman asked.

'Wise Hanuman, you think of your father Kesari, and you are correct. The rule by the wise does more than anything else to sustain *dharma*. But there is another reason why the Jatayus are necessary to the sustenance of *dharma*.'

'They are not our rulers. But, you say, they are not necessarily our tormentors. They can easily destroy our lives, but they don't. They follow *dharma*. I understand. But...'

'Cleanliness,' Vishwamitra said, brightly.

'Forgive my rudeness, O Rishi, but the Jatayus—' Sugreeva began.

'Not them, Sugreeva, but the entirety of Kishkindha itself. Can you imagine what would happen if the matter was left everywhere, among the living, as the imprint of Goddess Saraswati's order left it? It does happen, you know, for it is the nature of matter, of energy, of everything. Life goes away, only matter and decay remain. But if we saw this around us all the time, it would make living impossible. People would lose hope. Worse, the life-shadows that travel through the air, which no one can see, the forces that leap from one ill person to another, they would rise from the world of the dying and devour the lives of all creatures as well.'

'The life-shadows that we don't see... you mean like how when we sneeze, and then everyone sneezes for a few days in the rainy season,'

Sugreeva offered tentatively.

‘Yes,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘There are many things in Goddess Saraswati’s creation that we cannot see, but they can be more powerful than the largest of creatures. Some of them make us sneeze, some of them can do far worse to us.’

‘Are those all the reasons, O Rishi,’ Hanuman asked clearly now, ‘or is there more that we should consider?’

The eyebrows churned over his eyes again. Vishwamitra spoke in a slightly different voice now, a rough, wet, old man’s voice. ‘We keep the peace by staving off the taste of blood in the living. What the Naraka loka creatures do, and there are more than just the Jatayus as you might imagine, is something that others could decide to do too. The fire in us changes us, young princes, when it is fed with the magic of blood. It breaks out of the Goddess, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. We have no power to make it go back in again. Once we consume blood, the fire in it takes over our will, the blood eats more blood, through us, and then it devours us from within too.’

Sugreeva rubbed his wound embarrassedly. He remembered how it had smelled. He remembered how the Jatayus had smelled.

‘Are these things that might happen, or have they happened before?’ Hanuman asked.

‘It happened before, Hanuman, it really did happen. The Goddess had no real way of ensuring that only harmless, gentle creatures would come about in her creation. There was a time, well before even my father’s, when many creatures with fire walked this world. They had no sense of *parama dharma*, no connection at all with the cool waters that could have tamed their fire. They destroyed whole villages, left trails of savagery wherever they went, and none could stop them, for they were mighty, powerful giants, covered in skin of solid rock.’

‘Bigger than the Jatayus?’

‘They say the Jatayus are the last of their kind.’

‘What happened to the rest of them?’

‘They began to disappear. We do not know how it happened. They say that the Goddess herself appeared on earth, in many forms and guises, carrying all kinds of magical powers. The gentler creatures of Kishkindha asserted themselves; the Matsya Rajas, the Kings of the Fish, heaved whole islands out of harm’s way as the Goddess sent mountainous waves to wipe

out the homes of the tyrants. And the last of the remaining blood-drinking giant lizards were defeated by Riksharaja and her army, long before you were born. Finally, order returned. The fire was contained. It was one of the greatest triumphs in all of history. Kishkindha learned to live in the *parama dharma* .’

The shadows had melted into darkness by then. The three of them were hardly visible to each other now. An eerie silence filled the air.

Hanuman breathed once and began to chant his evening prayers softly.

He remembered what he had heard at Naraka, and the pitiable state Sugreeva had been in too. It was so easy to fall, to break open. How many times he had bruised himself before. It was perhaps just his sheer good fortune that he had never really spilled his blood on the earth.

What did it mean? What did it mean to actually draw one’s blood out, to hit, to tear, to rip? Is that what the Goddess’s creatures had once done to each other? Was there no law of kindness among them? Was such brazen destructiveness even possible between living creatures? After all, that was what the Jatayus were doing, even now.

What would stop them from doing it to him? Or to his parents?

Hanuman suddenly realized his palms were hurting. He had clenched his fists so hard the nails were digging into them.

The Jatayus did not harm him. They did not harm his people. They did not breach dharma.

That reassured him.

Yet, they might, and then, if they tried, he would answer them. He could do it.

His hands hurt again. He understood, suddenly, what Vishwamitra had been saying. The fire was within everyone. It was much easier to take it out than to put it back in again.

He breathed slowly to defuse his rage, and thought of the evening prayer in his mother’s voice. He had been so happy seeing Vishwamitra he had not even discussed the possibility of returning to Kishkindhanagara.

Perhaps that wouldn’t be difficult anymore.

Vishwamitra's Secret



The next morning, Hanuman stood in the water and solemnly led the Uttaras in their prayers. Vishwamitra was occupied with his own complex ceremony somewhere downstream, and did not look like he would leave the boulder he was sitting on any time soon. The Uttara Raja, though, took everything Hanuman did seriously, and Hanuman, for his part, tried to show to them all the dignity and elegance he associated with the traditions of the Kishkindhanagara *parampara* .

But then, they were Uttaras too.

As if on cue for mischief, a group of young Uttaras climbed suddenly on to Hanuman's *balance* with the intention of pulling it down into the water. The Uttara Raja froze in horror at the affront to his honoured guest. His teeth flashed, and he paused, as if unsure whether to come down on the children, their mothers, or anyone else available to absorb his anger at that moment.

But now, he had to run.

Hanuman had whirled around with a roar of a laugh, shooting Uttaras, water, and foam like a racing flood towards, even if unintentionally, the Uttara Raja's face!

'Jai Mata Saraswati!' he shouted, whipping up a series of waves with his *balance* in all directions now.

‘Uttara! Uttara!’ the tiny bodies shouted, bobbing up and down the river.

Hanuman laughed, and splashed the water with both his arms now.

Then, through the mist and spray, he saw Sugreeva shuffle up slowly to the water’s edge and sit down on a boulder.

‘Children. They are so innocent, no? Hanuman?’ he said, with a long face and sorrowful voice.

Hanuman wondered for a moment whether to grab Sugreeva’s legs with his *balance* and tug him into the water and out of his bad mood. He used to be especially good at doing that when they were small. He smiled to himself at the memory, but decided not to. Sugreeva had been through enough.

Hanuman pushed the remaining Uttara children clinging to him gently back into the water and stepped out, dripping, onto the boulder. ‘Come, my friend,’ he urged Sugreeva, ‘now that prayers are done, we can have some of the golden fruit.’

Sugreeva languidly picked up one of the mangoes that lay beside them, stared at it, and passed it on to Hanuman.

‘Praise the Goddess, that looks good,’ Hanuman declared.

Sugreeva smiled weakly.

Hanuman consumed the mango in three bites. ‘Do not worry, Sugreeva,’ he began in a calm voice, ‘I am sure the Rishi is planning a solution for our problem as we speak. See, your wounds are healing already. In another day, it will not look like there was an *apachara*. We will go home. The village will see reason.’

‘O Hanuman, I do want to believe you. I do want to go home.’

‘Your brother will be delighted to see you. And your mother too,’ Hanuman said.

‘Ruma,’ Sugreeva whispered. ‘It is Ruma that I wish I could see most.’

*

A bird took off from Vishwamitra’s boulder and flew south along the river. He got up slowly, and raised his right palm towards it as a blessing. The Goddess had been kind. The bird he had managed to call down was a *panchavaakshini*, capable of five sounds, three more than most other messenger birds. On a delicate matter like this, with so many young lives

looking up to him for guidance, it was best to have a messenger who could go beyond simple yes or no messages.

Vishwamitra knew how the politics of the village worked. There was no way that Riksharaja would let the matter rest and welcome the boys back. In another situation, had he been there, then, perhaps, that is what might have happened. After all, in his many years, Vishwamitra had performed discreet cover-ups on such *apacharas* numerous times. He did not want to state this fact openly before Sugreeva and Hanuman, just as he never let his younger pupils at the ashram catch on either. For the young, and for different reasons, for the very old, it was best to sustain the belief that tradition was inviolable. For everyone in between and busy facing life's situations head-on, there could be a little more flexibility. Truth, after all, was like water. It stayed true only because it could bend.

But then, there were also some things that could not be bent. Or broken. The *parama dharma* was about that, ultimately. A body could not be violated, a life could not be taken by another.

And yet...

Vishwamitra felt the fury rise again, like a black cloud on his brow. Who in Kishkindha was brazen enough to defy that? And why did even Naraka Raja, the king of intelligence, the witness of secrets, not know?

Vishwamitra stumbled and would have fallen in a quite undignified manner on his back but for a quick reflex move. He did lose some breath, and heaved a sigh of relief. He had not stumbled like this in a very long time. He knew instantly it had nothing to do with either friction or gravity. He had been indecisive, letting his thoughts distract him as he rose. A part of him was looking down the river, the direction home, a mere few days away if he were to take the children back to the rock city and deal with the politics and superstitions that would ensue. Another part of him could not afford such a distraction from the mystery that lay in the other direction, the direction he had been steadily pursuing with questions and worries, and no answers in sight.

Should he take the boys back?

Or should he take them onward, to the north, into whatever danger might be lurking?

No, it seemed too strange a thought. Kesari, perhaps, or Riksharaja in the really old days. But not the boys.

*

Hanuman rose and offered a sincere *pranamam* to Vishwamitra as he approached.

‘May you live long,’ Vishwamitra said, smiling fully now, as if the sight of Hanuman was enough to make his dilemmas resolve themselves. ‘And where is Cousin Sugreeva?’

Hanuman bowed slightly, as if the matter at hand demanded both reverence and a lack of it. ‘Sugreeva? My cousin? He wanders. Up this way, and then that way, and then back down this way.’ He gestured, somewhat indifferently for a perceptive young man rarely indifferent to things.

‘Why are you speaking in riddles, Hanuman?’ Vishwamitra asked, bemused by this sudden tone in Hanuman’s voice. But then the answer was obvious. Sugreeva was walking towards them from a distance with a forlorn look on his face. His body approached them, and yet his eyes did not show a flicker of acknowledgment. He needed rest, it was obvious. His forearms looked as if they had no strength in them, and sagged by his side pathetically.

‘This is more than homesickness,’ Vishwamitra said at last.

‘This despair is for the maiden Ruma,’ Hanuman noted, quietly, his palm covering his mouth respectfully as he spoke.

Vishwamitra looked surprised, and suddenly raised his fingers, as if to count. He mumbled a series of names, some of which Hanuman recognized as the names of stars and others as names of distant relatives. Then he made a funny sound with his mouth, and shook his head in the manner that meant agreement, and not just individual agreement, but an agreement consistent with *dharma*.

‘Good, good,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘Ruma and Sugreeva. This would be a fine match for the Third Ceremony. Let us wait for the bird and see what happens.’

*

The day grew increasingly hot. Sugreeva now looked like a shrivelled version of his old self.

‘Is Sugreeva not well?’ Hanuman finally asked Vishwamitra.

Vishwamitra laughed. ‘He is in something the poets call love.’

Hanuman considered everything before he spoke. 'I would rather not know this, this love,' he said.

Vishwamitra wanted to smile. But he remembered how these could be more than a little boy's big words, a little boy not even done with his Second Ceremony which marked the transition to adulthood. He remembered how he himself had said the same thing too as a child, and meant them, and failed to live up to them, and in the end, grew to live with that failure, that fire that did not fully cool, ever.

'The rains will be here soon,' Vishwamitra suddenly said, as if he had had enough of his own thoughts. 'This boy should be placed back in his home before that.'

'He is quite sure that we will not be forgiven, O Rishi,' Hanuman said. 'Is it really true that we shall not be allowed to cross the river? That all our relatives will turn their backs on us? That my father himself will have to chase us away if we try to enter?'

Vishwamitra sighed. He had hoped to have a solution to the problem rather than a conversation about it. But Hanuman, in his youth and innocence, could perhaps see things he was failing to notice now.

'That is indeed the law, child. I will not give us false hopes about that,' Vishwamitra said slowly. 'But there is something far more serious facing Kishkindha than the silly *aatapaaatahutshut* of how to enforce *dharma* over a child's accident.'

For the first time since their adventure began, Hanuman felt concerned. 'What is it?' he asked.

Vishwamitra looked at Hanuman as if he was seeing something more than just a boy in him, as if he was sizing up what Hanuman would be with the passing of the seasons. 'Come with me,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'And do not bother Sugreeva now. He must rest.'

He led Hanuman past the curve of the river and some trees, and into the shade of a small clump of thorny creepers. He pushed aside a few stones to reveal a stack of dried banana leaves tied together with vine. The wind blew the branches around them, and raised some dust.

A strange, dry and indifferent feeling hung in the air. Hanuman felt heavy, and thirsty. For some reason, he thought of Naraka, and the hot winds that had scorched their backs as they had fled. He had heard the volcano faintly again in the morning, but the river had made him feel safe.

‘We must be quiet, because the Uttaras are very, very curious,’ Vishwamitra said in a low voice. ‘They don’t come this far, but one never knows.’

Hanuman observed Vishwamitra’s hands as he carefully opened the package.

‘There,’ he said.

‘White stones?’ Hanuman asked. He knew that coloured stones could be precious, possessing strange properties that *rishis* and medicine-using elders like Riksharaja coveted, but these seemed dull.

‘Have you seen objects like these anywhere?’ Vishwamitra asked, as he had asked many people, of many races, and in many languages, since his journey from his warm and safe ashram in the south began.

Hanuman considered them carefully. They did not look like the soft and round pebbles with a yellowish glow that he had seen near home, in the river. Those riverbed stones looked almost like fruit; that was how skin looked in clear water: bright, brown, and alive.

But not these, they did not look familiar at all.

A dull sensation of pain seemed to reappear in Hanuman’s foot. He quickly picked up one of the stones and felt it with his sole. ‘Naraka,’ he said, decisively. ‘These were under our feet on the mountain.’ He rubbed the stone on the soil to symbolically remove the contact with his feet before handing it back to Vishwamitra. ‘Do these cause pain?’ he asked.

Vishwamitra made a sad sound. He then leaned over and took Hanuman’s hand in his. Slowly, he helped Hanuman feel the back of his neck and down towards his collarbone.

‘This stone, it’s someone’s neck. Or a part of it,’ Hanuman said with fascination. ‘But where is the owner? How did he spit it out?’

‘Hanuman, you and your cousin have been worrying about a *parama dharma apachara* ? THIS is a *parama dharma apachara* !’

‘Goddess Saraswati!’ Hanuman said softly as he imagined what its owner must have gone through. He remembered the screams that he and Sugreeva had heard in Naraka, the terrible, blood-curdling shrieks of pain, more alive than any sounds he had heard his whole life, and more sorrowful too. ‘Are these from Naraka?’

‘If they were, then I would not be here today, Hanuman. I would have been home too, teaching the Second Ceremony prayers to you. But I have

found too many of these and not even one answer for why these have been washing down the sacred river for several seasons now.'

'How many?'

'Thirteen large ones, and thirty-three smaller ones. And once, just once, something with the flesh still on it, covered in wriggling worms.'

Hanuman calmly slapped his cheeks in expiation.

'And before you ask if these were dropped carelessly by the Jatayus, look at this one,' said Vishwamitra, and picked up another bone to show Hanuman. 'Look at this crack in the bone.'

'*Apachara* ,' Hanuman said softly.

'This was made with intent, with very determined intent,' Vishwamitra said ominously. 'Who or what did it? What creature beyond *dharma* could strike so many blows? And why?'

Hanuman took a deep breath and controlled himself. His *balance* seemed to be alert of its own accord.

Vishwamitra tried to compose himself. 'These are harsh things to speak of, child. But when I speak to you, I feel as if I am speaking to my friend Kesari.'

'My father would not let this happen, O Rishi. He would not,' Hanuman said.

Vishwamitra smiled. 'We might still get to the bottom of it, Hanuman. The valiant Kesari has many friends up and down Kishkindha, as you no doubt discovered during your encounter with Naraka Raja. *Dharma* is still strong. I fear, though, that something is brewing far to the north, in the high kingdoms of cold and snow.'

'What exactly is its nature?' Hanuman asked.

'It is enormous, Hanuman, enormous. If my fears prove true, then Kishkindha faces an existential danger of a kind no one can possibly imagine.'

12

Outcast



The *panchavaakshini* returned to the river of the Uttaras the next day.

‘Vali, the king of Kishkindhanagara sends the following message,’ Vishwamitra passed on the bird’s message to Hanuman and Sugreeva. ‘Prince Sugreeva is pardoned. He must return.’

For the first time in nearly a day, Sugreeva looked alert. ‘We can go home? We are pardoned?’ he said eagerly.

Hanuman stayed silent. He looked at the bird intently. He could tell that the bird had not seen his father or mother in the rock city. There was a way the creatures of Kishkindha looked when they figured out relationships, noted who was whose offspring, and who was whose cousin how many times removed. It was a pleasure that they indulged in, and it was of course instituted into nothing less than a science in their studies after the Second Ceremony. But now, there was no flicker of recognition in the *panchavaakshini*’s eyes, no typical turn of the neck to put things together in its mind.

Vishwamitra understood what Hanuman was trying to do. It was not easy having extended conversations with the bird, even an articulate one. She probably wanted to rejoin her family now too.

‘It is as I had expected,’ he said to Hanuman softly, and with not too much cheer.

Sugreeva suddenly realized why he was the only one celebrating. 'Oh,' he said, and lowered his *balance* .

'My parents are perhaps no longer in Kishkindhanagara,' Hanuman said at last.

'Kesari is a just ruler,' Vishwamitra said. 'He must have proclaimed your exile as was expected. After that, there would be nothing more for him there. He has handed over the kingdom to Vali, as was always expected, and left with your mother.'

Sugreeva brought his hands together and looked slightly worried now. He felt happy for his brother, and even more so for his mother; and he could almost see Ruma and Tara smiling as elders showered heaps of flowers on them at their wedding ceremony. But he did not like what Hanuman was facing right now. 'Kesari Uncle is most generous to make my older brother the king. But I do not understand what is going on.'

'Hanuman, your parents, if I know them well, and I do,' Vishwamitra said almost in a whisper, 'must have left on the Great Walk.'

'But it is too soon,' Sugreeva protested.

Hanuman slowly brought his palms together in a *pranam* and closed his eyes. Those words seemed to drift away from him, just as how the world looked when he gazed into a ravine. *What did it mean? What did it mean to say you would not see your parents again? Was it possible? Could you separate your limbs from your body? Or your being from your existence?*

Hanuman had no answers. He opened his eyes and looked into Vishwamitra's, just once. This was his father now.

'Jai Mata Saraswati,' Hanuman said softly, and turned, and ran furiously up the bank and towards a distant clump of trees where he could be out of sight.

Vishwamitra raised his hand helplessly, his mouth opening on its own accord in awe. *Those are not eyes that I just saw, but wells , he thought. Wells into which I am going to fall, because I see something in them that I do not see anywhere else. I see hope for Kishkindha in them. I see all of Kishkindha in them. They hold all the sorrow of existence, its ultimate pointlessness, and yet make peace with them, a peace with strength. This boy is not ordinary. And now he and I are bound together, the outcaste and the unwitting guru .*

Hanuman kept running, perhaps faster than he had ever run before. A cloud of dust rose in his wake. Like a brown dot in a whirl of dust, he

entered the green cloud on the horizon, shaking leaves as he climbed onto a solitary perch isolated enough for the magnitude of his sorrow.

Later, many years later, the Uttaras would say that a string of precious stones had formed where his tears had rained on the ground. They would say that the great circle inscribed by Hanuman's tears would give them sanctuary, just as they had given it to him once. They would need it.

*

After a modest mid-day meal of fruit and some nuts, Vishwamitra bade farewell to the Uttara king and resumed his journey north, with Hanuman by his side. Vishwamitra and Hanuman had urged Sugreeva to follow the river south and go home.

But Sugreeva could not decide what to do. He had sat despondently on the shore the whole morning, paralyzed between temptation and something new altogether, the necessity of new ways of making his own sense of dharma.

If he went back, could he persuade Vali that it was all his fault, and that if he was pardoned, then so should Hanuman?

Could he convince their mother, perhaps, to speak to Vali?

Or would they silence him, as they often did? Would he have the courage to speak up? Would Ruma and he ever find peace with the thought of that humiliation, that desertion of dharma towards Hanuman, his friend and cousin?

Helpless and frustrated, Sugreeva picked up a stone and threw it into a shallow pool by the river. He felt slightly better about himself because his aim was accurate, and because he did not hit the frog family sunning itself at the edge.

They leaped into the water anyway, their accusing eyes staring back at him.

He looked at his wounds, and the cause of all this pain. Vishwamitra had given him some leaf pastes, and they had healed well. It was unlikely they would attract the attentions of the Mosalis or Jatayus again. He could just follow the water's edge, and walk, dawn to dusk. On the seventh morning, he would see the peaks of Rishyamukha Peak, and then, home.

His mother would smile at him with that look of disdainful triumph she showed when she had had her way. Vali would pick him up and then let his

right hand drop to his side, just to show that he could do it with one hand, that was how strong he was. He would share his finest fruits and flowers with him. He and Ruma would lack nothing. Vali and Tara would dote on them, as if they were their own children. In time, their children would come too. Riksharaja would be pleased. She would summon chiefs from all directions and altitudes, and have a grand feast and ceremony. They would sing the praises of the Goddess, and delight forever in the gardens of Kishkindha.

And yet not one thing, not one joy in the world, would be real without Hanuman.

Sugreeva picked up another stone and clenched it hard. He raised it to his forehead, and remembered the words Vishwamitra had said by way of farewell. It was not about fate, as too many Kishkindhans clucked their tongues sadly about, but about destiny, about living up to dharma as it changed, danced, and most of all as it stood ready to be devoured by adharma. And adharma was here. In his mother, in his brother, in whatever was happening.

The river went both ways, Kishkindhanagara and home, where adharma had raised its head, and upriver, to the mountains, where Hanuman and Vishwamitra were going, for dharma, in dharma.

‘Mother River,’ Sugreeva whispered to the waters, ‘I shall return to you this stone I have taken from your lap when I reach wherever it is that you wish me to be.’

With these words, and the tiniest thought of farewell to his Ruma and his home, Sugreeva turned north and ran furiously towards Hanuman and Vishwamitra.

Old and New Kings



Riksharaja sat on the flower-bedecked throne and stroked Tara's head with something like affection, but it wasn't quite that. To Ruma, it seemed like the old empress was polishing a trophy. She had reason to gloat. Vali had revived a ceremony that had not been observed in many generations. It was going to be a special day.

All morning, prayers and festivities had filled the valleys of the rock city with their sounds and smells. Chiefs from neighbouring hills had come to offer their salutations to Vali and Riksharaja.

The mood in Kishkindhanagara was uncertain, though ten days had passed since Kesari and Anjana left for the Great Walk. The expression, 'This festival is like a husk without a fruit' had been whispered more than once, though never anywhere close to Vali or Riksharaja. Others preferred the expression, 'This is all like a temple to the Goddess with everything in it but the Goddess'. They missed their king and his family.

After the ceremonies concluded, and the various horns and drums were sounded off ritually by one of Vishwamitra's once-despondent disciples now elevated beyond his dreams by her patronage, Riksharaja called Vali to her side with a flick of her finger.

He obeyed instantly, and that pleased Riksharaja. She smiled, leaned over, and waved her hands over his head and pressed it to her temples. Not

one spot of envy dare befall him.

She sized up the audience carefully, noting the clans that had come, how low the chiefs bowed, how much they smiled, where they sat now, every detail that a proficient empire-builder would have to notice. Kesari had been a much respected king, and Vali would not easily fill his place in the esteem of the people. Hanuman, had he been older, and had he still been here, would have easily been the popular choice. She knew that. And she knew she was right to have made sure she did something about it.

The prayers were over, and now it was time for a show few had watched in their lifetime. Riksharaja knew that a spectacle could achieve what a lack of charisma couldn't.

She stood up slowly, with Ruma and Tara supporting her arms. A polite ripple of applause broke out from the chiefs and the people below.

'My dear children,' she announced, 'you have honoured me a great deal today. Of course, I would have been even more content had everyone been here with us now. But the best we can do is to continue the good work of my dear Kesari and strengthen the hands of our prince, I mean, king, Vali.'

A loud roar erupted from the perimeter. All the boys with loud voices had been placed exactly where their words would carry well.

'His hands have the strength of elephants! His thighs have the power of their fathers! Long live Vali!' they yelled.

With a roar, a group of well-oiled, gleaming, muscular youth leapt out from behind the boulders that surrounded the audience. Each one carried a young uprooted palm tree, smeared in red, orange, and purple. Chains of shells had been tied to the leaves, and they made a wild, clanking sound as the wind rushed through them.

The young men then proceeded to run down the length of Kishkindhanagara's pathways, shouting and celebrating, their great tree-batons swaying dangerously behind them. The crowds had to push back to avoid being hit by the trees. Here and there, elderly grandmothers and fathers scowled and thumped their hands at their neighbours in futile annoyance as the people in front pushed back onto them.

But the children could not stop themselves from enjoying it. This is exactly what they wanted, not to wait for the lone and rare tree to fall, but to simply pull one down whenever they pleased and to run with it. They screamed, chattered, laughed, tried to slap the trailing leaves, and make as much of an uproar as they could.

Suddenly, they heard more shouts. Another youth had climbed atop a boulder jutting out from a cliff-face above them, while another climbed one exactly in front of him across the valley. The crowd below them looked up in wonder at what they would do.

‘Jai Vali!’ they shouted in unison, and began to hurl coconuts in great, soaring arcs over the heads of the people below. Every pair of coconuts smashed into one another, spilling their contents over everyone’s heads below.

Riksharaja laughed in delight. Dozens of children, parents, elders, scrambled and pushed over each other to gather up the pieces. It was good to see them enjoying themselves.

At last, all of Vali’s skilled performers lined up before his mother. She raised her hand majestically, and encouraged the crowd to clap for them.

‘Now, for the wrestling,’ she declared, gesturing to Vali.

Her son clapped and waved to another group sitting in the back. They walked slowly and heavily up towards a raised area to the front, where the prayers and ceremonies had been held. The new priest and his assistants quickly moved their offerings away, as another group rushed in carrying dried banana leaves heaped with soft river sand.

The wrestlers stood in the arena and bowed low. An awed silence descended on the audience. Kishkindhans wrestled, and on occasion, Kesari himself could still do it. But there had not been such ceremony about it in a long time.

Vali offered his salutations to his mother, and then, with a glance at Tara, proceeded to remove his garlands in preparation for the fight.

‘Remember,’ Riksharaja whispered to him, ‘do not break anyone. This *apachara* talk is still on everyone’s tongues.’

Vali smiled and nodded. He had not broken anyone recently, except once, long ago, and the Rishi Vishwamitra had fixed it up, without any *apachara* consequences at all. It was a mistake. And Vishwamitra was forgiving.

‘Roar, my son,’ Riksharaja shouted in unabashed pride. She noted that the attendants had brought dark sand, as she had insisted, just in case there were mistakes and blood was spilled. It would be less obvious.

Vali raised his hands and walked mightily down to the sand pit.

Only Tara noticed the tears in Ruma’s eyes even amidst all the dust and confusion. The trees had been growing on their father’s hill from the time

they were children. There was no explicit *parama dharma* for trees, but there had been no need for one, until now at least.

*

Far away from the madness of the city, Kesari and Anjana began one more day with the knowledge that it might be their last. They might see Hanuman, and they might say their farewells, or they might not. Nothing was written in stone now.

‘The Goddess still wants us here, I suppose,’ Kesari said calmly as he woke up. They were exactly where they had chosen to sleep in the night. The great tree under which they had slept seemed to talk to them now, all alive and awake and green in the morning sun. And it seemed as excited as him to see that she was still there too, the woman who was his great love, the woman who wrestled her son back to the world of *prana* even as he was born without breath.

Anjana woke up too, and then looked Kesari up and down anxiously. ‘Jai Mata Saraswati,’ she said, and stretched and shook herself into action.

That gesture made Kesari forget some of the heaviness he carried around on him, even now, even after feeling some of it slip away like a stone from his hand a few days earlier, as the ceremonial waters transferring the throne flowed from his palm to Vali’s.

‘My flesh must not be to the Jatayus’ liking then,’ he joked.

Anjana fixed him with a sharp look, and a half-smile appeared on her face. ‘Yes. You must be beyond the jaws of Jatayus, and Mosalis, and whatever else must have come and gone away in the night.’

‘I am still the mighty, undefeated Kesari,’ he boasted, slapping his thigh and shaking his *balance*. Without the flowers, and the shells, and the eight kinds of ointments that the king had to adorn himself with each morning to signify his royalty to all creatures, Kesari seemed small again, the little, youthful boy for whom Anjana had announced the Third Ceremony prayer, a long time ago, when he was still a prince, and when Riksharaja still had a sense of humour, despite being queen.

But Kesari’s boast was not the same. It was the way he had laughed. It was not regret, not for his decision to walk away from his throne, and his home, not in the least. But it had the same quality to it as the ubiquitous Kishkindhan click of fate.

The temptation to say it was on their minds. *Where was Hanuman? How was he?*

Anjana closed her eyes and stood still with her hands together in prayer. She began her chant and then slowly started to turn, around and around, left to right, until it seemed that every direction and every corner of Kishkindha had felt the force of her blessings for their Hanumantha.

In the Land of Ganeshas



Adi Ganesha moved his enormous head down slowly and smiled. His little visitors were not yet accustomed to the cool winds of the mountains. ‘O Rishi, I think you must take our friends to the yellow canyons for some warmth first!’

‘I could use some steam myself,’ Vishwamitra replied with an exaggerated shiver.

Hanuman took a breath and steadied himself. He could stop the shivering, but his hair refused to smoothen down. He looked at his hands and laughed to himself. Before the soaring majestic beauty of the mountains, in the presence of the grand and elegantly-mannered Ganeshas, in the most beautiful kingdom he had ever seen, Hanuman was reminded of how small he was, and therefore, his troubles too. Once the *sabha* and the serious concerns Vishwamitra had on his mind were dealt with, he would race to the peak of each and every mountain there. After the journey with the Jatayus, there was nothing left to fear about heights.

‘Hanuman, how beautiful this land is,’ Sugreeva said, admiringly. ‘Someday, I would like to bring my Ruma here.’

Hanuman patted him on his back. Sugreeva had finally settled down, and was now able to speak about Ruma without dwindling into a shell of grief all over again. He had finally dropped the pebble he had brought from the

river of the Uttaras into the hot springs here, at peace with the decision he had made.

It was the mountains. And the elephants, too. They had that effect on all creatures. It was a reminder that life was too full of beauty to be wasted on lamenting anything in it, even its most difficult problems.

*

After they had bathed and rested, Hanuman, Sugreeva and Vishwamitra were led by a brisk, young elephant into the great assembly, the *sabha*. Eighteen Ganeshas were present, in a loose semicircle. Many more waited on them, a little distance behind. At the entrance to the clearing, a motherly elephant anointed the three of them with turmeric paste, and sprayed them with a mixture of scented water and rose petals. After the hot bath, and in the now quite-pleasant and nearly-warm afternoon sun, it almost seemed that there were no problems at all, that all of this was just going to be a happy gathering of friends.

Though the elephants were the most precise of all of Goddess Saraswati's children in matters of protocol, Adi Ganesha did not like to always stand on ceremony. The moment he saw Vishwamitra, he pulled away from the group he was talking to and walked up to the middle of the semi-circle, where an enormous banner of sorts had been fashioned for him with giant ferns and even banana leaves. The soft, rumbling sounds of the Ganesha language slowly ceased all around him.

He raised his trunk and released one long, beautiful sound that seemed to clear the valley and the mountains of all distractions. It was the sacred sound 'Om' in the Ganesha *bhasha*, and Hanuman closed his eyes in pleasure. It did not ever sound this good in their own tongue. *Too much teeth in our tongue*, he thought.

Then, Adi Ganesha chanted a few lines of prayer in the direction of a tall, snow-capped mountain that gleamed reddish-brown in the afternoon sun. 'Father Mountain, Mother River,' he said, 'may truth prevail!'

They had a sense of ceremony, and obviously the memory and wisdom to go with it too.

*

‘We welcome our brothers from Kishkindhanagara,’ Adi Ganesha began. ‘Our venerable sage Vishwamitra has come with important questions. Also with him are the young Hanuman, son of Kesari-Anjana, and Sugreeva, son of Riksharaja. Also, may the *sabha* please note, Sugreeva’s brother, Vali, is now the king of Kishkindhanagara.’

Sugreeva and Hanuman bowed and offered their *pranams*. A few soft and affectionate rumbles of greeting went around the circle.

‘Vishwamitra, please speak,’ Adi Ganesha gestured graciously.

‘May Mother Saraswati grant me wisdom and no fear at all,’ Vishwamitra began. ‘O venerable Ganeshas, we have travelled this long distance from home because of a fear that may or may not turn out, in the end, to be significant. For the past four years, my students and I have been discovering a series of sacrileges in the Mother River. At first, I did not think these could be *parama dharma apacharas*, violations of what the Ganeshas of the far west call the Commandment, and the Ganeshas of the distant east call the Way.’ Vishwamitra nodded to the two elephants he recognized as ambassadors from these distant lands. They nodded back but did not react in a way that suggested they knew of any violations.

Then, he continued. ‘I believed these incidents were the result of mistakes, as mistakes do happen in this great and vast theatre of life that the Goddess has produced for her sport. Perhaps a Mosali somewhere was trying to teach her young their *dharma*, and the little one let something get away. Perhaps a Jatayu, too proud of his wings and handsome mien, raised his colourful beak too high to attract his mate, and lost a piece of matter. So I offered my prayers and disposed of the violations. But then...’

Vishwamitra suddenly felt alone. He had lived a long time already. A very long time. But by the Goddess’s grace, it had for the most part been a life of peace. He knew his next words were going to perhaps mark the end of whatever peace the Ganeshas had known too. But if it was true, then the Ganeshas would have to know, because they were Kishkindha’s best defence, and the first ones to face whatever danger might come upon it now.

