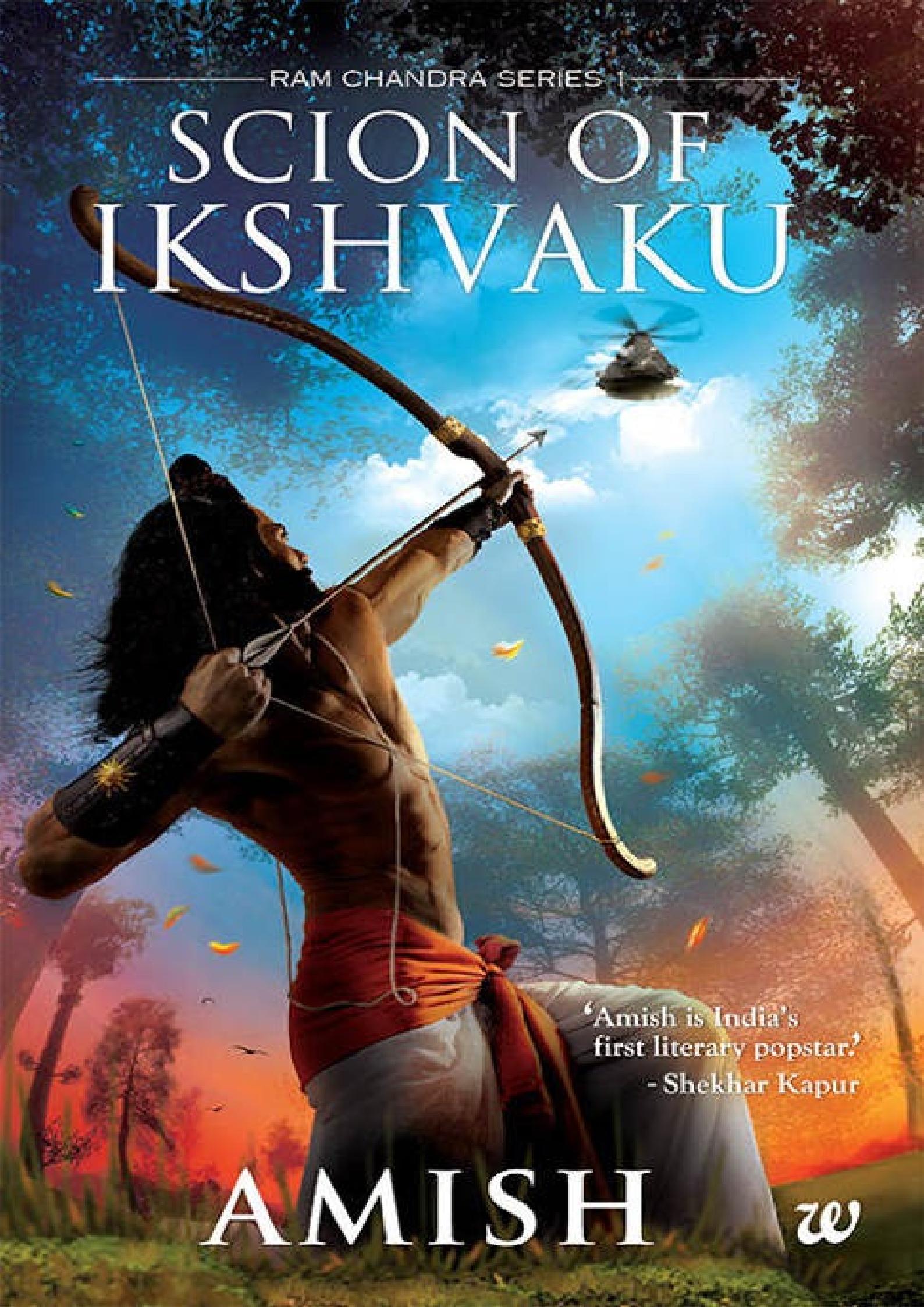


RAM CHANDRA SERIES I—

# SCION OF IKSHVAKU



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AMISH



**Amish** is a 1974-born, IIM (Kolkata)-educated, boring banker turned happy author. The success of his debut book, *The Immortals of Meluha* (Book 1 of the Shiva Trilogy), encouraged him to give up a fourteen-year-old career in financial services to focus on writing. He is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy, finding beauty and meaning in all world religions.

Amish lives in Mumbai with his wife Preeti and son Neel.

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# **Scion of Ikshvaku**

Book 1  
of the  
Ram Chandra Series

*... I Love you Rachu ...*

**Amish**



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*... I Love you Rachu ...*

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To my father, Vinay Kumar Tripathi,  
and my mother, Usha Tripathi

*Khalil Gibran said that parents are like a bow,  
And children like arrows.*

*The more the bow bends and stretches, the farther the arrow flies.  
I fly, not because I am special, but because they stretched for me.*

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Om Namah Shivāya  
The universe bows to Lord Shiva.  
I bow to Lord Shiva.

Rāmarājyavāsī tvam, procchrayasva te śiram  
Nyāyārthaṁ yudhyasva, sarveṣu samaṁ cara  
Paripālaya durbalam, viddhi dharmam varam

Procchrayasva te śiram,  
Rāmarājyavāsī tvam.

*You live in Ram's kingdom, hold your head high.*

*Fight for justice. Treat all as equal.*

*Protect the weak. Know that dharma is above all.*

*Hold your head high,  
You live in the kingdom of Ram.*



## **List of Characters and Important Tribes (In Alphabetical Order)**

**Arishtanemi:** Military chief of the Malayaputras; right-hand man of Vishwamitra

**Ashwapati:** King of the north-western kingdom of Kekaya; a loyal ally of Dashrath; father of Kaikeyi

**Bharat:** Ram's half-brother; son of Dashrath and Kaikeyi

**Dashrath:** The Chakravarti king of Kosala and emperor of Sapt Sindhu; husband of Kaushalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra; father of Ram, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughan

**Janak:** King of Mithila; father of Sita and Urmila

**Jatayu:** A captain of the Malayaputra tribe; a Naga friend of Sita and Ram

**Kaikeyi:** Daughter of King Ashwapati of Kekaya; second and the favourite wife of Dashrath; mother of Bharat

**Kaushalya:** Daughter of King Bhanuman of South Kosala and his wife Maheshwari; the eldest queen of Dashrath; mother of Ram

**Kubaer:** Trader and ruler of Lanka before Raavan

**Kumbhakarna:** Raavan's brother; he is also a Naga (a human being born with deformities)

**Kushadhwaj:** King of Sankashya; younger brother of Janak

**Lakshman:** One of the twin sons of Dashrath; born to Sumitra; faithful to Ram; later married to Urmila

**Malayaputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu

**Manthara:** The richest merchant of Sapt Sindhu; an ally of Kaikeyi

**Mrigasya:** General of Dashrath's army; one of the nobles of Ayodhya

**Nagas:** A feared race of human beings born with deformities

**Nilanjana:** Lady doctor attending to members of the royal family of Ayodhya, she hails from South Kosala

**Raavan:** King of Lanka; brother of Vibhishan, Shurpanakha and Kumbhakarna

**Ram:** Eldest of four brothers, son of Emperor Dashrath of Ayodhya (the capital city of Kosala kingdom) and his eldest wife Kaushalya; later married to Sita

**Roshni:** Daughter of Manthara; a committed doctor and *rakhi*-sister to the four sons of Dashrath

**Samichi:** Police and protocol chief of Mithila

**Shatrughan:** Twin brother of Lakshman; son of Dashrath and Sumitra

**Shurpanakha:** Half-sister of Raavan

**Sita:** Adopted daughter of King Janak of Mithila; also the prime minister of Mithila; later married to Ram

**Sumitra:** Daughter of the king of Kashi; the third wife of Dashrath; mother of the twins Lakshman and Shatrughan

**Vashishta:** Raj guru, the royal priest of Ayodhya; teacher of the four princes

**Vayuputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev

**Vibhishan:** Half-brother of Raavan

**Vishwamitra:** Chief of the Malayaputras, the tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu; also temporary guru of Ram and Lakshman

**Urmila:** Younger sister of Sita; the blood-daughter of Janak; she is later married to Lakshman

**\*Refer to inside back cover for map of India in 3400 BCE**



## Acknowledgements

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And last, but certainly not the least, you, the reader. Thank you from the depths of my being for the support you've given to the Shiva Trilogy. I hope I don't disappoint you with this book, the first in a new series. Har Har Mahadev!



## Chapter 1

3400 BCE, somewhere near the Godavari River, India

Ram crouched low as he bent his tall, lean and muscular frame. He rested his weight on his right knee as he held the bow steady. The arrow was fixed in place, but he knew that the bowstring should not be pulled too early. He didn't want his muscles to tire out. He had to wait for the perfect moment. *It must be a clean strike.*

'It's moving, *Dada*,' whispered Lakshman to his *elder brother*.

Ram didn't reply. His eyes were fixed on the target. A light breeze played with the few strands of hair that had escaped the practical bun atop his head. His shaggy, unkempt beard and his white *dhoti* gently fluttered in the breeze. Ram corrected his angle as he factored in the strength and direction of the wind. He quietly cast his white *angvastram* aside to reveal a battle-scarred, dark-skinned torso. *The cloth should not interfere with the release of the arrow.*

The deer suddenly came to a standstill as it looked up; perhaps instinct had kicked in with some warning signals. Ram could hear its low snort as it stomped its feet uneasily. Within a few seconds it went back to chewing leaves as silence prevailed. The rest of the herd was a short distance away, hidden from view by the dense foliage of the forest.

'By the great Lord Parshu Ram, it ignored its instincts,' said Lakshman softly. 'Thank the Lord. We need some real food.'

'Quiet...'

Lakshman fell silent. Ram knew they needed this kill. Lakshman and he, accompanied by his wife Sita, had been on the run for the last thirty days. A few members of the *Malayaputra* tribe, the *sons of Malaya*, led by their captain, Jatayu, were also with them.

Jatayu had urged flight well before the inevitable retaliation came. The botched meeting with Shurpanakha and Vibhishan would certainly have consequences. They were, after all, the siblings of Raavan, the wrathful demon-king of Lanka. Raavan was sure to seek vengeance. Lankan royal blood had been shed.