‘But then, the river brought more, and more. I set out, therefore, to journey up the river, to learn, perhaps, why this violation has been taking place so systematically. I asked the Jatayus, and they did not know. They are skilled and patient, and their home breathes the cleansing fire of the Goddess each dawn. They do not leave behind mistakes. Nor does anyone have a renegade to speak of. No one knows of anyone who might step over

that line that kings and *gurus* and most citizens of Kishkindha have honoured for so many years now.'

Adi Ganesha lowered his head and looked at some point that seemed to rest invisibly between his long tusks. 'So the source of this problem may lie even further to the north?' he asked.

'That is what I have come to ask,' Vishwamitra replied.

The *sabha* was silent for a long time. Occasionally, the Ganeshas flapped their ears, or whipped their tails. They were thinking, remembering little details from their journeys and conversations with other Ganeshas, with the traveller birds most of all, who lived at the northern edge of the world half the year and the south the rest, and had the greatest of information at their feet, even if they were not as eloquent as the *panchavaakshinis* in communicating it.

'I have not heard of any dangers in the east,' the ambassador said slowly.

'Neither have I, from the west.'

'And the woolly mystics who worship the Northern Light Mountain, they do not concern themselves with the affairs of the others, but one would imagine they are well too. After all, what could thrive in such a cold place except our hardened brothers?' another dignitary added. 'Anyway, it seems that there is still peace in the lands as far as we know.'

'As far as we know,' Adi Ganesha added, in a dark tone. He knew a *rishi* like Vishwamitra would not have come this far on a mere whim. It was not just his words, but his actions that signalled the gravity of the response that would have to come. *Rishis*, more than anyone else, had conquered their fears. They did not react to circumstances, but acted constantly to align themselves with the flow of *dharma*. The proof of the signals nature was sending them was in Vishwamitra's feet.

*

For the next few days, everyone waited, hoping some of the migrating birds might have news that would be useful to them.

Vishwamitra slowly began to relax. The beauty of the place, the warmth of the springs, the intelligent conversations with the elephants, all seemed too tranquil to turn away from. Hanuman seemed very content too; he hoped that Goddess Saraswati would guide Naraka Raja to turn away his

parents, and they too would one day find their way here. And Sugreeva was no longer ill.

Then, one afternoon, as the sun bathed their surroundings in light, and everything seemed as gentle as a sleeping child, Vishwamitra suddenly understood. A couple of the younger Ganeshas were playing with Hanuman and Sugreeva, mock-wrestling with their trunks. Hanuman cheered and laughed as he skilfully evaded even the most intelligent moves from the elephants. Vishwamitra quickly ran up to them and sat down almost under the feet of one of the elephants. He saw his mouth open and his tusks dancing in play. And he saw how his trunk stretched when it was raised. He knew.

He rolled out of their way and walked as quickly as he could to find Adi Ganesha. Suddenly, the tranquil paradise that surrounded him seemed bathed in blood. A vision of red and fire hung over his eyes. It was as if Naraka had come here—and without the justice and restraint of Naraka Raja to look over it.

*

‘That is truly appalling,’ Adi Ganesha said gravely.

‘I regret so much that the Goddess picked me to learn this,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘But the most disturbing violation that had come down the river, the one that I could never understand, was a piece of the Ganeshas’ face-hand.’

Hanuman looked with a feeling of amazement at the Ganesha’s face. He could not believe how a trunk could be separated from the rest of the body. It was not like a mere banana on a stem, meant to fall anyway. It was like someone’s face had been torn away violently.

‘No one trespasses on our Place of Dissolution,’ Adi Ganesha said, ‘not even Jatayus.’

‘You alone in all of Goddess Saraswati’s world have that honour,’ Vishwamitra said, and then realized it was odd. ‘The Ganeshas alone, that is,’ he corrected himself.

‘So you say it was not even much dissolved?’ Adi Ganesha asked.

Vishwamitra knew what possibility that implied. Robbing an elephant grave would have been bad. But what if ... what if it was even worse?

Adi Ganesha understood. ‘Vishwamitra, you bring sad information, but it is perhaps better for us to act now than to wait until much later. I shall

dispatch a scout team to the forbidden passes to make sure that our elders who leave on their Great Walks are not being dishonoured in any way.'

Vishwamitra bowed, and then lifted his hand in a manner that meant both request and assertion.

'Yes. We would be grateful if you would go too. Your intelligence is needed.'

Vishwamitra turned to find Hanuman and Sugreeva looking at him squarely. 'Not a place for you,' he said hastily, 'you would be better off here, until I return, in a few days.'

Hanuman crossed his arms in defiant humility. Sugreeva followed. Vishwamitra could see the muscles tensing in their thighs.

Like fire in a rock, he thought, and walked away, mumbling, *mm-mm*, noncommittally, as Kesari used to.

*

The next morning, Vishwamitra bade farewell to Adi Ganesha, and set out, Hanuman and Sugreeva behind him.

Veera Ganapati had insisted on carrying them; a Rishi's feet, he said, are always filled with good deeds and bless those who lift them. But Vishwamitra hesitated. These were the sons of the Lord of the Mountain, and immediate descendants of the Goddess herself. In the end, after the mutual exchange of respects had threatened to delay their departure infinitely, Hanuman decisively leaped on top of one of the two *sena* Ganas, soldier elephants, accompanying them, followed by Sugreeva.

Then, Veera Ganapati respectfully lifted Vishwamitra with his trunk and placed him on top of the other *sena*.

Slowly, at the pace of elephants, the six of them set out higher and further still into the mountains.

15

Waterfall



The valleys below grew steeper as they ascended, and the smell of the trees and flowers began to change. Here and there, they saw the people of the mountains. They passed one especially cheerful village where the children recognized them as cousins from the warmer south. They ran out to the edges of branches, cheering, their *balances* held long and high in the air above them, their orange fuzzy tips bold and amusingly different from the monochrome grey-browns of the southern Kishkindhans' *balances*. They asked where they were headed, but Vishwamitra only waved and smiled.

Then, on the third morning, the sound appeared, like a wind in the forests, but once it began, it would not go away.

'Hanuman, what is that sound?' Sugreeva finally asked. They had been hearing it for many hours now. It grew closer, slowly.

'It sounds like the wind, but it persists too much,' Hanuman replied.

The elephants seemed not to notice, so perhaps it was something to be expected.

Finally, Sugreeva could not contain his curiosity anymore, and asked Vishwamitra, with some anxiety now, what the sound was. *Why was he the only one to think a sound like that and the danger they were searching for could be connected?*

Vishwamitra only smiled enigmatically.

No wonder.

*

The sight of the hidden valley hit them like a wall of sound and wind and water.

‘Jai Mata Saraswati!’ Vishwamitra shouted, raising his arms high above his head in a *pranam* .

The waterfall roared down from somewhere so high up it could well have been the sky. Everywhere, all around them, smaller cataracts fell and smashed off the black stone face and gushed down far below. A series of rainbows seemed to dance in the mist everywhere, like garlands around the neck of a goddess.

‘She whose neck is adorned by rainbows for garlands,’ Hanuman said, slowly, a line from a prayer his mother used to like to sing about Goddess Saraswati.

‘Hanuman! Sugreeva!’ Vishwamitra called out in an ecstatic voice. ‘Come, my boys, see the Mother!’

Veera Ganapati suddenly charged ahead with his head low. It almost looked as if he would fall off the narrow path, but he obviously knew his way. The *senas* followed as well.

Vishwamitra now began to chant verses in great excitement, his hands extended in front of his chest, going up and down furiously, as if he were arguing with a woman of great beauty about how useless all effort to describe her might prove in the end.

He was happy, obviously.

*

When the elephants stopped at the bottom of the short trail, Hanuman realized why they had come down the path to this particular place. ‘Sugreeva, look up, it is the face of the mother herself,’ he said, in amazement.

Just across the swirling waters below them, where the middle of the waterfall lay, was a lone tree growing out of what looked like the lap of a set of massive boulders. The boulders were covered in flowers of every hue, and thousands of bees swarmed around them, despite the spray and wind.

‘The keeper of the bees that bring sweet and honest words to Kishkindhan tongues!’ Sugreeva said, referring to another saying about the Goddess.

Slowly, their eyes travelled upwards, until they could see one spot covered under a veil of water that looked like a face. It was difficult to see, but each time the waters shifted, it was there; a nose off which light bounced, as if studded by precious stones, a corner of a smiling mouth, a hint of a motherly eye gazing downwards at her children.

Hanuman and Sugreeva slid off the backs of the elephants and walked up to Vishwamitra. After all the travails of the last few days, and the lurking fear that more was to come, it was as if the Goddess had destined everything just so they could behold her in her ancient form.

‘How I wish everyone could see you like this, Mother Saraswati!’ Hanuman said, in a kind and sad voice.

Vishwamitra turned around and looked at Hanuman intently. He felt as if he could now understand something that had eluded him all along. It was no mistake. Hanuman was meant to be here. He was meant to be honoured in ways few others ever deserved. He was a mere child, but in his heart, he understood what the Second Ceremony was all about. It wasn’t about memorizing the names of relatives and the quantities of fruits and trees, but simply about recognizing one’s place in the world, that everyone was connected, and important. Hanuman had thought of everyone in the presence of the Goddess, and for Vishwamitra, that was enough.

‘Child, Hanuman,’ Vishwamitra said, and slowly placed his palm on top of his head. ‘I hereby consecrate you with all the honours, joys, and responsibilities of your Second Ceremony.’

Hanuman smiled in delight. It was a most unexpected, unorthodox move. No one expelled for an *apachara* had been found and anointed with a ceremony ever before, for rules like these were a weakness among Kishkindhans. They could easily have stopped sending their children to Vishwamitra’s *gurukula* for such a step.

But they were on top of the world. Vishwamitra could not possibly care for such things any more.

Hanuman offered his greetings ceremonially now, his *balance* draped over his shoulder and across his torso, in the traditional manner, to all assembled. ‘Jai Guru Deva. Jai Saraswati Mata.’

Veera Ganapati offered the only blessing he knew, 'May the strength of mountains be yours always.'

Sugreeva desperately tried to find a honeycomb somewhere, the one indulgence the young could not resist. Hanuman noticed, but laughed and drew him closer for an affectionate hug instead.

'If they say this can't be done, well, I say it can. If they dare, they can argue with *her* !' Vishwamitra gestured upwards towards the peak with a confident gesture, and laughed.

Hanuman was now formally an adult, with all the privileges and responsibilities that came with it.

*

As they began their way back up the path, Hanuman stopped. He raised his right forefinger and closed his eyes. With a smile, he began to hum, harmonizing with the subtle musical notes that rang out as the waters struck the rocks.

Vishwamitra put his hand on Hanuman's shoulder. 'All the songs in the world come from here, Hanuman. Some day, if the Goddess wills it, we must come back and stay all day.'

Hanuman observed the features of the waterfalls carefully as the elephants slowly moved away. There were two boulders in particular, one on top of what might be her right thigh, and another that extended from the rock face to the left of her chest, which seemed to be making the most musical sounds. Sometimes, when the wind moved the waters, he could see a stream traverse the distance between them too, finding a ridge that ran along the wall between the two boulders.

He imagined placing a vine across his shoulder, much like how one kept one's *balance* at ceremonies, and pulling it. Something similar happened when they played. Twine made a sound all its own as did coconut shells, which made the loudest of noises when children blew into them. Could they make the same kind of sounds the boulders made?

Amused by his own strange thoughts, Hanuman laughed it off. The Goddess was making his mind run faster than even his legs.

*

The next evening, they emerged through a passage between the mountains into what seemed like an endless and arid plateau. In the far distance, they could see the peaks of another mountain range, where the elephants' destination lay, already fading into the darkness. They stopped for the night near a small clump of skinny trees.

As all the light faded, the wind's incessant howl seemed to acquire a life of its own. It was as if many voices were whispering secrets, as if the dreams and nightmares of all the living things in Kishkindha were playing out here in a theatre of unrestrained fury no one was ever meant to witness.

Hanuman tried to sleep, sharing warmth with his cousin. Vishwamitra seemed to be awake, gazing at the stars from a distance. The three elephants rested in a loose semi-circle around them. Their bodies gave them some relief from the wind.

Hanuman watched the stars intently. They looked close enough to touch. Then in the north, a shimmering set of lights came and went. It was Mount Meru, the celestial mountain at the top of Kishkindha. The woolly Ganeshas supposedly lived right under it in a permanent state of bliss, as if they were carrying it on their backs.

In a dreamy state, Hanuman remembered his mother's voice, and the stories she told; of the god who danced with one leg up, and the sages who applauded in adoration, and the serpents, and the great kings, and the demigods closer home, who walked across the earth and into the lives of its creatures without even being seen by any but the wisest sages.

There, there comes guru, Hanuman thought, the shining celestial being who puts his heavy luminous feet down on earth from time to time to shield the children of this world from that hypnotic, magnetic, troublemaker pair, Rahu and Ketu. Was it their footprint that had led Sugreeva to miscalculate his jump across the ravine? Or was it the one known as Shani, the troublesome teacher, who dragged people to the Goddess's feet, oblivious of what suffering it might cause? Who were all these beings, visible only as dots of light, but talked about as if they were whole forces of destiny by the elders?

And why was Hanuman here, wondering about them, about everything?

As if to add to the mischief, the thin curve of a moon rose in the distance. It seemed to hang like a hair-ornament next to the peak of the mountain the Ganeshas prayed to, which lay behind them now, a reminder of how far they had come.

Everything was watching them, and everything could only be perfect; *paripurnam*, was the word that Hanuman remembered, in his father's voice. It felt complete, like it was all as Goddess Saraswati had wanted it to be, planet or no planet.

*

The next day, their journey resumed. The elephants guided them to a small lake in the otherwise barren land, where they found water and some more leaves and berries.

'One more day's walk,' Veera Ganapati said, 'and then tomorrow, we reach the Land of Dissolution. It has not been disturbed in a long time.'

'Let us hope it will not be disturbed at all,' Vishwamitra reassured him.

Hanuman and Sugreeva practised reciting the names of their relations and lineages. It seemed oddly satisfying to think of them all in such a distant landscape, as if none of them could ever possibly guess what an adventure they were currently on.

Suddenly, Hanuman made a strange observation. 'We are talking about the busy forests near Kishkindhanagara, and here we have not seen any living thing for a very, very long time.'

It was true. Sugreeva looked around and then back at Hanuman. It was only the six of them, and not a thing, not even a bird in the sky; it went on and on, blue and endless above.

Hanuman slid off the elephant's back and decided to run ahead a little bit to keep from falling asleep. Sugreeva followed. They leaped up and down a boulder that they found, and then sat there for a while, yearning for something taller and more challenging to engage with.

Then, the elephants paused. Vishwamitra looked back with a kind smile. They ran back and leaped up to join him again.

*

The stars rose again at night, resplendent and mysterious.

'I cannot believe we are even in the same Kishkindha,' Hanuman said. 'How vast and different the Goddess's creation is from one place to another.'

'And to think even this is only the beginning,' Veera Ganapati added with a soft laugh. 'You know, we are very near the exact place they say the

Goddess dispersed thirty-six races to all the ends of the world.'

'I always thought it was twelve,' Sugreeva said. 'One each for the four directions and the three altitudes.'

Vishwamitra laughed. 'That is for the tree people. The Ganeshas have their own calculation. And the *matsyas*, don't even try to understand their lineages, only the Goddess can keep up with their worlds.'

'But,' Sugreeva persisted, a little too adamant, 'but how can it be? How can twelve be thirty-six and something else somewhere else?'

His voice was so earnest everyone had to laugh.

'I will show you,' Vishwamitra said, and suddenly rolled over on his back, and lifted all four of his limbs upwards, stiffly. 'Four,' he said, and then rotated on his back so Sugreeva could see only his hands and not his legs. 'Two, from where you can see.'

Hanuman started to laugh at the sight of their venerable *guru* acting like this.

'Wait,' Vishwamitra declared in a not-so-venerable voice. 'You missed ... five!' And raised his *balance* as well.

Even Veera Ganapati had to laugh. He suppressed it cleverly and turned it into a vague sound as if he was clearing his throat in the cold air. He quickly turned his head in the direction of the *senas* and made another gruff sound as if to say, 'Be alert.'

Vishwamitra returned to his upright self. 'These are all but ways of seeing, Sugreeva. The Mother is vast, and we are small. That is all.'

They slept peacefully after that. Vishwamitra felt even more serene than usual. He had not been this light-heartedly childish in a long time. The Goddess was very near to him now. He lost his thoughts for the night with a slight hunch, just a suspicion, that whatever they were meant to find, would soon present itself to them. A twinge of fear rose in his mind, but like a practised reflex, something like a wave of faith rolled over it and smothered it. He slept, peacefully.

*

A veil of mist had settled across the floor of the plateau when they woke up. It was still dark. Veera Ganapati was whispering something to the *senas*. They were raising their heads, and their trunks even higher.

'What is it?' Vishwamitra asked.

‘I cannot say,’ Ganapati replied. ‘There seem to be four or five of them, and they are moving in a straight line. Possibly Ganeshas, from the north or west. But they might be deer travellers too. It is hard to tell from here.’

Hanuman scanned the horizon intently. ‘Not deer. Maybe small Ganeshas, two of them, and three adults.’

Ganapati walked forward and tried to listen. The wind blew in sudden gusts, and made his effort more difficult. ‘They are not moving with any clarity or purpose. Perhaps they are waiting for light, which is a sensible thing to do.’

‘The poor things must be lost,’ Sugreeva said. ‘Maybe your *senas* can help them, Ganapati.’

Vishwamitra agreed. ‘They may have some information that we need too. They must be quite desperate to have travelled so in the dead of night.’

‘They are most likely northern Ganeshas who have lost their way. It happens there, the snow probably came early.’

‘They appear to be moving again,’ Hanuman said.

Ganapati stepped forward and made a loud sound, announcing that Veera Ganapati of the Mountain was coming with help.

The elephants on the horizon stopped.

‘*Sena*, quickly, go and greet them,’ Ganapati ordered. ‘Offer them our assistance.’

The *sena* moved away quickly.

‘It is not wise to stumble into the Place of Dissolution, especially when one is not ready,’ Ganapati said. ‘It is a good thing we saw them now.’

‘They are sending one elephant ahead to meet our scout,’ Hanuman reported.

‘Ah, that explains why they have not answered our calls; they must be unsure of our language,’ Ganapati said.

‘Should they have replied?’ Hanuman asked, slightly concerned.

‘Perhaps they are tired,’ Ganapati said, a bit pensive now. ‘I do not know. But there has not been a conflict between Ganesha clans in these parts in a long time. We do manage to understand each other.’

‘Then why are the rest of them moving away?’ Hanuman wondered aloud.

16

Creature



Hanuman decided to follow the *sena* , and ran ahead to catch up with him. Perhaps he could get a better sense of what was happening, and if necessary, move forward quickly to speak to the other elephants too. If they were as lost as they appeared to be, it would be best to help them and make sure they didn't wander off into the narrower mountain passes where even turning around would be difficult.

'*Sena* , I am coming too,' Hanuman shouted. 'But keep going, you should speak to them first.'

The *sena* raised his trunk in acknowledgment, and continued.

The lone elephant that had stepped forward from the strangers, a smaller one, approached him cautiously.

'Veera Ganapati of the Mountain sends us to escort you and your family to safety,' he announced.

The elephant did not say anything. It waited a few seconds, and then started to move back slowly.

'Friend,' the *sena* shouted. 'Do not be afraid. I am Veera Ganapati's attendant, and I have come to help you.'

The elephant stopped again.

Hanuman tried hard to spot its eyes, to see if it was afraid. He could not see its face well at all. It seemed tired though, its skin almost limp and

shrivelled.

‘Where are your parents? Please, have no fear,’ the *sena* said, moving closer to the elephant now.

The elephant seemed to lower itself slightly, as if acknowledging his presence. Then, it moved back quickly again.

It is truly ill, thought Hanuman, its legs so weak and wobbly.

‘Child, please,’ the *sena* now moved forward quickly, lowering his head, a kind tone ringing through his voice.

Suddenly, a piercing cry broke through the air. The elephant wobbled, and then seemed to shake itself loose of its very skin!

Hanuman was stunned by what he saw.

A group of short, wild, two-legged creatures came running out at the *sena*. They had been hiding inside the elephant’s carcass.

A volley of rocks began to fall on the *sena* from all directions, and he cried out in pain.

Hanuman ran right into the mess, into whatever terror had opened its devouring presence upon them now, the stench of the creatures clouding his lungs like an evil of no name.

*

The *sena*’s legs buckled, and he collapsed. As he fell, he did the only thing he could possibly have done, something he had never really had reason to do in his whole long life. Even as he collapsed, he sounded a frantic and desperate warning.

Hanuman could hear Veera Ganapati respond from far behind them, but it was obviously too late. The morbid war-shrieks of the creatures now appeared from behind them too. They were surrounded.

It was all a diversion, a trap. He could also hear screams of pain and anger from Sugreeva, and Vishwamitra, and most of all, from Veera Ganapati.

Hanuman decided to help the injured *sena* near him first. He ran, keeping low to avoid the flying rocks that fell with menacing thuds near his feet and rolled all around him. He kept his *balance* off the ground, but low, and just as he had once studied the colours of leaves and fruit as he fell from trees, he observed the violent creatures and their method of approach towards the *sena*, counting, classifying, taking everything in matter-of-factly.

Three of the creatures were throwing rocks at the *sena*, shouting, keeping him occupied. The *sena* tried to rise again, but failed. The rocks that struck him tore pieces of flesh off him, making sickening sounds that made Hanuman's hair rise.

He could take down the attacker nearest him, and then another. The third would put up a fight. The second would regain his strength and rise, and then the fourth. The *sena* would not be able to rise at all. But it would be worth it. He still had surprise on his side. They had most likely not noticed him at all until now.

Then, Hanuman noticed one creature that was not throwing rocks at all. He was silent as a *matsya*, and he was moving just as smoothly through the mist closer to the fallen elephant. He too walked on only two feet, but with confidence, like a leopard or a lion.

In his right hand was a long, hard piece of tree trunk. Its end glinted in the night and its roughness startled Hanuman. It was meant to tear the flesh out of the elephant.

Dharma was over.

*

Hanuman leaped from behind the *sena* and, with a powerful yell, landed directly in front of the creature with the spear. The creature froze in fear, and Hanuman could see his crazed eyes even in the dark, even under his thick coat of mud and hair. But he reacted quickly and brought his spear down with a leap towards Hanuman's chest.

It was fast, but Hanuman was quicker. He rushed forward and caught the creature's right arm before he could even bring it down. It felt strong, but sticky, unclean.

Hanuman stared into the creature's eyes, feeling a rage forming inside him he had never felt before. He realized the creature was now trying to choke him. His sticky fingers were around his neck. A look of sheer terror was in his eyes now, because Hanuman was not falling.

Hanuman saw that look, and nearly, very nearly found pity. But the stones began to fall on him now.

In one imperious move, he brushed away the creature's hand from his throat and slapped him, slapped him so hard that he fell with barely even a yelp onto the ground.

The stones were now beginning to hurt.

Hanuman knelt down, and darted across very quickly to his left, to the nearest pair of legs he could see. *Only two to stand on, easy.* He rammed into the first creature, and toppled him easily. The second one threw a stone at his face but missed entirely.

Hanuman grabbed his head by the hair and hurled him onto the other one, still on the ground.

The fourth creature ran behind the fallen *sena* for cover. Hanuman walked quickly around to find him. He stood up once, from the far end of the elephant's large mass, and with a frightened sound, ducked down as if to run away.

Hanuman knew the creature was afraid, but did not want to spare it lest it harm the *sena* even more. The screams and sounds of struggle from Sugreeva and the others were growing louder now. He had to get back soon to help them too.

The creature ran a few feet away and again returned to the fallen elephant. It had a rock in its hand. It quickly, if somewhat weakly, tried to dig a hole in the elephant's back. The *sena* grunted in pain.

Hanuman shouted in anger and the creature retreated. It annoyed him, but he was losing time here. He turned away, hoping it would not harm the *sena* again.

But no sooner had Hanuman turned, than the creature was back. This time, what he witnessed shocked Hanuman. The creature was clinging to the *sena*'s back, burrowing its face into his injury, sucking his flesh as if he were a mango.

Hanuman felt enormous pity and disgust, but he could not let that continue. He made a move towards it again, and it ran around to the far side of the *sena*. Hanuman had hesitated leaping over his fallen comrade until now, out of respect, but perhaps that was what had to be done.

Suddenly, with an angry grunt, the *sena*'s trunk lashed up and coiled around the creature. The creature howled in fear. Then, without any more thought, the *sena* smashed it down like a coconut.

'Well done, *Sena*,' Hanuman said, impressed with the injured giant's fighting spirit.

'Go, master Hanuman, help them,' he replied, weakly.

Veera Ganapati and the other *sena* had formed a defensive flank protecting Vishwamitra and Sugreeva. There were at least ten two-legged creatures surrounding them now. They had made a near-perfect ambush, leaving one smaller team to distract them while the rest circled around behind.

Hanuman moved rapidly towards them. They were of all sizes, with even a few smaller ones, children, obviously, participating in the stoning.

Sugreeva was starting to fight back, collecting the rocks landing on them, and hurling them right back. His aim was deadly. Already, one creature lay flat on its back.

The rest of them did not seem to care at all. They ran over their fallen comrade, trampling him, paying no heed to his clutching fingers.

Their hunger was of a kind Hanuman could not ever imagine.

Hanuman circled behind them, back and forth, quickly, sizing up the strongest fighters. Veera Ganapati had noticed him, acknowledging his presence gratefully with a nod.

The elephants could have easily rushed forward and crushed them, but that would leave Sugreeva and, most of all, Vishwamitra vulnerable. They needed one moment, an opportunity.

Hanuman would find it; he just needed to find out who the blood-taker among them was. There had to be one, now that he had seen them working and knew their tactics.

At last, Hanuman spotted him. He was crouching, keeping his spear low, waiting for the elephants to weaken. The stones were causing them great injury, and it was only a matter of time before they buckled.

Hanuman began to shadow him, also keeping an eye on Ganapati's movements. Ganapati raised his trunk suddenly and turned it to one side.

There was another one with a spear on the other side, approaching stealthily. The two of them were working together, waiting for the right moment to take down both the elephants, or at least one elephant and Sugreeva.

Vishwamitra had his eyes closed and seemed lost in meditation. Amazingly, not one stone had struck him.

The volley of stones increased, and the elephants looked like they would either collapse or charge out in desperation.

Hanuman found his moment and charged at the spear-thrower near him with a terrifying roar. His frightened partner threw his spear at the same moment, but missed Ganapati. Ganapati suddenly turned and looked him

squarely in the eyes. He stood petrified for an instant, and then charged, screaming, directly at the mighty elephant. In his hand, he held another piece of rock, a jagged one, and he held it high and hard, ready to hack whatever he could manage.

Veera Ganapati lunged forward, ready to whip the creature up in his trunk. The creature swerved deftly, but not deftly enough. He impaled himself directly on his tusk.

Ganapati then charged at the rest of the attackers, the dangling body of the creature terrifying them now. The *sena* charged at those standing in the opposite direction. Sugreeva dealt with the two remaining attackers who remained in front.

In seconds, it was all over, as quickly as it had started.

Somewhere, across the dark landscape, the moans and whimpers of those who had survived could still be heard. Hanuman and Sugreeva looked at each other. Their fingers curled in revulsion as they realized what they were covered with, and what they had done.

*

Suddenly, Vishwamitra shot up from his seated trance, and began to dance. He did not speak, he did not look at anyone. He merely got up, and like a violent storm trapped inside some soft and gentle being's skin, pounded his feet and danced. It was frightening.

Sugreeva moved away from him, lest he get hurt.

Hanuman moved a little closer.

Quietly, they watched him, their gentle, harmless and wise grandfather, abandoning all restraint and his gentleness, in a frenzy that no one could have predicted he had inside him.

Yet, the dance was perfect. The way his hands rose, the way he kicked, the way he spun, and leaped, everything had perfection, and grace.

It was a war dance, Hanuman understood, a dance of madness, a way to relieve unbearable pain.

When, at last, he had calmed down, Hanuman embraced him. 'My Guru,' he said softly.

Vishwamitra held him and began to cry. All these fears he had held at bay for four years were now in front of him; they had come true.

*

In the first violet-tinged light of dawn, they began to take stock of the mess that lay before them. Ganapati inspected the elephant-skin remains the creatures had disguised themselves in. He picked them up and put them down again, repeatedly. The *sena* stood mournfully by the side of his injured comrade. Every now and then, his legs rose as if he were ready to stand, but he would fall back down again.

Vishwamitra was back to chanting some kind of prayer.

Sugreeva stood guard by him.

Hanuman walked slowly around the fallen creatures. It was hard to distinguish between them or make out their faces from their mud-caked furs. They looked as if they had wriggled out of a swamp.

Hanuman was puzzled most though, not by their appearance, but by their conduct. They did not seem to have any grief for each other's injuries.

They sat there, dazed, yet their eyes seemed defiant; fearful, yet defiant.

Two of them were small, perhaps just children.

Hanuman stared at them, unable to comprehend how even such little creatures could be capable of so much violence.

Finally, he asked, locking eyes with the one creature who seemed less disoriented than the rest, 'Who are you? Which lineage do you come from? What is your home called?'

His voice was firm but free of anger. Still, the creatures did not sense the lack of aggression in it. They merely howled in protest, and pounded the earth with their fists. They were angry. And, Hanuman guessed, hungry too. They stared at the elephants greedily.

'What is the nature of this feeling, Sugreeva?' Hanuman asked his older cousin.

'I do not know at all, my friend,' he answered, calmly. 'But it is not good.'

'Does hunger drive one to such lengths? Or is it the *adharma* that causes such misery?' Hanuman wondered.

Sugreeva decided to try. He approached the creatures and tried to talk, calmly, hoping to reassure them that they would not be harmed. They reacted loudly again, having an argument with each other.

Sugreeva backed away, his head low, his *balance* lower.

Then, one of the creatures stood up straight. Hanuman became alert. She caught one of the children by the hair and the neck, and then dragged it up. The child started crying and screaming. That much was clear. Then, she pulled the child against its will up towards Vishwamitra, recognizing apparently that he was an important person in the group.

Vishwamitra opened his eyes in surprise. The creature pulled off the child's furs and shoved him to the ground in front of the sage's feet.

Then, she raised her arms to reveal her breasts, and pounded them angrily.

'It is her son,' Hanuman said, amazed that, despite his similarities to the Kishkindhan boys, he had no *balance*. But whatever these creatures were, the mother still seemed to care for her son. 'She is asking Vishwamitra for mercy for him.'

'No Hanuman,' Sugreeva answered, incredulously. 'She is bargaining. She has just offered our revered Vishwamitra what she believes he will want to eat for breakfast.'

17

The Boy



Vishwamitra winced at the sound of the boy's sobbing. He leaned forward to comfort him.

The child snapped at his hand with his teeth.

'Mother! Goddess!' Vishwamitra exclaimed and drew his hand back.

The boy's mother hit him on the back of his head, and he fell. Again, she made a furious gesture to Vishwamitra. She pointed to the child, and then she pointed towards the elephants.

'This is a strange dilemma.' Vishwamitra said. 'I do not know what to make of a disease that makes mothers harm their own children.'

'Not to mention the *parama dharma*,' Hanuman added.

One of the creatures suddenly got up and tried to run away. Sugreeva chased it down and scowled menacingly. It returned to its pack, snarling in protest, kicking the earth violently.

The light was brighter now. Slowly, everyone's injuries became visible. The scent of blood, and fear, was everywhere.

Hanuman stared at his hands helplessly. In one day, they had gone from hands that had worshipped the Goddess in her most beautiful and pristine waterfall form, to hands that had breached the *parama dharma*. He knew this was not going to be an exception. From now on, his life would be about what Vishwamitra had called the Fire with No Reason.

*

Veera Ganapati returned with his *senas*. The injured elephant moved slowly, making a soft, moaning sound with each step.

‘Vile creatures!’ he said in a voice full of grief and contempt. ‘What cruel desires have made you do this to my people?’

The creature now shrieked in fear. She ran forward and fell on the ground next to her child. Again, she pointed to him, and then she pointed into the distance. In the half-light, it was clear what she wanted. It was not the elephants anymore, but the skins. The *senas* had respectfully placed them all together on the ground, beside each other.

‘Children. There were Gana children too,’ Ganapati continued, his voice choking with tears now.

Hanuman admired his self-control though. He did not move one bit from where he stood as he spoke. Even his head did not move. He had no intention of harming the creatures in revenge, though the fire blazed in his voice.

‘Do you recognize any of them?’ Vishwamitra asked him. ‘Families who left on the Great Walk, maybe?’

Ganapati shook his head. ‘No. Children rarely go. These are the remains of families that were still very much in the world of family life. And that is what makes everything even more disturbing.’

‘How so?’ asked Vishwamitra.

‘These creatures are no mere scavengers. They have taken the lives from those who were still in their prime.’

‘I wonder how many more of them there are.’

‘Many, many more, I fear, O Sage. The Ganas whose lives were taken are northern Ganas, you can tell by their long hair which keeps them warm when the sun goes away in the dark season. Like us, they too live in very large families, in groups of sixty- six, usually, sometimes as many as ninety. They rarely separate.’

‘So if these eight or nine were...’ Sugreeva trailed off.

‘Yes. It means that it wasn’t just them. The creatures must have destroyed an entire family of northern Ganas, or maybe even more than one family.’

‘That means there must be many more of these creatures,’ Sugreeva said.

‘If hundreds of Ganas have been harmed, that means there must be thousands of these savage creatures somewhere,’ Hanuman said.

It sounded ominous to say it, but Vishwamitra had to state the worst-case situation. 'Or maybe even more. And this is what we know of them. They kill. They eat. They do not fear death.'

'And they are coming our way,' Veera Ganapati said.

Suddenly, the creature that had been pleading screamed and began running away; all the remaining creatures got up and began to run as well. In the morning sun, their forms looked even more hideous, but capable of great harm.

The *sena* made a move towards them, but Vishwamitra asked him to wait. 'Let us see where they go,' he said, calmly.

In a determined fashion, their screams not letting up one bit, they ran towards the elephant remains.

'Something has scared them,' Sugreeva said.

Hanuman turned around. At the end of a cruel and deadly night, he felt a breath of relief when he saw the sun, rising slowly on the horizon. He brought his palms together, and said a prayer quickly. 'They fear the sun,' he said.

The creatures fell upon the skins, and that enraged the *sena*, who went after them suddenly with great speed. Seeing him, they grabbed two skins, and then dropped one, and fled, trying to cover themselves from the sun, bickering and arguing with each other.

The chase went on until it was clear that the *sena* would not be able to catch up. Veera Ganapati signalled him to stop and come back.

'Wise choice,' Vishwamitra said. 'But what of this dilemma now?'

The boy the creatures had left behind lay still, right there, at Vishwamitra's feet.

*

Before noon, they had reached the mouth of the pass to the elephants' Place of Dissolution. The plateau they had crossed stretched behind them like an enormous wasteland with ugly secrets lurking beneath its ground.

'Ganapati,' Vishwamitra said, 'I have already seen more than I had ever thought I would see. Please, continue with your duties, while we wait for you here.'

Ganapati moved his head slowly. No one besides elephants had ever entered their forbidden lands. He appreciated Vishwamitra's thoughtfulness.

‘We shall perform the rites for our northern comrades and return very quickly,’ he said.

The *sena* deposited the child on the ground, beside Hanuman. The elephant looked dismal, and almost grotesque, under the weight of all the skins on his back.

Hanuman felt tears in his eyes. Here was a *gana* whose innocence had been robbed forever; he was wounded, his brother injured, and here he had to carry the remains of his people so unjustly robbed of their family, dignity and life. With his trunk, under his mouth, he had carried the child of their killers, not letting his tusks gore him, treating him as a child, and not as a killer.

You are Goddess Saraswati’s best, O Ganas , Hanuman thought to himself, and that gave him hope. A little bit.

*

The sun was about three-quarters of its way down when the Ganas returned, their foreheads now smeared with white ash. ‘Our ancestors’ rest is not disturbed,’ Ganapati reported to Vishwamitra. ‘The god of the mountains still looks after us.’

Vishwamitra smiled weakly at the consolation. They had come to investigate if the remains of elephants were being stolen from their forbidden grounds. They had ended up having to carry the remains of innocent elephants there instead.

Slowly, close to sunset, the boy stirred awake.

Vishwamitra offered him some leaves and berries he had picked along the way. The boy ate them greedily, and then passed out again.

‘He is ill,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘We must move to a safer place soon.’

‘There is a possibility they will return at night,’ Veera Ganapati said. ‘This time, they will not surprise us.’

‘But what they lack in surprise they might make up for in numbers, won’t they?’ Hanuman wondered.

‘And we have one more to think about now,’ Sugreeva said, touching the child carefully.

Vishwamitra took a deep breath. ‘Ganapati, is there another way?’

‘I have heard my forefathers speak of a river,’ Ganapati said slowly. ‘It is swift and furious and few dare try to cross it. But if one were to succeed, we

would find Mother Earth favouring a quick descent for us.'

'Do you mean the whirlpool of Vashishta?' Vishwamitra asked.

'Yes,' Ganapati answered. 'They say the sage Vashishta was the only who was able to cross it. They say his prayers were so strong that the Goddess appeared around him as a shield of air.'

Vishwamitra laughed. 'With every problem, the Goddess presents an answer too. Vashishta's *ashram* may be the one place which has the answers to our troubles too.'

Ganapati was puzzled. 'The Ganapatis must assemble a defence council without delay. We must organize some rescue expeditions if necessary.'

Vishwamitra smiled and nodded. 'Indeed, O valiant Ganapati. The defence must be deployed, and for as much of Kishkindha as we can save. But the greatest weapon we might have still lies with Vashishta.'

'Who is Sage Vashishta?' Sugreeva finally asked, a bit shyly.

'Our *guru*'s own *guru* ,' Hanuman answered.

'And he is not just a *rishi* , boys, but a *brahmarishi* ,' Vishwamitra answered. 'He knows secrets of life few others have been able to understand. He will heal this boy, and if Goddess Saraswati wills it, he might be able to tell us what ails those wretched creatures too.'

Veera Ganapati obviously did not share that sort of optimism.

Vishwamitra noticed it. 'Of course, we have a whirlpool to deal with too, first. And one thing, just one thing, could happen along the way to help us.'

'What is that?'

'Let us pray that Vashishta is home.'

The Whirlpool of Vashishta



By the next evening, the foam and spray from Vashishta's Whirlpool were in view, rising like a gigantic sphere of light from a cleft in the rocky ground. In the tender evening light, a stream of colours danced at the edges of the spray.

'Praise the Goddess,' Vishwamitra announced. 'And my compliments to your *senas*, O noble Ganapati. We still have enough sunlight to make the descent.'

One by one, the three elephants approached the edge of the cliff. Occasionally, the wind blew the spray into their faces.

'Hanuman,' Sugreeva finally said, 'I am not sure there is really a way down from here.'

Hanuman could see well, and see especially well in matters of heights. There really was no sign at all that there might be any kind of easy approach. The ground in front of them stretched flat and pale brown, full of dried waste accumulated over endless icy winters, and then opened up suddenly into the abyss. Across the gap, through the mist, they could vaguely see the black stone face of the cliff opposite them. Somewhere there, hidden in its veins, was the tiny passage that led to Vashishta's cave.

Suddenly, almost at the edge, the elephants turned sharply right. A narrow path began its descent to some place out of their sight.

The roar of the waters below increased and swallowed them like a hungry giant.

*

The elephants wiped their eyes frequently with their trunks. The mist was thick, and the valley grew cooler. The path was narrow, and with each step, each sway of the elephants' hips to their left, it seemed as if their passengers might fall. Sugreeva rode on the injured *sena*, and Vishwamitra on Veera Ganapati. Hanuman sat on the remaining *sena*, holding the unconscious child in front, keeping him from falling off.

The first glimpse of the abyss stunned Hanuman. Then, he withdrew his gaze, admitting to himself that this was a fall that even someone who had delighted in defying gravity as a child would have to respect. Slowly though, Hanuman began to peek again, and look out even more, down into the ravine as the elephants moved, learning to notice whatever tiny hands of help the remorseless rock face might offer him; a rock that protruded, a ledge, a clump of small trees. It was beyond anything he had done, but it might not be impossible, once he had surrendered his mind to the Goddess, as his father always said.

Across the ravine, on the far side, the sunlight began to turn red. It rose slowly up the side of the rock, plunging the part below into dark shadow. They were only halfway down, and the sun would set soon, making it even harder to see their way. The air was damp.

Hanuman touched the side of the rock as they passed. It was wet. The path under the elephants' feet might be slippery too.

*

The red patch of light rose quickly above them. It became narrow, clung to the rim of the rock for a few seconds, and then vanished. The sun had set. In a few more minutes, there would be almost no light above.

The elephants began to move faster. They were no longer thinking about what their senses were telling them, but only going along with the flow the mountain had presented to them. Their worship was great, thought Hanuman. They were truly the sons of the Lord of the Mountain. They had come such a long, long way over the generations, walking, as Hanuman and Sugreeva had done, all the way from the warm forests near

Kishkindhanagara until they reached the ice-peaks, and then travelling from the plateau of the Great Dispersal to reach and make homes in every corner of the earth.

Hanuman wondered about the great qualities the Goddess had placed in elephants, and why on earth she had made something as strange and cruel as this creature that lay before him. He was still a child, and his face was small, innocent. But no matter how much Hanuman had tried to clean him, his mud and hair still reeked of blood. Was he born this way? Was he born to kill? Was he born to take away the lives of others, deprive elephant children of their parents? Was he not taught the First Ceremony of Goddess Saraswati, where he would know what was food and what was not? Why was his head different, and his hands, and his teeth? They were even smaller than his. They were not sharp, like the Jatayus' beaks. Yet, they seemed accustomed to hard flesh.

Would the child want to kill him and eat him when he woke up?

'Hanuman,' Sugreeva suddenly said, 'what is that thing raining on us?'

*

Hanuman had thought it was water, but it wasn't. It stuck to his hands, and it felt like soil. He looked above him. The path they had come down on was already quite dark.

'Ganapati,' he said, 'do you hear anything?'

Veera Ganapati's ears moved slightly. 'The night creatures, I suppose. I hear the feet of mice, and of course, the lizards.'

'I think I hear goats,' Sugreeva said.

'Why would goats come out at night?' Vishwamitra said. 'And I do not hear one sound of the goat language.'

'Listen,' Ganapati said, stopping for a moment so their own footfalls might not disturb them.

They heard it. It was more than the footfalls of small animals, and it stopped too. They moved on, and then stopped suddenly again. The sounds followed suit.

'These are not the sounds of four legs moving,' Ganapati said in a whisper. 'Quick, we must find a corner where there is room for us to turn around and face them.'

But it was too late. The creatures began to drop down onto the path all around them.

*

This time, there were no disguises, no elephant hides. With hideous screams, they raced towards the Ganas from both sides.

‘Sugreeva, cover the rear, Ganapati has the front,’ Hanuman shouted. He handed the child over to Vishwamitra and leaped off the elephant’s back.

The creatures flung a few stones from above, but within seconds, Hanuman was blazing his way through their ranks, pulling them down, pounding them with his fists, knocking their feet out from under them with his *balance*.

But they only kept coming. Below him, Hanuman could see the dozen or so creatures who had arrived on the path trying to intimidate the elephants with their spears. Sugreeva valiantly tried to hold off the rear while Veera Ganapati shuffled around to find an angle that would let him face the attackers with his trunk.

And the shadows trembled and shuddered above them. The creatures crawled down the side like lizards.

Hanuman leaped up to the immediate ledge above and pushed aside some of the creatures who had made it that far. But many more stormed down ahead, attacking the elephants. Veera Ganapati dispatched one attacker, but another pierced his trunk. The *senas* could not do much in the narrow space, except to try to protect Vishwamitra again.

‘Hanuman, look!’ Sugreeva shouted suddenly.

A rocket of blinding white light rose from the bottom of the valley. The creatures howled in pain at the sight of it.

‘Forward, now!’ ordered Ganapati and rushed forward, easily pushing the attackers in front of the ledge. The remaining creatures began to retreat, shrinking into cracks in the rocks and trying to hide their heads under their arms.

‘Vashishta has seen us,’ Vishwamitra declared in relief. ‘Sugreeva, Hanuman, come back. Ganapati, let us make haste. The light will give us a few moments.’

Quickly, the elephants moved forward again. Vishwamitra was aware now that their injuries were quite bad, and they left a trail of blood as they

moved. 'Let us hope Vashishta has sent his students to meet us at the bottom. There is no other way to cross the whirlpool.'

*

The light faded into a dull yellow, and then vanished into darkness. Slowly, the sounds of the creatures began to reappear.

'Again,' a voice shouted in the mists below. Another yellow light soared up in a streak of fire. Now that Hanuman and the others had reached the bottom, they could see the rockface they had clung closely to in their descent. It seemed impossible to even contemplate that a group of elephants could have made it. But now, a new danger was imminent. The paths above were full of the violent creatures, huddling into themselves only as long as the light was shining in their faces.

'This is a temporary solution,' the voice in the mist said, 'but hopefully they will not observe the path across the whirlpool.'

'Vashishta! Thank the Mother that you were home!' Vishwamitra shouted.

'Salutations, my old friend, and welcome, brave Ganapati,' Vashishta appeared in the mist, his head wet and sticky. His eyes seemed steadily focused on tasks far beyond the immediate, though the present situation was as difficult as it could be. 'Come this way, follow my students carefully.'

Three of Vashishta's disciples walked quickly past him and paired up with each of the elephants. Without any hesitation, they held their tusks and began to lead them into the icy waters.

Hanuman looked down into the water. It flowed swiftly, in one great circle. Somewhere to their left, he could see its furious vortex. But Vashishta's students knew the secret stepping stones intimately. 'Brother Gana, here!' 'Brother Gana, there!' they urged the elephants, making sure that their feet landed in safe spots.

By the time the last elephant crossed, the light began to fade again. Quickly, the group scrambled up a pebble-covered strip of land towards the rockface. In a few minutes, they reached the opening of a cave. The elephants barely managed to squeeze in, but soon as they entered, another group of students who had been waiting there moved in quickly with a long tree trunk in their hands, pulling along a whole series of rolling logs on which an enormous boulder was placed.

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‘The mountain protects us well, but we must not forget our precautions, especially after the visitors you brought behind you,’ Vashishta said with a slight hint of relief in his voice.

Vishwamitra slid down the back of the elephant and embraced him as he would an older brother.

A Time of Change



Vali laughed. Word of his victory against the only chief who had dared to refuse the Five Coconuts had spread quickly through the forest and the mountain clans all around Kishkindhanagara. He now sat on an elevated rock duly decorated with coconut palms and mango leaves, chewing betel nuts and leaves that one of his aides assembled for him. His mother was pleased with him. His fans, the youthful Vali Sena, were now growing rapidly in numbers.

It was just that one upstart princeling, in that puny village downriver, who had dared to defy his sena, and by extension, him. It started with a dispute over a banana tree. The boys had only wanted some branches to decorate the entry to the village with a welcome arch for Vali and his entourage. The venerable granny who cared for the tree refused to part with it. 'Not a single leaf for you hotheads,' she had allegedly said. Then, when Vali's boys pushed her aside, her grandson had given it back to them in kind. He had kicked them so hard the clot still showed. And he had rubbed it in too. He had said, with a laugh, or so Vali's boys later reported, 'Go tell your empress to try another *apachara* expulsion on me now. I didn't draw blood, did I?'

All of this had riled Vali. But it did something more to Riksharaja. She thought in icy silence for a few minutes. Then, she summoned her newly-

appointed *rajaguru* , the once emaciated disciple of Vishwamitra's who had now risen to great social prominence in Kishkindhanagara. She and the *rajaguru* conferred, and on the morning of the next full moon, proclaimed the start of an ancient ceremony unheard of in recent times, known as the March of the Five Coconuts.

The *rajaguru* anointed the chosen coconuts with turmeric and other auspicious marks. Then, the coconuts were taken by the Vali Sena with great pomp and confidence to the nearest village, where they would be handed over to the chief. Then, he would have to walk across, with his supporters, to the next village, and so on. It was a simple way of reinforcing what Riksharaja had already signalled months earlier.

Vali was no mere village chief. He was the king.

Of course, the very first stop that the procession made on that morning was in the upstart's village. Naturally, the upstart refused to pick up the coconuts. Naturally, he was made a severe example of, and his brothers too, until someone appalled by all the violence finally picked up the coconuts and ran with them to the next village.

In this way, resistance began to fall, and the sinews of an empire began to emerge. Riksharaja grew gleeful with each tribute that came her way. Sometimes though, she missed Sugreeva and wished he would return. It would be fitting to have both her sons marry the two sisters at the same time. But it could wait.

The rate at which Vali was building an army and marching through the land, he would run into Sugreeva sooner or later; and oh, that Hanuman too, if he was still around .

Riksharaja amused herself by wondering how Kesari's son would respond when he saw her own son surrounded by an army of ten thousand warriors, basking in their praise. Would he ask him for pardon? Would she be inclined to grant it? Maybe, empresses could be generous, and that Kesari was now gone for good.

And ... *maybe not!*

The boy should just be a monk, she thought, not a prince or a king.

She laughed out loud, and then slid around on her throne and slapped one of the girls peeling a mango hard on her back, just in good humour.

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Kesari and Anjana walked on through the forests. With each day that passed without their being taken by Jatayus, their hopes of seeing their son again grew.

‘I must eat some richer fruit,’ Kesari joked. ‘My matter must really not be to the Jatayus’ liking.’

‘We are on the Great Walk, are we not?’ Anjana countered. ‘We eat only what is on the ground, and only enough to walk another day. That is the rule.’

‘But ... the poor Jatayus,’ Kesari pleaded.

‘Poor Kesari,’ Anjana insisted.

Kesari laughed. He wondered each night, as he pretended to sleep, if he was really prepared to end all ties and leave the world. In principle, that was what they ought to have done. That was *dharma*. Walk away from all your duties in the world after you have fulfilled them, and keep going until dissolution, of thought, and then, of matter too. Some would see that moment as a river flowing upwards, straight up into the sky, where it would merge into the Goddess’s hair of clouds. Some would see it as a swan, sent by the Goddess for them. It would most likely just be a Jatayu though.

It did not matter now. Kesari would not admit it to Anjana, but he had no intention of leaving the world yet. A Great Walk made sense only after he had carried out his duties. He had not seen his only son through his ceremonies. He had not even learned what had happened on that fateful day to his son. He had exiled him, in his absence. And now he had exiled himself.

It was best Anjana did not know. On their first night on the mountain, a Jatayu had come. Kesari was alert, only pretending to be asleep. He deepened his breathing. He made every signal possible to confuse the bird. In the end, the Jatayu saw only a husband in love with his mate, not one ready to leave the world yet.

Of course, unknown to Kesari, Anjana had noticed everything. She pretended not to, though. The Goddess knew her heart was pure, and in it there was only a mother’s love for her child. It was not right, perhaps, to crave affection. But it was not wrong to wish to see Hanuman one more time, at least one more time, before they could truly leave the world; or the world allowed them to leave for good.

And once they reached the Forest of the Seven Flowers, it seemed the world was only asking them to delight in it some more. In the most tranquil

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of forests, where the gentlest of souls lived in quiet contemplation, Kesari came upon the person he needed to see the most. It was not Hanuman, nor Vishwamitra, but another who had left on a Great Walk a very long time ago.

‘Welcome, my son,’ Kesari’s father said, to his complete surprise.

Dharma Debated



Vashishta's cave network was fed, and drained, by many underground springs and wells. This was good. There were many wounds that had to be cleaned now.

His students carried the boy away to another cave, whispering to each other furtively about his strange appearance. Another group of students tended to the elephants.

Hanuman and Sugreeva sat down, exhausted, in a small pool of water that seemed surprisingly warm. One of Vashishta's disciples set down some powders and herbs on the boulder beside them, and began to make a mixture. The moment he dropped the concoction in the pool, a white sweet-smelling froth began to bubble up, easing the pain in their muscles.

'I feel like a king whose kingdom has never seen strife,' Sugreeva said, in some relief.

'You should feel like a king who has returned from a battle that has saved his kingdom from that strife,' Hanuman replied.

The cousins looked at each other with sadness and affection. Hanuman could sense that his words had caused Sugreeva's thoughts to turn slightly towards his brother and mother. But in Hanuman's estimation, Sugreeva was the one with true courage. Kesari had always said he would step down, not in favour of his own son, but his nephew, because that was what the

history of obligations in the family demanded, and Hanuman too thought Vali ought to let Sugreeva rule. He had a far better sense of the danger their world faced than anyone else now.

But he stopped his thoughts. It was not appropriate. Vishwamitra was their *guru*, and now here he was with his own *guru* as well. The important thing was for everyone to deal with the new reality in the way Mother Saraswati would want them to.

‘Sugreeva, let us examine our *apacharas* now,’ Hanuman said, seriously at first, but then he couldn’t help smiling at the absurdity of their situation. They had left home because of a mere fall, and now they lay smeared in more blood than they had seen in their whole lives.

Like children, the two cousins began to chant, ‘Here. Here. Here.’ They pointed to bruises and bumps, and cuts and scrapes, on their backs, necks, legs, feet, arms, chest, foreheads, cheeks, and thighs. By the end of it, they were laughing, and in tears.

‘That is not an *apachara*, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva shouted, ‘that is my *balance*.’

‘And this is not an *apachara*, Sugreeva,’ Hanuman laughed, ‘that is my head!’

Veera Ganapati walked up to them slowly, approaching like a boulder in the cramped cavern. In the phosphorescent light of the walls, his skin glowed blue and green from the patches of medicine. ‘You sound like you are better now,’ he said, stopping a respectful distance from them.

‘Salutations, Ganapati,’ Hanuman replied. ‘How are your *senas* now?’

‘They are in good hands. They will recover.’

‘How the world has changed since we left home,’ Hanuman said. ‘Who knew that the lives of so many creatures, wretched as they might be, were meant to be taken by our hands.’

Ganapati’s trunk flicked to the left and to the right as if to make a mystical gesture whose meaning could not be understood by thought or by words.

‘For us, this is how it all began, too,’ Sugreeva added, ‘a *parama dharma apachara*, and now I fear to think about what the *dharma* demands of us for our deeds of the past two days. I wonder if there is a way to atone.’

‘I wondered too, once, if there was another way,’ Ganapati said with a sigh, as if he could predict what his young friends were going to say. ‘I wondered the most of all because, I, among my brothers, was chosen to be

the *gana* responsible for such matters, for the security of our *loka* . I used to wonder why I was given this privilege. Was it my size? Or my skills? Or did I become that way because I was taught to grow into a Veera? Finally, it did not matter. It was as the Lord and Mother of the Mountains wanted it. I was, and I am, a Veera. I am responsible for everyone's safety. I am responsible for the wise use of force, when necessary.'

'Was what we did necessary, Ganapati?' Hanuman asked. 'Could we have avoided breaking *parama dharma* ?'

'This is what we are told we have to do, if the conditions demand it.' Ganapati raised his head with a distant look. 'But we never had to do it before, not in my time at least. Today, we broke the laws. And we broke our Mother's reign of gentleness.'

'So you think of them as the Mother's children too?' Hanuman asked.

'There is nothing outside the Mother,' Ganapati said. 'But we make mistakes. And sometimes, if unchecked, mistakes become whole mountains of misdeeds. Then, it is hard to blame the gods for them. They only mean well. That is why they are our gods.'

'Do you think these creatures were a mistake?' Sugreeva asked.

'They live and breathe and become parents like us,' Ganapati said. 'And yet, not quite like us. I do not know.'

'I wonder what the *rishis* are talking about,' Sugreeva said, looking into the darkness from where voices echoed from time to time.

'It appears they share many secrets,' Hanuman said. 'But I hope they will tell us something about what needs to be done now.'

'I think there is only one thing to do,' Ganapati declared. 'We must mobilize our forces and fight.'

They fell silent. Hanuman stared into the waters. He could not tell what was what anymore. *What was the difference between his blood and those of the creatures ?* There seemed to be none. Yet, there was a difference. He had not drawn the blood of any creature into his own. These creatures were full of nothing but the blood of others. Even the Jatayus did it only after life had lost its ties to matter. These creatures did not. Why did they not wait? Why did they not know the first law of Goddess Saraswati? Did they once have it, and lose it along the way?

If so, could they be returned to the Goddess's path again?

The following morning, Vishwamitra made a solemn announcement after bowing to Vashishta. 'Friends, the danger before us is indeed great. This holy cave, in which many generations of us have learned the secrets of grace from our Goddess and our guru, may no longer be secure. We shall permanently seal the entrances by which the attackers may enter, and begin our journey out of the mountains. We must hasten to our *ashrams* in the forests and beyond, and alert the rulers of Kishkindha of the threat that comes upon our world. We hope, naturally, that someday we will return, with our children, and this *gurukula* will resume its pursuit of learning once again.'

Quickly, Vashishta's disciples organized everyone into two groups. One group would take a narrow path of underground tunnels and find their way to the foot of the mountains relatively soon. The other, which included the elephants, would first leave the caves through an opening on the other side, and then follow yet another steep path along the river's edge. The valley and the mountain ranges would, hopefully, give them at least a few days' advantage over the creatures in case they were following them.

Before they left, Veera Ganapati walked up to Vishwamitra to seek his blessings. If it weren't for his long journey from his warm forests in the south, they would not even have had a warning of the danger that was coming towards them.

'O Friend to the Universe,' Ganapati said, 'your presence, and that of your noble companions from Kishkindhanagara, has seen me and my men through the worst troubles to have ever come upon the world of the Ganas in a very long time. I hope we shall meet again soon, and have answers to our troubles.'

'Blessed Ganapati,' Vishwamitra smiled, 'Kishkindha has been fortunate to have the Ganas as its protectors and friends. I am indeed most regretful that I did not begin my journey even sooner. Please offer my condolences to Adi Ganesha for the terrible fate that has fallen over your northern relations. I hope you will get better news when you send messengers to the rest of the far Gana clans.'

Ganapati's mouth moved slowly in the dark, as if the words were not easily available. 'Sage, I have been a warrior without a war for my whole life. There were times I would think it might be good if the Lord of the Mountains sent me some challenges, not simply moving boulders about and disciplining lusty youth. It is a warrior's curse, I suppose, to think that way.'

Now, I have seen that war is not a test for warriors, but a terrible, sacrilegious thing.'

'What is your question, Ganapati?' Vishwamitra prompted him.

'I wish to take the counsel of a *rishi* with me to the war council. First, I want to know if the danger we have seen deserves the response we have given it so far, and, second, I want to know if the danger that comes to us is only the beginning of something infinitely worse. I want to be sure that I am not going to speak out of anger, a warrior's trained anger at that, before the *sabha*. Is the threat imminent?'

'All our answers, and hopes too, lie in that child, Ganapati,' Vishwamitra said, pointing to the child-creature, who was being hoisted onto an improvised carrier of leaves and branches by Vashishta's students. 'I have watched him for two days and two nights, and what I have noted is that, even in his sleep, he always turns with his head to the south, even inside this dark cave. These are the sort of skills Goddess Saraswati gives her children, even the most unfortunate ones. I am convinced that creatures like him have therefore been coming towards us for a long time now, maybe longer than before he was even born. If it is in their very nature, they will come.'

'I will advise the council. There will surely be voices calling for expeditions to be sent to the north, and perhaps to the east and west too. Elephants do not stop to think of such things as weakness, as you might imagine.'

Vishwamitra smiled, and nodded.

'But I believe we cannot undo what has already been done,' Ganapati went on, 'so I intend to convince the elders that we must concentrate on securing the mountain passes, and keeping these creatures from ever spilling into the rest of Kishkindha.'

'I wish you success, Ganapati. That is a wise approach.'

'And for my benefit, O Sage, please, an answer to my first question?'

'Were we right to deal with them as we did?'

'Yes. Even a Veera who follows his orders without questions must know. In fact, we must know more than anyone else. My *senas* are strong, but not killers. I will be asking new, difficult things of them now.'

'You know why the creatures come, don't you?'

'Why?'

‘They come to eat us. That is all. There is more life teeming in our part of Kishkindha with its sunlight and rivers than the cold north where the Goddess sends even their dreams to sleep. Life was sparse to begin with, in the north, but something must have happened, something bad, for Goddess Saraswati’s creation to have taken such a desperate, ugly course.’

‘Ugly is correct,’ Ganapati agreed.

‘Do not forget “desperate”. We have been fortunate. Our tree-mothers grow well, and we have no dearth of food, no lack of warmth and light. All we have had to do is to steady our *dharma* and minimize actions that might damage it.’

‘We are lucky. I wish they too...’ Ganapati began.

‘Spoken like a true hero, Ganapati,’ Vishwamitra said, knowing exactly what the elephant was going to say. ‘We all wish that these poor creatures would find peace and shelter too, and understanding of *dharma*. Vashishta will wrestle an answer from his study of the sick child, I am sure. Until then, we must do what we must. But always remember, we do not have to eat them. At the moment, they know of nothing else but to eat us. Tell your men that. Tell them to defeat, but not destroy. Knowing that difference alone is Goddess Saraswati’s grace to us.’

Ganapati moved his head with a new surety. He raised his trunk and curled it to his forehead in a salute. Every muscle moved with a majesty that seemed to say Kishkindha would not be surrendered lightly.

From the ledge on which he had sat and listened to this whole conversation, Hanuman raised his hands too in salute to his mighty Gana brother. The Ganas had wisdom and force. How fortunate to be blessed with both, and not just one, like their enemies! He had sat for a long time with his forearms crossed across his knees. Now he rubbed his kneecaps slowly with his palms. He remembered every single blow he had delivered upon the creatures with his palms, and then with his fists, and his elbows. He remembered how they had defeated the creatures, sent them reeling down, but had not drawn blood, at least not from the point of contact at least. He could beat them, and still not dismember them. For a boy exiled for merely cleaning a friend’s wound, an *apachari*, he was still in the Goddess’s hands. He thought of the Goddess of the Waterfall, and the boulders from which music had played under the water. A strange new image flashed in his mind. He imagined the Goddess standing up suddenly, breaking free from the mountains, and hurling those boulders, with great

force, and fiery anger, at whatever wretched ignorance had caused these creatures to be as they were.

Hanuman leaped to his feet and picked up the first round, smooth boulder he could find in the cave. This could be the only way the smaller, slower, peaceful creatures of his world could match the ferocity of the invaders without violating the sanctity of their most important principle.

Defeat, do not destroy.

21

Princess Vaishnavi



After the chilling ordeals of the past few days, the foothills with their tall, sweet-smelling trees seemed pleasant and warm for Hanuman and Sugreeva. By the grace of Goddess Saraswati, their journey from the labyrinths of Vashishta's cave was swift and safe. Once, just once along the way, they spotted their elephant friends, looking like ants in the distance, walking slowly down the meandering mountain paths.

'There are two great mountain ranges that diverge from the land of the Great Dispersals,' Vishwamitra had explained to them, 'the Ganeshas will secure one, and if we are lucky, we will find the right friends to help us protect the other.'

'Who are these friends?' Sugreeva had asked. He had often wondered if Vali and his mother would come to their help at a time like this.

Vishwamitra had not replied, until they finally arrived at a path leading down a gentle slope into a beautiful green valley.

'The Princess. Her people call her the Mother too. She is indeed like a mother and a goddess to them, though she is still young. She will be more useful in the defence of Kishkindha than anyone else we can think of.'

The three of them waited at the foot of a hill, as an attendant went up the slope and into a cave to inform the princess of their arrival.

Sugreeva began to get impatient and aimlessly stretched himself from the trunk of a nearby tree.

Hanuman was the first to see her. She stepped out of the cave, covered in purple and red stripes, with two of her companions. 'Maharishi!' she shouted. She leaped from the ledge above them to the top of a tree, and slid down effortlessly.

She had a flower in her hand, and she offered it to Vishwamitra.

'Princess Vaishnavi,' Vishwamitra said, 'this is Hanuman, the son of Kesari and Anjana, and this is his cousin Sugreeva, the son of Riksharaja.'

Vaishnavi's eyes seemed to light up with recognition. She smiled. 'Welcome, good princes of Kishkindhanagara,' she said, her eyes turning towards Hanuman as if they knew mysteries about him that even he couldn't fathom.

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'Hanuman,' Sugreeva slowly began after they had been left alone to rest in a cave. 'Everyone here is reminding me of Ruma.'

'There is a reason for that,' Hanuman answered. 'If you have not noticed it already.'

Sugreeva shook his head. He obviously hadn't.

'There are no men in the princess's realm, Cousin Sugreeva! You, me, and Vishwamitra are the only men I have seen since we entered the valley,' Hanuman explained.

'How perceptive of you, Hanuman!' Sugreeva said, teasingly.

'No, not really, I just thought it was...' Hanuman began, a bit baffled by Sugreeva's tone. There were occasions when he felt protective of Sugreeva, and there were times when he felt he did not know everything Sugreeva did about life. His cousin was, after all, older than him and on the threshold of the Third Ceremony.

'The stars are all moving very quickly, my young brother,' Sugreeva said, with a laugh. 'And not all of them move with the winds of war.'

Hanuman tried to make sense of Sugreeva's newfound mysticism. 'Why do you suppose the sage brought us here, Sugreeva?' he asked, quite earnestly, hoping to return the conversation to things that made sense. 'Do you think these gentle women have a powerful army hidden somewhere up

in the mountains? I mean, why would they have an army in the first place? They seem to be far more trees than people here.'

'Maybe that is exactly why. This valley with its abundant trees would be an ideal place to gather a very large army. Any place further north would not have enough food to keep them strong,' Sugreeva answered.

'Now, that is truly perceptive, Sugreeva,' Hanuman remarked.

'I have seen much of the world suddenly, my friend,' Sugreeva said, a little sadly.

*

At sunset, Vishwamitra sent word for Hanuman and Sugreeva through one of the princess's attendants. They followed her into a cave, which opened out onto a path on the other side of the hill. There, at a cliff's edge, sat Vishwamitra, the princess, and a handful of her advisors.

'Come, children, you really should see this,' Vishwamitra said. Despite speaking in little more than a loud whisper, he sounded more cheerful now than he had since their whole adventure began.

In the orange glow of the setting sun, Vaishnavi's eyes seemed full of a pure and energetic warmth. Hanuman thought she looked very peaceful, though all the news she must have heard from the sage during the day could not have been anything but disturbing to her.

'Our friends have gathered,' she said, proudly, even if in a soft voice, gesturing to the valley below them.

Hanuman and Sugreeva approached the edge slowly, and looked down.

'Goddess Saraswati!' Hanuman whispered in amazement.

Below them, all over the valley, stood hundreds of brilliantly-coloured birds. The light from the setting sun reflected off dozens of small lakes and pools scattered across the valley floor, mirroring the birds' plumage and legs, making it appear as if they were multiplying magically before their eyes. They were red, and orange, and purple, and turquoise, and green. Some of them were all white, and some, all black. Some had long beaks, and others had the tiniest ones. Some had brilliant plumes on their heads, and others, none at all.

And they all stood, some in the water, and some on the boulders around it, in complete silence.

All their attention seemed to be fixed on one single bird that stood at the foot of the hill below the cliff. The bird's long neck was bent downward, and its head seemed to be resting almost on the ground. Hanuman noticed that the muscles in its neck were moving, as if it was saying something, as if it was praying, even.

Then, suddenly it raised its head and emitted a sharp, commanding sound. Every single bird seemed to respond instantly.

It was a peacock. It unfurled its tail and moved swiftly towards a boulder in the middle of the lake. In one decisive step, it leaped into the air and flew away.

The silence shattered. The rest of the birds raised first their voices and then their wings and took flight. It was if a mountain made of garlands had decided to float away into the sky.

'May Goddess Saraswati protect your wings and your tongues!' Vishwamitra declared.

'Sugreeva,' Hanuman laughed. 'The princess doesn't simply have an army. She has a flying army.'

The message had now been sent to all the chiefs in Kishkindha. Hopefully, at least some would listen.

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For the first time in ages, a whole series of lights were set up on top of the mountains. Using the green phosphorescent pebbles that Vashishta's students had given them, the princess's sentries set up positions all around the perimeter. It was unlikely that the creatures would reach this far and so soon, but Vishwamitra insisted on the defence. Every few minutes, the sentries would have to strike the pebbles against each other to increase the glow. If a dark gap appeared in the ring of light for too long, it would mean that trouble might be at hand.