Racing east through the *Dandakaranya*, the dense *forest of Dandak*, they had travelled a reasonable distance parallel to the Godavari. They were fairly reassured now that they wouldn't be easily spotted or tracked. Straying too far from the tributary rivers or other water bodies would mean losing out on the best chance of hunting animals. Ram and Lakshman were princes of Ayodhya, inheritors of the proud Kshatriya tradition of the *Raghukul*, the *descendants of Raghu*. They would not survive on a diet of herbs, fruit and leaves alone.

The deer remained stationary, lost in the pleasure of grazing on tender shoots. Ram knew this was the moment. He held the composite bow steady in his left hand as he pulled the string back with his right, till it almost touched his lips. His elbow was held

high, almost perfectly parallel to the ground, exactly the way his guru, Maharishi Vashishta, had taught him.

*The elbow is weak. Hold it high. Let the effort come from the back muscles. The back is strong.*

Ram pulled the string a notch further and then released the arrow. The missile whizzed past the trees and slammed into the deer's neck. It collapsed immediately, unable to even utter a bleat as blood flooded its lungs. Despite his muscular bulk, Lakshman rushed forward stealthily. Even as he moved, he pulled out a knife from the horizontal scabbard tied to the small of his back. Within moments he reached the deer and quickly plunged the blade deep in between the animal's ribs, right through to its heart.

'Forgive me for killing you, O noble beast,' he whispered the ancient apology that all hunters offered, as he gently touched the deer's head. 'May your soul find purpose again, while your body sustains my soul.'

Ram caught up with Lakshman as his brother pulled the arrow out, wiped it clean and returned it to its rightful owner. 'Still usable,' he murmured.

Ram slipped the arrow back into his quiver as he looked up at the sky. Birds chirped playfully and the deer's own herd displayed no alarm. They had not sensed the killing of one of their own. Ram whispered a short prayer to Lord Rudra, thanking him for what had been a perfect hunt. The last thing they needed was for their position to be given away.



Ram and Lakshman made their way through the dense jungle. Ram walked in front, carrying one end of a long staff on his shoulder, while Lakshman walked behind, holding up the other end. The deer's carcass dangled in the middle, its feet having been secured to the staff with a sturdy rope.

'Aah, a decent meal after so many days,' said Lakshman.

Ram's face broke into a hint of a smile, but he remained silent.

'We can't cook this properly though, right *Dada*?'

'No, we can't. The continuous line of smoke will give our position away.'

'Do we really need to be so careful? There have been no attacks. Maybe they have lost track of us. We haven't encountered any assassins, have we? How would they know where we are? The forests of Dandak are impenetrable.'

'Maybe you're right, but I'm not taking any chances. I'd rather be safe.'

Lakshman held his peace even as his shoulders drooped.

'It's better than eating leaves and herbs,' said Ram, without turning to look at his brother.

'That it certainly is,' agreed Lakshman.

The brothers walked on in silence.

'There is some conspiracy afoot, *Dada*. I'm unable to pin down what it is. But there's something going on. Perhaps Bharat *Dada*...'

'Lakshman!' rebuked Ram sternly.

Bharat was the second oldest after Ram, and had been anointed crown prince of

Ayodhya by their father Dashrath following Ram's banishment. The youngest, Shatrughan and Lakshman, were twins separated by differing loyalties. While Shatrughan remained in Ayodhya with Bharat, Lakshman unhesitatingly chose a life of hardship with Ram. The impulsive Lakshman was sceptical of Ram's blind trust in Bharat. He considered it his duty to warn his excessively ethical eldest brother about what appeared to him as Bharat's underhand dealings.

'I know you don't like hearing this, *Dada*,' Lakshman persisted. 'But I'm certain that he's hatched a plot against—'

'We'll get to the bottom of it,' reassured Ram, interrupting Lakshman. 'But we first need allies. Jatayu is right. We need to find the local Malayaputra camp. At least they can be trusted to help us.'

'I don't know whom to trust anymore, *Dada*. Maybe the vulture-man is helping our enemies.'

Jatayu was a Naga, a class of people born with deformities. Ram had come around to trusting Jatayu despite the fact that the Nagas were a hated, feared and ostracised people in the *Sapt Sindhu, the Land of the Seven Rivers*, which lay north of the Narmada River.

Jatayu, like all Nagas, had been born with inevitable deformities. He had a hard and bony mouth that extended out of his face in a beak-like protrusion. His head was bare, but his face was covered with fine, downy hair. Although he was human, his appearance was like that of a vulture.

'Sita trusts Jatayu,' said Ram, as though that explained it all. 'I trust Jatayu. And so will you.'

Lakshman fell silent. And the brothers walked on.



'But why do you think it's irrational to think Bharat *Dada* could—'

'Shhh,' said Ram, holding his hand up to silence Lakshman. 'Listen.'

Lakshman strained his ears. A chill ran down his spine. Ram turned towards Lakshman with terror writ large on his face. They had both heard it. *A forceful scream!* It was Sita. The distance made faint her frantic struggle. But it was clearly Sita. She was calling out to her husband.

Ram and Lakshman dropped the deer and dashed forward desperately. They were still some distance away from their temporary camp.

Sita's voice could be heard above the din of the disturbed birds.

'... Raaam!'

They were close enough now to hear the sounds of battle as metal clashed with metal. Ram screamed as he ran frantically through the forest. 'Sitaaaa!'

Lakshman drew his sword, ready for battle.

'... Raaaam!'

'Leave her alone!' shouted Ram, cutting through the dense foliage, racing ahead.

'... Raaam!'

Ram gripped his bow tight. They were just a few minutes from their camp. 'Sitaaaa!'

'... Raa...'

Sita's voice stopped mid-syllable. Trying not to imagine the worst, Ram kept running, his heart pounding desperately, his mind clouded with worry.

They heard the loud whump, whump of rotor blades. It was a sound he clearly remembered from an earlier occasion. This was Raavan's legendary *Pushpak Vimaan*, his *flying vehicle*.

'Nooo!' screamed Ram, wrenching his bow forward as he ran. Tears were streaming down his face.

The brothers broke through to the clearing that was their temporary camp. It stood completely destroyed. There was blood everywhere.

'Sitaaa!'

Ram looked up and shot an arrow at the *Pushpak Vimaan*, which was rapidly ascending into the sky. It was a shot of impotent rage, for the flying vehicle was already soaring high above.

'Sitaaa!'

Lakshman frantically searched the camp. Bodies of dead soldiers were strewn all over. But there was no Sita.

'Pri... nce... Ram...'

Ram recognised that feeble voice. He rushed forward to find the bloodied and mutilated body of the Naga.

'Jatayu!'

The badly wounded Jatayu struggled to speak. 'He's...'

'What?'

'Raavan's... kidnapped... her.'

Ram looked up enraged at the speck moving rapidly away from them. He screamed in anger, 'SITAAAAA!'



## Chapter 2

*Thirty-three years earlier, Port of Karachapa, Western Sea, India*

‘Lord Parshu Ram, be merciful,’ whispered Dashrath, the forty-year-old king of Kosala, the overlord kingdom of the Sapt Sindhu.

The emperor of the Sapt Sindhu had marched right across his sprawling empire from Ayodhya, its capital, to finally arrive at the western coast. Some rebellious traders sorely needed a lesson in royal justice. The combative Dashrath had built on the powerful empire he had inherited from his father Aja. Rulers from various parts of India had either been deposed or made to pay tribute and accept his suzerainty, thus making Dashrath the *Chakravarti Samrat*, or the *Universal Emperor*.

‘Yes, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya, the general of Dashrath’s army. ‘This is not the only village that has been laid to waste. The enemy has destroyed all the villages in a fifty-kilometre radius from where we stand. The wells have been poisoned with the carcasses of dead animals. Crops have been burned down ruthlessly. The entire countryside has been ravaged.’

‘Scorched earth policy...’ said Ashwapati, the king of Kekaya, a loyal ally of Dashrath, and the father of the emperor’s second and favourite wife, Kaikeyi.

‘Yes,’ said another king. ‘We cannot feed our army of five hundred thousand soldiers here. Our supply lines are already stretched.’

‘How the hell did that barbarian trader Kubaer acquire the intellect for military strategy?’ asked Dashrath.

Dashrath could scarcely conceal his Kshatriyan disdain for the trading class, the Vaishyas. For the Sapt Sindhu royalty, wealth was the conqueror’s right when acquired as the spoils of war, but inappropriate when earned through mere profiteering. The Vaishyas’ ‘lack of class’ invited scorn. They were subjected to heavy regulation and a draconian system of licences and controls. The children of the Sapt Sindhu aristocracy were encouraged to become warriors or intellectuals, not traders. Resultantly, the trading class in these kingdoms was depleted over the years. With not enough money pouring in from wars, the royal coffers quickly emptied.

Ever sensing an opportunity to profit, Kubaer, the trader king of the island of Lanka, offered his services and expertise to carry out trading activities for all the Sapt Sindhu kingdoms. The then king of Ayodhya, Aja, granted the monopoly to Kubaer in return for a huge annual compensation, which was then distributed to each subordinate kingdom within the Sapt Sindhu Empire. Ayodhya’s power soared for it became the source of funds for other kingdoms within the empire. And yet, they could continue to hold on to their old contempt towards trade. Recently, however, Kubaer had unilaterally reduced the commissions that Dashrath rightfully believed were Ayodhya’s due. This impertinence of a mere trader certainly deserved punishment. Dashrath directed his

vassal kings to merge their troops with his own, and led them to Karachapa to remind Kubaer of his place in the power hierarchy.

‘Apparently, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya, ‘it is not Kubaer who is calling the shots.’

‘Then who is?’ asked Dashrath.

‘We do not know much about him. I have heard that he is no more than thirty years of age. He joined Kubaer some years ago as the head of his trading security force. Over time, he recruited more people and transformed the unit into a proper army. I believe he is the one who convinced Kubaer to rebel against us.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Ashwapati. ‘I can’t imagine that obese and indolent Kubaer having the nerve to challenge the power of the Sapt Sindhu!’

‘Who is this man?’ asked Dashrath. ‘Where is he from?’