Sugreeva seemed most excited about the elaborate arrangements being made. After the desperate and dirty fighting of the past few days, this seemed more appropriate for a ruler. He demonstrated the right way of positioning the sentries, and the best way to make a quick ascent in case of a breach in the perimeter, though it seemed to Hanuman that Vaishnavi's people were quite capable of handling everything on their own.

‘All will be well, Sugreeva,’ Hanuman finally said, feeling more at peace himself too.

‘We are Kishkindhans,’ Sugreeva said proudly. ‘We will keep the *parama dharma* no matter what.’ Hanuman noticed that his *balance* stiffened the way Vali’s *balance* used to when he spoke a certain way.

He decided to encourage him some more. ‘Vali will be here soon too, my friend.’

The mention of his brother’s name had exactly the effect on Sugreeva that Hanuman had imagined it would have. His body rose upright, his *balance* tilted, and a broad smile spread across his face. Then, suddenly, Sugreeva tried to conceal his joy, lest Hanuman think he had forgotten the injustice meted out to him.

Hanuman placed his hand reassuringly on Sugreeva’s shoulder. ‘The Goddess never gives us troubles, Sugreeva, only opportunities for us to realize something good about ourselves.’

Sugreeva smiled now. In these circumstances, Vali’s petty rivalry with Hanuman would have to end. And perhaps at the end of it, they would all return home, with Hanuman’s expulsion as much an illusion as everything else.

‘Jai Mata Saraswati,’ he said.

*

The birds began to reach their destinations in a few hours. Vaishnavi had instructed them carefully. The chiefs of all the clans had to be alerted that a major danger was imminent. They would have to mobilize their fighters, no easy task in a land with an excellent practice of *parama dharma*, and send whoever could fight up to her valley. There, they would prepare for whatever invasion might come.

The peacock reached Kishkindhanagara on the third day. The young boys who saw it first went to call Riksharaja’s priest, who approached the bird with some amount of fear. Perhaps it was an admonition from his *guru*, warning him that he had gone too far, and that he had grown too fat?

The bird looked at him curiously, and then squawked again in a commanding voice. It recognized that whoever this man was, he could not be the chief.

Chastened, and somewhat relieved too that the bird had not spoken any words against him, he slipped away to pass on the news to Riksharaja.

Slowly, imperiously, Riksharaja rose out of her midday rest. She sent her attendants to go and bring Vali, who was busy wrestling on the banks of the river, and began to put on her royal garlands. She could tell from the priest's description that the bird was a northern peacock, a messenger used by royalty for only the most important messages, and, naturally, for only the most important destinations.

Riksharaja seated herself with due grandeur under the now-permanently installed banana leaf canopy. Whole piles of fruits and precious stones still lay by the side, tributes from solicitous chiefs and kings relieved to have passed on Vali's Five Coconuts without any trouble. She would have to count them, and keep a sharp eye on that priest as he inventoried them, soon. Otherwise, it would be hard keeping up.

The bird bowed its head low in her direction. She looked in the direction of Vali, who, as usual, preferred to stagger in covered in sweat rather than in royal adornments and unguents. The bird bowed its head towards Vali too, and then began to speak.

At first, its sounds did not seem familiar to anyone. Then, slowly, with repeated effort, it modulated its sounds, until words began to appear. *Ganeshas. Vaishnavi Devi. Great Danger. Army. Follow the river. North. North. Army. North.*

*

Tara and Ruma sat quietly, without a word, without displaying a reaction more than the faintest of smiles and the most earnest of nods.

'This is the greatest opportunity your husbands have been given,' Riksharaja declared in a loud voice. 'My elder son, my Vali, will now lead the largest army ever assembled in all of Kishkindha, and bring glory to my line. And you, younger daughter, I understand your fears. You must not worry any more. Vali will bring his little brother home with him, and you will both marry and have many sons and daughters. I, Riksharaja, have blessed you!'

'Thank you, O mighty mother,' Tara said, softly. Discreetly, she tapped her sister on the leg with her *balance* to remind her to salute her as well.

Riksharaja seemed pleased, as she usually was when people gave her the respect she knew she deserved. She also liked a bit of grovelling, but it had to be done correctly. In any case, she would now have a fairly busy time ahead of her. Without Vali and his boys, the process of tribute collection, accounting, and protocol maintenance would require much more out of her. It was a good time, therefore, to step up the training of her two daughters-in-waiting. Picturing Tara supervising her unguents and baths, and Ruma overlooking the accounting, Riksharaja walked out to see to Vali's ornamentation. That boy was about to make an impression on the length and breadth of the land. Left to himself, he would set out looking like a husk-gatherer, like his rough and absent father, yes, like his father, and not his royal mother at all.

When she was sure that Riksharaja was a good distance away from the cave, Tara turned and whispered to Ruma, 'Tonight, we must leave. Be prepared.'

Ruma looked surprised.

'This is the only way, Ruma,' Tara continued. 'Vali and Sugreeva both need us. We do not know what sort of danger they are walking into. This sort of alarm has not been sounded in a long time.'

'But what about her? Who will attend to her bath?' Ruma asked, nodding in the direction of their future mother-in-law.

'She and her bath are precisely what I do not want to be left holding at this time,' Tara replied.

Ruma allowed herself a smile. Perhaps, as Tara thought, Vali would prove more compassionate and less prone to his mother's whims if he were away from all this, away from her, that is. Perhaps they would bring Sugreeva home too. She never lost faith that Sugreeva was still well. Ruma, like every woman in Kishkindha, knew what Hanuman was made of.

A Call for War



‘The boy rejects all the food we have given him,’ Vashishta’s student reported in a sad voice. ‘He sits and does not move for hours, and then, suddenly, he begins to hit the walls with his fists.’

‘What ails him, O Rishi?’ Vaishnavi asked. The tantrums of the boy had grown louder all afternoon, causing the number of worried onlookers to grow as well.

‘It is a lack of food, and some sort of poisoning that took place while he was still inside his mother’s womb,’ Vashishta said, busily grinding some leaves in his palm. ‘As you can see, this child was born without a *balance*.’

One of Vaishnavi’s advisors giggled, but then quickly composed herself. She now began to look positively sorry for the child.

Vishwamitra smiled.

‘Yes,’ Vashishta continued, ‘at first we thought that perhaps the child’s *balance* had been cut by his parents, since they do seem to have a talent for such things. But that is not how it seems to have happened.’

‘Why would the Goddess...’ Vaishnavi began, still somewhat incredulous at the sight of the boy’s back.

‘*Vakrakavyaleelavathi*,’ both Vashishta and Vishwamitra said at once.

‘She who plays with twisted words,’ Vashishta explained to her. ‘A name for the Goddess in the eastern parts. It is Her sport. That is how some

Kishkindhans got big noses, and others their long *balances* . And now, this. No *balance* . And, of course, no hair too.'

'But the boy had hair when you brought him,' Vaishnavi said.

'All ornamentation. Just as we use flowers, his kind seem to use mud and hair. His skin underneath is smooth and pale. There is one thing that is endearing, though.'

'What is that?'

'He suckles his thumb, just as our children do.'

Hanuman smiled. He ran his fingers gently over the boy's arms.

Perhaps the wretched creatures were not so different after all.

*

After three days, the birds began to return. In contrast to their solemn, silent and well-disciplined departure, now they were all excited, a giant buzzing cacophony of voices. The princess's advisors walked around the lake, trying to keep track of who had returned from where and what responses they had brought. Vishwamitra walked alongside them, quietly. He was easily the person with the most experience in communicating with the many clans of Kishkindha.

The advisors struggled, painfully trying to imitate the sounds being made by the birds, and drawing inferences from that about what the original messages might have been. Some languages translated well. Some did not.

But Vishwamitra knew that the alert had been sounded successfully. Whether everyone understood exactly what was happening, or whether they would actually come, was still unclear. He knew that no one could imagine how ruthless these new creatures could be. Even Vaishnavi's people seemed more curious than fearful. The only creature they had seen was the child. And Vishwamitra knew that the child would have to be kept hidden, lest the soldiers expect entertainment rather than the violent conflict that was ahead.

Weaving his way through the birds, Vishwamitra also wondered about the birds that had not yet returned. Had they lost their way? Did they lose focus? Were they not received properly? Were the clan chiefs still deliberating, arguing about what could possibly be so dangerous as to warrant such a large mobilization?

But he knew the one they needed most would come. Riksharaja was the only one left in Kishkindhanagara with memories of a time when there was

conflict in the land. She sought that glory, always, and would now send Vali to find it too.

The peacock had not yet returned from the rock city.

*

Meanwhile, Sugreeva and Hanuman tried to show Vaishnavi's guards what they recalled about the way the creatures had attacked them, and the ways in which they had risen to defend themselves. It was not very persuasive, because they could not help laughing whenever Hanuman or Sugreeva demonstrated how the creatures walked only on their rear legs.

Finally, Hanuman gave up and walked away from his unwilling pupils. 'We cannot teach a race that has never fought what it is all about.'

'Are you saying there is no other way?' Sugreeva asked.

'I cannot conceive of another method, Sugreeva. Our fights are always about posturing. Our *dharma* operates because we have an efficient system in place. Our disputes are settled through the weight of reputation each person brings. We rarely confront each other in anger.'

'And even if we do...' Sugreeva laughed.

'...we push each other. That is it. We are wrestlers, at best. We don't even scratch, let alone use our teeth.'

Sugreeva tried to pull back his lips in a snarl.

'That is actually very useful,' Hanuman said. 'Though we may look like confused jackals when we do that...'

Embarrassed, Sugreeva closed his mouth.

Hanuman laughed. 'No. It is a good thing. We need to learn the basics. We are not going to neutralize the creatures shoulder to shoulder, muscle to muscle. No. They will tear our arms and limbs and heads off with everything they have. I think we have to start with fear. We have to show them that we have whatever it is they are afraid of. Fire, light, sound. Teeth, maybe.'

'But Hanuman,' Sugreeva began, sadly. 'Do you think we will really have to, you know, bite them?'

'Did you feel like it? When you fought?'

'I did and I didn't. I don't know. They are a strange race.'

'Sugreeva, I would rather not go anywhere near them ever again. But the sad truth is that they are coming towards us. They are coming for us. I

believe that we can put up a defence here, and stop them. But I still do not know what it really means to stop them.'

'Simple. We defeat them. We leave them to the Jatayus. We go home. We are greeted as heroes. My mother will stop this silly *apachara* talk. Vali will rule. You and I will live as brothers. And...'

'And?'

'And Ruma and Tara will make sure that in a few years you too...'

Hanuman laughed. 'I have never understood that. But I am happy about how you feel about Ruma and how Ruma feels about you.'

Vishwamitra walked in. 'You sound happy, even in these unhappy times.'

'We try,' Sugreeva said, 'we must think of better days ahead.'

'We were actually wondering, O Rishi,' Hanuman said, seriously now, 'what it means to stop these creatures. I can picture them falling, by the hundreds, and maybe by the thousands, down these tranquil hills. I can picture this bed of flowers and songbirds, and these fair maidens, becoming bloody like Naraka Raja's domain. I can picture their children, like this boy who the Goddess willed into our hands, an unwilling guest, falling down as well. I cannot believe that such horror is the only path our Goddess will present before us.'

'That is true, Hanuman. But perhaps we can make sure all this goes no further.'

'That was my concern, wise Rishi,' Hanuman said. 'Let us say we are victorious, as the Goddess will make sure we are. Let us say we drop these barbarians into the mouths of Jatayus and their fires until not a single one of them is left. Let us say we do return to our homes, as Sugreeva says, as heroes. Will we still be who we are now? Will we still feel the same respect for the *parama dharma* as we did before?'

Vishwamitra's face seemed to glow in the dark.

'Or,' Hanuman continued, 'will we end up merely carrying on what these creatures have brought to us? What will stop us from becoming like them, becoming indifferent to the *parama dharma* ?'

'Now, Hanuman,' Sugreeva began, 'we are surely different from those barbarians. After we have fought them, we will wash ourselves nicely, roll in the best flowers, and then put all this and the smell of all this well behind us.'

Vishwamitra sighed. 'You are young and strong, my friends. And your brother will come too, Sugreeva, for he is now the strongest among all the

chiefs in the land today, that is what all the birds say, that is what all the races of our *loka* speak of today. So do not worry. We will not let the creatures pass. But Hanuman is right. What such a battle will do to our sense of *dharma* is important too. And only one person can help us achieve victory without destroying the *parama dharma* .’

‘Who is that?’ Hanuman asked.

‘Vashishta,’ Vishwamitra answered. ‘He cares for the boy not only because he wants him to live, but also because he understands things few of us do. He might find a way of curing the barbarians.’

‘Before what ails them begins to ail us too?’ Hanuman asked.

‘I am sorry, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva said, a little too mirthfully now. ‘That is simply not possible. When *adharma* raises its head, *dharma* gives it a knock till it goes down again. That is what we shall do now too. You just wait till Vali comes. Between the three of us, we will break their teeth so they can never kill anything that lives ever again.’

‘That is one option too,’ Vishwamitra said, with an equally funny twist of his head.

*

Riksharaja extracted every drop from every favour she had bestowed upon the priest. He had to chant his prayers louder, longer, and with a near war-like ferocity to win her approval now. Vali was restless, impatient to start on the march. His *sena* had rounded up hundreds of boys from nearby kingdoms. Most had come willingly. After the Five Coconuts, it wasn’t just the chiefs of these kingdoms who had fallen under Vali’s sovereignty, but their people too, especially the youth. Riksharaja had set up a special unit of entertainers and troubadours who went from village to village, enacting plays about Vali’s valour. Soon, anyone who could lift his *balance* off the ground was telling his parents that he wanted to be a part of the Vali Sena.

The first thing Riksharaja thought when she saw so many people gathered to fight under Vali was that she had almost outdone the size of the crowd that had come to see Hanuman when he was born. But that was a rag-tag collection of whining babies and overzealous grannies. This, the Vali Sena, was real power. Kesari could not ever have put together a force like this. She snorted in satisfaction.

At an opportune moment, she nodded to the priest to conclude. He lit a massive, ornamental *arathi* that he raised carefully so as to not scorch any more fingers than he had during the practice. It was bigger and more spectacular than any fire display Vishwamitra had put on. A group of musicians began to bang stones and hollow trunks loudly. A formidable tension had built up in the air, and Riksharaja was aware that she, and Vali, now suitably ornamented, were at the heart of it.

Everyone watched closely as Vali approached his mother for her blessings. Even from the farthest ranks, he was a sight to behold, draped in every kind of red and orange flower the forest could offer. His muscles gleamed and exuded power as he moved, from one prostration to another. Finally, as he was about to turn and face his army, Tara stepped forward from behind Riksharaja. He looked mildly pleased, as if her presence was more real than all the pomp. Tara was aware he was glad, but she did not quite show it, not around his mother anyway. With a serious look, and a couple of earnest glances at Riksharaja, she proceeded to garland Vali, and anoint his forehead with an auspicious marking. As she did so, Vali looked sincerely confused. He was keen to set out on his adventure, but there was a little part of him that just wanted to stay with her too. He had been that way from childhood.

Tara knew him better than anyone, even Riksharaja. She stepped back behind the lines of the waiting attendants, and covered her face as if she was about to cry. Once she was sure Riksharaja noticed this, she slipped away, still holding her face, sobbing gently, as if to return to the mournful solitude of her chambers.

Vali stepped forward to survey his army. One of his tributaries from the coastal mountains had given him a conch shell, something no one had heard in these parts. He raised it to his mouth and blew. The soldiers cheered lustily.

The march began.

It took almost the whole afternoon for the last of the soldiers to disappear into the forests. The sound of their progress through it echoed much longer. Finally, around sunset, only the faintest rhythm of drumbeats echoed between the mountains.

It was only the next morning that the attendants confirmed what Riksharaja had suspected all night. Tara and Ruma were gone.

23

Jambavanth



The first forces to reach the valley of Princess Vaishnavi were those of Jambavanth. Their numbers were not very large, but their presence was enough to make up for that. Each bear looked capable of effortlessly sweeping up three or four of the creatures in each of their arms.

As Vishwamitra expected, Jambavanth was thoroughly confused by the sight of the boy. ‘This little child is the cause of the alarm ringing through the length and breadth of Kishkindha?’ he exclaimed.

The child, in turn, seemed to like him. For the first time since he had become an unwitting member of Kishkindhan hospitality, he smiled. The princess’s attendants had cleaned him when he had slept, but he still clung to the untidy and crumbling blanket of skin, hair and mud he had been covered in. His sickness, and his tantrums, had now considerably reduced. Vashishta’s medicines were obviously working, even if slowly.

He walked up to Jambavanth, and touched his fur gently.

‘You say this child eats elephants?’ Jambavanth asked, now completely befuddled.

Hanuman and Sugreeva had to laugh. There was something completely disarming about Jambavanth. He seemed so much like a long-lost uncle or grand-uncle. He took a liking to Hanuman instantly, and now, his booming,

questioning voice almost made it seem like what Hanuman and Sugreeva had witnessed of the child's race had all been a dark hallucination.

'Now, this child eats bananas,' Vashishta said, proudly, 'as any child should.'

'But when he was a baby, *this* small,' Jambavanth gestured, 'he ate elephants, or so you say.'

Vishwamitra touched Jambavanth's shoulder, which he could barely reach. 'Come, my friend, the Princess awaits your wisdom.'

The attendants gently led the child away. He held on confidently, as if he was holding his own mother's hands. His walk too seemed more appropriate now. Even though his body did not quite look it, the way he swayed as he moved was almost as if he could climb trees and leap from them like any other normal Kishkindhan child.

'What magic did the Goddess give you, O Rishi?' Hanuman asked Vashishta.

Vashishta leaned over and looked at his feet as if there was a great ongoing study involving them that no one else could understand. 'Oh. Just some leaves. Just some grass. Just some juices,' he said vaguely.

Hanuman thought carefully about every word he'd said. Vashishta really did not speak much, and even now, when he did, he seemed to be very nonchalant about everything. But anyone who spoke so little had to be more serious about what he was saying than he let on.

A grass. A leaf. The creatures were malnourished. Perhaps that was the problem.

'O Rishi, please wait,' Hanuman went after him, realizing suddenly that everyone had walked away. 'I have one question. When we used to play in the river near Kishkindhanagara, we used to swim and float along with its currents. But we always knew where we could go and where we couldn't by the lines of the trees that we saw.'

'Good boys!' Vashishta said, looking as if he was going to ascend the tree he was inspecting and vanish somewhere into its heights.

'My question is this. These grasses that have healed the child, what if we were to make them grow where the creatures will find them?'

'Good question!' Vashishta shouted, and leaped up the trunk of the tree.

Hanuman stood there, wondering if that was a possibility. 'But what is the answer to that question?' he finally called out, in some exasperation.

Vashishta's voice now appeared from deep inside the leaves, perhaps from another tree altogether. 'Vishwamitra. He has all the answers.'

*

'So we should plant trees and grasses all across the place of the Great Dispersal?' Sugreeva asked Hanuman. His voice contained enough incredulousness to represent that of everyone present at the discussion. 'And that will make them leave us alone?'

'The *rishi* Vashishta said it was a good question. I am assuming it means it is worthy of our serious consideration,' Hanuman replied.

'Will creatures that are elephant-eaters suddenly stop to eat leaves and grass and decide to leave us alone?' Jambavanth asked, absent-mindedly. It seemed that either he had not reconciled to the new reality, or to having woken up in the morning. In any case, the question was not irrelevant, thought Hanuman.

'I saw their hunger, and I think it is this that drives them to whatever it is they do. If Vashishta's medicines can help their bodies overcome that hunger, then maybe they will evolve their own ideal of *dharma* too,' Hanuman said.

Jambavanth looked at him admiringly, as if he had found a long-lost son. He made an elegant gesture with his hand that Hanuman should continue.

Hanuman smiled. 'The child could be an example. Children learn from parents. But in times of distress, or sudden change—which describes the world at present—parents too learn from children. Maybe the Goddess gave him to us so we could find an answer to the problem that ails his people.'

Sugreeva shook his head vigorously. 'The poor child can be excused, for now. But you are forgetting what you saw with your own eyes, Hanuman. His own mother would probably eat him, instead of any medicine or solution you might try and give her.'

For the first time, Vaishnavi reacted. Her hand went up to tap her cheeks in repentance for hearing such a thing. But she stopped, because she was also a ruler, and she knew exactly how she had to look at all times. She straightened herself, and allowed Sugreeva to continue.

'Jambavanth is here. The Ganas are mobilizing. And I am sure my mother will send Vali to fight alongside us too, very soon,' Sugreeva said. 'I

think we should discourage these creatures from coming anywhere close to us.'

Jambavanth leaned back silently, watching Sugreeva. Then, he took a deep breath and spoke. 'I see the wisdom of both viewpoints here. I too think that hunger drives one to terrible extremes. We have been fortunate for the most part in our *loka*. Our people, big and small, follow *dharma*. We have not seen starvation on any widespread scale, as this unfortunate race of creatures seems to be experiencing. We must assume there was a time when they were aware of *dharma* too, but then, somehow, they fell into bad times. Now, having said that, there is also the possibility that even if we were to be able to help their children, we would not really be able to help them.'

'Why is that?' Hanuman asked.

'There is the possibility that they might see the grass and fruit as an invitation. If they are as cunning as you say, disguising themselves in elephant skins, there is a chance they might just learn to use our food in a way that suits them. Just as how we use a little honey to coax the bees into leaving their richer combs for us. What if they use our fruit and trees to entice more of us to walk into their jaws?'

Hanuman nodded. This bear's mind was as big as his reputation.

'And speaking of cunning,' Jambavanth continued, 'creatures like these should normally have caught the attention of the Jatayus. I am very curious that none of the northern Jatayus have spoken about it.'

A cold silence filled the gathering.

'I have not seen or heard a northern Jatayu in recent times,' Vishwamitra said.

'If my suspicion is correct,' Jambavanth said, 'these creatures are extremely intelligent, even if it is in a narrow, selfish way. They are probably eating not only the elephants, but even the great birds that soar away from us so easily. They are probably eating everything that they see.'

Hanuman looked disappointed.

'It is a sad reality, my young brother,' Jambavanth placed his hand gently on Hanuman's shoulder. 'A creature that has decided to kill anything it finds will stop at nothing. Only a great act of grace, and force, from the Goddess, can restore the balance now.'

'So war is inevitable.' Sugreeva said, but he sounded unenthusiastic, now that it had actually come to this.

*

That evening, Princess Vaishnavi went to see the child again. Despite his improvement, he sometimes became restless and agitated at twilight. His muscles twitched, and he kicked, and he began to run around the cave in circles.

‘I believe he cannot help recalling what his people do when the sun sets,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘Sometimes the mind heals faster than the body, and sometimes, it is the other way around.’

The boy became even more agitated as Vaishnavi approached. He began to chew his finger, and lash out at the walls of the cave.

She closed her eyes with a feeling of sadness, and then opened them again. She gazed intently into the boy’s face, and suddenly, without any warning, he calmed down. She extended her hand to him, and the boy raised his and held it tightly.

Then, the princess of the mountains calmly took the boy out for a walk under the rising moon.

Vaishnavi walked purposefully down the path until she reached the cave where Hanuman was resting. She stood there quietly for a moment, thinking about what Hanuman had said. The boy began to make some sounds, almost as if he was singing.

Hearing the sound, Hanuman came out. ‘Greetings, O Princess,’ he said, bowing slightly.

‘The moonlight seems to ease the child’s pain,’ she said with a smile.

‘Your attendants could take him out, but, you are too kind, you do it yourself,’ Hanuman said, a bit hesitantly. He felt the princess should not be careless in trusting even the child of a troubled race, lest some illness befall her. He had lost a great deal of the hope he had felt before that morning’s meeting, about the creatures’ potential to change for the better.

‘I wish to honour you for every effort you are making, O wise son of Kishkindhanagara,’ the princess said. ‘If there is any room at all in the Goddess’s plans for us to find a peaceful solution, we must pursue it.’

‘Great Princess,’ Hanuman said, walking up to her now. ‘I do not think the Goddess can find a better voice for her thoughts than you on this earth.’

‘Come, I wish to show you something, it will soothe your senses after all the troubles you have seen,’ she replied, smiling brightly.

Hanuman followed her as she began to walk up the path towards the summit of one of the hills, staying a few feet behind, respectfully. She kept pausing and turning around to speak to him as she did, and soon, so as to not inconvenience her, Hanuman began to walk by her side.

Then, as they neared the summit, the child reached out and caught Hanuman's hand too. Suddenly, he raised his feet off the ground, and began to swing between the two of them.

'He is one of us now!' Vaishnavi laughed.

How else could it be? Hanuman thought, and smiled. But he would stay on his guard against his optimism. He had seen too much beauty and ugliness all at once, all too soon.

The valley spread out below them like a smile on the face of the Goddess. The lake and the dozens of smaller water bodies around it reflected the moonlight as if they were holding up a mirror to some celestial beauty's face. The leaves moved gently in the breeze, and the perfumed air made Hanuman feel very content and peaceful.

'What a beautiful land this is, Princess,' he said.

'You can call me Vaishnavi. That is what my friends called me when I used to play with them,' she said, seemingly with a bit of regret.

'I shall do as you say, Princess Vaishnavi,' Hanuman readily answered.

She laughed.

The child began to make some happy sounds as well.

'I wish all their troubles are nothing more than a bad dream, Hanuman,' she said, looking down at the child. 'This earth has such a large heart that I cannot see the reason why anyone would harm anyone else. I hope this child will prove to be the way to avert a conflict that really should not take place at all. I hope his mother will one day come and embrace him, and feed him with love.'

It was a kind wish, Hanuman thought. But the memory of the creatures and their apparent lack of restraint even with their own children disturbed him. Vaishnavi's optimism was important though. He did not want to contest it. 'I was worried I spoke too much this morning,' Hanuman admitted.

'No. Your wisdom is obvious. It is your strength. A peace obtained over time is better than a victory won in war. Look at those green lights up in the hills, look at all those poor things, staying alert each night, guarding their senses and their thoughts for the sake of our sleep. A war can defeat an

enemy on the horizon, but what about the enemy that comes into our mind, the enemy of fear, mistrust, suspicion? We are living on that edge already.'

'It is true. I cannot fully appreciate this moonlight or this beauty as I once did. My mind wanders into a state of happiness, and suddenly, it leaps like a startled rabbit. Was that a shadow? Or did that rock just move? Is that tree going to leap at me with its terrible claws?'

'Your hands move as if you are in a fight, Hanuman,' Vaishnavi said.

'It has been that way, Vaishnavi,' Hanuman said, bringing his palms together in a prayer to the Goddess. 'I try to stop, but then a part of my mind says not to stop, but to practise, do it again and again, imagine those savages hurtling upon my friends, and imagine my fists and elbows pounding their heads and their chests like boulders.'

Vaishnavi did not speak. The sound of Hanuman's breath filled the silence.

She reached out to him and placed her palm on his chest. His heart raced and filled with feelings of terror, and of hope, of horror, and then of a strange purity. She nodded slowly, and smiled.

Hanuman felt his heartbeat slow down, and the rush of anger he had felt passed. 'May the Goddess forgive me; what fiery words I speak in so beautiful a place!' He laughed.

'Come, let us sit and listen,' she said.

Hanuman and Vaishnavi sat down with the child between them and gazed into the distance. Vaishnavi began to hum softly, a gentle, lilting melody. Soon, Hanuman realized that she was chanting the thousand names of the Goddess, but doing so without speaking a word. The effect was magical, and soothing. In the distance, the green rocks clicked, glowed, and faded.

Hanuman stretched out on the grass and slowly fell asleep. *These were all the Goddess's creations, this beautiful princess, this strange child, this enchanted valley. The fear and anger he felt were just distractions. They would not change anything. They would not change him.*

He slept, better than he had slept since the night he had gone to bed with his mother and father in Kishkindhanagara, nearly a whole season ago.

When he woke up, Vaishnavi was still asleep, a few feet away. But the boy was gone.

The Armies Assemble



The next morning, news came quickly and all at once from many directions. An advance party of two Ganapatis arrived, followed by a host of birds whose garbled words indicated, most likely, that more help was on the way. Then, shortly after the morning prayers came a most unexpected advance party from the south.

‘What on earth!’ whispered Vaishnavi. At the head of the procession was an improvised palanquin, and inside it lay her peacock, obviously uncomfortable and bothered. ‘What have these fools done?’ she asked her attendants, who seemed bewildered as well.

As if on cue, two members of the Vali Sena opened the lid of the palanquin and tried to coax the peacock out. It looked fat and wobbly.

The *senas* kneeled down and gestured to the peacock. ‘Oh Princess, our king, the mighty Vali, returns your fine messenger with honours.’

The peacock squawked in protest and, relieved to see Vaishnavi again, wobbled off into the trees.

Vishwamitra assured her it was nothing serious. The answer lay in the contents of the other cargo the *senas* had carried on their shoulders: heaps of bananas, coconuts and mangoes. They had fed the bird more food than it was accustomed to, and had also carried enough now to last a whole season it seemed.

Convinced that Vaishnavi was impressed with their treatment of her bird, the Vali Sena now proceeded to make more announcements proudly. *Lord Vali, King of Kishkindhanagara, Protector of the Plateau, and the Banks of the Mother River in Both Directions, Benevolent Guard of the Four Directions and Three Altitudes, was on his way with a mighty army of fearless soldiers, loyal vassals, and all manner of preparation to assist the Princess Vaishnavi of the north and all others who face dangers from the strange worlds of Outer Kishkindha.*

Vaishnavi's attendants thanked the emissaries politely, and led them away to a grove quite far from the princess's cave. Thrilled by their hospitality, the youth of the *sena* now shouted in praise not only of their ruler, but their fair hostess, and Goddess Saraswati too, though in the end they didn't seem to quite get any of the pronunciations right.

Through it all, the bears looked content. Since they had come early, they had managed to set up camp under the best trees, with the best access to the lakes as well.

'Noble Jambavanth,' an elderly bear warrior mumbled, 'are you certain we had to come?'

'Don't you think I asked them that too?' Jambavanth replied, in his inimitable tone.

*

By noon, the valley was busy with too many voices asking too many questions in too many different tongues. Vishwamitra was once again everywhere, translating, intervening, and most of all, squashing all forms of rumours and theories, including an especially preposterous one that assumed that a marriage was about to be announced between the powerful southern King Vali and the noble northern princess Vaishnavi. 'No, no, and once again, no,' Vishwamitra was soon shouting. 'There are barbarians beyond the north—no, these are the bears, our friends—the barbarians are far more deadly. Wait. Wait. We will hold a great *sabha* shortly.'

'Good Princess,' Vishwamitra finally had to say when he returned to the princess's cave, 'I wonder if we should perhaps reassign your attendants to other duties. I fear this new group of youth Vali seems to have recruited are a little too boisterous to be around ... er ... gentle ladies.'

‘Do not worry, O Rishi,’ she smiled. ‘I would worry for Vali’s men, if they make the mistake of thinking my guard are actually, well, gentle.’

Vishwamitra had suspected as much. But the assurance helped. He raised his palms and blessed her, and everyone, sincerely. On this day, he was blessing everyone a lot. Hopefully, the Goddess was watching him, and had her palm hovering benevolently above his head too.

*

Hanuman finally returned from his futile search. None of the hills and trees around the valley had any signs of the missing boy. Vashishta did not seem to react badly when Hanuman told him the news, but nonchalantly went along on his way into some bushes. Nonetheless, Hanuman couldn’t help feeling that he had failed both the princess and the rishis by allowing himself to fall asleep. Like a distant echo, Riksharaja’s voice seemed to echo in his mind. *Wasteful Hanuman. Rowdy Hanuman.*

Hanuman paused. And, for the first time, laughed at the thought of her words. It did not matter now.

The only inferences Hanuman could draw from the way the leaves were crushed, and the reports of noises from the guards on duty, was that the boy had headed south, and thus was at least not in danger of running into his own violent kind. Perhaps, someday, if it was meant to be, the Goddess would guide him to a better life too.

Sugreeva, naturally, was not convinced, and extended his search much longer. He thought the boy might lead his people into the valley undetected, and ought to be recaptured. The boy’s behaviour convinced Sugreeva that whatever cure Vashishta had attempted had been unsuccessful.

Finally, in the late afternoon, Sugreeva too gave up. The sounds of something like thunder were now audible in the distance. They grew closer, and louder.

At sunset, a procession of musicians, singers, and palm tree-banner-holders walked down a gentle slope into the valley. They were followed on all sides by what seemed like a sea of people. Finally, the crowds parted and knelt as one before the formidable person swathed in red and orange seated at its centre.

‘Anna!’ Sugreeva shouted, and ran down from the cave with tears of happiness.

‘Princess Vaishnavi,’ Hanuman said quietly. ‘That is my Cousin Sugreeva’s brother, the King Vali.’

From their cave, even from that height and distance, they could see the affection with which the powerful, red-adorned man leaped down from his palanquin to embrace his brother. In a way, Hanuman was deeply relieved.

*

The talks began early the next morning. As Vishwamitra had expected, there was no clear understanding about exactly what the danger was. Neither did anyone have ideas on how to confront it. In a way, it was perhaps for the best that the child had run away. His presence was deceptive. No one would have believed that a creature so small and fragile could come from a race of relentless killers.

But now, Veera Ganapati was here, and his words carried the most weight of all. All of Kishkindha was used to thinking of the Ganapatis as the last word in matters such as these, though there had never been matters quite like these as long as anyone could recall.

Vali, for all his careful presentation and ceremony, seemed suddenly humble and ready for the task, perhaps entirely because of his warm reunion with his brother. He had spoken cordially to Hanuman too, and in a way that got Vaishnavi’s attention.

‘Some meet the souls of others with their eyes, as equals,’ she said to Vishwamitra discreetly, ‘O wise teacher, but with Hanuman, I can tell that our royal guest could never have made his peace without all the ceremony he now brings with him. He meets Hanuman as an equal because he is now king. Before, he probably lacked the conviction to ever know Hanuman as he is.’

Vishwamitra smiled, and made his peace and blessings gesture, as was now his habit. She was correct.