‘We really don’t know much about him, My Lord,’ said Mrigasya.

‘Do you at least know his name?’

‘Yes, we do. His name is Raavan.’



Nilanjana, the royal physician, rushed down the hallway of the palace of Ayodhya. She had received an urgent summons late in the evening from the personal staff of Queen Kaushalya, the first wife of King Dashrath.

The gentle and restrained Kaushalya, the daughter of the king of South Kosala, had been married to Dashrath for more than fifteen years now. Her inability to provide the emperor with an heir had been a source of constant dismay to her. Frustrated by the absence of a successor, Dashrath had finally married Kaikeyi, the tall, fair and statuesque princess of the powerful western Indian kingdom of Kekaya, which was ruled by his close ally Ashwapati. That too was of no avail. He finally married Sumitra, the steely but unobtrusive princess of the holy city of Kashi, the city that housed the spirit of Lord Rudra and was famous for non-violence. Even so, the great Emperor Dashrath remained without an heir.

No wonder then that when Kaushalya finally became pregnant, it was an occasion marked by both joy and trepidation. The queen was understandably desperate to ensure that the child was delivered safely. Her entire staff, most of whom were loyal retainers from her father’s household, understood the political implications of the birth of an heir. Abundant caution was the norm. This was not the first time that Nilanjana had been summoned, many a times over frivolous reasons and false alarms. However, since the doctor too was from Queen Kaushalya’s parental home, her loyalty forbade any overt signs of irritability.

This time, though, it appeared to be the real thing. The queen had gone into labour.

Even as she ran, Nilanjana’s lips fervently appealed to Lord Parshu Ram for a smooth delivery, and yes, a male child.



‘I order you to restore our commission to the very fair nine-tenths of your profits and, in return, I assure you I will let you live,’ growled Dashrath.

In keeping with the rules of engagement, Dashrath had sent a messenger in advance to

Kubaer for a negotiated settlement as a last resort. The adversaries had decided to meet in person on neutral ground. The chosen site was a beach midway between Dashrath's military camp and the Karachapa fort. Dashrath was accompanied by Ashwapati, Mrigasya, and a bodyguard platoon of twenty soldiers. Kubaer had arrived along with his army's general, Raavan, and twenty bodyguards.

The Sapt Sindhu warriors could scarcely conceal their contempt as the obese Kubaer had waddled laboriously into the tent. A round, cherubic face with thinning hair was balanced on the humongous body of the seventy-year-old fabulously wealthy trader from Lanka. His smooth complexion and fair skin belied his age. He wore a bright green *dhoti* and pink *angvastram* and was bedecked with extravagant jewellery. A life of excess which, when added to his girth and effeminate manner, summed up in the mind of Dashrath what Kubaer was: the classic effete Vaishya.

Dashrath restrained his thoughts as they struggled to escape through words. *Does this ridiculous peacock actually think he can take me on?!*

'Your Highness...' said Kubaer nervously, 'I think it might be a little difficult to keep the commissions fixed at that level. Our costs have gone up and the trading margins are not what they—'

'Don't try your disgusting negotiating tactics with me!' barked Dashrath as he banged his hand on the table for effect. 'I am not a trader! I am an emperor! Civilised people understand the difference.'

It had not escaped Dashrath's notice that Kubaer seemed ill at ease. Perhaps the trader had not intended for events to reach this stage. The massive troop movement to Karachapa had evidently unnerved him. Dashrath presumed that a few harsh words would effectively dissuade Kubaer from persisting with his foolhardy quest. After which, to be fair, he had decided that he would let Kubaer keep an extra two percent. Dashrath understood that, sometimes, a little magnanimity quelled discontent.

Dashrath leaned forward as he lowered his voice to a menacing whisper. 'I can be merciful. I can forgive mistakes. But you really need to stop this nonsense and do as I say.'

With a nervous gulp, Kubaer glanced at the impassive Raavan who sat to his right. Even sitting, Raavan's great height and rippling musculature was intimidating. His battle-worn, swarthy skin was pock-marked, probably by a childhood disease. A thick beard valiantly attempted to cover his ugly marks while a handlebar moustache set off his menacing features. His attire was unremarkable though, consisting of a white *dhoti* and a cream *angvastram*. His headgear was singular, with two threatening six-inch-long horns reaching out from the top on either side.

Kubaer helplessly turned back to Dashrath as his general remained deathly still. 'But Your Highness, we are facing many problems and our invested capital is—'

'You are trying my patience now, Kubaer!' growled Dashrath as he ignored Raavan and focused his attention on the chief trader. 'You are irritating the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu!'

'But My Lord...'

‘Look, if you do not continue to pay our rightful commissions, believe me you will all be dead by this time tomorrow. I will first defeat your miserable army, then travel all the way to that cursed island of yours and burn your city to the ground.’

‘But there are problems with our ships and labour costs have—’

‘I don’t care about your problems!’ shouted Dashrath, his legendary temper at boiling point now.

‘You will, after tomorrow,’ said Raavan softly.

Dashrath swung sharply towards Raavan, riled that Kubaer’s deputy had had the audacity to interrupt the conversation. ‘How dare you speak out of—’

‘How dare *you*, Dashrath?’ asked Raavan, an octave higher this time.

Dashrath, Ashwapati and Mrigasya sat in stunned silence, shocked that the mere head of a protection force had had the temerity to address the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu by his name.

‘How dare you imagine that you can even come close to defeating an army that I lead?’ asked Raavan with an eerie sense of calm.

Dashrath stood up angrily and his chair went flying back with a loud clutter. He thrust his finger in Raavan’s direction. ‘I’ll be looking for you on the battlefield tomorrow, you upstart!’

Slowly and menacingly, Raavan rose from his chair, all the while his closed right fist covering a pendant that hung from a gold chain around his neck. As Raavan’s fist unclenched, Dashrath was horrified by what he saw. The pendant was actually the bones of two human fingers — the phalanges of which were carefully fastened with gold links. Clenching this macabre souvenir again, Raavan appeared to derive enormous power from it.

Dashrath stared in disbelief. He had heard of demons that drank blood and wine from the skulls of their enemies and even kept their body parts as trophies. But here was a warrior who wore the relics of his enemy! *Who is this monster?*

‘I assure you, I’ll be waiting,’ said Raavan, with a hint of wry humour lacing his voice, as he watched Dashrath gape at him with horror. ‘I look forward to drinking your blood.’

Raavan turned around and strode out of the tent. Kubaer hurriedly wobbled out behind him, followed by the Lankan bodyguards.

Dashrath’s anger bubbled over. ‘Tomorrow we annihilate these scum. But no one will touch that man,’ he growled pointing towards the retreating figure of Raavan. ‘He will be killed by me! Only me!’



Dashrath was bristling with fury even as the day drew to a close. ‘I will personally chop up his body and throw it to the dogs!’ he shouted.

Kaikeyi sat impassively as her seething husband paced up and down the royal tent of the Ayodhya camp. She always accompanied him on his military campaigns.

‘How dare he speak to me like that?’

Kaikeyi scrutinised Dashrath languidly. He was tall, dark and handsome, the quintessential Kshatriya. A well-manicured moustache only added to his attractiveness.

Though muscular and strong, age had begun to take its toll on his well-built physique. Stray streaks of white in his hair were accompanied by a faint hint of a sag in the muscles. Even the Somras, the mysterious anti-ageing drink reserved for the royals by their sages, had not been able to adequately counter a lifetime of ceaseless warring and hard drinking.

‘I am the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu!’ shouted Dashrath, striking his chest with unconcealed rage. ‘How dare he?’

Even though alone with her husband, Kaikeyi maintained the demure demeanour normally reserved for her public interactions with him. She had never seen him so angry.

‘My love,’ said Kaikeyi, ‘save the anger for tomorrow. Have your dinner. You will need your strength for the battle that lies ahead.’

‘Does that outcaste mercenary even have a clue as to who he has challenged? I have never lost a battle in my life!’ Dashrath continued as though Kaikeyi hadn’t spoken.

‘And you will win tomorrow as well.’

Dashrath turned towards Kaikeyi. ‘Yes, I will win tomorrow. Then I will cut him to pieces and feed his corpse to mongrel dogs and gutter pigs!’

‘Of course you will, my love. You have determined that already.’

Dashrath snorted angrily and turned around, ready to storm out of the tent. But Kaikeyi could no longer contain herself.

‘Dashrath!’ she said harshly.

Dashrath stopped in his tracks. His favourite wife used that tone with him only when necessary. Kaikeyi walked up to him, held his hand and led him to the dinner table. She held his shoulders and roughly pushed him into the chair. Then she tore a piece of the *roti*, scooped up some vegetables and meat with it, and offered it to him. ‘You cannot defeat that demon tomorrow if you don’t eat and sleep tonight,’ she barely whispered.

Dashrath opened his mouth. Kaikeyi stuffed the morsel of food into it.



## Chapter 3

Lying in her bed, Queen Kaushalya of Ayodhya appeared frail and worn. All of forty, her prematurely grey hair seemed incongruous against her dark, still gleaming skin. Though short in stature, she'd once been strong. In a culture that valued women for their ability to produce heirs, being childless had broken her spirit. Despite being the senior-most wife, King Dashrath acknowledged her only on ceremonial occasions. At most other times, she was relegated to obscurity, a fact that ate away at her. All she desired was a fraction of the time and attention that Dashrath lavished on his favourite wife, Kaikeyi.

She was keenly aware that giving birth to an heir, hopefully Dashrath's first son, had the potential to dramatically alter her status. No wonder then that today her spirit was all fired up, even though her body was weak. She had been in labour for more than sixteen hours but she barely felt the pain. She soldiered on determinedly, refusing the doctor her permission to perform a surgical procedure to extract her baby from her womb.

'My son will be born naturally,' announced Kaushalya firmly.

A natural birth was considered more auspicious. She had no intention of putting the future prospects of her child at risk.

'He will be king one day,' continued Kaushalya. 'He will be born with good fortune.'