Whatever had been his past follies, Vali was now ready for battle. He had, of course, not quite seen anything like what Hanuman and Sugreeva and the Ganas had faced, but the fact remained that he had a reasonably skilled and highly-motivated force. The members of the Vali Sena were raw, but then they had come with a motivation no one else really felt, and that was a desire for glory. Like Vali, they had known only the peace that had lasted for a long time, and that utopia seemed to stifle their very nature.

They wanted fights, and stories about those fights that they could tell their grandchildren.

*

Veera Ganapati began the meeting. 'Friends, no words we say can possibly convey the horror we feel at this strange new threat that our world now faces. To put it plainly, a race of killers, without any thought of the *parama dharma*, or feeling of even parental love towards their young, has appeared on our northern horizons.'

His voice had the effect that Vishwamitra had hoped for. It did not leave any scope for doubts as to its seriousness.

But Hanuman also understood the challenge before them. No one but them had seen those creatures. There was a possibility that everyone else would either underestimate them, or perhaps start that way and then swing to the other extreme of losing hope in the fight against them.

'As the *rishi* Vishwamitra has explained to many of you,' Ganapati continued, 'we have had two frightful face-to-face encounters with members of this race, in the place of the Great Dispersals. That is to say, not more than a few days' journey from us, for those who know the paths through the mountains. We may assume that they have not yet shown themselves here because they have not found a way, or perhaps because the season grows colder, and the mountain paths will be drowned now in ice and snow. But in time, they will find a way, because they are not lacking in intelligence.'

'A crooked kind of intelligence, *vakra buddhi*,' one of the chiefs said, contemptuously.

'That may be. But for now this is the reality.'

'How have the woolly Ganeshas of the far north dealt with it?' someone in the back asked, leading to a ripple of embarrassed murmurs.

Ganapati lowered his head. 'Let us say our northern friends gave their lives to warn us. They have not survived. We do not believe anything other than these creatures now roam the lands beyond the ice desert.'

'West?' the same voice asked, a little more respectfully now.

'Our messengers have not returned,' Ganapati said. 'There is no word from the east either. As for all the other regions beyond which our ancestral

hero Sree Varaha Ganapati found land for us to live on, we have no news at all.'

'Who is Varaha Ganapati?' Hanuman asked Vishwamitra softly, hoping there was another mighty warrior who could help them.

'An ancient legend,' Vishwamitra whispered. 'They say that when frightening creatures rose out of the waters and threatened to devour the elephants, he single-handedly defeated them with his six tusks, and led all the elephants across the waters to safety.'

'Could these creatures that we faced have come from the water too? Or perhaps are their descendants?' Hanuman asked.

Vishwamitra thought about it, then shook his head to indicate he had no answer.

'So, there it is my friends,' Ganapati concluded. 'The wisest and bravest leaders of our *loka* are all here. It is for you now to think of the appropriate *upaya*, the strategy, to eliminate this danger.'

'Where do these creatures live?' Vali asked. 'My men can march on them and defeat them long before they ever come here. Just show us the way, Ganapati.'

Vali's fans shouted support from outside. He gestured to them to remain quiet.

'I do not believe they are civilized enough to have homes and families like us, brother,' Sugreeva spoke up now. 'It is hard to imagine, but that is how they are. They kill, collect the skins, and move along, searching for the next kill. That is all.'

'They must have camps? Maybe by the rivers? I am sure a race as powerful as this must have a powerful leader, and he must have a place where he oversees his tributes, a place where they collect and distribute their carcasses.'

Sugreeva touched his ears in repentance but did not let on he was disturbed by the callousness of Vali's remark.

Vali continued, loudly. 'We must challenge their leader, and I will defeat him.'

His admirers roared again.

Ganapati spoke with all the patience his race was renowned for. 'We are grateful for your presence, mighty Vali. If it emerges that these creatures do have a *dharma* of sorts, even a twisted *vikruthi dharma*, then it may be

possible to achieve our goals without too much suffering, for us, and for them, too.'

'Well spoken, noble Ganapati,' Vishwamitra beamed. 'I think we must first of all be clear about what our goals are. In the face of *adharma*, which is surely what we face here, and in the heat of conflict, which we will also surely see in the days ahead, it would be easy to forget our goals. It would be easy to be consumed by fire, and look for revenge and punishment where justice and safety are all that *dharma* prescribes.'

'Yes, yes, I concur,' Vali said. 'But first we must secure a hold over them, is that not correct?'

Ganapati agreed.

'So let us go then, let us go north till we find them, and then we will teach them a thing or two,' Vali said cheerfully.

His army once again roared its approval.

This time, the princess laughed. Their enthusiasm was innocent, and so dangerous too. 'O mighty Vali,' she began, 'the north is no Kishkindhan garden. The Kishkindha you know ends with this valley. Beyond this, beyond the great mountains, lie endless expanses of desolation. There will be no trees, and no food for your troops beyond a few days' march; and the seasons too are exceptionally hostile now.'

Vali looked disappointed.

'But do not worry about their well-being. We are blessed enough by the Goddess that we can hold out here for a long time.'

'So we just wait for them to come here? Just sit and wait?' Vali said.

'Waiting is a virtue, friends, but it is not for everybody,' Ganapati laughed. 'We must act according to our natures, but in harmony with the greater good of nature.'

Hanuman smiled at that remark. It was as if Goddess Saraswati had herself instructed Ganapati to clarify their purpose now in such lucid terms.

'Some of us move, some of us lie in wait. Some of us have speed, some have strength. But we all have *dharma* at heart. So we must think. What is the best way for all our races to work together now? What is the best way for us to work with the forces of land and climate, and not walk into more opposition than we really need to now?'

'I agree with Ganapati,' Vaishnavi said. 'A long march to the north may prove costlier than necessary, even with a supply line stretching out from our valley. Bracing for a siege here may also prove wasteful. We must find

a way to draw them out somewhere in the middle, and to engage them there.'

'And we know what draws them out,' Sugreeva said, perhaps a bit too matter-of-factly, and then quickly added, 'but we shall make sure that no harm befalls anyone now.'

Ganapati smiled. Even someone as small as Sugreeva was confident in his ability to protect his kind. That was indeed the life and spirit of *dharma*. Strength and size did not matter. Only the sense of kindness for others did, for the intelligence borne of kindness could make up for what they lacked in cruelty. 'Sugreeva is right. We must use the knowledge we have about these creatures to our advantage. And what we know about them is that they will risk everything for the flesh of my brothers and sisters.'

'A trap, then,' Vali said.

'An invitation to self-improvement, let us just call it that,' Hanuman raised his finger sharply, surprised by his own boldness in contradicting Vali.

And Vali, for his part, couldn't help smiling faintly too, at his younger cousin's wit and wisdom.

Sisters in Arms



‘When do we...’ Ruma began.

‘Not yet, little sister,’ Tara whispered. ‘We are near our Vali and Sugreeva, and we have seen them, that is enough for now.’

‘Sugreeva looks thin and weak. Have you seen the scratches on his arms and legs?’ Ruma said.

Tara laughed. ‘We do not look all that beautiful ourselves. When was the last time we really cleaned ourselves?’

Ruma laughed too. ‘Who knew that not cleaning one’s self was all it took to not get noticed by boys?’

‘Listen,’ Tara continued. ‘After all this marching and shouting, it seems that something is finally going to happen now. There is going to be action. And from what everyone says, it will be beyond any argument we have seen back home. It will be biting and tearing and a no-thoughts-of-*dharma* kind of fighting.’

‘But that is how Vali’s boys like to talk.’

‘That is true. But now, it seems like all that talk may come to fruition. Have you noticed how they are training? Have you noticed how carefully Hanuman and Vishwamitra screen the soldiers and take them away for their assignments?’

‘Do you think they will discover us? Hanuman, or Vishwamitra?’

‘For now, they won’t. There are many here who came along because they were excited about adventure and now just want to keep their heads down. No one here has even been far from their parents, forget about actually being in a battle. We will not be alone if we appear unenthusiastic. So for now, we will keep our heads down. Remember, anytime anyone comes around asking for volunteers, we do not answer. We must lie low until we find the correct moment.’

‘What is that moment, Akka?’

‘When the brothers are fully ready to recognize what they mean to us. It might be the case that this war has to end first, and they have to finish celebrating and whatever else they may wish to do. But until then, by the Goddess’s grace, we are here, and we shall enjoy the hospitality of Princess Vaishnavi’s valley.’

‘You there, and you,’ a gruff voice suddenly called out to them. ‘Snuggling and snickering like two cousin sisters looking at boys during a Third Ceremony? Lord Vali has brought us here to fight a war. Go on and join the patrol party that is leaving for the hills.’

‘A rotten smell on the *balance* of his ancestors...’ Ruma began cursing in a low voice.

Tara looked around her. She had failed to notice that everyone around them had drifted off. Now, they had no way of wriggling out of this. ‘All for the best,’ she mumbled to Ruma. They stood up and hurried off to join the group of *senas* walking towards a mountain path.

‘Jai Vali!’ the gruff voice shouted behind.

‘Jai Vali,’ Tara said cheerily, and then whispered in mock anger to her sister, ‘But for this he will have to do patrol duty around my garden every time he comes to preen at me.’

‘I do not understand, Akka,’ Ruma said. ‘We walk across this wide and endless land to be near our beloved ones, and now we extend our separation.’

‘O little sister,’ Tara laughed. ‘No wonder you like Sugreeva and I like Vali. That is all.’

*

Once they reached the crest of the hill, Tara and Ruma took up positions in two trees a few dozen feet away from each other. The rest of their troop

settled into places to the left and to the right of them. Far below them, the sea of moving shapes and shadows that was the army slowly began to settle down into stillness and silence in the valley.

‘Remember,’ the troop leader had whispered, ‘you will keep looking at this tree trunk and this rock as if they are your own mother and father, and everything in between are your own little brothers and sisters.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ruma and Tara said.

‘If anything more than a shadow or a leaf moves, you make a warning sound. Two sounds for an alert, only one for anything more dangerous.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they answered again.

The darkness came swiftly, and the air became cooler. Then, the shapes of the other soldiers hiding in the trees soon melted into the dark, and even Ruma and Tara could barely see each other.

‘Still awake?’ Tara finally whispered.

‘Yes, sister.’

‘Good. Just checking. We must be on guard.’

‘I wish they had given us those green stones. It would have given us something to do.’

‘We are not senior enough! Not enough training!’

One of the other sentries in the trees made a sound whose meaning was not entirely clear, but the intent was. He was annoyed.

Tara and Ruma made chuckling bird-like sounds, softly, as if to annoy him, but then fell silent as well. There had been no conflict in all these days, but he was right. It was improper to forget the gravity of the reason that had brought them all here.

*

Ruma was the first to notice the stench. At first, it seemed to come from far away, something borne on the wind. Then, it seemed much closer, as if it was coming from below them.

She wondered if she should sound the note of caution. It could just be a nocturnal being of some sort, not of a clan given to as much cleanliness as them.

But still, thought Ruma, most creatures in Kishkindha avoided the presence of other living beings when they had to complete their natural

body matter expulsions. They did not like the thought of being associated with foul smells by anyone.

Did the gruff-voiced soldier bring them to an unclean area on purpose?

One of the sentries made the sound. It was two sounds, for a general alert. Ruma looked at Tara. Her eyes were white and wide open, even in the dark. She seemed to be staring fixedly at the rock in front of them.

To the side of the rock, there seemed to be a shape that hadn't been there before. Maybe it was a shadow, and it had moved with the angle of the moonlight.

But it was cloudy, and the moon was not even visible.

Suddenly, the shadow moved, and then rose to near full-height. It raised its hands high, and it howled like a beast with no language.

'Ruma, behind me, quick,' Tara shouted, and leaped out from the branch. On the ground, the stench from the creature was even more pronounced.

Ruma brought down a branch and handed it over to Tara. Tara raised it and shouted back at the creature.

The creature now howled some more and raised its hands high. It held something in them—stones.

'Create a flank, create a flank,' someone shouted, as the rest of the patrol came down from the trees to help.

The creature flung the stones in its hands at Tara, and they hit the earth a few inches from her feet. Tara shuffled back, and raised her stick high.

The creature advanced a couple of feet and then stopped.

Tara tried to focus. This was very similar to the way in which Vali's sena used to have their mock-fights. She made her plan. She could duck low and pull the creature's feet from under him once he came close. He was relying too much on his hind legs. He had not brought his fore legs to the ground even once until now.

Just as she prepared a move, a sound came from behind her, and then from all around. The stench came quickly and without mercy. The creatures were leaping on to them from all directions.

'Jai Mata Saraswati!' Tara shouted as the arms of a creature locked around her from behind. She could see Ruma had fallen down and was rolling away underneath another attacker. The stench was unbearable, and her arms and shoulders stung, as if the creatures had thorns in their hands.

Tara watched the other creature run towards her now, and without even a thought, leaped up off the ground using her arms for support and swung

back until her legs were around the creature's head. She could feel him trying to snap at her inner thighs. The smell from his arms and chest suffocated her. The pressure from her legs did not seem to be doing anything to him, so she leaned back, and in a way that she used to kick coconuts off trees, kicked him exactly where she knew his face would be. The creature screamed in pain and dropped her.

Quickly she ran past the grasping hands of other creatures until she reached the one on top of Ruma. With a fierce scream, she caught his ears and pulled.

Ruma turned around and scratched his face with her nails until he yelped in pain. He pulled back, and kicked, sending another sentry who had come to help skidding across the mud.

The first creature Tara had kicked now came up towards them. In his hand, he held a huge, jagged chunk of rock. He raised it high and looked for a target. Tara and Ruma were on their feet and could have run, but the sentry on the ground was barely moving, and out of breath. The creature turned towards him in anger, and threw the rock directly at his head.

Ruma screamed at the sight of the imminent *apachara*, but just then, something like a whirlwind rushed down from a tree and caught the rock in his hands.

It was Hanuman.

'Everyone, stop!' Hanuman shouted. A white figure rushed up behind him, and with a scratching sound, made a glowing yellow fire on the edge of a stick. It was Vishwamitra.

The creatures withdrew into a straight line, nursing their injuries, looking sadly at them. In the light, it was now clear. These were Vali's *senas*, just like them, covered in mud and dried leaves and something else that made them smell. They had their *balances* tied around their waists like belts to avoid detection.

'Stop,' Hanuman said again, raising his palm to pacify both lines. 'This is not real! This is an exercise! You are Kishkindhans and brothers. Say it.'

Vishwamitra said it, in a gentle voice, and then slowly encouraged everyone to repeat it. Tara felt something like cool air entering her and calming the fire that still pervaded every part of her body. A part of her mind kept insisting that the creatures before her had dared to hurt her, and her sister. Another part noticed only their sad faces, and their own wounds, and forgave them.

‘Forgive us, good soldiers,’ Vishwamitra said, to both lines of people. ‘This is the only way for us to prepare for what we are going to face very soon. Remember this smell, because what you will smell will be even more revolting. Yet, you will have to embrace it, and hold arms and legs and heads that are not like yours and yet are like yours too. You will have to defend yourself from weapons like this sharp stone, and worse. And all the while you will have to remember your *dharma*, and see if you can defeat them without destroying them.’

‘You have all done well, soldiers,’ Hanuman then added. ‘You are relieved now and may return to the valley to rest.’

As everyone began leaving, Hanuman went up to the last person in the row and touched her shoulder reassuringly.

‘Brother Hanuman,’ Ruma said, in tears, and embraced him.

*

By the next morning, Tara and Ruma looked, and felt, a lot better. They huddled against each other, still a bit damp from the cold water with which they had washed themselves. Princess Vaishnavi looked at them with affection and amusement. It made her view Sugreeva, and especially Vali, rather differently now. She was impressed that, underneath all their military talk, they were simple Kishkindhans at heart, having won the affections of these two young sisters.

‘That was very brave of you, Tara, and you too, Ruma,’ Vali said, in what he obviously hoped was an appropriately formal and polite tone. Then he almost said something about how his mother would be worried about their absence, but then checked himself. Unknown to him, Tara’s plan was obviously working. Vali was learning to be his own man, far from his mother’s powerful influence. She let her eyes smile.

‘We are here to stand by you and help you fight,’ Ruma said, unusually assertive now. ‘All these days, we have seen and heard what the soldiers are thinking. They are young, and brave. But they will need a lot more from all of us if they are not to turn and run when the danger comes.’

‘Why talk of danger, Ruma...’ Sugreeva began.

Hanuman smiled. ‘If anyone ran during our exercises, it was towards danger, Sugreeva, not away from it. But I appreciate Ruma’s point. We cannot take anything for granted.’

‘And that is why, I say, the stars are favourable and the Goddess has spoken,’ Vishwamitra clapped his hands and laughed.

‘For what?’ Vali asked, a bit dumbfounded.

‘For your marriage of course,’ Vishwamitra answered, raising his forefinger in a very matter-of-fact manner. ‘In the middle of preparing for war, there is nothing more important than making arrangements for a wedding!’

‘It was not our intention...’ Tara began.

‘But, O Rishi...’ Vali began.

‘Save your words for one another,’ Vishwamitra said, clapping his hands, and then proceeding to make quite a fuss now with his hands, feet, *balance*, and face. He looked almost funny now, as if a festival could be as important as a rigorous training exercise for war. ‘O Princess Vaishnavi, with your permission, let us solemnize their vows today.’

Vaishnavi looked at Hanuman. He seemed happy for them. Was there anything he felt *he* needed? Did the thought occur to him that said, you are happy, detached from troubles and content with the right action, just as the Goddess says; but maybe you could consider the *possibility* that you could be happier still?

‘Princess Vaishnavi?’ Vishwamitra asked again.

‘We are honoured to host the wedding of the brave King Vali and the noble Prince Sugreeva with the noble princesses Tara and Ruma,’ she said, her face as bright as the sun.

Jambavanth made a slow, deep, and loud sound that those at a distance could have taken for a yawn. But it wasn’t. He said, ‘*Subhamasthu*, may all good wishes come to you,’ and then got up and gave Hanuman a stiff Jambavanth-hug.

*

As Vishwamitra had expected, the prospect of a wedding in the charged atmosphere of a war camp gave the soldiers something to be cheerful about. The elephants washed off their sombre war markings and came anointed with bright colours as was their custom at happy occasions. Vaishnavi’s attendants ran here and there, quickly setting up a festive platform for the ceremony on one of the ledges overlooking the valley, and threading long rows of flowers through the tops of the needle-leaved trees. Below them,

soldiers sat in long and happy rows, while others served them exotic and colourful fruit of a kind some of them had not ever seen.

Vashishta, meanwhile, sat with his students around a fire, stirring something in a bowl-shaped stone. It began to smell very good.

Hanuman and Vishwamitra walked up and down along the soldiers' lines. After their long march, and the even harder training of the past few days, they looked happy and refreshed. Here and there, they sat side-by-side with Vaishnavi's female fighters, who had largely kept to themselves until now.

'What a day for love, Hanuman,' Vishwamitra said.

'The Goddess is unexpectedly gracious,' Hanuman replied. 'Who would have thought that such a tough and frightful training exercise would result in such a happy day today!'

'It is important to accept grace when it comes, Hanuman,' Vishwamitra continued. 'And that is why I insisted. Vali, of course, wanted to win his war first. Tara, naturally, wanted him to win his war too, lest he think of her as a distraction from his career goals. But a bout of fresh air is good. Look what it is doing for their morale, listen to what the soldiers are saying.'

It was true. Hanuman could see more smiles than he had in many days. The soldiers were talking about their loved ones, about their friends back home, about what they would do once they returned, and of course, about how they had seen through Tara and Ruma's disguise long ago but they hadn't said anything out of loyalty. It almost sounded like a normal day back in the rock city.

Jambavanth saw them coming and raised his hand to indicate he had something to say. When Hanuman approached, he merely caught his arm and shouted to Vishwamitra, 'O Rishi, what are you going to do about this boy? Are we not going to start making arrangements for his Third Ceremony too?'

Hanuman really had to wonder what the fuss was all about. He backed away from all the teasing, insisting that the tall tree in the back hadn't been decorated yet and he needed to get to the top before someone else tried and slipped and fell on this happy day.

But Vishwamitra and Jambavanth noted what was important here. Vaishnavi had heard them, and more importantly, she had smiled.

Saraswati's Intelligence



Vali and Sugreeva exchanged betel leaves with Tara and Ruma at their Third Ceremony and, after everyone had feasted and sung songs of joy and love, left on two small boats fastened together with twigs, grass and flags for some happy time downriver and around a bend in the valley.

The birds Vishwamitra had placed on full alert on a perimeter around the valley had not mentioned any danger yet. Nonetheless, Vishwamitra also deputed a couple of birds to follow the couples wherever they would wander from above.

In their absence, Hanuman and Vaishnavi took charge of the preparations for the march. A ready army would be the best wedding gift at a time like this, Vishwamitra had said, and Hanuman, as always, took those words very seriously.

By the time the happy couples returned from their wanderings around the hills, Hanuman was indeed ready. He had organized the soldiers into effective units and explained them to Vali on his return.

‘These, brave King Vali, are your scouts. These are your criers and howlers, and their sound will drown out the screams and curses of enemies and inspire your fighters. These, of course, are your fighters, who we have assembled in three groups. These are the traditional troops, with formidable wrestling and close-combat skills. They will be accompanied by

Jambavanth's men. Then, we have the smaller, but no less important division, of our female fighters, consisting of the Princess Vaishnavi's sentries as well some of our own sisters from Kishkindhanagara. Yes, we discovered after your Third Ceremony that there were more!

Vali looked confused.

Hanuman explained. 'We will need them because, unlike us, our enemies think nothing of pushing their mothers and children into war too. And our *dharma* teaches us that women and men are not different except—'

'—in times of war,' Vali said, reluctantly patting Hanuman on the back now. *What had he transformed this boisterous, hero-worshipping fighting brigade into!*

'Our soldiers may not fight as they should when they are confronted by female opponents,' Hanuman continued. 'Or worse, if they do, it will not be good for *dharma*. So, our sisters will ensure that their barbarian cousins stay under control.'

'This is very good, Hanuman,' Vali said, the admiration in his voice sincere now.

'But there is more, good king,' Hanuman said, and now he actually smiled too. For the first time, Vali noticed Hanuman's face, and saw things he had never noticed before. His markings—how like Uncle Kesari they made him look. And yet, there was a certain gentleness in Hanuman too, just like Aunt Anjana. He was such a perfect union of two perfectly good people. For the first time, Vali saw Hanuman as he was, and perhaps saw himself too as he was. Far from his mother, in love with his beloved, ready to do his duties as ruler, Vali was at peace. In his gratitude, he realized, was contentment.

'And these soldiers,' Hanuman gestured to a smaller group standing at the edge, 'carry something that may help us fight for *dharma* without weakening it.'

'Raise. Arms!' the leader of the unit shouted.

With a stomp and a roar, the soldiers lifted what looked like small tree trunks by their sides. At the tip of each stick was a small, round, heavy object.

'Rishi Vashishta calls them *gadas*,' Hanuman explained. 'He says they remind him of the Vishnu stones in the river bed.'

Vali wondered why he had never thought of something as simple as that before. They could easily bring enemies to their knees, and to the ground,

without necessarily breaking them open.

‘They will defeat, but not necessarily destroy,’ Hanuman said. He nodded to the captain, and asked two men for a demonstration.

The larger of the two men picked up two sharp rocks and took his position. The smaller soldier stood with his *gada* a few feet in front. They both bowed to Vali, and then, suddenly, the taller man charged at the smaller one with the rocks in his upraised hands.

The smaller soldier stood still and calm, and in a quick flow of movement, countered his opponent’s thrust, knocked his feet out from under him, and stood on him with his formidable *gada* over his head.

‘Defeat, but not destroy. That is our *dharma*,’ Hanuman said again.

Vali nodded appreciatively to the soldiers, and they returned to their ranks. Then he turned to Hanuman and slowly raised his right hand and placed it on his shoulder. ‘You, dear Hanuman,’ he said in a sincere and affectionate voice, ‘are the dearest friend I, or our *loka*, could have ever found.’

Sugreeva stopped smelling the flowers from the garland Ruma had given him and looked up at the two of them. He could not believe his good fortune. First, his Ruma, here. Then, his marriage. And now, this reconciliation, at long last. He stepped forward, and in the way of a younger brother sure of his place in everyone’s world, placed one hand on Vali’s back, and the other on Hanuman’s, and leaned forward between them with a smile, insisting silently, fervently, on recognizing their friendship and brotherhood. Their shadows fell as one in the noonday sun at their feet. The Goddess willing, they would return as brothers. Each one’s breath made its own sound, and then slowly, led by Hanuman, they turned their breaths into one steady flow of an ‘Om’.

The army for Goddess Saraswati’s *dharma* was ready.

*

Veera Ganapati had finally calculated a suitable location for the confrontation. The enormous mountains to the north were now fully covered in ice, and it seemed unlikely that the creatures would get across them. If they were heading south, towards them, as was feared, then it was likely that they would approach slowly from around the mountains, through

the passes in the north-west. That is where the battle would have to be staged.

Accordingly, a number of elephant families had been sent out to cover the region in slow circles. Ganapati's hope was that the creatures would follow the elephants to a place where they could be defeated. Then, perhaps, as the *rishis* insisted, a cure of some sort could be administered to them, though the runaway boy's actions still made him feel somewhat pessimistic.

Shortly before sunrise, Veera Ganapati concluded his prayers. The leaders stood facing each other in a circle as the sacred fire Vishwamitra had started sputtered and sparked. Vashishta tied a small rolled leaf around each leader's wrist, while Ganapati indicated he could tie it around his trunk.

Then, as the sun rose, Vishwamitra pointed to the sky and announced that the planet of war was in the right place. The auspicious moment was here.

The honour of blowing the conch was given to their brave and noble host. Princess Vaishnavi raised it to her lips and blew. The sound filled the valley with a new surge of energy. The soldiers at the back began to whisper that they could see eight hands emerge from the back of the queen, covered in fire, lashing out like trees in a storm.

With a great roar from every voice in the valley, they began their march. Hundreds of birds took off from trees to witness the spectacular sight, and flew in circles above, happy that they had done their part too.

By the time the last lines of the soldiers left, the sun was high up in the sky.

*

The landscape changed each day as they headed in the direction of the setting sun. Soon, they were in a very different place from the verdant valleys and hills of Vaishnavi's people. It was still cool, though, suggesting they were at a higher altitude. But instead of rolling hills and towering trees, there were endless landscapes of dry soil and yellow and red rock, with clumps of bushes and small trees here and there.

'I almost feel like we are back at the place of the Great Dispersal, Hanuman,' Sugreeva said.

'It looks like that—so few trees compared to our home,' Hanuman agreed. Then, he found cause for a smile. 'But if the Goddess wills it, this place will come to be known as the place of the Great Meeting. Maybe this

is where we will stop *adharma*, with all the wisdom and medicines that we bring with us in the form of the *rishis*.’ Hanuman looked reverentially at the row of Vashishta’s students marching behind them, carrying large, mysterious bundles of herbs on their shoulders.

‘You have armed us with troops of great strength and courage now, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva said. ‘But you still speak as if you hope there will be no war.’

‘I do hope we will confront what we seek, and do so soon, Sugreeva. Our friends, the Ganeshas, have lost so much already, and they have still risked their lives to tempt our foes into coming here. But I hope our encounter won’t be as brutal and meaningless as it was before.’

‘Do you think we will be able to speak with them, make them see reason now?’ Sugreeva asked.

‘Vishwamitra has seldom failed to strike a bond wherever he has travelled in Kishkindha. If we can use our strength wisely to defuse the fire that rages in these creatures, then maybe we can place them in a position where, slowly, they see themselves as part of the Goddess’s creation again.’

‘May you be right, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva said. Then, he turned to Vali, who seemed lost in thought, admiring the stark beauty of the place. ‘What is on your mind, brother?’

Vali smiled. He turned back slowly so as to not disturb Tara, who had fallen asleep with her head on his knee. The rocking motion of the open palanquin could do that.

‘See those cliffs?’ he pointed to a tall, sheer rockface. ‘Someday, people will pass here and say, “Those rocks look like the heroes Vali, Sugreeva, and Hanuman”.’

‘Do you think they will really think of us as heroes?’ Sugreeva asked.

‘What do I know?’ Vali shrugged now. ‘If, as Hanuman says, peace prevails, then maybe they will look at those rocks and say, “Those look like the gentle and enlightened saints Vali, Sugreeva, and Hanuman”!’

They laughed, and Vali laughed the loudest, nearly waking Tara in the process.

*

At first glance, the size of the river and its majesty eluded them. It seemed narrow, small and modest in a land of unrelenting stone and aridity. But

when Vishwamitra took them to the right position, they saw the entirety of the valley below them. The river was broad, slow, and sustained a green belt stretching wide on either bank.

‘Not as powerful as the Saraswati river in our parts, but still very nice,’ Sugreeva said.

‘Not bad, not bad for a scene of battle. If we actually get them to come here,’ Vali remarked, sliding off his palanquin.

Ganapati walked up to join them on the hill. He moved his ears slowly in all directions, and then nodded. ‘This is good. I think I can hear the sound of my brothers’ feet far in the west.’

‘They have not been ambushed, then,’ Vali asked.

‘No. I do not think so,’ Ganapati replied, wondering briefly if Vali meant it in any other way. But he, too, could see that Vali had been more sober and respectful since his wedding. ‘Thank you for your prayers.’

‘We are in your debt, Ganapati,’ Vali said.

Vishwamitra walked down the side of the hill and began to quickly explore the trees and shrubs that grew here and there. A couple of soldiers walked down behind him to assist him.

He returned, and then gave instructions to Hanuman about how the army should position itself.

‘So, now, we wait?’ Vali asked.

‘That is what we do,’ Sugreeva replied.

*

The next morning, the scouts returned with a more detailed survey of the land. The river valley was wide and went on for many miles. There were three passes through the mountains beyond which lay the deserts of the west and the north. The elephants, if everything went well, would soon appear through them.

After setting up camps in four positions to form a large square, Hanuman went from one to the other to mark places from where he would have the best line of sight.

‘Tonight, after dark, we check the flames again to see how well we understand each other,’ he said to Vashishta’s students, who seemed very excited about using their pyrotechnic skills again. ‘From what we know of these creatures, they will come at night.’

Then, he organized a broader circular perimeter of lookouts at sixteen carefully-chosen positions. Going by the clever subterfuge with which the creatures had first attacked them, they could approach from any side and Hanuman wanted his army ready to draw them in from any angle.

After establishing everyone's positions, duties, and signal protocols, Hanuman summoned the captains and made them line up their soldiers along the length of the river. Then, to set an example, he began to walk slowly from the far end of the bush all the way towards the water, clearing out rocks and stones.

'Pass the smooth, round stones back so we can stockpile them in the hills. The rough, jagged ones, take them towards the riverbanks.'

With a cheer, everyone got to work, and soon the banks were cleared of all the sharp rocks the creatures could use against them. Vali picked up one particularly deadly looking one and said, 'You say they use these to slice through flesh?'

Hanuman nodded.

Vali pressed it to his own skin, until he could see red marks appear.

'In the heat of the battle, when we face these wounds, we too will want to inflict them on the creatures,' Hanuman said.

'I understand, Hanuman. It may be an advantage we are giving up now, but I understand.'

'We can make sure that our enemies don't have this cruel advantage either,' Hanuman said. 'It will be for the best if you show the men.'

Vali stepped up and raised the rock in his hand. Then, with a shout and a grunt, he turned in a semi-circle and flung it deep into the middle of the river.

The soldiers then began to throw their rocks as far as they could into the river.

On the other side, the soldiers began to move the round stones up into the hills in small batches.

'Defeat, not destroy,' Princess Vaishnavi said to Hanuman with a smile.

Hanuman was pleasantly surprised to find Vaishnavi standing beside him. Suddenly, all the tumult and noise of the army at work around him seemed to fade away. In her eyes, he seemed to understand something, something he had seen but had no name for until now. He raised his palms to the top of his brow and pointed downward to indicate the whole of his body.

‘All this holds together by Goddess Saraswati’s grace, Princess Vaishnavi,’ he said excitedly, his eyes full of hope that here was someone who would understand him. ‘This skin, this face, these eyes. We do not see what is inside, but in battle, we will. It is a desperate sight, and no one who honours what a mother goes through to create a child will want to see that.’

‘Sit down, Hanumantha, sit down from your world of care and tell me.’

Hanuman looked away as if there were too many more things to do before he could think of resting. But he could not think of anything more important than the princess.

‘Really, sit,’ she insisted.

Hanuman sat down a couple of feet down the slope from her. He noticed how her guards positioned themselves: at a respectful distance from her, but always alert. He wondered often what the best way was to address her. That one night of friendship and intimate conversation made him feel he could speak to her as he might to Sugreeva, in full trust; but then she was a princess, and she was a friend who seemed very different from anyone he had known.

She slid down the bank slightly so she could see his face clearly, at eye level. ‘What did you see, brave Hanuman? What is it that all of us are going to see now?’

‘In my life I have seen injuries, falls, scrapes, bruises, things of that nature, nothing more. But what I saw that night, when the creatures came ... it was ... appalling. They use their teeth to tear the flesh off living things. It is a terrible sight, your majesty. Who knew we were no different from mangoes or coconuts? Who knew that one could tear apart the dignity of Goddess Saraswati’s creations so easily?’

‘What did you see?’

Hanuman folded the skin near his forearm. ‘All this is held together by something, Princess. We do not stop to think about it. But when it is torn, the blood rushes out. You see it all, the naked horror of it.’

‘The smell of blood is indeed frightful.’

Hanuman looked at her, as if one so kind should not have to hear what was lingering in his heart. ‘When the body is broken, and you see past the blood, you will find that inside us are tiny fingers and hands.’

Vaishnavi wiggled her fingers.

Hanuman laughed. ‘Not just like that. But there are all sorts of things inside us, things that are living, moving, talking to each other in their own

way. And when they are hurt, that is how it looks. It looks like little babies' fingers are clutching out at the sky, crying in pain.'

Vaishnavi shuddered.

'What do we do then, Vaishnavi?' Hanuman's voice almost became a whisper because of its urgency. 'If a baby falls, you take him to his mother and you comfort him. But what of this life inside us that is just as tender? I have seen the *rishi* cure many ills; with his leaves and juices he makes the skin talk across injuries, so it grows together again. But what happens when something more devastating happens?'