Nilanjana sighed. She wasn't even sure if the child would be a boy. But she wouldn't risk the merest flagging of her mistress' spirits. She administered some herbal pain relievers to the queen and bided her time. Ideally, the doctor wanted the birth to take place before midday. The royal astrologer had warned her that if the child was born later, he would suffer great hardships throughout his life. On the other hand, if the child was born before the sun reached its zenith, he would be remembered as one of the greatest among men and would be celebrated for millennia.

Nilanjana cast a quick glance at the *prahar* lamp, which measured time in six-hour intervals. The sun had already risen and it was the third hour of the second *prahar*. In another three hours it would be midday. Nilanjana had decided to wait till a half hour before noon and, if the baby was still not born, she would go ahead with the surgery.

Kaushalya was stricken with another bout of dilatory pain. She pursed her lips together and began chanting in her mind the name she had chosen for her child. This gave her strength for it wasn't an ordinary name. The name she had picked was that of the sixth Vishnu.

'Vishnu' was a title given to the greatest of leaders who were remembered as the Propagators of Good. The sixth man to have achieved this title was Lord Parshu Ram. That is how he was remembered by the common folk. *Parshu* means *axe*, and the word had been added to the name of the sixth Vishnu because the mighty battle axe had been his favourite weapon. His birth name was Ram. That was the name that reverberated in Kaushalya's mind.

*Ram... Ram... Ram... Ram...*

The fourth hour of the second *prahar* saw Dashrath battle-ready. He had hardly slept the previous night, his self-righteous rage having refused to dissipate. He had never lost a battle in his life, but this time it was not mere victory that he sought. Redemption now lay in his vanquishing that mercenary trader and squeezing the life out of him.

The Ayodhyan emperor had arranged his army in a *suchi vyuha*, the *needle formation*. This was because Kubaer's hordes had planted dense thorny bushes all around the Karachapa fort. It was almost impossible to charge from the landward side of the port city. Dashrath's army could have cleared the bushes and created a path to charge the fort, but that would have taken weeks. Kubaer's army had scorched the earth around Karachapa, and the absence of local food and water ensured that Dashrath's army did not possess the luxury of time. They had to attack before they ran out of rations.

More importantly, Dashrath was too angry to be patient. Therefore he had decided to launch his attack from the only strip of open land that had access to the fort of Karachapa: its beach.

The beach was broad by usual standards, but not enough for a large army. Hence, Dashrath's tactical decision to form a *suchi vyuha*. The best troops, along with the emperor, would man the front of the formation, while the rest of the army would fall in a long column behind. They intended a rolling charge, where the first lines would strike the Lankan ranks, and after twenty minutes of battle slip back, allowing the next line of warriors to charge in. It would be an unrelenting surge of brave Sapt Sindhu soldiers aiming to scatter and decimate the enemy troops of Kubaer.

Ashwapati nudged his horse a few steps ahead and halted next to Dashrath.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, ‘are you sure about this tactic?’

‘Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts, King Ashwapati!’ remarked Dashrath, surprised by the words of caution from his normally aggressive father-in-law. He had been a worthy ally in most of Dashrath’s conquering expeditions throughout the realms of India.

‘I was just thinking we will not be using our numerical superiority in full strength. The bulk of our soldiers will be behind the ones charging upfront. They will not be fighting at the same time. Is that wise?’

‘It is the only way, believe me,’ asserted Dashrath confidently. ‘Even if our first charge is unsuccessful, the soldiers at the back will keep coming in waves. We can sustain our onslaught on Kubaer’s eunuch forces till they all die to the last man. I do not see it coming to that though. I will annihilate them with our first charge!’

Ashwapati looked to his left where Kubaer’s ships lay at anchor more than two kilometres into the sea. There was something strange about their structure. The front section, the bow, was unusually broad. ‘What role will those ships play in the battle?’

‘Nothing!’ dismissed Dashrath, smiling fondly at his father-in-law; while Dashrath had had experience of a few naval battles, Ashwapati hadn’t. ‘Those fools haven’t even lowered their row-boats from the vessels. Even if they have a reserve force on those ships, they cannot be brought into battle quickly enough. It will take them at least a few hours to lower their row-boats, load their soldiers, and then ferry them to the beach to

join the battle. By then, we would've wiped out the soldiers who are inside the fort.'

'Outside the fort,' corrected Ashwapati, pointing towards Karachapa.

Raavan had, strangely, abandoned the immense advantage of being safe within the walls of the well-designed fort. Instead of lining them up along the ramparts, he had chosen to arrange his army of probably fifty thousand soldiers in a standard formation *outside* the city, on the beach.

'It is the strangest tactic I have ever seen,' said Ashwapati warily. 'Why is he giving up his strategic advantage? With the fort walls being right behind his army, he does not even have room to retreat. Why has Raavan done this?'

Dashrath sniggered. 'Because he is a reactionary idiot. He wants to prove a point to me. Well, I will make the final point when I dig my sword into his heart.'

Ashwapati turned his head towards the fort walls again as he surveyed Raavan's soldiers. Even from this distance he could see Raavan, wearing his hideous horned helmet, leading his troops from the front.

Ashwapati cast a look at his own army. The soldiers were roaring loudly, hurling obscenities at their enemy, as warriors are wont to do before the commencement of war. He turned his gaze to Raavan's army once again. In sharp contrast, they emanated no sound. There was no movement either. They stood quietly in rigid formation, a brilliant tribute to soldierly discipline.

A shiver ran down Ashwapati's spine.

He couldn't get it out of his mind that those soldiers were bait that Dashrath had chosen to take.

*If you are a fish charging at bait, then it usually doesn't end well.*

Ashwapati turned towards Dashrath to voice his fears, but the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu had already ridden away.



Dashrath was on horseback at the head of his troops. He ran his eyes over his men confidently. They were a rowdy, raucous bunch with swords drawn, eager for battle. The horses, too, seemed to have succumbed to the excitement of the moment, for the soldiers were pulling hard at their reins, holding them in check. Dashrath and his army could almost smell the blood that would soon be shed; the magnificent killings! They believed, as usual, that the Goddess of Victory was poised to bless them. *Let the war drums roll!*

Dashrath squinted his eyes as he observed the Lankans and their commander Raavan up ahead in the distance. Molten rage was coursing through him. He drew his sword and held it aloft, and then bellowed the unmistakable war cry of his kingdom, Kosala and its capital city, Ayodhya. '*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*'

*The conquerors from the unconquerable city!*

Not all in his army were citizens of Ayodhya, and yet they were proud to fight under the great Kosala banner. They echoed the war cry, '*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*'

Dashrath roared as he brought his sword down and spurred his horse. 'Kill them all! No mercy!'

'No mercy!' shouted the riders of the first charge, kicking their horses and taking off

behind their fearless lord.

But then it all began to unravel.

Dashrath and his finest warriors comprised the sturdy tip of the Sapt Sindhu needle formation. As they charged down the beach towards the Lankans, Raavan's troops remained stationary. When the enemy cavalry was just a few hundred metres away, Raavan unexpectedly turned his horse around and retreated from the front lines, even as his soldiers held firm. This further infuriated Dashrath. He screamed loudly as he kicked his horse to gather speed, intending to mow down the Lankan front line and quickly reach Raavan.

This was exactly what Raavan had envisaged. The Lankan front line roared stridently as the soldiers suddenly dropped their swords, bent, and picked up unnaturally long spears, almost twenty feet in length, that had been hitherto lying at their feet. Made of wood and metal, the spears were so heavy that it took two soldiers to pick each one up. The soldiers pointed these spears, tipped with sharp copper heads, directly at Dashrath's oncoming cavalry. The pointed heads tore into the unprepared horses and their mounted soldiers. Even as the charge of Dashrath's cavalry was halted in its tracks and the mounted soldiers thrown forward as their horses suddenly collapsed under them, Lankan archers emerged, high on the walls of the Karachapa fort. They shot a continuous stream of arrows in a long arc from the fort ramparts, right into the dense formation of Dashrath's troops at the back, ripping through the Sapt Sindhu lines.

Many of Dashrath's warriors, who had been flung off their impaled horses, broke into a fierce hand-to-hand battle with their enemies. Their liege Dashrath led the way as he swung his sword ferociously, killing all who dared to come in his path. But the Ayodhyan king was alive to the devastation being wrought upon his fellow soldiers who rapidly fell under the barrage of Lankan arrows and superbly-trained swordsmen. Dashrath ordered his flag bearer, who was beside him, to raise the flag as a signal for the Sapt Sindhu soldiers at the back to also break into a charge immediately and support the first line.

But things continued to deteriorate.

The troops on the Lankan ships in the distance abruptly weighed anchor, extended the oars, and began to row rapidly to the beach, with their sails up at full mast to help them catch the wind. Within moments, arrows were being fired from the ships into the densely packed forces under Dashrath's command. The Lankan archers on the ships tore through the ranks of the Sapt Sindhus.

No brigadier in Dashrath's army had factored in the possibility of the enemy ships beaching; it would have cracked their hulls. Unbeknownst to them, though, these were amphibious crafts, built by Kubaer's ingenious ship-designers, with specially constructed hulls that could absorb the shock of landing. Even as these landing crafts stormed onto the beach with tremendous force, the broad bows of the hulls rolled out from the top. These were no ordinary bows of a standard hull. They were attached to the bottom of the hull by huge hinges which simply rolled out onto the sand like a landing ramp. This opened a gangway straight onto the beach, disgorging cavalrymen of the

Lankan army mounted on disproportionately large horses imported from the west. The cavalry rode out of the ships and straight onto the beach, mercilessly slicing into all who lay in their path.

Even as he watched the destruction unleashed upon his forces near the fort, Dashrath's instincts warned him that something terrible was ensuing at the rear guard. As the emperor stretched to gaze beyond the sea of frenzied battling humanity, he detected a quick movement to his left and raised his shield in time to block a vicious blow from a Lankan soldier. Screaming ferociously, the king of Ayodhya brutally swung low at his attacker, his sword slicing through a chink in the armour. The Lankan fell back as his abdomen ripped open with a massive spurt of blood, accompanied by slick pink intestines that tumbled out in a rush. Dashrath knew no mercy as he turned away from the poor sod even as he bled to his miserable end.

'NO!' he yelled. What he saw was enough to break his mighty warrior's heart.

Caught between the vicious pincer attack of the brutal Lankan archers and infantry at the Karachapa walls from the front, and the fierce Lankan cavalry at the back, the spirit of his all-conquering army had all but collapsed. Dashrath stared at a scene he'd never imagined he would as the supreme commander of his glorious army. His men had broken rank and were in retreat.

'NO!' thundered Dashrath. 'FIGHT! FIGHT! WE ARE AYODHYA! THE UNCONQUERABLES!'

Dashrath swung hard and decapitated a giant Lankan in one mighty blow. As he turned to face another of the seemingly never-ending waves of Raavan's hordes, his gaze fell upon the monster who was the mastermind of this devastation. Raavan, on horseback, was leading his cavalry down the beach on the left, skirting the sea. It was the only flank of the Lankans that was open to counter-attack from the Ayodhya infantry. Accompanied by his well-trained cavalry, Raavan was shrieking maniacally and hacking his way brutally through the Ayodhya outer infantry lines before they could regroup. This was not a war anymore. It was a massacre.

Dashrath knew that he'd lost the battle. He also knew that he'd rather die than face defeat. But he had one last wish. Redemption lay in his spitting on the decapitated head of that ogre from Lanka.

'YAAAAAAHH!' screamed Dashrath, as he hacked at the arm of a Lankan who jumped at him, severing the limb cleanly just above the wrist. Pushing his enemy out of the way, Dashrath lunged forward as he desperately tried to reach Raavan. He felt a shield crash into his calf and heard the crack of a bone above the din.

The mighty emperor of the Sapt Sindhu screamed as he spun around and swung his sword at the Lankan who had broken the rules of combat, decapitating him cleanly. He felt a hard knock on his back. He turned right back with a parry, but his broken leg gave way. As he fell forward, he felt a sharp thrust into his chest. *Someone had stabbed him.* He didn't feel the blade go in too deep. *Or had it gone in deeper than he thought?* *Maybe his body was shutting the pain out...* Dashrath felt darkness enveloping him. His fall was cushioned by another soldier from among the heaving mass of warriors battling

in close combat. As his eyes slowly closed, he whispered his last prayers within the confines of his mind; to the God he revered the most: the sustainer of the world, the mighty Sun God Surya himself.

*Don't let me live to bear this, Lord Surya. Let me die. Let me die...*



*This is a disaster!*

A panic-stricken Ashwapati rounded up his bravest mounted soldiers and raced across the battlefield on horseback. He negotiated his way through the clutter of bodies to quickly reach the kill zone right outside Karachapa fort, where Dashrath lay, probably seriously injured, if not dead.

Ashwapati knew the war had been lost. Vast numbers of the Sapt Sindhu soldiers were being massacred before his very eyes. All he wanted now was to save Emperor Dashrath, who was also his son-in-law. His Kaikeyi would not be widowed.

They rode hard through the battle zone, even as they held their shields high to protect themselves from the unrelenting barrage of arrows raining down from the Karachapa walls.

‘There!’ screamed a soldier.

Ashwapati saw Dashrath’s motionless form wedged between the corpses of two soldiers. His son-in-law lay there firmly clutching his sword. The king of Kekaya leapt off his horse even as two soldiers rushed forward to offer him protection. Ashwapati dragged Dashrath towards his own horse, lifted him, and laid the emperor’s severely injured body across the saddle. He then jumped astride and rode off towards the field of thorny bushes even as his soldiers struggled to keep up with him.

Kaikeyi stood resolute in her chariot near the clearing along the line of bushes, her demeanour admirably calm. As her father’s horse drew near, she reached across and dragged Dashrath’s prone body into the chariot. She didn’t turn to look at her father, who had also been pierced by many arrows. She picked up the reins and whipped the four horses tethered to her chariot.

‘Hyaah!’ screamed Kaikeyi, as she charged into the bushes. Thorns tore mercilessly into the sides of the horses, ripping skin and even some flesh off the hapless animals. But Kaikeyi only kept whipping them harder and harder. Bloodied and tired, the horses soon broke through to the other side, onto clear land.

Kaikeyi finally pulled the reins and looked back. Riding furiously on the other side of the field of thorns, her father and his bodyguards were being chased by a group of mounted soldiers from Raavan’s army. Kaikeyi understood immediately what her father was trying to do. He was leading Raavan’s soldiers away from her.

The sun had nearly reached its zenith now. It was close to midday.

Kaikeyi cursed. *Damn you, Lord Surya! How could you allow this to happen to your most fervent devotee?*

She kneeled beside her unconscious husband, ripped off a large piece of her *angvastram*, and tied it firmly around a deep wound on his chest, which was losing blood at an alarming rate. Having staunched the blood flow somewhat, she stood and

picked up the reins. She desperately wanted to cry but this was not the time. She had to save her husband first. She needed her wits about her.

She looked at the horses. Blood was pouring down their sides in torrents, and specks of flesh hung limply where the skin had been ripped off. They were panting frantically, exhausted by the effort of having pulled the chariot through the dense field of thorns. But she couldn't allow them any respite. Not yet.

'Forgive me,' whispered Kaikeyi, as she raised her whip.

The leather hummed through the air and lashed the horses cruelly. Neighing for mercy, they refused to move. Kaikeyi cracked her whip again and the horses edged forward.

'MOVE!' screamed Kaikeyi as she whipped the horses ruthlessly, again and again, forcing them to pick up a desperate but fearsome momentum.

She had to save her husband.

Suddenly an arrow whizzed past her and crashed into the front board of the chariot with frightening intensity. Kaikeyi spun around in alarm. One of Raavan's cavalrymen had broken off from his group and was in pursuit.

Kaikeyi turned back and whipped her horses harder. 'FASTER! FASTER!'

Even as she whipped her horses into delirious frenzy, Kaikeyi had the presence of mind to shift slightly and use her body to shield her husband.

*Even Raavan's demons would be chivalrous enough not to attack an unarmed woman.*

She was wrong.

She heard the arrow's threatening hum before it slammed into her back with vicious force. Its shock was so massive that it threw her forward as her head flung back. Her eyes beheld the sky as Kaikeyi screamed in agony. But she recovered immediately, the adrenaline pumping furiously through her body, compelling her to focus.

'FASTER!' she screamed, as she whipped the horses ferociously.

Another arrow whizzed by her ears, missing the back of her head by a tiny whisker. Kaikeyi cast a quick look at her husband's immobile body bouncing furiously as the chariot tore through the uneven countryside.

'FASTER!'

She heard another arrow approach, and within a flash it slammed into her right hand, slicing through the forefinger cleanly; it bounced away like a pebble thrown to the side. The whip fell from her suddenly-loosened grip. Her mind was ready for further injuries now, her body equipped for pain. She didn't scream. She didn't cry.

She bent quickly and picked up the whip with her left hand, transferring the reins to her bloodied right hand. She resumed the whipping with mechanical precision.

'MOVE! YOUR EMPEROR'S LIFE IS AT STAKE!'

She heard the dreaded whizz of another arrow. She steeled herself for another hit; instead, she now heard a scream of agony from behind her. A quick side glance revealed her injured foe; the arrow had buried itself deep into his right eye. What she also perceived was a band of horsemen moving in; her father and his faithful bodyguards. A flurry of arrows ensured that the Lankan attacker toppled off his animal, even as his leg

got entangled in the stirrup. Raavan's soldier was dragged for many metres by his still galloping horse, his head smashing repeatedly against the rocks strewn on the path.

Kaikeyi looked ahead once again. She did not have the time to savour the brutal death of the man who'd injured her. *Dashrath must be saved.*

The rhythmic whipping continued ceaselessly.

‘FASTER! FASTER!’



Nilanjana was patting the baby's back insistently. He still wasn't breathing.

‘Come on! Breathe!’

Kaushalya watched anxiously as she lay exhausted from the abnormally long labour. She tried to prop herself up on her elbows. ‘What's wrong? What's the matter with my boy?’

‘Get the queen to rest, will you?’ Nilanjana admonished the attendant who was peering over her shoulder.

Rushing over, the attendant put her hand on the queen's shoulder and attempted to coax her to lie down. A severely weakened Kaushalya, however, refused to submit. ‘Give him to me!’

‘Your Highness...’ whispered Nilanjana as tears welled up in her eyes.

‘Give him to me!’

‘I don't think that...’

‘GIVE HIM TO ME!’

Nilanjana hurried over to her side and placed the lifeless baby next to Kaushalya. The queen held her motionless son close to her bosom. Almost instantly the baby moved and intuitively gripped Kaushalya's long hair.

‘Ram!’ said Kaushalya loudly.

With a loud and vigorous cry, Ram sucked in his first breath in this, his current worldly life.

‘Ram!’ cried Kaushalya once again, as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Ram continued to bawl with robust gusto, holding on to his mother's hair as firmly as his tiny hands would permit. He opened his mouth and suckled reflexively.

Nilanjana felt as if a dam had burst and began to bawl like a child. Her mistress had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. The prince had been born!

Despite her evident delirium, Nilanjana did not forget her training. She looked to the far corner of the room at the *prahar* lamp to record the exact time of birth. She knew that the royal astrologer would need that information.

She held her breath as she noticed the time.

*Lord Rudra, be merciful!*

It was exactly midday.



‘What does this mean?’ asked Nilanjana.

The astrologer sat still.

The sun was poised to sink into the horizon and both Kaushalya and Ram were sound

asleep. Nilanjana had finally walked into the chamber of the royal astrologer to discuss Ram's future.

'You'd said that if he was born before midday then history would remember him as one of the greatest,' said Nilanjana. 'And that if he was born after midday, he'd suffer misfortune and not know personal happiness.'

'Are you sure he was born exactly at midday?' asked the astrologer. 'Not before? Not after?'

'Of course I'm sure! Exactly at noon.'

The astrologer inhaled deeply and became contemplative once again.

'What does this mean?' asked Nilanjana. 'What will his future be like? Will he be great or will he suffer misfortune?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I mean I don't know!' said the astrologer, unable to contain his irritation.