'Like babies left in a battlefield.'

Hanuman was struck by the accuracy of that statement. A dull pain formed in his stomach. He had to make sense of the horrors that awaited them, had to make sure he did not forget who he was, and what Kishkindha was, before all this started.

'Food. All this horror is because they believe that we are their food. But we are not what they think we are. We are whole lives. We are families, friends, children of Mata Saraswati. We know what we can take and what we must not. We begin our lives praying to her to give us the intelligence to find food—our First Ceremony, which our parents conduct for us even as we are taking our first breaths,' he said. 'But there is a lot more she gives us, a lot more we need, that we do not even realize. She rules over everything, Vaishnavi, I can see it. The seed that grows into an enormous tree with no more than air and water, the child that grows into a mother and a grandmother, the eye that sees, the tongue that learns the shape of sounds as it grows and, most of all, the body that keeps life like a secret to itself.'

'Everything.'

'Everything. Everything, from the smallest to the largest, from the smallest drop of blood to the largest Ganesha. Whatever the mystery of creation is, it is all happening, everything is living in this universe only because of Goddess Saraswati's Intelligence. And this horror that we will now see must not trick us into forgetting that.'

A Sign of Life



Tara wondered whether to tell Vali or Ruma first. She had dreams, and then when she woke, the dream stayed with her like a strange sensation. She was not sure if she was imagining it, or if something she ate had refused digestion.

Vashishta, who always moved lightly and at the edge of everyone's activities, suddenly made it a point to walk decisively up to Tara. He stood in front of her, raised his palm, and said something in a soft, lilting voice.

Tara laughed. There was something incredibly mother-like about him. Absentminded, but still mother-like. She had to think of the obvious contrast: if Riksharaja was a warrior-like mother, then Vashishta was the opposite. The *brahmarishis*, Vishwamitra had said, were all like that. Their skin was soft and tender, their faces bright and clear. Their words were sweet, even if few. They were creators, and therefore nurturing came naturally to them. The *rajarishis*, like Vishwamitra, were a sturdier lot, carrying the affairs of rulers and states on their minds.

It would be a pleasant shock for anyone to be confronted by all of Vashishta's presence up close and for that long, and after her amusement had subsided, she understood the wonderful words he had chanted.

Quickly, she folded her hands in prayer and bowed her head.

‘Take good care of the prince, my daughter,’ Vashishta said. ‘He comes on the edge of great change in the world.’

*

That night, Vali let loose in celebration. He consumed two whole chunks of honeycomb the bears offered him as a gift, and sang, ran, and danced at the water’s edge in a lonely stretch of the camp. The lights from the four sentry camps glimmered and faded in the distance. There was a little more activity too from the four camps. It was not boisterous, but it was there. Hanuman had ordered the captains to keep their men in place, but to allow them whatever cheer they wanted. News like this travelled fast. They sang too, and they played their games, and allowed themselves one night of relaxation.

In the quiet valley where no one but the closest would know, Hanuman, Sugreeva, and Vishwamitra sat and watched in quiet amusement as their king celebrated. Finally, he came running up to them, and tried to persuade them to drink from his honeycomb too.

Vishwamitra pretended to be in a meditative trance.

Sugreeva looked at Hanuman. Hanuman smiled and declined the intoxicant. But he knew the night was safe. Goddess Saraswati had blessed them with happy news once again amidst troubling times. Sugreeva could indulge though. He wanted to.

Hanuman smiled and patted Sugreeva. ‘Have one for me, my friend.’

Around midnight, the four sentry camps set off a series of floating lights, much like what they had seen at Vashishta’s cave. These lights were gentle though, and changed colour as they floated in the wind. Then, after a long time, they spluttered, and a shower of soft, colourful sparks rained down gently on the valleys of soldiers of a place and a time that had never seen blood.

*

At dawn, the sentries brought news that a dust cloud was now in sight. The elephants were approaching. Ganapati went out to survey the horizon.

‘It is them,’ he said, with great relief. ‘And they are safe.’

He then sent his scouts to meet them, and to guide them into the valley.

‘All else will play out now as the Goddess wills,’ Vishwamitra said. ‘It is time now for us to take up our positions.’

Hanuman, Vali, Sugreeva, and Jambavanth stood facing each other in a square. They would each take command of one quadrant. Hanuman and Ganapati would face north, and Vali, west. Jambavanth would secure the south, and Sugreeva the east.

Vishwamitra offered his blessings, and the four leaders set forth to their stations.

The cloud came closer, and soon one could distinguish the elephants within the dust too. Ganapati and Hanuman gazed intently. They still shared one unspoken fear that they could not tell anyone else.

‘The Goddess will not give us bad news now, Ganapati,’ Hanuman said, by way of assurance. ‘Today will not be a day for war.’

Ganapati’s ears flicked this way and that. ‘May you be right, young friend. May you always be right. I would not have any faith left in the world if what we see now is not true.’

The elephants approached, and their individual sizes and shapes became apparent. The children followed close to their mothers’ legs, and here and there, the guards towered large over everyone else.

‘Praise the God of the Mountains,’ Ganapati heaved a sigh of relief. ‘Your word is indeed watched over by the Goddess, Hanuman. It is not a disguise. I can even hear their hearts beat. Let us go greet them, come.’

Hanuman and Ganapati descended the hill and went forward to receive the brave elephants.

‘Hail, Veera Ganapati,’ the leader of the group raised her trunk in salute.

‘My sister, my dear, noble, sister,’ Ganapati rushed forward to embrace her trunk. ‘All is well? You were not harmed?’

‘No, not at all,’ she said. ‘The north remains safe, for now. We were not harmed.’

Hanuman smiled, and instructed one of the captains with him to return to the camp and have the appropriate signal raised. The captain showed three fingers to Hanuman again, to confirm, then bowed and ran back.

‘My sister, this is the noble Hanuman, friend to the Ganeshas, friend to all.’ Ganapati introduced Hanuman.

‘May the Goddess, our Mother, always protect you, good Hanuman,’ she said.

Hanuman returned the greeting, and asked the question on everyone's minds. 'What did you see, O Lady Ganapati? I trust you were spared the sight of horrors and pain. But will our plan work?'

'You are a true student of the Goddess's path, Hanuman,' she said. 'May your peacefulness stay with you.'

She turned to one of her aides, who walked back towards the end of the group. In a moment she returned with another elephant, a scout with news, Hanuman assumed.

But it was more than that. Behind the elephant followed a small, straggly group of the creatures.

*

'What in the world!' Ganapati said in surprise. 'And they do not fear the sun!'

The creatures folded their hands and bowed their heads. They no longer looked afraid of light, and seemed somewhat washed and clean as well. They were mostly children and women, and a few older men.

'They sought our protection, brother. We could not refuse them.'

'Since when do the hunters of elephants seek protection from them?'

'They listen to us, brother. And if we are patient, we can understand what they have to say too.'

'And what is it they have to say?'

'The creatures are many, as many as sand in the earth, and as bent upon killing each other and everyone else. They have killed even the birds of the west, and not one flies above in the sky.'

One of the women in the group, an elder, picked up two handfuls of sand and threw them together violently and dramatically.

'There is hope,' Hanuman said. 'Where there is communication, the dharma of the Goddess inevitably asserts itself.'

'Maybe,' Ganapati said, slowly, and not without suspicion. 'I can already see what Vali is going to say.'

'What about their hunger, lady? Does it no longer drive them as it did?'

'They feed themselves with small things. They try to find rivers at twilight and then they crawl for a long time at its edges.'

'The soft grasses? Like us?'

‘Not quite. They eat the juices of the small things in their shells. That seems to give them enough nourishment to walk without falling ill the rest of the time.’

‘Is that what they did? They walked behind you?’

‘No. They offered us their shells and the women...’ Lady Ganapati paused, ‘...wanted us to understand they were mothers.’

Hanuman studied them carefully. The creatures looked smaller, slightly smaller, than the ones that had attacked them. Their skins were shiny, and smoother. They had small, deep-set, eyes that looked like they had seen fear, but had not returned that fear with violence, or, at least, any great violence. They were calm, even though they too did not have *balances*, which Hanuman thought was a sign of Mother Saraswati’s grace.

‘Their mothers care for their young, unlike the more desperate creatures we saw before,’ Hanuman observed. ‘Sage Vashishta will surely have some ideas about what that means.’

Veera Ganapati sighed again. ‘Very well. We shall take them under guard to that hillock and have the others come and see them.’

Lady Ganapati smiled. ‘Civilizations begin this way,’ she said.

*

Vashishta and Vishwamitra were, as Hanuman expected, pleasantly surprised that some of the creatures could indeed be peaceful, even if not fully versed in the *parama dharma*. Vishwamitra tried to talk patiently and gently with the creatures, just as he would to anyone else, without condescension. Hanuman noticed that they nodded, and smiled a lot too. The children seemed to laugh at the sight of Vashishta’s curious eyes and hands as he touched and squeezed them here and there. They took to some berries that Vashishta’s students brought them, and ate them with relish. Then, when they saw that their fingers were red, the younger children began to cry.

Their mothers wiped their fingers, and reassured them.

‘These will be easy,’ Vishwamitra said to Hanuman. ‘Perhaps there is hope still.’

‘The pleasantries aside,’ Vali said, at last, rising slowly from the ground, ‘if it is in our power, we must ask our guests about the rest of their kind. It is for them that we have come this far, is it not?’

‘From what we know,’ Vishwamitra said, ‘they are of different kinds. Some of them, like this group here, do not raise their hands against large creatures. That is why, perhaps, they flee, and they fear the other group.’

Vali laughed.

‘We cannot learn much more just yet, Vali,’ Vishwamitra continued. ‘But in these creatures, we have the best early warning system we could think of. They have spent their lives fleeing their wars. Their bodies will most likely tell us when the enemy comes even before we can see them.’

‘Or smell them,’ Vali shouted, and laughed again, almost frightening the children. But hearing his laughter, the soldiers who had gathered all around finally laughed too.

*

‘Do you think we will be able to offer an arrangement for peace with their kind?’ Vaishnavi asked Hanuman.

‘Some of them are on the edges of *dharmā*, perhaps driven somewhat beyond it by necessity, but still close. Our *rishis* are hopeful.’

‘When the rest of their kind come—I cannot say “if” because we have not yet heard from the Ganeshas who are due to return from the West—what will it be like?’ Vaishnavi asked. ‘Will they establish a siege and send us threats and demands? Or will it be mindless slaughter?’

Hanuman’s heart moved slightly to hear Vaishnavi speak of dark things like this. She seemed to know a lot more about the world than her gentle demeanour let on. ‘Slaughter is mindless,’ he said. ‘That is how it felt when the creatures fell upon us before. There were no demands, no attempts to assert domination, nothing of the sort we see when Kishkindhans have their occasional quarrels. There is something almost lifeless about their actions. Their hands move, their legs move, but then there is such an absence of feeling in them about what they are doing.’

‘Like a leaf-puppet dance?’

‘Something like that, yes. When we were children we could see that the motions of the leaves in the puppet show were not like those of real living things, but we believed it anyway, it made us laugh. With these creatures, it is as if something really terrible is controlling them. At least, they do not look like they own themselves anymore.’

‘Did they, ever, though?’

‘Only the *rishis* know. And I suspect you, too, Vaishnavi,’ Hanuman smiled.

‘No. No.’

‘You are the ruler of one of the last territories separating inner and outer Kishkindha. Perhaps you heard stories too, from the cranes, the birds that travel half the world in a few days, when they were still there, that is.’

‘The stories I heard were really strange, though.’

‘Tell me...’

‘I have heard of a flying creature that burns and devours the smaller birds.’

The Battle Begins



It was just before sunset that Veera Ganapati received news from the lookouts at the western camp—they could hear the elephants from the west. From what the scouts reported, it did not sound as if the elephants were pursued by the creatures. The army's peaceful wait, the northern elephants' safe return, and the fact of the existence of these less lethal creatures, all made it seem that perhaps they had overestimated the danger.

And yet, Ganapati looked worried. Hanuman could see that.

'I pray to the Goddess that they return safely too, Ganapati,' he said.

Ganapati's trunk turned this way and that, and then dropped down suddenly. He had been in a state of great alertness for many days now. It must have taken a toll, Hanuman thought.

They walked quickly to join the scout party standing a few hundred yards in front of the lookout hill. The dust cloud was on the horizon, and the swirling sands made the red sun seem even bloodier.

'He is ferocious today,' Hanuman said, looking at the sun.

*

Soon, the sounds of the elephants began to travel across the plains, enough for Hanuman to be able to hear them as well. 'What are they saying,

Ganapati?’

Ganapati seemed lost in prayer, but was not entirely without anxiety.

‘They are in a hurry, Hanuman,’ he said, opening his eyes. ‘I do not understand their words clearly, but it seems they are in a rush to reach us before the sun sets.’

‘Are they being pursued?’

‘I do not hear distress. But I hear urgency.’

Hanuman signalled to his captain to place some soldiers on alert. He confirmed the order with two fingers. The signal was raised accordingly. A tall tree trunk rose up on the hillock, with two clumps of coconuts tied on it at equal intervals. In seconds, a tree trunk rose from the distance behind them, alerting the rest of the camps as well. A few seconds later, all of them were lowered. The message had travelled and there was no need to reveal their locations anymore.

The sun was almost on the horizon when the elephants began to appear.

‘The sun is against us now,’ Ganapati said. ‘I cannot see their faces very well.’

‘Do the creatures lurk among them?’ Hanuman asked, curling his fingers to give the full signal now.

‘I am not sure. Their sounds and movements do not indicate any foul play. Yet.’

Now Hanuman too could see their faces. They had children too, and they were having a difficult time keeping up amidst all the rushing feet.

The scout elephants Ganapati had sent ahead were about halfway across the plain now.

‘They have seen our scouts. That will give them hope. Good. They will reach us before dark,’ Ganapati said with a bit of relief.

The two scouts were the first to disappear.

Then, just a moment later, an enormous hole opened up in the ground right under the elephant herd. With a great roar and a cloud of dust, the elephants fell right into the trap.

Veera Ganapati yelled out in uncharacteristic desperation. It was a terrible sight, even at a distance, as if a whole mountain had collapsed and turned into mere pebbles. After a momentary silence, a new wave of cries began to rise from the trap, cries of pain.

Hanuman felt all his muscles stiffen into one uncontrollable seizure of rage. He felt his teeth grind, and his head shiver.

‘One!’ he shouted to his captain, and leaped like fire from a tree struck by lightning towards the trapped elephants.

*

Behind him, the lookouts raised the signal for a full response. In seconds, conch-shells blew, drums began to pound, and the shouters began to exhort the men into action.

Despite his formidable size, Veera Ganapati was already ahead of Hanuman. Hanuman kept a steady pace close to him, scoping the land carefully for signs of movement. It was dark, though, and he was unable to make out much.

‘Ganapati,’ Hanuman shouted, ‘look up there!’

On the other side of the cavern that had swallowed their friends, a strange set of bloated, glowing objects began to float up in the western sky. They looked hideous, even from a distance, like clouds, but too low and too dark.

‘What creatures are these?’ Ganapati shouted. ‘How do they fly with no wings?’

Hanuman looked carefully. The flying objects looked terrifying. As they bobbed, and turned and moved towards them, they looked familiar, like bears, like Jatayus, like goats. One large floating object even looked like an elephant, but a dull glow shone through its skin.

‘Ganapati, it is them. And they have learned to use fire too.’

Beneath the floating objects, a long line of the creatures walked up purposefully. They had long vines in their hands, with which they controlled their airborne devices.

Ganapati slowed down in disbelief. Hanuman stopped as well.

The floating objects were indeed the carcasses of various animals, sometimes of two different creatures stitched together, and made to float in the air.

The stench was here.

Suddenly, the creatures tugged at the ropes, and the floating animals burst open, raining what looked like burning rocks down on the fallen elephants below.

Hanuman shot ahead of the stunned Ganapati, and without any hesitation, without even stopping to look below, leaped over the endlessly wide and hellishly dark canyon below him, filled with screaming, crying elephants.

Once he crossed the canyon, he looked ahead and saw the creatures. They stretched for as far as the eye could see on the left and all the way to the right. They were just one, long, menacing row.

And then, a few hundred feet behind them, like a fire that had fallen on earth from a part of the sky no one could have seen even in their nightmares, like one slow, unstoppable beast, the rest of the endless army of elephant-eaters walked on, two legs after two.

They were cloaked in the hides of their kills, and they carried weapons that bobbed up and down menacingly as they strode forward.

Hanuman turned and looked down into the trap. The elephants lay tumbled upon each other in a terrible condition, some of their skins still smouldering with fire. Those at the edges tried desperately to find a way to ascend but could hardly even stand up without falling again. There were innumerable mothers, children, elders, all trapped, crushed, broken down below.

Hanuman's heart now felt as if it was made of fire. He pictured himself charging directly into the frontline of these creatures, taking them down two at a time, breaking their heads off their shoulders.

But he heard Ganapati's voice from behind him.

'Hanuman,' he said, 'find a way for them, please.' He was standing at the cliff's edge on the other side. He looked like a large, sad cloud unjustly brought down from the sky to answer to gravity.

The fire in his heart cooled down. With a sharp exhalation, he flushed out his angry thoughts about the creatures, their weapons, and their complete insanity. He thought of the elephants as friends in distress, just as they might have been in peacetime. He thought of how his father and his friends might have helped someone who had slipped in the warm, faraway forests of Kishkindhanagara.

Hanuman told himself this was still the earth, his mother. This was still the creation of Goddess Saraswati. Nothing else mattered. He walked swiftly up and down the length of the hole, calling out to the elephants, assuring them they were safe, help was at hand.

Then, he saw the one possibility for escape that still existed.

‘Ganapati, there in the north-east, the slope of the earth is different. And there are trees there too. Tell them.’

Ganapati called out to the elephants below. A feeble voice answered, and identified itself as that of the leader of the western elephants. Ganapati told him to move his people towards the corner Hanuman had indicated, and then rushed there himself.

Quickly, Ganapati then moved around towards the nearest tree, and with a quick thought of apology for it, began to ram it out of the ground. If it fell the right way, it could offer a stepping stone to the elephants below.

The creatures saw him, and a cluster, and then a whole swarm of them, broke away from the main group to advance in his direction.

Hanuman judged the distance between them and Ganapati, and looked back to see if the Kishkindhan soldiers would reach on time.

He closed his eyes and saw the whole battlefield in his mind now, just as Ganapati had told them to imagine it, as a series of squares, and then more squares, and to think of them in clusters of space, and strength, and vulnerability, in multiples, four and eight and thirty-two and sixty-four. Hanuman understood. There was not enough time for the soldiers to reach. Only he could stop the creatures from harming the elephants stuck in the trap.

With no further thought, except a prayer to Goddess Saraswati, and for some reason, a fleeting flash of Vaishnavi’s face in his mind, Hanuman calmly, coolly, ran towards the crazed faces pouring forth towards them like a rain of death.

He remembered only the first blow. He remembered the creature’s face, how at the moment of contact it disappeared from his sight, from his effort to think of it as belonging to a person, a living thing. Nothing. It was over. With the sound of that slap, Hanuman knew the war had begun.

*

Hanuman tore through the attackers’ ranks like a wind inside a mountain pass. His palms flew, right to left, left to right, faster than the creatures could comprehend. His feet moved furiously through the ranks of fallen and falling bodies. His balance seemed to have gained a life of its own, taking stock of every single movement and presence, breaking knees, lashing into bellies, whipping across faces before they could bite him.

Then, he noted the stench, and exhaled the one breath that had lasted him from the time he prayed to Goddess Saraswati to what he recalled were eighty-four blows from him, resulting in the annihilation of almost as many creatures all around him.

He looked back and saw Veera Ganapati moving the trunk of the lone large tree that had stood there towards the edge of the canyon. Below, the elephants who could move had recovered slightly, and had ordered themselves into a steady line towards the escape route. From the back, a host of anxious trunks and heads nudged the elephant children forward and up, sometimes over the backs of injured elders as well.

Hanuman looked down at the fallen bodies of his enemies, and as he did, he felt a vile and terrible taste rise in his mouth. His anger was complete now, and wholly a part of himself. He felt nothing more than force in this world, and he would be that force; he would give not one bit less of himself towards it. What these creatures had done, and were about to do now if they were not stopped, was truly the most terrible, ugly thing in the whole vast river of life that Goddess Saraswati had given birth to millions of years ago.

That bitter taste filled Hanuman's mouth. And in one gesture of contempt that he swore right then that he would never, never repeat, no matter how vile a creature he faced in his life, apologizing to the earth in his thoughts, and with one look that took in all the creatures' broken bodies on the ground, he spat.

Hanuman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and waited for the next row of attackers to reach him. He smacked his lips once. He tasted his sweat. And mud.

But not one drop or hint of blood.

He thanked the Goddess for keeping him with Her, and ran forward into the devilish night ahead of him.

Just One Hanuman



Veera Ganapati lowered his trunk to help the children out. Elephants from the camp had reached him now, giving him a moment to resurvey the battlefield.

Far ahead in the distance, another row of floating objects appeared, being pulled slowly across the sky by a new line of creatures below.

‘Hurry! Hurry!’ Ganapati shouted, urging the elephants trapped in the pit to move out before another volley of rocks rained down on them.

The leader of the trapped elephants was the last to climb up. His back was scorched and badly wounded. ‘Praise be to you, Veera Ganapati,’ he said.

‘My praise to you for coming,’ Ganapati said. ‘And for giving me a chance to see what happens when one good being’s kindness towards his friends turns into something like that.’

Across the cavern, in the distance, they could see the only reason this rescue had been possible. They watched Hanuman’s silhouette moving away from them, towards the enemy lines, surrounded by splattering explosions of fire. The front ranks of the creatures, such as there were, were now doing something very different from what they had done a few minutes ago. They had seen what Hanuman had done to the first wave of their fighters, the bravest and most enthusiastic of them. Now, as he walked

purposefully towards them, they were pausing, turning, fearfully moving away.

‘He has scared them!’ the Western Gana shouted in disbelief. ‘Just one...’

‘Just one Hanuman,’ Veera Ganapati said, with pride, and relief.

Ganapati’s captain was now by his side. ‘The visitors are protected, and the fighters are here now,’ he reported.

Veera Ganapati raised his trunk and issued a powerful cry. ‘One unit to Hanuman’s left. One unit to Hanuman’s right. *Charge!*’

With a roar of anger and force issued by the howlers, the soldiers of Kishkindha ran out into the fire-strewn dark.

*

‘But I am the king, O Guru,’ Vali pleaded with Vishwamitra back in the safety of the camp. ‘I am surprised at how adamant you have proved yourself to be!’

Vishwamitra, in turn, was taken aback at Vali’s sudden determination. But he did not show his surprise. He simply repeated the monosyllables with which he had suddenly made himself a very effective *rajaguru* at the first sign of war. ‘No,’ he said sharply. ‘Wait.’

Vaishnavi stood by calmly, with her hands folded. Her eyes were open wide and, under the long, red mark on her brow, looked capable of any challenge the world might throw upon her. She seemed to be looking at some point above her head and in the distance, and her lips moved slightly, as if chanting some prayers.

‘The war is here. This is what I have waited so many months for,’ Vali continued, trying to convince Vishwamitra.

Finally, Sugreeva spoke. ‘Brother, our *guru* is correct. Hanuman and Ganapati have not asked for reinforcements yet. We cannot move our forces away from the other fronts.’

Vali thumped his *gada* down into the earth and walked back to a sheltered spot beneath a rock where Tara and Ruma sat.

‘Come,’ Tara said, touching her belly, ‘teach your son about the duties of a king in times of war.’

That calmed him down.

*

Sometime before midnight, the fighting stopped. Even the few stragglers who had remained at the back of the invaders' broken army retreated.

Ganapati raised his trunk and sounded a victory. The call was taken up by the elephants at the back of the frontlines, and then all the way until the news reached the camp.

Then, Ganapati went to find Hanuman. It was easy. He had weaved his way through the enemy ranks, taking down as many as five creatures at a time. Ganapati followed the bodies wherever they had fallen in heaps of five. Some of them still moved, but huddled down in fear when they saw him approach.

'Hanuman,' Ganapati said. 'Let us return now.'

*

At first light, they returned to pick up whoever had been missed out in the night. They sedated the wounded creatures who lay there and then carried them to the far end of the field, where they left them in the hope that their friends would tend to them at nightfall.

A gloomy pall of smoke lay everywhere. The sun seemed covered by a thick blanket of despair.

The victory had not been without cost.

The damages were far more visible now. Bits of flesh and blood lay everywhere, and the wounded moaned from the medical camp. Vashishta had set up far away from the field.

Under Vishwamitra's supervision, a group of soldiers threw some kind of dried and crushed herbs all over the field, and swept it into the mud. 'This will ease the burden on the Goddess, our Mother. She does not like the taste of blood.'

Hanuman finally broke his silence. 'Why does the Mother bring us to this? Is she not all-powerful? When not even a nail or hair can grow without Her bidding, why all this?'

Vishwamitra heard in Hanuman's voice the pain of a child who had not even had a formal education, not even grown up fully, and was now turned into something no Kishkindhan had had to be in a long time—a man of war.

'Child. Hanuman,' he said, gently, touching his shoulder.

Hanuman's voice was heavy with grief now. 'She teaches us what to eat. She teaches us how to hold our mothers before we can even stand on the ground. Why do her powers not reach those who have caused this?' He pointed towards the diabolical elephant trap. Some elephants stood sadly by the edge, not knowing what to do about the remains of those who had fallen first, and now moaned no more.

'We are not meant to look,' Vishwamitra said quietly. 'The Ganeshas express their grief with more ceremony than almost anyone else.'

Hanuman listened quietly to the haunting sounds of the battle's aftermath, and stared at the broken remains of one of the enemy creatures lying near his feet. He could see the traces of his work too now, how the creatures had fallen, in groups of five, and he remembered, slowly, in a haze, every blow he had delivered.

The sound of the elephants' laments rose and fell. It was not loud, but it was distinct, and eerie.

'The world's heart breaks. That is the sound when an elephant cries. That is why they go far away. That is why we all go far away, child. We have all our lives to prepare for death. In peace, we do so well; we leave our ties only when we are content, when we have fulfilled our duties and our legitimate pleasures. In war, nothing is correct, everything is out of place and time.'

'Was this the only way?' Hanuman asked.

Vishwamitra answered with his eyes wide open. 'If I had your strength, my child, I would have done exactly what you did.'

Finally, Veera Ganapati approached Vishwamitra on a sombre matter. 'O Friend to All, we have a request. Their families have agreed that we will not be able to accord the dead a return to our Place of Dissolution. But this war is only beginning now, and we cannot leave them here to be desecrated by these creatures. We wish to follow different rites. Can your friend Vashishta help us?'

Vishwamitra nodded, sadly. The fires of Naraka would now be everywhere.

*

It was almost evening when the smoke finally died down. No one seemed capable of speech any more. Vali's soldiers, who had done nothing but

boast from the days of their innocent youth in Kishkindhanagara, now seemed as sober and mature as any old Kishkindhan. Their faces looked crestfallen. Their silence was not the silence of contentment that the elders of their old world had, but simple resignation. If they could speak, they would ask only one thing: *why is all this happening, O Goddess?*

As soon as the elephants returned from their ceremonies, Vali summoned everyone together for a prayer. Everyone knew that this was just the beginning. There would in all likelihood be another assault on them once it grew dark. No one said it, but there was now a smell in the air that would no doubt give the creatures an even greater invitation to attack. It was a smell few among them had known. They were young, and had been born in a time of peace; there had been no opportunity.

‘Friends,’ Vali spoke from atop a boulder in the middle of the space between the camps. In the twilight, the faces of the Kishkindhan army around him looked like an ancient sea. Whether he had really spoken to his unborn son or not as Tara had suggested the previous night, he now sounded a lot more serious, like a father, like a man responsible for more than himself, and his vanity. ‘Friends, we have come a long way on the strength of our fears for our children and our land. Now we have seen the cause for those fears, face to face. We confront an enemy that is far outside any traditions of combat we have followed in the past. They bring carcasses that rain fire from the sky. They fight to open rivers of blood from our veins. They fight to fulfil no other purpose, it seems, but to fight.’

Vali paused. He understood something more of himself after he’d said those words. He did not let his remorse show, but continued. ‘They are cruel and ingenious. They have gone from fearing fire to playing with it. They are bigger and stronger than us. They feed on life itself, and grow strong with it. They have conquered, it seems, most of the outer world, which is why not even one bird friend comes to us from their way.’

Vali paused now, and looked up at the sky.

‘But they will not conquer us,’ he said.

He said it calmly. But the effect it had was powerful.

‘Long. Live. Emperor Vali!’ someone with a voice full of authority shouted from the crowd.

The chant picked up, and a great roar rose through the army. They shouted for Vali, and for Sugreeva, and for Hanuman, and for Vaishnavi, and for Jambavanth, and for Ganapati.

Hanuman listened to it, and knew that, whatever he had done the previous night, and whatever he would still have to do, it was all for them, and for their children. If he had the strength, he would have decimated the enemy by himself and spared everyone else the ordeal of violence. But something was changing, profoundly, in the Goddess's world.

'Where stands the star of war tonight, O Rishi?' he asked Vishwamitra.

'He is there,' Vishwamitra pointed to a place in the sky with the utmost confidence, as if he had been paying as much attention to the skies as to the battles below.

'Does it favour the outcome we had hoped for, still?' Hanuman asked. 'Do you think we can tame these creatures?'

Vishwamitra gazed ahead. He considered all the possibilities. Then he nodded, slowly. 'Don't lose hope, Hanuman. The star of illumination favours us too. We will all learn something more about ourselves after this. That is how Mata Saraswati proceeds with the course of things.'

Vaishnavi joined them then and, with a puzzled look, asked, 'Stars?'

Hanuman nodded. 'The *rishi* says that our plan will still unfold.'

'Yes, O Princess,' Vishwamitra said, rather insistently now. 'And it is not because the stars say so, but because nature herself says so. There is only one way.'

'Which, in simple terms,' Vaishnavi said, unable to avoid the smile rushing to her face now, 'means we get battered, they get battered, then in the end, we put them in a place where they say, "Maybe this being battered isn't the only way to do things".'

'An invitation to self-improvement,' Vishwamitra reminded Hanuman of his words.

A smile was dancing on Hanuman's face now. Vishwamitra realized he had made everyone smile, though it was hard to see. It was dark, now. From that infinity of possible terrors, anything could come. Yet, he could not help himself in the face of so much hope from his young friends. Like a light in his heart, he felt all his prayers, all the memories of the people he had known and those with whom he was still standing with. He smiled too.

The Horned Giant



The sounds of the creatures began to draw closer to the Kishkindhan camps just after sunset. Hanuman stood at the western camp with Vali. They had moved some groups around the four camps so that the soldiers who had seen the worst of the previous night's battle could stay on the sidelines for this one.

The shapes of the creatures in the lead were visible now. Hanuman stepped back behind Vali to indicate to him that this would be his fight to lead. He sensed that Vali was pleased, but his cousin did not show it. Something had obviously sobered him down.

The signals went up around the camps, and everyone became alert, gathering their *gadas*, stones, and branches around them.

The creatures came up to a position close to the scene of the previous night's battle, and then, suddenly, stopped walking. Hanuman could hear their movements, and the strange, oozing sound of their heavy breathing. They seemed to cough, gurgle, and spit a lot.

'What are they doing?' Vali asked. 'Why have they stopped?'

'They have a plan, that is for sure. They are waiting for something, for us to go out, or for someone else to come join them,' Hanuman said. He could sense activity in the enemy lines, but it was not yet clear what they were up to.

‘Maybe they have a leader who is going to show himself today,’ Vali said. ‘Which means, of course, that we showed them what we are made of yesterday.’

‘What is that sound?’ Hanuman asked, softly, making a gesture for silence.

The wind blew, and the coughs and sputters of the creatures dipped and grew. But there was something else too. Hanuman had heard *that* sound before. It was something to do with Vishwamitra. Then, he remembered. ‘They are making fire,’ he said.

Vali told his captain that the Kishkindhans with stones should advance. Once the floating weapons came, they would puncture *them* with the rocks well before they got anywhere close to them. They also carried on their backs pallets of large leaves that would not burn *even* if sparks fell on them.

The soldiers moved quickly and quietly *ahead*, about halfway between the enemy lines and their camp. Another row of fighters moved too, to shadow them.

The striking of fire-sticks continued and, *in* the distant dark, the sparks grew more visible now. Hanuman *wondered* why they had not brought the air devices with them as they had *earlier*. *Why were they not—*

Suddenly, something like a ball of fire rose from the enemy ranks, not slowly like the night before, but *more* like an incensed hornet. With a loud hiss and a shower of sparks, the device shot up and across the plain towards them.

‘Take shelter!’ Vali *shouted*, as his guard quickly moved two large shields over him and themselves.

The device rose *high* above them, but then suddenly lost altitude and fell in the mud in front of *them*. Its rear stuck out of the mud hideously, and it smelt of burning skin and hair. It had been some poor life once, turned into a monstrous tool *now*.

‘So much for *that*!’ Vali laughed.

But the *rockets* came again, and again. They were poorly aimed, but frightening *enough* to watch, as balls of fire shot across all over the plain. There *was* not much the soldiers ahead could do, except avoid the ones that came *close*.

‘I wonder if even Vashishta knows how to do that,’ Hanuman said. ‘This is *truly* a twisted kind of intelligence.’

‘But they are not doing anything else,’ Vali said. ‘What do they hope to gain with this?’

Suddenly, Veera Ganapati shouted from somewhere behind them, ‘The monsters!’ and he charged ahead suddenly.

The elephants rushed out in a wild rage, signalling their fury.

Hanuman’s heart became heavy. He understood. ‘They are desecrating the smouldering remains of our friends now,’ he said to Vali.

Vali ordered the soldiers forward to support the elephants. It would be another terrible, wasteful battle.

With a sigh, and a prayer, Hanuman leaped forward once again.

*

Hanuman’s immediate concern was to drive the creatures away from the elephant remains. This time, the creatures looked even more disturbed, and some of them—in their desperation to dig through the half-burned wood and ash—did not even react to Hanuman’s arrival. They seemed immune even to pain.