Nilanjana looked out of the window, towards the exquisite royal gardens that rolled endlessly over many acres. The palace was perched atop a hill which also was the highest point in Ayodhya. As she gazed vacantly at the waters beyond the city walls, she knew what needed to be done. It was really up to her to record the time of birth, and she didn't *have* to record it as midday. How would anyone be any the wiser? She'd made her decision: Ram was born a minute *before* midday.

She turned to the astrologer. 'You will remain quiet about the actual time of birth.'

She needn't have exercised any caution. The astrologer, who also belonged to Kaushalya's parental kingdom, didn't need any convincing. His loyalties were as clear as Nilanjana's.

'Of course.'



## Chapter 4

Maharishi Vashishta approached the fort gates of Ayodhya, followed by his bodyguards at a respectful distance. As the guards on duty sprang to attention, they wondered where the great *raj guru*, the *royal sage* of Ayodhya, was headed early in the morning.

The chief of the guards bowed low, folded his hands into a namaste and addressed the *great man of knowledge* respectfully, ‘*Maharishiji*.’

Vashishta did not break a step as he nodded in acknowledgement with a polite namaste.

He was thin to a fault and towering in height, despite which his gait was composed and self-assured. His *dhoti* and *angvastram* were white, the colour of purity. His head was shaven bare, but for a knotted tuft of hair at the top of his head which announced his Brahmin status. A flowing, snowy beard, calm, gentle eyes, and a wizened face conveyed the impression of a soul at peace with itself.

Yet, Vashishta was brooding as he walked slowly towards the massive Grand Canal that encircled the ramparts of *Ayodhya*, the *impregnable city*. His thoughts were consumed by what he knew he must do.

Six years ago, Raavan’s barbaric hordes had decimated the Sapt Sindhu army. Though its prestige had depleted, Ayodhya’s suzerainty had not thus far been challenged by other kingdoms of North India, for every subordinate kingdom of the empire had bled heavily on that fateful day. Wounded themselves, none had the strength to confront even a weakened Ayodhya. Dashrath remained the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu, albeit a poorer and less powerful one.

The pitiless Raavan had extracted his pound of flesh from Ayodhya. Trade commissions paid by Lanka were unilaterally reduced to a tenth of what they had been before the humiliating defeat. In addition, the purchase of goods from the Sapt Sindhu was now at a reduced price. Inevitably, even as Lanka’s wealth soared, Ayodhya and the other kingdoms of North India slipped into penury. Why, rumours even abounded that the streets of the demon city were paved with gold!

Vashishta raised his hand to signal his bodyguards to fall behind. He walked up to the shaded terrace that overlooked the Grand Canal. He raised his eyes towards the exquisite ceiling that ran along the canal’s entire length. He then ran his gaze along the almost limitless expanse of water that lay ahead. It had once symbolised Ayodhya’s immense wealth but had begun to exhibit signs of decay and poverty.

The canal had been built a few centuries ago, during the reign of Emperor Ayutayus, by drawing in the waters of the feisty Sarayu River. Its dimensions were almost celestial. It stretched for over fifty kilometres as it circumnavigated the third and outermost wall of the city of Ayodhya. It was enormous in breadth as well, extending to about two-and-a-half kilometres across the banks. Its storage capacity was so massive that for the first

few years of its construction, many of the kingdoms downriver had complained of water shortages. Their objections had been crushed by the brute force of the powerful Ayodhyan warriors.

One of the main purposes of this canal was militaristic. It was, in a sense, a moat. To be fair, it could be called the Moat of Moats, protecting the city from all sides. Prospective attackers would have to row across a moat that had river-like dimensions. The adventurous fools would be out in the open, vulnerable to an unending barrage of missiles from the high walls of the unconquerable city. Four bridges spanned the canal in the four cardinal directions. The roads that emerged from these bridges led into the city through four massive gates in the outermost wall: the North Gate, East Gate, South Gate and West Gate. Each bridge was divided into two sections. Each section had its own tower and drawbridge, thus offering two levels of defence at the canal itself.

Even so, to consider this Grand Canal a mere defensive structure was to do it a disservice. The Ayodhyans also looked upon the canal as a religious symbol. To them, the massive canal, with its dark, impenetrable and eerily calm waters, was reminiscent of the sea; similar to the mythic, primeval ocean of nothingness that was the source of creation. It was believed that at the centre of this primeval ocean, billions of years ago, the universe was born when *The One, Ekam*, split into many in a great big bang, thus activating the cycle of creation.

The impenetrable city, Ayodhya, viewed itself as a representative on earth of that most supreme of Gods, the *One God*, the formless *Ekam*, popularly known in modern times as the *Brahman* or *Parmatma*. It was believed that the *Parmatma* inhabited every single being, animate and inanimate. Some men and women were able to awaken the *Parmatma* within, and thus become Gods. These Gods among men had been immortalised in great temples across Ayodhya. Small islands had been constructed within the Grand Canal as well, on which temples had been built in honour of these Gods.

Vashishta, however, knew that despite all the symbolism and romance, the canal had, in fact, been built for more prosaic purposes. It worked as an effective flood-control mechanism, as water from the tempestuous Sarayu could be led in through control-gates. Floods were a recurrent problem in North India.

Furthermore, its placid surface made drawing water relatively easy, as compared to taking it directly from the Sarayu. Smaller canals radiated out of the Grand Canal into the hinterland of Ayodhya, increasing the productivity of farming dramatically. The increase in agricultural yield allowed many farmers to free themselves from the toil of tilling the land. Only a few were enough to feed the massive population of the entire kingdom of Kosala. This surplus labour transformed into a large army, trained by talented generals into a brilliant fighting unit. The army conquered more and more of the surrounding lands, till the great Lord Raghu, the grandfather of the present Emperor Dashrath, finally subjugated the entire Sapt Sindhu, thus becoming the *Chakravarti Samrat*.

Wealth pouring into Kosala sparked a construction spree: massive temples, palaces, public baths, theatres and market places were built. Sheer poetry in stone, these

buildings were a testament to the power and glory of Ayodhya. One among them was the grand terrace that overhung the inner banks of the Grand Canal. It was a continuous colonnaded structure built of red sandstone mined from beyond the river Ganga; the terrace was entirely covered by a majestic vaulted ceiling, providing shade to the constant stream of visitors.

Every square inch of the ceiling had been painted in vivid colours, chronicling the stories of ancient Gods such as Indra, and the ancestors of kings who ruled Ayodhya, all the way up to the first, the noble Ikshvaku. The ceiling was divided into separate sections and, at the centre of each was a massive sun, with its rays streaming boldly out in all directions. This was significant, for the kings of Ayodhya were Suryavanshis, the descendants of the Sun God, and just like the sun, their power boldly extended out in all directions. Or so it had been before the demon from Lanka destroyed their prestige in one fell swoop.

Vashishta looked into the distance at one of the numerous artificial islands that dotted the canal. This island, unlike the others, did not have a temple but three gigantic statues, placed back to back, facing different directions. One was of Lord Brahma, the Creator, one of the greatest scientists ever. He was credited with many inventions upon which the Vedic way of life had been built. His disciples lived by the code he'd established: relentless pursuit of knowledge and selfless service to society. They had, over the years, evolved into the tribe of Brahma, or Brahmins.

To its right was the statue of Lord Parshu Ram, worshipped as the sixth Vishnu. Periodically, when a way of life became inefficient, corrupt or fanatical, a new leader emerged, who guided his people to an improved social order. Vishnu was an ancient title accorded to the greatest of leaders, idolised as the Propagators of Good. The Vishnus were worshipped like Gods. Lord Parshu Ram, the previous Vishnu, had many centuries ago guided India out of its Age of Kshatriya, which had degenerated into vicious violence. He'd ushered in the Age of Brahmin, an age of knowledge.

Next to Lord Parshu Ram, and to the left of Lord Brahma, completing the circle of trinity was the statue of Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev. This was an ancient title accorded to those who were the Destroyers of Evil. The Mahadev's was not the task to guide humanity to a new way of life; this was reserved for the Vishnu. His task was restricted to finding and destroying Evil. Once Evil had been destroyed, Good would burst through with renewed vigour. Unlike the Vishnu, the Mahadev could not be a native of India, for that would predispose him towards one or the other side within this great land. He had to be an outsider to enable him to clearly see Evil for what it was, when it arose. Lord Rudra belonged to a land beyond the western borders of India: Pariha.

Vashishta went down on his knees and touched the ground with his forehead, in reverence to the glorious trinity who were the bedrock of the present Vedic way of life. He raised his head and folded his hands in a namaste.

‘Guide me, O Holy Trinity,’ whispered Vashishta. ‘For I intend to rebel.’

A sudden gust of wind echoed around his ears as he gazed at the triumvirate. The marble was not what it used to be. The Ayodhya royalty wasn’t able to maintain the outer

surface anymore. The gold leafing on the crowns of Lords Brahma, Parshu Ram and Rudra had begun to peel off. The ceiling of the terrace had paint flaking off its beautiful images, and the sandstone floor was chipped in many places. The Grand Canal itself had begun to silt and dry up, with no repairs undertaken; the Ayodhya royal administration was probably unable to budget for such tasks.

However, it was clear to Vashishta that not only was the administration short of funds for adequate governance, it had also lost the will for it. As the canal water receded, the exposed dry land had been encroached upon with impunity. The Ayodhyian population had grown till the city almost seemed to burst at its seams. Even a few years ago it would have been unthinkable that the canal would be defiled thus; that new housing would not be constructed for the poor. But, alas, many improbables had now become habitual.

*We need a new way of life, Lord Parshu Ram. My great country must be rejuvenated with the blood and sweat of patriots. What I want is revolutionary, and patriots are often called traitors by the very people they choose to serve, till history passes the final judgement.*

Vashishta scooped some mud from the canal that was deposited on the steps of the terrace, and used his thumb to apply it on his forehead in a vertical line.

*This soil is worth more than my life to me. I love my country. I love my India. I swear I will do what must be done. Give me courage, My Lord.*

The soft rhythm of liturgical chanting wafted through the breeze, making him turn to his right. A small group of people walked solemnly in the distance, wearing robes of blue, the holy colour of the divine. It was an unusual sight these days. Along with wealth and power, the citizens of the Sapt Sindhu had also lost their spiritual ardour. Many believed their Gods had abandoned them. Why else would they suffer so?