The Ganeshas were now in a complete fury. They kicked, trampled, and pushed the creatures back without any remorse, not stopping even when the fireballs bounced off their backs.

Still, the creatures did not react. It was like beating pieces of stone, Hanuman thought, lethal, greedy, ravenous pieces of stone. *Why did they not stop? Why did pain not bother them? And why were they putting up such a mindless fight against the elephants?*

By then, Vali had reached the frontline. He stood on his open palanquin, as his personal guard formed a ferocious square all around him. Vali’s face glowed red and dark, full of sweat and violent anger. This was the moment he had been waiting for. With a loud scream, he leaped off his platform and into the enemy lines, destroying rows of the creatures with his massive tree-club.

This front was well covered between Vali’s fury and the elephant forces.

Finally, Hanuman found Ganapati and called out, ‘Ganapati, I fear there is more than this coming now.’

Ganapati paused and lowered his trunk. A limp body dangled from it. It shook like a question.

Hanuman ran nearer to him and shouted again. ‘This is only a diversion.’

*

From his vantage point in the north, Jambavanth knew the creatures were coming towards him, and from many different directions at that. The smells of burning flesh and explosive substances from the left were overpowering, but still, he sensed there was something else approaching too.

The only problem, though, was that by the time he saw them, they were only a few hundred feet from where he and his troops waited. The creatures had come in stealthily from the north, running softly, keeping low along the ground. Like lethal shadows, they rose up only when Jambavanth's voice sounded the alarm.

Jambavanth's soldiers rushed out into the dark, like shadowy clouds themselves. Quickly, they picked their fights, and stunned the creatures with mighty blows.

Then, suddenly, another alarm rose out from the east. It was Sugreeva's camp. From the sound of it, there had been a stealth attack there too.

Despite all the preparations they had made, the sudden approach of danger from almost all sides caused confusion inside the camps. Too many creatures seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Then, from somewhere, like a giant with whole tree-trunks for legs, came the one who would be called the One with the Horns.

His voice alone was enough to frighten the entire battlefield. Even the howlers could not drown it out. He seemed to be chanting, muttering angry curses, but then it turned out he was singing, even if something completely eerie.

*

Hanuman and Ganapati reached the north, where Jambavanth's forces were just about holding off the creatures. But even from a distance, they could see that Sugreeva's flank in the east was badly broken. The giant creature seemed to be bounding over three or four Kishkindhan soldiers at once. Ganapati had to wonder if he was as tall as an elephant, and where those tusks on his head might have come from.

'There comes Vali's important opponent,' Hanuman said, with a hint of disapproval in his voice.

The Kishkindhan soldiers tried in vain to spread out in long lines between the camps and face off the attackers. They stood their ground boldly, but lacked the density to push back. In the end, in close quarters, at the moment of confrontation, the creatures' superior weight and force prevailed easily over the Kishkindhans' agility and speed. Wherever the line was thin, they fell, with pitiable yelps, an arm, or shoulder, or sometimes even a head slashed by the creatures' gruesome jagged rock weapons.

But wherever a larger cluster of soldiers stayed in place, they prevailed. They took some blows, but between five or six of them, they managed to topple the creatures and render them unconscious with blows to the head with their rounded stones.

Some Kishkindhans, Hanuman noticed, also picked up their attackers' sharp rocks and gave it back to them with full, violent, force. It was not the moment to talk to them about it though.

Hanuman turned his attention to the horned giant. Maybe Vali's theory about a formidable leader had some merit. If the giant were indeed some kind of a leader, defeating him would send a strong signal to the rest of the army. Hanuman made an instant decision. He would have to leave the giant to someone else.

'Vali is needed back in the middle. The enemy's chief warrior has broken through and must be stopped,' Hanuman told his captain.

Then, as the captain bowed and turned to deliver the message, Hanuman remembered one more vital piece of information. 'Remind Vali that Queen Tara's camp is in the middle too, where the enemy giant is heading.'

'Ganapati,' Hanuman called out to the weary elephant. 'We are falling on two fronts. I can reach Sugreeva quickly, and I shall go to him. Please provide reinforcements to Jambavanth here.'

With that, Hanuman shot off through the darkness towards the terrible noises from the east, where his friend Sugreeva needed him.

*

Ruma picked up a *gada* from a soldier and stood cautiously near Tara. Unlike the earlier battle, the screams tonight were coming closer and closer still. Vishwamitra climbed on top of the boulder against which Tara was resting. Only the south seemed to be relatively quiet.

He saw the picture as Ganapati had described it, in terms of squares. From where they were, it was easier to see the whole battlefield this way. A series of squares on the left, noisily engaged by the enemy, just to draw their attention away. Then, a series of random, stealthy but determined, approaches from the front. And a larger push from the right. What happened beyond that would depend on how many more creatures were there, and how soon they would deploy.

He had hoped that the fight would be brought into the middle, but on terms that were favourable to them. Tonight, the terms, as such, were not clear. The screams and war-cries seemed to be coming from everywhere. Enough enemy creatures were now within the perimeter of the four camps, and drawing in soldiers away from the front too.

It would not be possible to deploy the trap. Not only that, but there was a real danger that the creatures could cause damage to the only two possible points of vulnerability tonight.

Vishwamitra could see the giant's head bobbing here and there in the darkness. A few Kishkindhan soldiers seemed to be shadowing him, but not with much success.

He looked down at the pregnant Tara, and the guard that stood around her. Then, he looked away, into the dark, where Vashishta had set up camp with his students. The giant, it seemed, could easily destroy that.

With a prayer and a lot of trust in Goddess Saraswati's reign over his mind, Vishwamitra told the captain near him to move as many soldiers as he could towards Vashishta's position. Whatever happened, Vashishta's medicines could not be destroyed. Everything in the world rested on that little white-haired Kishkindhan elder and his leaves.

*

Sure enough, in a few minutes, Vishwamitra heard the screams intensify on that side. Fortunately, the extra soldiers had reached an advantageous position very quickly. He could see them line up on a high ridge, and rain rocks down with a desperate fury. Some of them were even pushing loose boulders and sending them rolling down at the creatures.

Vishwamitra's move had worked.

Pleased, he turned away, only to see that the giant with the horns pointing out of his head was standing right in front of Tara and Ruma.

31

Vali's Vengeance



Vishwamitra scrambled off the rock and put himself bravely between the giant and the sisters. In the dark, the giant looked like a large, thorny rock covered with slime. He smelled worse than all the other creatures put together.

Tara placed her arms protectively around her stomach and drew back against the boulder. Ruma held her tightly with one hand, and tried to lift the *gada* onto her shoulders with the other.

The giant bent down slightly to get a better look at them. For the first time, they could see his face. Even in the dark, they could see the amusement in it. He began to laugh, loudly, until the drool ran out of his mouth and down his red moustache and splattered on to the ground.

The horns on his head shook. From this close, Vishwamitra could tell they were no mere goat horns as he had thought, but the tusks of the great northern elephants, stitched together with some poor thing's skin.

The giant raised his foot and aimed it over where Vishwamitra was standing.

Tara stifled a scream as the foot came down with a powerful sound.

But Vishwamitra had quickly moved away.

The giant turned slightly, and tried again.

Vishwamitra ran again. Tara and Ruma held their breath. Vishwamitra was slowly trying to draw the giant away from them.

But the giant soon realized Vishwamitra's ploy. He had already smelled Tara, and knew she carried the most delicious of pickings for him inside her.

With a contemptuous snort, he veered around quickly and walked purposefully towards the boulder, his teeth clearly visible now. With each step he grunted, and more saliva dripped from his mouth. He dropped his clubs—two rock slabs with jagged edges—and began to move as if in a trance. His fingers twisted and moved of their own accord.

Tara knew this as hunger, an insane hunger, and she knew what those blood-red claws were twitching for. She turned her face to the rock and shut her eyes.

'I am here, Tara,' Ruma said, 'I am here.'

She lifted the *gada* and waited. At best, she knew, she could land one small blow on his knees. Beside her, she could hear Tara desperately chanting a prayer to Goddess Saraswati for courage.

*

The giant yelped in pain as something lashed across his face. He covered his eyes with his hands and stepped back, giving Ruma enough room to pull Tara away from where they had been cornered.

Above them, a ferocious Vaishnavi was standing atop the boulder. In her hands, she held a long, sinuous cane. She stayed absolutely still, the tension in her body seemingly reflecting the tension in the bent cane. The far end of the cane bent low with the weight of the attachments that glinted and glowed in the dark menacingly.

'Wretchedness, sheer wretchedness,' she murmured angrily. She knew exactly what the giant was drooling for. She would not have unsheathed her weapon for any other reason. The crystal shards from the icy mountains that studded the striking end of her cane were no ordinary objects, but could seep into a victim's skin, and mind.

The giant screamed and then leaped onto the boulder, still holding his face with one hand.

Vaishnavi stepped back and lashed out again, this time at his knees. He yelped and bent low, but the cane was now stuck to his flesh, preventing

Vaishnavi from pulling back for another strike at him. He lunged towards her, pushing away the cane.

Vaishnavi let go of her weapon and rolled away. The crystals were probably seeping into his blood and poisoning his vision. With some luck, he would be disoriented and his aim would not be good.

Angered by Vaishnavi's speed, the giant picked up an enormous boulder, but suddenly he paused, swaying this way, and that. He had not lost his senses yet, though, and his hands, and the boulder, seemed locked on to Vaishnavi, moving whichever way she moved.

Suddenly, a volley of stones began to rain onto his back. He turned around, veering to the left and the right.

Vali was running towards him with a fury in his eyes that even a giant could recognize. The giant's head bobbed towards the left, where Vishwamitra and Ruma had taken Tara. He seemed to know what that meant to Vali.

With a cruel, sneering laugh, the giant spat once in the direction of Tara, though she was too far from him to be reached. Then, before Vali could come any closer, he turned sharply and began to run away at great speed.

*

Vali chased after him for a few feet, and then flung his *gada*. But the giant was too disoriented to run straight, and the *gada* missed him entirely. In a few seconds, all that remained of him was the sight of the top of his horns.

And within a few minutes of his exit, the rest of the creatures began to withdraw as well.

The battle was over for the night.

Tara hugged Vali closely and chanted the Goddess's name over and over in gratitude.

Vali stroked her head and nodded. But he knew that he would never know peace again in his life.

*

The only injury in the family that night would once again be the unfortunate Sugreeva's. When he came to at dawn, Hanuman was standing over him, squeezing some leaves in the palm of his hand and pouring the juices into a

coconut shell. Vashishta clapped his hands and sang, rather too cheerfully, 'Morning! Morning!'

Sugreeva laughed, and so did the others recovering from their injuries in Vashishta's care. Amidst all the destruction, it was good to have someone capable of appearing that oblivious to the gloom in everyone's hearts.

'What happened?' Sugreeva asked, finally.

'You led with your head, my friend,' Hanuman replied, and then paused as everyone laughed at the unintentional bluntness of the comment. 'I mean, you leaped out at the first enemy you saw and didn't see the others come around and gang up on you.'

'Yes! That shadow! I knew it was one of them, and then I...' Sugreeva began, vaguely recollecting the events of the previous night.

'You went so fast that your captain and his men could not even catch up with you,' Ruma said.

'Ruma!' Sugreeva said, with deep happiness now, and held her hand. Suddenly he looked alarmed, and tried to see who else was there now. 'Tara? Vali? The others?'

'We are all still here, Sugreeva,' Hanuman said. 'It was difficult, but the Goddess still keeps us here.'

'Hanuman reached you just in time. Your captain managed to bring you back from the front, but the only reason we are all here today is because Hanuman's instinct told him you needed help the most,' Ruma said.

'If something sounds like it is good for us, then it is the Goddess herself speaking. Our duty is to learn to listen,' Hanuman smiled. It was something his mother used to say, in another world far from all this, long ago.

'There was a terrible attack on Tara too,' Ruma continued. 'An ugly giant made his way into the camp. But the Princess Vaishnavi appeared just in time, and then Vali returned too, because Hanuman had alerted him.'

Hanuman could not ever understand Ruma's admiration for him. She always seemed to see him as someone bigger than himself. She was so much like his mother—never angry, always sensible.

'My brother? Is he well?' Sugreeva asked.

'He broods. He is in a terrible rage. He has spent the whole morning pacing the three outer fronts in search of clues for the giant's whereabouts,' Hanuman said.

'I wish he had come to see me instead,' Sugreeva said.

*

That afternoon, Vishwamitra, Vashishta and Ganapati made many arrangements inside the perimeter. Hanuman made sure all the captains understood the plans for the night, and that the communication signals were clear. The previous night had been retrieved from the edge of tragedy only because of a quick exchange of information between the leaders of the different camps. With Sugreeva's injury, his front would have easily collapsed without Hanuman's timely arrival there to take charge. And without Vali's return, Vaishnavi, Tara, and Tara's unborn child would not have probably escaped from the terrible giant.

Just before sunset, Vali visited Tara. He barely noticed the arrangements that had been made within the valley to lure the creatures into a place where they could be defeated. Vishwamitra explained the rationale to him calmly. Having been turned back twice, it was likely that the enemy would come at them this very night with every inch of strength that they possessed. All four camps would most likely come under attack, all at once. At the right moment, the Kishkindhan soldiers would start falling back to tempt as many enemies as possible to enter the valley. Once inside, the fight would go on as long as needed to defeat them. At dawn, with the Goddess's grace, those who still lived would be at their mercy, and could be handed over to Vashishta for a cure.

'Yes. Yes,' Vali said, absently. 'A cure.'

He did not look like he cared about anything more than vengeance now. Vishwamitra sensed that. He spoke to Hanuman and Ganapati discreetly, and in turn they spoke to Vali's captain. The king would most likely not be available for command tonight. He would only seek out and destroy the giant. It was obvious.

*

The sounds began at twilight, and seemed like echoes at first, for they came from everywhere. The floating devices appeared on the horizon, and this time, they seemed to be studded with shards of elephant tusks. Hanuman and Vaishnavi made quick rounds of the perimeter from opposite directions, and then stood at their command posts. The sky seemed to stay red for a

very long time, even after the sun had set. And the reddish hue was everywhere, in almost all directions.

The screams and the stomping came closer. It appeared that every creature of its kind on the planet was now here.

The creatures stopped marching, and then they spread out into a single line to form an enormous circle, almost as wide as the scout perimeter Vishwamitra had set up earlier. They did not intend for anyone inside to escape.

Vali paced the top of the hill, trying to see where the horned giant might be. He had deputed a number of soldiers to run between the scouts and him, so they could inform him the moment the giant was spotted.

Hanuman placed his palms together and prayed quietly. For the first time in many months, he allowed himself one wish for himself. He thought of his parents. He prayed that they were safe. He prayed that tonight would end the war, and he could go home again to find them.

Vaishnavi saw him as the breeze moved aside the leaves of the tent, and felt deeply touched. 'Who are you, Hanuman?' she said to herself as the breeze grew suddenly into a monstrous wind and rushed through the red silence of the awaiting battlefield.

*

With an enormous roar, the creatures began to run towards the camps. As they did so, dozens of explosive rockets began to shoot up into the sky, spinning and somewhat out of control. But their presence was hideous enough to agitate the Kishkindhan soldiers.

They too bared their teeth in threat, as they had seen the creatures do for the past two days, and then slapped the ground with their *gadas*. They looked with determination towards their captains for orders to engage.

The captains held on, waiting for word to be flashed around the four signal posts. Vishwamitra would decide the right time.

The flying devices began to land even closer to them now, rolling into balls of fire and skin.

Then, the soldiers saw the strangest thing happening. The creatures began to hold the flying rockets and attempt to launch themselves into the air. Most of them fell, limp. But some of them rolled around and got up, and

with newly-energized voices, roared and charged into the Kishkindhans in the frontlines.

Vishwamitra sighted the one he wanted to see, and signalled for the battle to start. With an angry war cry, the Kishkindhan soldiers charged out in all directions to fight to the finish.

Then, Vishwamitra pointed out the one he had spotted to Hanuman. He was a giant too, but he looked different from the one who had attacked them the night before. He sat on an enormous and grotesque palanquin of sorts, some kind of an animal-skin draped box, carried atop two logs.

Hanuman noticed that the creature in the chariot seemed to have not one, but ten heads.

32

Ten Skulls



The procession stopped a few hundred feet from the Kishkindhan line. The creatures on either side stopped marching as well. They were waiting for something.

The Kishkindhan captain ordered his men to stop and step back as well. He was petrified by what he saw, and so were they.

One of the creatures stepped forward and picked up a rock. He turned and pointed it at the giant, and then pointed it to the captain, and threw it contemptuously on the ground.

Vishwamitra saw the scene unfold and said with a laugh to Hanuman, 'So they *can* communicate when they want to.'

'What does it mean?' asked Hanuman.

'Vali gets what he wants. They want to challenge him to a single fight. So be it.' Vishwamitra sent a runner to ask Vali to come.

'Why does this creature have ten heads, O Rishi?' Hanuman asked. 'Is it a symptom of the disease that ails them?'

'What isn't?' Vishwamitra said, with resignation.

Vali came running with his personal guard and stood squarely between the enemy and his own frontline. His chest heaved with anger. He looked at the giant with the ten heads, and then turned and snapped at his captain for spotting the wrong giant. The captain gestured plaintively and pointed towards Vishwamitra.

Breathing heavily, Vali stepped forward and nodded to the captain. He did not seem particularly disturbed by the strangeness of the creature awaiting battle with him.

The captain picked up a rock and threw it back on the ground in front of them, assuming that gesture would mean he had accepted the challenge.

The giant now stood up. He was tall, and his heads dangled ominously on his shoulders. He snarled and strode down towards Vali furiously.

Vali stood still, glaring at him with quiet fury. His mind was still set on the other one, the one who had dared come so close to his queen, and who had dared to spit; *he would break his face.*

The giant came closer to Vali and stopped. They could see each other's faces now. The giant pushed his left hand forward like a fist in the direction of Vali's head and made a grunting sound. Then, he lifted the hand and thumped it onto his right shoulder, besides the lifeless heads mounted there.

Vali laughed contemptuously. How could a person wearing jewellery made of elephant tusks and creature-skulls expect an enemy to take him seriously?

Then, the creature did the one thing that could really enrage Vali. He spat on the ground.

Like a stone falling from a great height, the fire of his anger plunged into Vali's head. The amused indifference he'd felt a second ago was gone. With one great shout of rage, he leaped at the ten-headed giant.

Given the disparity in size between the two of them, the giant underestimated the full extent of Vali's strength, and merely thrust his chest forward in a brazen fashion.

Vali's feet connected powerfully, and the surprised giant fell backwards, his skull collection falling back and tumbling into an ignominious tangle on his shoulders. A stunned silence descended on the creatures.

Vali knelt over the giant. He could see the look of shock and fear in his eyes. He was not someone who had ever seen defeat. Vali looked at his mouth, and the gross, filthy lips, and felt a blob of spit rising up in his own

mouth. But his hands spoke again. He put them together to make one fist, and smashed it down onto the creature's mouth.

The creature howled in pain and rolled away. His skull-ornaments now dangled pathetically from his shoulders and down his back. Vali leaped behind him and kicked him to the ground.

The giant scrambled up and gestured to his soldiers. Quickly, one of them threw him an enormous stone, hewn in the shape of a jagged dagger.

His mouth bloodied with pain and rage, the giant raised his weapon and swung violently at Vali.

Vali merely stepped aside. He allowed a moment for the giant to register his surprise. Then, he leaped again and caught his head in a tight lock between his legs. The giant struggled desperately.

Vali merely sat there, choking him, enjoying his dominance. He saw his soldiers stare at him admiringly, and noticed that even Hanuman and Sugreeva had come. Then, he saw the look on the faces of the creatures as they witnessed their most powerful fighter being humiliated thus.

For a moment, it seemed as if not only the war, but the future of Kishkindha was won.

Vali's name echoed over the battlefield as the Kishkindhan soldiers shouted their jubilation to the skies.

*

Hanuman felt calm for the first time since the battle began. Even if their method was infinitely more violent, the creatures too had a system, it now seemed, for recognizing the reality of a superior force confronting them. *Maybe the bloodshed could end. Maybe the cure could be found without all this trouble, maybe a compromise, between savagery and the Kishkindhan way...*

Vali was now dragging the creature around the dirt with his *balance*. He was simply unmatchable. It would only be a matter of time now before the creature begged for mercy, in whatever form his kind might be inclined to do.

But news of their hero's thrashing spread quickly through the creatures' ranks, and from somewhere far off, at another front, the horned giant who had escaped Vali the previous night came running. Hanuman heard his song, spotted his approach, and rushed to block him.

Hanuman leaped directly into the path of the bounding giant. He fell forward and recovered slowly. He turned to see Hanuman standing near him with his arms by his side. He moved as if to fight Hanuman, but then turned with a laugh, and began to run towards Vali, singing his crude and mocking song.

Hanuman understood what he was trying to do. He wanted to distract Vali from his fight with Ten Skulls.

Vali, meanwhile, was pushing the broken enemy warrior down with his foot. With his left hand, he picked up the creature's skull-necklace and pulled his head up tauntingly. In that moment, and only for just one moment, it seemed Vali could have extracted whatever he wanted from his fallen foe. His followers stood by aghast, trembling before Vali.

But then, Vali heard the sounds. He looked up and saw the horned giant running away from Hanuman and towards him.

A smile of gratitude and madness flashed across Vali's face. His vengeance would be sweet.

Hanuman leaped forward and again knocked the horned giant down. He quickly caught him by his hand and, in one elegant move, swung him back a good distance away from Vali's fight.

But it was too late. 'Hanuman!' Vali shouted. 'He will be mine.'

Hanuman could see the ten-skulled giant under Vali's foot looking up, desperately. One moment of respite from Vali was all he was hoping for. One moment was all it would take for the victory so close at hand now to slip away.

Hanuman gestured to Vali to wait, that he would capture the other giant and bring him over.

But Vali was already in a red-hot rage. He leaped off his fallen opponent's body and charged towards his target. Already, Hanuman could see the horned giant laughing, for he had succeeded in drawing Vali away from the verge of victory.

The formerly ten-headed warrior scrambled to his feet and ran back to his ranks. He grabbed something from one of his men, and then struck a rock furiously. It sparked, and one of their flying devices began to expand and rise. He held it with one hand, and with the other, he covered his face in despair.

Hanuman was almost near him when the fire fully ignited. Suddenly, the device shot off in an arc somewhere far behind the skulled-giant's lines,

carrying his beaten body along with it.

Hanuman knew then that Vali had just made an expensive mistake that would have consequences for him, and for Kishkindha.

*

The battle raged on once again. Everyone who had stopped to see the duel between Vali and the ten-headed giant forgot all about it and went back to their screaming frenzy. As Vishwamitra had predicted, Vali turned into a completely unpredictable element on the battlefield. The horned giant eluded him, and led him on a wild chase all over.

But Vali's madness did not matter any more. Vishwamitra had accounted for it in his plans. As instructed, Hanuman withdrew from the chaos and returned to the middle of the arena, from where he could see the lines led by Ganapati, Jambavanth, and Vaishnavi slowly moving backwards, drawing enemy hordes into the valley.

Hanuman quietly inspected the inner perimeter set up by Vashishta and his students, and made sure the soldiers holding the arrangements there were alert and ready. He could not help smiling though, because Vashishta still seemed chirpily unaware of the massive destruction unfolding all around him.

Everything was happening slowly, but precisely as planned. He could see Ganapati's forces, and then, Vaishnavi, and then, like shadows rumbling down a hill, Jambavanth. And for all their callowness, the foot-soldiers of Kishkindha too were playing their part well. Despite their anger, and their desire to avenge their fallen friends, most of them were now doing what they were naturally inclined to do, before this unnatural war fell upon them. They were playing with the creatures now, taunting them, leading them in, avoiding their blows with quick footwork.

Only Sugreeva was missing.

*

Hanuman saw Vishwamitra walking up the hill towards Vashishta. He went up to him quickly to ask if he had seen Sugreeva. But Vishwamitra seemed to know more than what his eyes had seen.

'What will be will be now,' he said, his gaze steadily on Vashishta and his students taking their positions along the ridges of the hills overlooking

the valley.

‘But what of Sugreeva? I must go to his help, should I not?’

‘Sugreeva follows Vali everywhere to help him. And Vali follows the most unimportant speck of flesh on this arena to be a hero to himself. Do you see anything worthwhile really to follow here, O wise and valiant son of Kesari?’

Hanuman heard a strength and coldness in Vishwamitra’s voice that he had never heard before. But the *rishi* was right. What was it that he wanted to follow? Sugreeva was his friend and brother; but Sugreeva had left because of a compulsion that had gripped the two brothers their whole intense lives. Hanuman sighed softly, and let go his concern for his friend. He would trust the Goddess to take care of him. He would need to be here, by Vishwamitra’s side. One mistake now, and the trap could fail, or worse, turn into a massacre.

Primal Solution



Hanuman watched as Veera Ganapati ascended the hill across the valley from him. That meant that his fighters were now all out of the valley, or at least had manoeuvred their way to the edges. Their presence there was essential. The creatures would not be able to escape once they were in place.

Then, Jambavanth appeared on another crest, and his captain struck the glowing rocks to signal that they were truly ready too.

Finally, Vaishnavi ascended as well. The sounds of the skirmish were now contained almost entirely within the perimeter that had been set up.

Vishwamitra gently touched Vashishta's shoulder. 'Now, my *guru* !' he said.

'Phee-Phee One!' Vashishta shouted to his students.

A green glowing light rose up into the sky, bathing the valley in light. The Kishkindhan soldiers were already where they were supposed to be, mostly along the outer edges.

'Phee-Phee Two!' Vashishta shouted, and clapped his hands.

Another light rose and popped with a bright incandescence aimed at blinding the creatures, at least for a few minutes. As planned, the Kishkindhan soldiers in the middle began to push free and run outside very

quickly, stopping to break a few strangleholds and wrestling locks along the way to help their comrades.

Even before the light could fade, the creatures began to realize that they were in a large field surrounded by hills. The river roared deep and black behind them in the distance. It had to be a trap.

They screamed and snarled orders to each other and tried to move, but Vashishta had already shouted for Phee-Phee Three.

A pink sheet of flame rose from the tops of the hills and moved down like a wall of annihilation. Then, another wall of flame rose along the banks of the river.

The creatures screamed, and then began to wail.

*

‘May the Goddess continue to favour us with the wind, and all will be well, for now,’ Vishwamitra said. As expected, the fires spread exactly along the lines set up by Vashishta, and did not extend all the way to consume the creatures. His students had mixed and laid the combustible materials and the retardants as planned.

After a few hours, the wailing and moaning stopped. The creatures began to take off their ragged skins and furs as they sweated out their ordeal helplessly.

‘Time for Phee-Phee Four?’ Vishwamitra asked Vashishta.

‘No, not a Phee-Phee,’ Vashishta said, as if Vishwamitra ought to have known better.

He gestured to his students and they moved down the slope with piles of dried leaves and branches of some kind in their hands. They threw these into the flames, setting off a sharp, pungent smell that made everyone cough.

‘I don’t recall it being that tough,’ Vishwamitra said.

Hanuman thought the fragrance was like something Riksharaja might have carried in her wake, a mystical, powerful smell. As Vashishta’s plan began to unfold, Hanuman paused, hoping once again that Vali and Sugreeva were safe. But his place was not in that fight. He had to be here. If the creatures broke free, or if something went wrong, this was where he had to be. This was what they had struggled for all these months, from the time that first drop of blood had fallen from Sugreeva’s wound, from the bones

that Vishwamitra had carried around the whole length of Kishkindha, through the training, the battles, the lives taken, destroyed...

He did not cough. But his eyes watered.

*

By dawn, the creatures were exhausted. They lay on the earth naked, covered in sweat and saliva. The fires still burned, but the flames were lower now. They had stopped sweating, and many of them were now done vomiting as well. Some of them lay with their tongues hanging out. Others gazed forlornly at the river rushing past them, full of water to quench their thirst, but separated by that wall of fire that would not cease.

A few of them, just a few, Hanuman noted, held each other in their arms almost tenderly.

The sun rose and, as always, whatever remaining spirit the creatures had seemed to leave them as well.

Hanuman walked down towards them, followed by Vishwamitra and a few soldiers.

The soldiers sprinkled some herbs and put out a few feet of flames in their firewall. Hanuman walked in. It was a very different feeling, to be surrounded by hundreds of these creatures, and for not one of them to want to harm him.

The smell was still terrible, but it was no longer the creatures' alone. It was in the air now, burnt, sent away into the skies.

Hanuman walked around calmly, looking into everyone's faces. No one moved. No one did anything. It reminded him suddenly of how it was in the forests of Kishkindha. No one had to fear another living being.

Then, he heard a sound behind him, and he turned to look. Vaishnavi had walked in too. Hanuman hesitated. His hands closed into fists, and he became alert suddenly. Was she safe here? Were they truly out of danger now, as he was beginning to think they might be?

Still, not one creature moved. He saw her walking amongst them as she would among her own kind. Right then, the creatures seemed just like anything else in the Goddess's creation. They lived, and others lived. There really was no need for anything more beyond that.

Vaishnavi felt it was safe too, now, and she gestured towards her guards. They came in carefully and handed her a coconut shell filled with water.

She tried to pour some into the hands of the creatures. They did not understand. But when it fell on the ground, they bent down and licked it up.

They had created weapons that flew like birds and spit fire. They had hacked down elephants with their hands. They had taken the lives of hundreds of Kishkindhans with those hands.

Yet, those hands had not learned even how to take some water to one's lips.

Hanuman saw the pity on Vaishnavi's face, and was quickly filled with a feeling of compassion for the creatures' ignorance.

He walked up to Vaishnavi and knelt beside her on one knee. He raised his right palm, and held his left hand underneath to steady it. She poured him some water, and he drank it carefully, without spilling a drop, without forgetting even for a second how monumental the events they had lived through had been. All of it, just for something like this, perhaps, just to know the significance of a few drops of water in one's hand, to learn how to take it to one's mouth, and to see one's loved ones do that too.

Some of the creatures were too weak to sit up. Their companions accepted the water and clumsily splashed it near their mouths. Their arms had the same powerful, mechanical force to them as they had when they had been hacking elephants. But now, they were learning a new use for them.

One of them took the water and gave it to his companion first.

Hanuman smiled.

Vaishnavi left then, and so did Hanuman. A row of soldiers sat along the hillside with bananas for the creatures. The only look on every Kishkindhan's face was of pity for this primitive creature so disconnected from the *dharma* Kishkindha knew intimately.

*

At noon, Sugreeva returned to the camp. He was alone.

Ruma rose in relief at the sight of him, but then realized what Sugreeva returning alone meant for Tara. And Tara's unborn child.

The three of them embraced each other in tears.

'But why did he not come back?' Tara asked, swallowing her tears. 'Not even for our son?'

‘He swears he will not return until he has avenged his honour,’ Sugreeva reported, his voice low and sad.

‘Why has he not done it yet?’ Ruma asked.

‘The horned giant would not stop running. And Vali would not stop running after him. I went behind them as far as the bottom of the great mountains, beyond which lie the lands of the Great Dispersal. The giant disappeared into a cave. Vali stopped for a moment then, only then, to embrace me and to tell me to go back to you.’

Tara stopped crying and stared intently to the north. ‘He will come back. I know it.’

Ruma smiled and embraced her.

‘He told me I should take good care of you and the baby ... in case he is ... delayed.’

That afternoon, Vishwamitra, Ganapati, Jambavanth and Vaishnavi duly presided over the anointment of Sugreeva as the lord of Kishkindha in Vali’s absence. Their world was passing through a delicate transition. Sugreeva insisted he would only remain a titular head and only until Vali’s son was born. But Vishwamitra insisted that Sugreeva would have to be ready to do a lot more than that.

The creatures, after all, had only just been tamed. Until they fully understood that they would not need to ever violate the *parama dharma* again, it would be better for them to remember that Kishkindha was capable, and capable of force. For that, they had to know that Kishkindha was ruled by a strong leader, and Vali had left exactly such an aura now for his brother to assume.

Sugreeva glanced at Ruma, and then at everyone gathered around him. They were looking at him in a way they never had before. He had to live up to everyone’s expectations. It would not be easy. Then his gaze fell upon Hanuman and, with a sense of relief, he stepped forward and embraced him.

‘Emperor Sugreeva,’ Hanuman said, ‘my father will be proud to see Kishkindha in your good hands.’

Sugreeva smiled, touched by Hanuman’s affection for him. Then, suddenly, he burst out laughing. ‘My first order...’ he shouted, and paused. And then called out to everyone to listen. ‘I, Sugreeva, Lord of Kishkindha, duly declare as void, no, silly, absurd, and void, the so-called exile of my dearest friend and our noblest Kishkindhan son, our Hanuman!’

‘One brother speaks as the other brother fights,’ Rumi said and laughed. Tara too, seemed reassured now that all would be well.

‘I, Jambavanth, am the first to salute you, noble Sugreeva. Your throne is built on good deeds and is secured by the best of men I have known.’ He turned to Hanuman as if he would now embrace him, but instead brought his claws together in a respectful *pranam*.

Hanuman returned his salutations, and bowed. He looked at Vishwamitra, and at Vashishta, and briefly, just from the corner of his eye, at Vaishnavi.

‘Sugreeva, I mean, Emperor Sugreeva,’ Hanuman said. ‘Rule well and bring hope back to our people. Let us not allow these dark times we have faced to darken our hearts. I know you will be wise and just, and the Goddess will guide you through these tricky times of settling in these troubled creatures.’

‘You guide me too, Hanuman,’ Sugreeva said, gently.

‘I must learn much more before I presume to guide you, dear friend,’ Hanuman said. ‘It is my wish, if our *rishi* permits me, to study and learn the ancient wisdom of the Goddess Saraswati. And, if the Goddess so wills it, I would like to see my parents again, wherever they are now. So, return without me for now to our warm home in the sun, and think of me and our games by the river when you do.’

‘Hanuman? You will not come with us?’ Sugreeva asked, disbelief and grief in his voice.

‘Sugreeva, child. King of Kishkindha,’ Vishwamitra said gently. ‘Your friend is many years younger to you. He is a child, only just about old enough to stand as a man. And he has already seen so much and done so much more than anyone of his age and innocence should ever have to. But if his heart desires learning, we must see to it that he has a formal Second Ceremony this time. We must ensure that only the best *gurukula* receives him. And we must send word to his parents too.’