The worshippers chanted the name of the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram.

*'Ram, Ram, Ram bolo; Ram, Ram, Ram. Ram, Ram, Ram bolo; Ram, Ram, Ram.'*

It was a simple chant: 'Speak the name of Ram.'

Vashishta smiled; to him, this was a sign.

*Thank you, Lord Parshu Ram. Thank you for your blessings.*

Vashishta had pinned his hopes on the namesake of the sixth Vishnu: the six-year-old eldest prince of Ayodhya, Ram. The sage had insisted that Queen Kaushalya's chosen name, Ram, be expanded to Ram Chandra. Kaushalya's father, King Bhanuman of South Kosala, and mother, Queen Maheshwari of the Kurus, were *Chandrvanshis*, the descendants of the moon. Vashishta thought it would be wise to show fealty towards Ram's maternal home as well. Furthermore, Ram Chandra meant 'pleasant face of the moon', and it was well known that the moon shone with the reflected light of the sun. Poetically, the sun was the face and the moon its reflection; who, then, was responsible for the pleasant face of the moon? *The sun!* It was appropriate thus: Ram Chandra was also a Suryavansi name, for Dashrath, his father, was a Suryavansi.

That names guided destiny was an ancient belief. Parents chose the names of their children with care. A name, in a sense, became an aspiration, *swadharma, individual*

*dharma*, for the child. Having been named after the sixth Vishnu himself, the aspirations for this child could not have been set higher!

There was another name that Vashishta had placed his hopes on: Bharat, Ram's brother, younger to him by seven months. His mother, Kaikeyi, did not know at the time of the great battle with Raavan that she was carrying Dashrath's child in her womb. Vashishta was aware that Kaikeyi was a passionate, wilful woman. She was ambitious for herself and those she viewed as her own. She had not settled for the eldest queen, Kaushalya, being one up on her by choosing a great name for her son. Her son, then, was the namesake of the legendary Chandravanshi emperor, Bharat, who had ruled millennia ago.

The ancient Emperor Bharat had united the warring Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis under one banner. Notwithstanding the occasional skirmishes, they had learnt to live in relative peace; a peace that held. It was exemplified today by the Emperor Dashrath, a Suryavanshi, having two queens who traced their lineage to Chandravanshi royalty, Kaushalya and Kaikeyi. Ashwapati, the father of Kaikeyi and the Chandravanshi king of Kekaya, was in fact the emperor's closest advisor.

*One of the two names will surely serve my purpose.*

He looked at Lord Parshu Ram again, drawing strength from the image.

*I know they will think I'm wrong. They may even curse my soul. But you were the one who had said, My Lord, that a leader must love his country more than he loves his own soul.*

Vashishta reached for his scabbard, hidden within the folds of his *angvastram*. He pulled out the knife and beheld the name that had been inscribed on the hilt in an ancient script: Parshu Ram.



Inhaling deeply, he shifted the knife to his left hand and pricked his forefinger, puncturing deep to draw out blood. He pressed the finger with his thumb, just under the drop of blood, and let some droplets drip into the canal.

*By this blood oath, I swear on all my knowledge, I will make my rebellion succeed, or I will die trying.*

Vashishta took one last look at Lord Parshu Ram, bowed his head as he brought his hands together in a respectful namaste, and softly whispered the cry of the followers of the great Vishnu. '*Jai Parshu Ram!*'

*Glory to Parshu Ram!*



## Chapter 5

Kaushalya, the queen, was happy; Kaushalya, the mother, was not. She understood that Ram should leave the Ayodhya palace. Emperor Dashrath had blamed him for the horrific defeat he'd suffered at the hands of Raavan, on the day that Ram was born. Till that fateful day, he had never lost a battle; in fact, he'd been the only unbeaten ruler in all of India. Dashrath was convinced that Ram was born with bad karma and his birth was the undoing of the noble lineage of Raghu. There was little the powerless Kaushalya could do to change this.

Kaikeyi had always been the favourite wife, and saving the emperor's life in the Battle of Karachapa had only made her hold over Dashrath absolute. Kaikeyi and her coterie had speedily let it be known that Dashrath believed Ram's birth was inauspicious. Soon the city of Ayodhya shared its emperor's belief. It was widely held that all the good deeds of Ram's life would not succeed in washing away the 'taint of 7,032', the year that, according to the calendar of Lord Manu, Dashrath was defeated and Ram was born.

It would be best if Ram left the palace with Raj Guru Vashishta, Kaushalya knew. He would be away from the Ayodhya nobility, which had never accepted him anyway. Furthermore, he would stand to gain from the education he'd receive at Vashishta's *gurukul*. *Gurukul* meant the *guru's family*, but in practice it was the *residential school* of gurus. He would learn philosophy, science, mathematics, ethics, warfare and the arts. He would return, years later, a man in charge of his destiny.

The queen understood this, but the doting mother was unable to let go. She held on to her child and wept. Ram stood stoic as he held his mother, who hugged and smothered him with kisses; even at this tender age, he was an unusually calm boy.

Bharat, unlike Ram, was crying hysterically, refusing to let his mother go. Kaikeyi glared at her son with exasperation. 'You are my son! Don't be such a sissy! Behave like the king you will be one day! Go, make your mother proud!'

Vashishta watched the proceedings and smiled.

*Passionate children have strong emotions that insist on finding expression. They laugh loudly. They cry even more loudly.*

He observed the brothers as he wondered whether his goal would be met through stoic duty or passionate feeling. The twins, Lakshman and Shatrughan, the youngest of the four sons of Dashrath, stood at the back with their mother, Sumitra. The poor three-year-olds seemed lost, not quite understanding what was going on. Vashishta knew it was too soon for them, but he couldn't leave them behind. Ram and Bharat's training would take a long time, maybe even a decade, if not more. He could not risk the twins being in the palace during this period, for the political intrigue among the nobility would lead to the younger princes being co-opted into camps. This malicious nobility was already bleeding Ayodhya dry with its scheming and plotting to enrich itself; the emperor was weak and distracted.

The princes would return home for two *nine-day* holidays, twice a year, during the summer and winter solstices. The ancient *navratra* festival, which commemorated the six-monthly change in the direction of the Sun God's north-south journey across the horizon, was celebrated with great vigour. Vashishta believed those eighteen days would suffice to console the bereft mothers and sons. The autumn and spring *navratras*, aligned with the two equinoxes, would be commemorated at the *gurukul*.

The raj guru turned his attention to Dashrath.

The last six years had taken their toll on the emperor. Parchment-like skin stretched thinly over a face that was worn out by grief, his eyes sunken, his hair grey. The grievous battle wound on his leg had long since turned into a permanent deformity, depriving him of the hunting and exercising that he so loved. Seeking refuge in drink, his bent body gave little indication of the strong and handsome warrior he'd once been. Raavan had not just defeated him on that terrible day. He continued to defeat him every single day.

'Your Highness,' said Vashishta, loudly. 'With your permission.'

A distracted Dashrath waved his hand, confirming his order.



It was a day after the winter solstice and the princes were in Ayodhya on their half-yearly holiday. It had been three years since they first left for the *gurukul*. *Uttaraayan*, the northward movement of the sun across the horizon, had begun. Six months later, in peak summer, Lord Surya would reverse his direction and *Dakshinaayan*, the southward movement of the sun, would begin.

Ram spent most of his time, even on holiday, with Guru Vashishta, who had moved back to the palace with the boys; Kaushalya could not do much besides complain. Bharat, on the other hand, was strictly confined to Kaikeyi's chambers, subjected to incessant tutoring and interrogation by his forceful mother. Lakshman had already started riding small ponies, and he loved it. Shatrughan ... just read books!

Lakshman was rushing to his mother Sumitra after one such riding lesson when he stopped short, hearing voices outside her chamber. He peeped in from behind the curtains.

'You must understand, Shatrughan, that your brother Bharat may make fun of you, but he loves you the most. You should always stay by his side.'

Shatrughan was holding a palm-leaf booklet in his hand, desperately trying to read as he pretended to pay attention to his mother.

'Are you listening to me, Shatrughan?' asked Sumitra, sharply.

'Yes Mother,' Shatrughan said, looking up, sincerity dripping from his voice.

'I don't think so.'

Shatrughan repeated his mother's last sentence. His diction was remarkably clear and crisp for his age. Sumitra knew that her son hadn't been paying attention, and yet she couldn't do anything about the fact that he'd not been genuinely listening to her at all!

Lakshman smiled as he ran up to his mother, yelping with delight as he leapt onto her lap.

'I will ladden to you, *Maa!*' he said with his childish lisp.

Sumitra smiled as she wrapped her arms around Lakshman. ‘Yes, I know you will always listen to me. You are my good son!’

Shatrughan glanced briefly at his mother before going back to his palm-leaf booklet.

‘I will do whatever you tell me to do,’ said Lakshman, his earnest eyes filled with love. ‘Alwayth.’

‘Then listen to me,’ said Sumitra, leaning in with a clownish, conspiratorial expression, the kind she knew Lakshman loved. ‘Your elder brother Ram needs you.’ Her expression changed to compassionate wistfulness as she continued. ‘He is a simple and innocent soul. He needs someone who can be his eyes and ears. No one really likes him.’ She focused on Lakshman once again and murmured, ‘You have to protect him from harm. People always say mean things about him behind his back, but he sees the best in them. He has too many enemies. His life may depend on you...’

‘Really?’ asked Lakshman, his eyes widening with barely-understood dread.

‘Yes! And believe me, I can only count on you to protect him. Ram has a good heart, but he’s too trusting of others.’

‘Don’t worry, *Maa*,’ said Lakshman, stiffening his back and pursing his lips, his eyes gleaming like a soldier honoured with a most important undertaking. ‘I will alwayth take care of Ram *Dada*.’

Sumitra hugged Lakshman again and smiled fondly. ‘I know you will.’



‘*Dada!*’ shouted Lakshman, banging his little heels against the pony’s sides, willing it to run faster. But the pony, specially trained for children, refused to oblige.

Nine-year-old Ram rode ahead of Lakshman on a taller, faster pony. True to his training, he rose gracefully in his saddle at every alternate step of the canter, in perfect unison with the animal. On this vacant afternoon, they’d decided to practise by themselves the art of horsemanship, at the royal Ayodhya riding grounds.