‘When the Goddess decides you need me,’ Hanuman smiled, ‘she will surely send me to you again, Sugreeva.’

Sugreeva and Hanuman embraced, and wept as brothers. In just a few days, their paths would diverge.

34

Kamadhenu



In five days, everything that needed to be done was done. The creatures captured in the battle behaved like cooperative patients rather than the ferocious killers they had been just days ago. A few of their non-fighting companions who had stayed away from battle began to crawl up to the medicinal fire each night out of curiosity, and they too joined them. The peaceful refugees who had come with Lady Ganapati began mingling with the newly-tamed creatures, and helped reassure them that the Kishkindhans only wanted to help them.

Each night, Vashishta organized a fire with a particular set of aromas. On the second night, the creatures stopped drooling. On the third night, they began to sleep again, seemingly without nightmares.

Each morning, a young and slender student of Vashishta's no one had seen before came swimming up the river and, with a salutation to the *rishis*, proceeded to teach the creatures a series of exercises. Hanuman noticed that a small group of river serpents too came out to the water's edge to watch. He realized that the exercises were making the bodies of those who did them move like snakes, fluid, smooth, without a quarrel with nature.

Hanuman began to perform them as well. On the third day, his body took on a will of its own. He began to perform the series of moves together just

as the sun rose, and—with each practice—it seemed to take him closer to the sun.

When he completed twenty-one such moves, he noticed the murmuring from the shores below. The *rishis* and their students were watching him in admiration. They gestured for him to continue, and as he did, they began to imitate him as well.

Vishwamitra told Vaishnavi what she been hoping he would say. ‘Only Surya can teach this boy more than what he already knows.’

‘And we shall take him to the sun then,’ she smiled.

After the exercises, as the Kishkindhans and the creatures all lay back on the earth, in silence, in peace, it did not seem as if anyone or anything was different anymore.

*

On the sixth morning after the war, Vishwamitra offered a set of prayers to the ground to seek forgiveness for all the injury that had taken place there. The remaining soldiers cleaned the land thoroughly, and planted saplings and watered them.

Then, they began to walk south, along the river. Vishwamitra knew of a place, he said, not too far away, where the creatures could be left to make a home and live in peace. After that, he and Vashishta would accompany Hanuman to a school in the east, to learn from Surya himself.

Hanuman glanced back once and saw the saplings where once there had been broken bodies. It was almost as if the strife had been an illusion. He looked at the vast horizons beyond. The skies were pink at the rims, reflecting the rising sun on the other side.

He wondered about the creatures that had got away, particularly the one with the ten skulls. Despite his beating at Vali’s hands, Ten Skulls did not seem like one to give up. Vali had made a mistake, though the full consequences of that would not be clear to anyone just yet. It was a costly revenge Vali had chosen, and missing the birth of his child would be only the beginning.

The world was not pure anymore, thought Hanuman. Perhaps it had never been pure. The only thing one could do was to keep resolving troubles when they came. One good thing might be that, even if Vali’s son would not see his father for a long time, he would live, as they had once, in a time of

peace. A wise combination of force and justice could make the *parama dharma* possible again.

‘Save those thoughts for Surya,’ Vaishnavi said, and laughed.

Hanuman had not even realized that she had been staring at him.

‘They will be so happy to have you in the *gurukula*,’ she said. ‘They are like that all the time, thinking, thinking, like a mountain with a lot of height and no real movement.’

‘Am I like that, Vaishnavi? I have no movement?’ Hanuman asked sincerely.

Vaishnavi placed her hand affectionately on his. ‘There is no one on this earth like you, Hanuman.’

*

In a few days, they neared their destination. They started to see more signs of life in the land around them. There were birds in the sky, and they sang. There were more trees, and they seemed to be bursting with fruit and flowers. There was a sense of order, as if everything had been carefully coaxed into growth and fruition, and nothing had been harmed.

Vishwamitra halted the march and went ahead along with Vashishta to make some arrangements. ‘Keep their morale up, Hanuman,’ he said. ‘Just a few minutes, and they will have a new guardian.’

Hanuman wondered what clan in all of Kishkindha would be brave enough to take on these once-lethal wards. Admittedly, they did not seem like even a shade of the frightful beasts they had been all their lives. They had had many chances to regress these past few days. They could have easily attacked their captors, or run away, but they had not. They seemed content to have been granted their lives, and a way to live that had a place for kindness in it. Some of the refugees, it was starting to show now, were soon going to be mothers too. It was very unlikely, thought Hanuman, that these new children, born in the care of Kishkindha, would ever have to fear being devoured by their own parents.

Vashishta’s student came running back and indicated to Hanuman that he should come now, and bring their guests along as well.

‘Is this a *gurukula* too, Vaishnavi?’ Hanuman asked, as they ascended the small hill that led to their destination.

‘There is much I do not know, Hanuman,’ she said, and laughed.

‘Welcome, friends,’ a voice said, from the top of a beautifully-decorated mound of mud that rose up at the centre of the clearing. Hanuman looked up and saw a pair of large, dark, kind eyes looking at him. Her face was like a deer’s, but she was white. Hanuman knew she was a mother. The way she held her head up, the way her voice sounded, like a mother elephant perhaps, strong, but still different.

She had horns too, and they were coloured with yellow and red stripes. The same matching patterns were also repeated on her four legs. A garland of bright flowers adorned her neck.

‘Mother Kamadhenu,’ Vishwamitra said, ‘this young man is Hanuman. His bravery is what has made this day possible.’

Hanuman offered a respectful salutation.

‘And this is Vaishnavi, Princess of the Northern Valley, and daughter of...’

‘Surya, I know,’ Kamadhenu said, lowering her head gently, and letting loose a shower of rose petals from her long, braid-like garland. ‘Welcome, children.’

Hanuman was confused. He had seen those horns, those eyes, those footprints in the forests. But they were the shyest of creatures. Here, they seemed bold, and they were ready to give shelter to the most violent of creatures ever seen in Kishkindha.

‘Hanuman seems to be wondering if he should bring them in,’ Kamadhenu said.

Vishwamitra chuckled. ‘It is all right Hanuman. It will all be all right. Come.’

Hanuman waved to the captains, and they gestured to everyone to get up and walk. He followed Kamadhenu into the valley, and before him lay a landscape he had never seen before.

On either side of the river, the land was shaped into neat green squares. There was grass everywhere—some that grew tall, and some, short. There were a few mud-built square houses and hundreds of cows roamed here and there. A few young Kishkindhans, with the markings of Vashishta’s *gurukula*, walked amidst them, cleaning their backs, and attending to their needs.

Vaishnavi pointed to one cow in the field below, which seemed to be attracting a lot of attention. One of Vashishta’s students led a small group of

the creatures' children and their mothers towards it. The children stopped, and then slowly went to caress her head.

'May Goddess Saraswati ever rule this land,' Hanuman said, in happy disbelief.

*

'How did it come to be?' Hanuman asked Vishwamitra later that afternoon as they rested.

'The answer, Hanuman, was in the food that we ate today,' he answered.

'It was very tasty. Is it the fruit of the grass that they grow here?'

'That, and something else too. The Kamadhenus' milk contains the only energy that can wean the creatures off their hunger for blood.'

Hanuman picked up one of the small round, white balls everyone was eating and bit it. 'It is sweet, and it fills me with energy.'

'Exactly,' Vishwamitra said. 'The creatures are used to higher energy needs than us. They killed everything that had blood for that reason. Now, they know there is a less *adharmic* way. It keeps them nourished, and it keeps them, well, sane.'

Then, Vishwamitra pointed towards Vashishta. 'He figured it out.'

Hanuman turned, and saw that Vashishta was balancing six of the small balls, one on top of each other; then he pretended to lose balance and drop them. Then, he smiled, and handed them around to everyone.

Hanuman saw the creatures slowly walking around and interacting with the villagers. He could see them laughing, and everything seemed to be in order.

'I do not see any violence in them now,' Hanuman said.

'The Kamadhenus are strong in their ability to domesticate their companions. You will see that the old and the new in Goddess Saraswati's creation will find something in common.'

'What is that?'

'The creatures, I believe, will start to see the Kamadhenus as mother-figures. And they will not hurt their own mothers, will they?'

'But they used to, didn't they?' Vaishnavi asked, looking a bit worried.

Hanuman became alert and scanned the fields below them quickly. Nothing seemed untoward at all.

Vishwamitra smiled. 'This is where some of my lineage will come in. My boys have been trained in administration, statecraft, running things according to *dharma*. When they get here, they will educate the creatures in the ways of the Three Ceremonies, and maybe encourage them to start a few of their own too!'

Vaishnavi laughed. 'Ceremonies for birth, first steps, food...'

'Learning to say their mothers' names, going to school...' Hanuman added.

'That will keep them busy for a while,' Vaishnavi said, impressed by the idea. 'Festivals or ceremonies all year round, just like us.'

'And most of all,' added Vishwamitra, 'ceremonies revolving around the care and worship of the Kamadhenus. On the days of their birth, they will worship the Kamadhenus and their own birth-mothers in the same manner. They will see how the Kamadhenus nurture their young, and they will learn to do the same.'

'Like Mother Saraswati, they will have Mother Kamadhenu!' Hanuman smiled. The memory of the wars, and of the desperate mother who flung her child at Vishwamitra's feet in the cold north on that fateful night, all of it seemed like an illusion now.

'I wonder what happened to the child who came back with us,' Hanuman said.

Vishwamitra laughed. 'Maybe he will learn that all the world is his friend, if he behaves as a friend to all the world too.'

'Kishkindha has company for good from now on, Hanuman,' Vaishnavi said.

*

'Did we have to fight?' Hanuman asked Vishwamitra late in the night.

'Go to *gurukula*, Hanuman!' Vaishnavi shouted sleepily from somewhere.

Vishwamitra got up briskly and sat up straight. 'Yes. When something comes in peace, let it come. When something comes in war, let it meet war.'

He lay down. Then, after a moment, he got up again. 'After the war, make peace again.'

Hanuman laughed softly and stared at the stars. He knew his parents were looking at them too, somewhere. He would have so many things to tell

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Surya's Mantras



The sea roared like an enormous giant in the morning sun. Hanuman sat calmly at the water's edge, listening to its sound. He cupped some sand in his hands and poured it out carefully. Then, he saw Vishwamitra offering his prayers and decided to do the same.

After the prayers, they resumed their journey. It had been many days since they had left the village of the Kamadhenus. They had journeyed all the way from the stark northwest to the green and hot south-eastern edge of Kishkindha, seeing everything anew and with new gratitude to Goddess Saraswati. Only her blessings had made their success possible.

'We are almost there, Hanuman,' Vaishnavi said. 'If we reach at noon, my father will be at his best.'

Hanuman looked up at the sun, the pillar of life in this whole universe. In the prayers his parents chanted, the sun was described as a face of Goddess Saraswati, the One of Luminous Intelligence. But Vaishnavi had been speaking of the sun as a man, and her father at that. As Vishwamitra had said on the night before they first encountered the creatures, twelve can be thirty-six, three can be four, gods can be goddesses; with so many different clans and tongues in the world, the same thing could be seen and talked about in different ways. It was nice to view all the little differences, and

how they challenged one to recognize the underlying fundamental similarities too.

‘Is he going to descend from there?’ Hanuman asked, only half-joking, as he pointed at the blazing sun rising quickly above them.

‘He is everywhere, don’t you know? And he draws all life to him like the moon draws the waters each night,’ Vaishnavi laughed.

Hanuman thought the sun’s daughter was drawing him there for sure. She seemed to look more radiant with every moment that the sun rose in the sky.

After many long months in the cool and mountainous north, it was good to be back in the warmer parts of Kishkindha. And there would be much to learn.

*

At the beach, they turned south towards Surya’s temple. On the soft, white sand, they came across hundreds of tiny turtles rushing towards the water. Vaishnavi picked one up and gave it to Hanuman. Hanuman laughed as its little feet tickled his palm. He affectionately placed it back down to join its siblings.

‘Do these indicate their names?’ Hanuman asked, noticing that their backs had distinct marks, some in the shape of wheels, and others in the shape of a conch. In the front, they all had lines in the shape of a ‘u’.

‘The names of their ancestors,’ Vaishnavi answered. ‘The Kurmas in these parts say they hail from the greatest ancient ever known, Adi Kurma.’

‘Is that him?’ Hanuman asked in a soft, awe-struck voice as a great turtle, large as an elephant, began to crawl slowly out from the hills towards the water.

Vaishnavi laughed. ‘That is one of his descendants. Adi Kurma is so big he stays in the ocean. The ground would sink if he tried to climb on it.’

Hanuman felt slightly dizzy hearing that.

‘They say the earth is supported on his back. Still, he carries it as lightly as a leaf.’

‘The five leaves that the Goddess dropped into the waters to give us the five great lands of Kishkindha,’ Vishwamitra said, gesturing grandly out towards the endless ocean.

‘Indeed,’ Vaishnavi said and smiled. ‘And that is why our footsteps on it must always be light, and not burdensome. Greed adds weight to our

presence. It is not good.'

Vaishnavi's skin now seemed to be glowing with a yellowish-red colour.

'Vaishnavi, may I ask why you live so far away from the place of your birth?'

'I just need the cool air, O Hanuman.'

*

The sun was nearly directly overhead when they reached the mountain at the edge of the shore. It looked a little like the rock city of Kishkindhanagara, and a little like the mountain of Naraka.

Vishwamitra knew what was on Hanuman's mind. 'The Goddess came here as Fire too, Hanuman,' he said, reassuringly, 'but before the waters, she has cooled herself now. There is no dissolution here at all. Only the opposite. Here the fires are only of life.'

'I will show you fire, Hanuman,' Vaishnavi laughed, and made a low, growling sound. She seemed very sure of herself now, looking at every plant, tree, and bird with a deep familiarity. It was her home, after all.

Hanuman looked around.

Vaishnavi growled more loudly now. And this time, the sound returned from somewhere.

Suddenly, a group of lions strode out from the forest and walked majestically towards her.

'The children of Narasimha, my brothers,' Vaishnavi said, and embraced each one of them affectionately.

They walked up a gently sloping path along the side of the mountain and into a cave-like opening. Vaishnavi led Hanuman in and they emerged out onto a large courtyard on the other side. Vishwamitra remained a few feet behind, smiling to himself.

In the middle of the courtyard was a rock arrangement that seemed like a shrine. Around the perimeter, there were five other formations, but of a smaller size, each one slightly different. A handful of young Kishkindhan couples with the auspicious markings of the Third Ceremony fresh on their bodies sat outside some of the shrines.

'The newly-weds come here to pray for healthy progeny,' Vaishnavi whispered. 'But our work is inside, with the temples of the five elements, and my father's shrine in the middle. Come, hurry!'

They hurried to the middle.

The sun reached overhead, and suddenly, a bright, blinding light spread from the middle to all the five outposts, and a large number of voices began chanting loudly from inside the shrines. The effect was tremendous. It felt as if the world was on fire. Hanuman closed his eyes and suddenly it seemed to him that his mother and father were there with him, and then many more people that he knew, vaguely, and then those he did not know at all. The chants sounded familiar, and yet they did not seem to be in any language he had heard. They were more like fragments of language, powerful and so alive that the sounds seemed capable of sculpting shapes out of rock.

Hanuman felt strangely drawn to one of the five shrines around the edges. He felt he had been there before, though that was impossible; maybe in a dream.

‘Father,’ Vaishnavi called out as the chanting stopped and the golden light receded.

A tall, gentle being with nearly translucent skin and a bright face stepped out from inside the shrine. He smiled generously. ‘Suvarchala, my child,’ he said happily. ‘Vishwamitra! My dear friend. And ... and you, welcome, Vayu Putra. How fare your parents, the good Kesari and Anjana?’

Hanuman bowed low and saluted him.

‘Suvarchala?’ he asked Vaishnavi softly.

Surya laughed. ‘She adopted the gentler name to spare her friends’ the difficulty. Parents live in one era and children in another. But it is all for the best. As you saw, when the sun blazes at his peak, he leaves no shadows or differences. We know it is all one. So is Vaishnavi or...’

‘Suvarchala,’ Hanuman said, with renewed admiration.

*

After a few days, Vishwamitra and Vaishnavi left. Hanuman would now learn the wisdom of ancient Kishkindha from Surya Rishi. First, he would have to assist Surya in his morning prayers. He assembled a series of crystals on the sandy beach. *This is Ganesha, this is Saraswati, this is Shiva, the Lord of the Mountains, this is Vishnu, the sleeping giant in the sky, this is Vayu, this Agni, this is...*

Hanuman sat happily. He held his hand the proper way, as the *rishi* instructed, gently pouring water on the crystals, diligently learning the protocols of proper control over one's every action, gesture, breath, and thought.

In the nights, though, he missed his friends and, most of all, Vaishnavi, who said she had to leave and get back to the cool hills because two hot beings in the hotter regions would upset the elements. He was not sure if she was joking or if it was true. There really was no one else like her; she was a mystery.

In the mornings, Hanuman saw something of her in her father's presence, and knew that everything he felt about everyone was a part of his education. Surya and his daughter were like that. In their presence, everything seemed illuminated, full of knowledge.

After his morning prayers with his *guru*, Hanuman went every day for his lessons with each of the elemental *rishis*. Naturally, even on the first morning that Surya walked with him into the deep underground caves under the Vayu shrine, Hanuman knew. The sounds of the Vayu *mantras* made every cell in his body vibrate with a greater energy. This was his lineage, borne, it was said, of the wind from the wings of the Goddess's swan itself. But it was not a sense of possessiveness that he felt at all. All the elements seemed to have life in them; life itself emanated constantly from them. But the wind seemed to him the way in which life would always reveal itself to him.

After forty days, Hanuman had visitors. The Vayu Muni announced them in. He seemed to know them well.

*

'Mother! Father!' Hanuman said, and rushed to their embrace.

Kesari braced for impact. His son was now as tall as him. His arms, his chest, every inch of him glowed with strength and power. He tried to pick him up, as he used to, but gave up with a laugh, and blessed him instead.

Then Anjana embraced her son, and stroked his head gently and lovingly for a very long time.

'Come, come this way, down to the shore,' Kesari said.

They stepped out of the Vayu cave and went down the slope. There were more people sitting there on the sand, talking with Surya Rishi. They turned

to watch him as he went down, and Hanuman smiled.

‘Grandchild, come!’ Kesari’s father shouted.

Hanuman touched their feet, and embraced them.

‘It took three generations, but we seem to have got it right, now,’ Kesari’s father said with a laugh.

*

As they ate and reminisced, Hanuman began to notice everything anew. Surya’s lessons were so much about learning to learn. The Goddess gave everyone the talent to learn the practical things—how to eat, how to mate, how to live with others and be happy, generally. But in Surya’s care, Hanuman had begun to understand the principles behind everything that Kishkindhans did. Now he could see his parents and his grandparents not just as his elders, but as the source of everything he was, and he could understand how that source functioned too.

‘We came here long ago to ask the Mother for a child,’ Hanuman’s grandfather explained, and pointed towards Kesari. ‘And then he was born.’

‘And by Vayu’s grace, after we visited, you came,’ Kesari explained.

‘And someday, after you complete your studies and leave for your Third Ceremony, maybe you will come back too.’ Anjana smiled.

Hanuman wondered about the nature of life. This was Goddess Saraswati’s Intelligence too. He had seen it literally, in the wounds and injuries and recklessly torn open *apacharas* of war. He had seen nerves, blood vessels, organs, pulsating, pounding, trying to restore their dignity to themselves under violence, and knew it was all Goddess Saraswati’s Intelligence, the ability of life to keep going. Now, amidst his elders, he saw it all more happily.

His grandfather’s jaw was gigantic, his father’s smaller, and now Hanuman’s jaw was large again, but more rounded.

Everything was related. Everyone was related.

As if she knew, Anjana reached out and affectionately touched Hanuman’s chin.

‘Everyone we met on our journeys was full of praise for you, son,’ she said. ‘They say that their children all say they want to be like Hanuman when they grow up.’

Hanuman was mystified. 'But I am neither a king nor a sage. I am a student, that is all.'

'We saw your friend, Jambavanth. He sees that Kishkindha is safe with a son like Hanuman. That is all every parent hopes for from their children,' Kesari added.

'As we did, of them,' Kesari's father said, smiling proudly at Kesari.

'How can the future of Kishkindha not be safe, father?' Hanuman asked. 'All of you have made sure that we learned the value of things, that we lived in *dharma* and we lived for *dharma*.'

'We just do our Three Ceremonies, my son,' Kesari said, slightly overwhelmed by Hanuman's admiration. 'We just count our coconuts, and that is all we do.'

Suvarchala



Seven years later, Hanuman's parents returned. Vishwamitra and Vashishta came too. They blessed him on the completion of his studies. Hanuman was skilled now in thirty disciplines of knowledge and had earned a reputation for being especially masterful in the Vayu chants. The newlywed Kishkindhans making the long journey to Surya's temple for the blessing of progeny inevitably requested that his brightest student Hanuman chant the appropriate prayers so their children would be swift and light of spirit like him.

The graduation was simple, and without much fuss. Hanuman took a bath before sunrise, saluted the lions, who were now his brothers too, and walked back up to the central shrine. The elders all stood in a row, and he walked up to each of them and prostrated at their feet: father, mother, Vishwamitra, Vashishta and finally, his own teacher, Surya.

'Hanuman,' Surya said, holding his shoulders and making him rise from the ground. 'Your dedication to your *guru* is unsurpassed. I wish to offer you a gift that I believe will make everyone concerned very happy, most of all your parents, just as much as it shall make me.'

Hanuman bowed low, and showed his gratitude in silence.

Surya turned to Kesari, and saluted him.

Kesari spoke the words he knew Surya wanted him to. 'Dear Surya, you have been a teacher and a father to my son. Would you, if the children want it too, consider our lineages' union in the Third Ceremony for Hanuman and Suvarchala?'

Surya smiled. 'Dear Kesari, you speak only what is best. If the two children see it exactly the same way, then we are all happy, and honoured.'

Hanuman nodded his agreement. He had not seen Vaishnavi in many years. But he knew. She was not of a kind that would let absences change things.

For the first time in many years, Hanuman could not sleep. He wondered what his *dharma* would be. Everything had been peaceful since the end of the war. He had not thought about *dharma* since that unreal time.

Sometime before dawn, Hanuman sighed. It was a sigh of relief. At least it was not a decision he would have to make alone.

*

A few days later, Vaishnavi arrived.

'You have grown very tall, Hanuman,' she said with a kind smile, and walked away to her father's cave.

Hanuman sat silently in a corner of the Vayu shrine and closed his eyes in prayer, not knowing at all what else he could possibly do. When he opened them, it was evening, and brothers and sisters were walking down to the shore for their prayers.

He got up and hurried to catch up. For an instant, it was just like any other evening, and then he remembered. He looked around to see if he could spot Vaishnavi in the crowd. She was not there.

Hanuman looked up at the sky, and felt tiny before it. Nothing was really his to choose now. If she had declined, she had declined, and he would accept it. If she had decided to go back without seeing him again, he would have to accept that too.

He walked up to his favourite spot on the beach, and saw two younger pupils there, eagerly waiting for him. They had swept the wet sand with their hands for him so only his footprints would show. It was what he used to do for Surya, and now everyone did it to show their reverence for elders, and their love.

The prayers ended, and then, in that silence, Hanuman knew. One pair of feet walked up towards him from behind, even as everyone else's had retreated.

'Hanumantha, come,' Vaishnavi said softly.

*

Vaishnavi led Hanuman to a peaceful cove where a new generation of tiny turtles was getting busy to enter the waters. The waves scattered the moonlight with each roar.

Vaishnavi sat down and buried her arm in the sand right under the path of the turtles. As they tickled her, she laughed.

Hanuman stared at her admiringly. Finally, he had to ask.

'What do you feel about this proposal, Princess?' he said.

'Why, Hanuman, you still think I know everything?'

Hanuman smiled. 'You have the sixteen good qualities of the Goddess herself. You have a great father.'

'So do you. You have a great father and mother too,' she said, leaning back against the sand a little.

'I mean, you could marry a king, or someone you like. I am, I mean, I don't know...'

'The great Hanuman doesn't know,' she laughed. 'He is being called the Great Hanuman across the length and breadth of Kishkindha and he says, "I don't know". He is being called the defender of the *parama dharma*, and he says, "I don't know".'

'All of us deserve that glory.'

Hanuman looked up at the stars and felt grateful to them.

'You,' Vaishnavi said suddenly. 'You, I know. You, I like. More than anyone else. You alone.'

*

The constellations wheeled and turned slowly, and the waves continued the sound of their slow march to eternity.

'You make me feel happiness in a way no one else can,' Hanuman said, softly. 'I want to know though, and yes, there are things you know better than me, because you are the worthy daughter of my *guru* ...'

'Well, yes. I suppose I got some rays too,' she said with a small laugh.

‘I have seen many happy couples come and go, and I know their joy. I do not know why, but I feel that joy as if it were mine. Would I still feel that? Or would I be...’

Vaishnavi understood. ‘I have had the same doubt, Hanuman, and I have asked my father, and all the *rishis*. That is perhaps why I have remained, to this day, on my own, never even allowing a thought of desire to disturb my contentment.’

‘What did your father say? What is the nature of *dharma* now?’

Vaishnavi took a long breath. ‘They said exactly what I will say now. They said *dharma* is far more than what we are required to do or not to do. There is no list of things to get through to reap some reward in the end. *Dharma* is just the way everything is, without distortion, untruth and, most of all, without violence and destruction. So it is for each one of us to recognize *dharma* as the reality that we live in, and then decide on actions that will best support that reality.’

‘A noble son, or daughter, is that our best offer to our *loka*?’

‘Our love too.’

Hanuman felt his heart do something unusual, as if it had a life of its own. Those words sounded as if they had rolled off the Goddess’s own lips. He smiled. Whether those words were uttered as fact or possibility didn’t matter.

‘But,’ Vaishnavi continued, ‘is a son or daughter born from us the best way to offer our love to this world? That is your dilemma, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘The honest, unflinching answer is this, *Pavanaputra*. You and I are among the most effective students to have ever come out of this school. We carry an expertise that no one else, except Vashishta, probably has now.’

‘You mean the *mantras* we chant to the Goddess asking Her to grant Her blessings for new families to start?’

‘That is just how the old school talks. Have you ever considered what is really happening inside the body of the mother? Have you ever considered what effect the *bija mantras* are having?’

‘I think I understand, but no, I do not,’ Hanuman said.

‘Inside the womb, as life begins and takes its form, it reflects the history of all of Goddess Saraswati’s creations. The foetus of every being begins by looking like the foetus of a tiny fish. Then, if it carries in its being the

Goddess's message that it is to be a lion, it grows hands, and legs, and so on.'

'Goddess Saraswati's Intelligence. Your father has explained that.'

'But what Vashishta found is that with the force of the right *mantras*, each growing life can be persuaded, even if in little ways, to *change*.'

'Is that what we are doing? Assuming the Goddess's powerful role? Playing God?'

Vaishnavi touched Hanuman's cheek with her hand lightly. 'How do you know God is not playing you, Hanuman?'

Hanuman laughed. This is how he and his *guru* had had many, many conversations.

'No,' Vaishnavi continued. 'We are her instruments. I am sure my father has said that many times too. But in truth, we *are not* even that. We have found, over many generations of study, that the *bija mantras* associated with each element shape the nature of the child a great deal. The *agni mantra* children are vibrant, powerful, full of heat. The *varuna mantra* children are gentler, peace-makers. The *vayu-mantras* are, well, supposed to be like you. They are full of energy, speed, supportive, and also invisible, selfless and life-giving.'

'You put it so clearly, Princess,' Hanuman smiled. 'Why did you not stay here to teach, like your father?'

'I am an *agni mantra* child. And the *rishis* believed the cold northern mountains could use more *agni mantra* children. Sometimes, our talents can be useful there, at the fringes of outer Kishkindha. As you know.'

'Our friends from outer Kishkindha!' Hanuman exclaimed. 'And the Kamadhenus! How are they?'

'Not an *apachara* in seven years,' Vaishnavi said calmly. 'And now there are five Kamadhenu villages, all up and down the river.'

'Jai Mata Saraswati!' Hanuman said happily.

'But the *rishis* keep the *agni mantras* going at a good rate anyway. Some of them follow the Kamadhenus to new lands to help. You see, our new friends now have taken this Goddess Kamadhenu tradition most seriously. They need more and more land to clear and grow their grass, for themselves and their Mothers.'

'I cannot even imagine. It must be like Kishkindhanagara now,' Hanuman said.

‘It is not quiet anymore, I will say. But, by the Goddess’s grace, it is peaceful, still. And the grass grows well, and there is no hunger anymore.’

Hanuman’s thoughts turned to Vali, as if thoughts of peace had to consider their contradiction too. He shook it off. ‘And the new people have ceremonies like us too? They have little children?’ he asked.

Vaishnavi smiled. ‘It is as *dharma* should be.’

Hanuman took a deep breath. ‘What does *dharma* say to us now?’

‘It says, “follow the *kurmas*!”’ Vaishnavi laughed and ran after another row of turtles.

‘Follow the *kurmas*!’ shouted Hanuman and ran after her, laughing too.

They stood on the edge of a small sand dune and, as their hearts raced, Hanuman felt his *balance* easing up gently towards hers.

‘There is something we should consider though, isn’t it?’ he asked, suddenly sounding older and wiser about everything.

Vaishnavi nodded.

‘You are about to give up something, not for yourself, but something important to *dharma* too.’

‘So are you, Hanumantha. You are wise to notice this. Women know these things sooner, because of the way the Goddess’s Intelligence works in us. But you too can guess what the consequence of our decision will be.’

‘We can no longer chant the *mantras* for other children if we have our own, isn’t that so?’ Hanuman guessed.

‘I have chosen, Prince of Kishkindhanagara. And I am here before you now.’

A blur of faces and voices, coconut shells and turmeric marks, mornings in sunshine and rain, all raced through Hanuman’s mind. He remembered the faces of the pilgrims who had come seeking the blessings of Surya Rishi’s school for progeny. He remembered the children who came to visit too, later, accompanying the parents who wished to fulfil a simple vow. He remembered their names, and their long *balances* and innocent mischief. A whole, long life of service to the Goddess, to Kishkindha. So many happy faces.

And yet the person before him contained every happiness, beauty and truth he could think of.

A gentle film of light seemed to illuminate Vaishnavi's face. Dawn was almost here.

'Say something, Hanuman,' Vaishnavi said.

Hanuman stared into her eyes. He felt, just a little bit, of what Sugreeva felt, once, long ago, when he pined for his Ruma. He understood, finally. He smiled at her.

'What?' Vaishnavi asked, laughing nervously now.

Everything seemed unreal, suspended in an eternal twilight. Whatever happened, it would not change anything, it would remain love, whether love was taken out of it, or something more was added to it. Every Goddess and God they learned about seemed to say that. *Paripurnamidi...*

Hanuman suddenly started to pace back and forth, clasping his arms across his chest. He began, in a mock serious tone. 'Every day, I saw the first sign of light, and I asked your father, the ablest interpreter of life on earth, "Where does the sun come from?"'

'What did he say?' she asked, chuckling at Hanuman's elegant dramatics.

'Sometimes,' Hanuman paused, and raised a finger, 'sometimes, he said, it is the eye of Goddess Saraswati. Sometimes, he said it is a drop from her eye, suspended forever in the sky to remind us of her compassion for us. Sometimes, he said, it is a fruit she eats at dinner each night.'

She laughed. 'What do you think?'

'It doesn't matter what we think. That is what I have come to realize. So, for seven years, I have thought, each morning, what would happen if I went east? Would I find the source of the sun?'

'Hanuman, that is the sky itself. Not some fruit in a tree,' Vaishnavi laughed.

Hanuman laughed too.

'But it is. And I am going to get it for you, Vaishnavi,' he said, and turned his pacing into a seamlessly graceful jumping in the sand.

Vaishnavi turned her face to avoid the sand. 'Hanumantha!' she said in a chiding tone.

'I am getting a golden mango for Princess Vaishnavi!' Hanuman declared, and turned and shot off up the overhanging cliff.

*

Goddess Saraswati! Maata!

Beloved Vaishnavi!

Suvarchala!

Daughter of the Sun!

Hanuman embraced the cold rockface as if it contained the whole of his love, the whole vast explosion of *rasa* the Goddess had plunged him into now. This world was her, this universe, and he would say that word to her with all the height and joy he could gather now, with this *deha*, this *anubhava*, this *bhaava*, yes, *all the words in the world, all the mantras in this world, everything was for her now...*

In a few seconds, Hanuman stood at the top. The waves lapped onto the shore far below him. Vaishnavi was a tiny figure, waving her hands and her balance happily.

He waved to her, and with his eyes fixed on the crimson glow on the eastern horizon, he offered a *pranam* to the tip of the rising sun and leaped long and hard into the sky.

In that moment, free of all gravity, pure as the wind that had blessed his birth, he felt all his love for Vaishnavi, and recognized hers for him. Just this once, just for one moment, he knew it would not be selfish of him to accept, and reciprocate, that love. Her face, her voice, and the thought of the Third Ceremony filled him with happiness.

He remembered once asking his mother why Kishkindhans had only three ceremonies, and not four. She had said simply, in a voice sweet and clear, 'Why, because after that it's the First Ceremony all over again, dear little one.' One ceased to live for one's self after this, after one's children came. Everything would be about them, and then theirs. He laughed, in his flight, and he imagined himself plucking that great, red fruit from the sky for his love waiting for his answer below. *He had to control his descent now, get the arc just right, turn, face her as he fell into the water, arms outstretched, and through that sound of splashing water and her amused laughter, he would call her name with love for the first time...*

Before the sound hit him, before he lost consciousness, Hanuman noticed only one thing. Something like a gigantic red fist of fire had torn its way powerfully up from the edge of the ocean, and in its middle was the sun, a small, red dot, like a mango, like the ones his mother and father had given him, like the mango he wanted to give his Suvarchala. But it wasn't a fruit at all.

<https://rb.gy/zxhwdo>

<https://t.me/indianmythologybooks>

Then, the force of the wind and ash from the explosion of the volcano hit him, plunging him into blackness.

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The author with his father

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