‘*Dada! Thop!*’ screamed Lakshman desperately, having abandoned by now any pretence at following vaguely-learnt instructions. He kicked and whipped his pony to the best of his ability.

Ram looked back at the enthusiastic Lakshman and smiled as he cautioned his little brother, ‘Lakshman, slow down. Ride properly.’

‘*Thop!*’ yelled Lakshman.

Ram immediately understood Lakshman’s frantic cry and pulled his reins as Lakshman caught up and dismounted rapidly. ‘*Dada, get off!*’

‘What?’

‘Get off!’ shouted an agitated Lakshman as he grabbed Ram’s hand, trying to drag him down.

Ram frowned as he got off the horse. ‘What is it, Lakshman?’

‘Look!’ Lakshman exclaimed, as he pointed at the billet strap that went through the buckle on the girth strap; the girth, in turn, kept the saddle in place. The buckle had almost come undone.

‘By the great Lord Rudra!’ whispered Ram. Had the buckle released while he was

riding, he would have been thrown off the dislodged saddle, resulting in serious injury. Lakshman had saved him from a terrible accident.

Lakshman looked around furtively, his mother's words echoing in his brain. 'Thomeone tried to kill you, *Dada*.'

Ram carefully examined the girth strap and the attached buckle. It simply looked worn out; there were no signs of tampering. Lakshman had certainly saved him from an injury, though, and possibly even death.

Ram embraced Lakshman gently. 'Thank you, my brother.'

'Don't worry about any *conthpirathieh*', said Lakshman, wearing a solemn expression. He was now certain about his mother's warnings. 'I will protect you, *Dada*. *Alwayth*.'

Ram tried hard to prevent himself from smiling. 'Conspiracies, huh? Who taught you such a big word?'

'*Thatrughan*', said Lakshman, looking around again, scanning the area for threats.

'*Shatruhan*, hmm?'

'*Yeth*. Don't worry, *Dada*. *Lakhthman* will protect you.'

Ram kissed his brother's forehead and reassured his little protector. 'I feel safe already.'



The brothers were all set to go back to the *gurukul* two days after the horse saddle incident. Ram visited the royal stable the night before their departure to groom his horse; both of them had a long day ahead. There were stable hands, of course, but Ram enjoyed this work; it soothed him. The animals were among the handful in Ayodhya who did not judge him. He liked to spend time with them occasionally. He looked back at the sound of the clip-clop of hooves.

'Lakshman!' cried Ram in alarm, as little Lakshman trooped in atop his pony, obviously injured. Ram rushed forward and helped him dismount. Lakshman's chin had split open, deep enough to urgently need stitches. His face was covered with blood, but with typical bravado, he did not flinch at all when Ram examined his wound.

'You are not supposed to go horseback riding in the night, you know that, don't you?' Ram admonished him gently.

Lakshman shrugged. 'Thorry... The horthe thuddenly...'

'Don't talk,' interrupted Ram, as the blood flow increased. 'Come with me.'



Ram hastily sped towards Nilanjana's chambers along with his injured brother. En route, they were accosted by Sumitra and her maids who had been frantically searching for her missing son.

'What happened?' shouted Sumitra, as her eyes fell upon the profusely bleeding Lakshman.

Lakshman stood stoic and tight-lipped. He knew he was in for trouble as his *dada* never lied; there was no scope for creative storytelling. He would have to confess, and then come up with strategies to escape the inevitable punishment.

‘It’s nothing serious, *Chhoti Maa*,’ said Ram to his *younger stepmother*, Sumitra. ‘But we should get him to Nilanjanaji immediately.’

‘What happened?’ Sumitra persisted.

Ram instinctively felt compelled to protect Lakshman from his mother’s wrath. After all, Lakshman had saved his life just the other day. He did what his conscience demanded at the time; shift the blame on himself. ‘*Chhoti Maa*, it’s my fault. I’d gone to the stable with Lakshman to groom my horse. It’s a little high-spirited and suddenly reared and kicked Lakshman. I should have ensured that Lakshman stood behind me.’

Sumitra immediately stepped aside. ‘Quickly, take him to Nilanjana.’

*She knows Ram Dada never lies*, Lakshman thought, filled with guilt.

Ram and Lakshman rushed off, as a maid attempted to follow them. Sumitra raised her hand to stop her as she watched the boys moving down the corridor. Ram held his brother’s hand firmly. She smiled with satisfaction.

Lakshman brought Ram’s hand to his heart, and whispered, ‘Together alwayth, *Dada*. Alwayth.’

‘Don’t talk, Lakshman. The blood will...’



The Ayodhyian princes had been in the *gurukul* for five years now. Vashishta watched with pride as the eleven-year-old Ram practised with his full-grown opponent. Combat training had commenced for Ram and Bharat this year; Lakshman and Shatrughan would have to wait for two more years. For now, they had to remain content with lessons in philosophy, mathematics and science.

‘Come on, *Dada*!’ shouted Lakshman. ‘Move in and hit him!’

Vashishta observed Lakshman with an indulgent smile. He sometimes missed the cute lisp that Lakshman had now lost; but the eight-year-old had not lost his headstrong spirit. He also remained immensely loyal to Ram, whom he loved dearly. Perhaps Ram would eventually be able to channel Lakshman’s wild streak.

The soft-spoken and intellect-oriented Shatrughan sat beside Lakshman, reading a palm-leaf manuscript of the *Isha Vasya Upanishad*. He read a Sanskrit verse.

*Pushannekarshe yama surya praajaapatya vyuha rashmeen samuha tejah;*

*Yatte roopam kalyaanatamam tatte pashyaami yo saavasau purushah so’hamasmi.*

*O Lord Surya, nurturing Son of Prajapati, solitary Traveller, celestial Controller; Diffuse Your rays, Diminish your light;*

*Let me see your gracious Self beyond the luminosity; And realise that the God in You is Me.*

Shatrughan smiled to himself, lost in the philosophical beauty of the words. Bharat, who sat behind him, bent over and tapped Shatrughan on his head, then pointed at Ram. Shatrughan looked at Bharat, protest writ large in his eyes. Bharat glared at his younger brother. Shatrughan put his manuscript aside and looked at Ram.

The opposing swordsman Vashishta had selected for Ram belonged to the forest people who lived close to Vashishta’s *gurukul*. It had been built deep in the untamed forests far south of the river Ganga, close to the western-most point of the course of the

river Shon. The river took a sharp eastward turn thereafter, and flowed north-east to merge with the Ganga. This area had been used by many gurus for thousands of years. The forest people maintained the premises and gave it on rent to gurus.

The solitary approach to the *gurukul* was camouflaged first by dense foliage and then by the overhanging roots of a giant banyan. A small glade lay beyond, at the centre of which descending steps had been carved out of the earth, leading to a long, deep trench covered by vegetation. The trench then became a tunnel as it made its way under a steep hill. Light flooded the other end of this tunnel as it emerged at the banks of a stream which was spanned by a wooden bridge. Across lay the *gurukul*, a simple monolithic structure hewn into a rocky hillside.

The hill face had been neatly cut as though a huge, cube-shaped block of stone had been removed. Twenty small temples carved into the surface faced the entrance to the structure, some with deities in them, others empty. Six of these were adorned with an idol each of the previous Vishnus, one housed Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev, and in yet another sat Lord Brahma, the brilliant scientist. The king of the *Devas*, the *Gods*, Lord Indra, who was also the God of Thunder and the Sky, occupied his rightful place in the central temple, surrounded by the other Gods. Of the two rock surfaces that faced each other, one had been cut to comprise the kitchen and store rooms, and the other, alcove-like sleeping quarters for the guru and his students.

Within the *ashram*, the princes of Ayodhya lived not as nobility, but as children of working-class parents; their royal background, in fact, was not public knowledge at the *gurukul*. In keeping with tradition, the princes had been accorded *gurukul* names: Ram was called Sudas, Bharat became Vasu, Lakshman was Paurav, and Shatrughan, Nalatardak. All reminders of their royal lineage were proscribed. Over and above their academic pursuits, they cleaned the *gurukul*, cooked food and served the guru. Scholastic mastery would help them achieve their life goals; the other activities would ingrain humility, with which they'd choose the *right* life goals.

'Looks like you're warmed up, Sudas,' Vashishta addressed Ram, one of his two star pupils. The guru then turned to the chief of the tribe, who sat beside him. 'Chief Varun, time to see some combat?'

The local people, besides being good hosts, were also brilliant warriors. Vashishta had hired their services to help train his wards in the fine art of warfare. They also served as combat opponents during examination, like right now.

Varun addressed the tribal warrior who had been practising with Ram. 'Matsya...'

Matsya and Ram immediately turned to the spectator stand and bowed to Vashishta and Varun. They walked over to the edge of the platform, picked up a paintbrush broom each, dipped it in a paint can filled with red dye, and painted the sides and tips of their wooden practice swords. It would leave marks on the body when struck, thus indicating how lethal the strike was.

Ram stepped on the platform and moved to the centre, followed by Matsya. Face-to-face, they bowed low with respect for their opponent.

'Truth. Duty. Honour,' said Ram, repeating a slogan he'd heard from his guru,

Vashishta, which had made a deep impact on him.

Matsya, almost a foot taller than the boy, smiled. ‘Victory at all costs.’

Ram took position: his back erect, his body turned sideways, his eyes looking over his right shoulder, just as Guru Vashishta had trained him to do. This position exposed the least amount of his body surface to his opponent. His breathing was steady and relaxed, just as he had been taught. His left hand held firmly by his side, extended a little away from the body to maintain balance. His sword hand was extended out, a few degrees above the horizontal position, bended slightly at the elbow. He adjusted his arm position till the weight of the sword was borne by his trapezius and triceps muscles. His knees were bent and his weight was on the ball of his feet, affording quick movement in any direction. Matsya was impressed. This young boy followed every rule to perfection.

The remarkable feature in the young boy was his eyes. With steely focus, they were fixed on those of his opponent, Matsya. *Guru Vashishta has taught the boy well. The eye moves before the hand does.*

Matsya’s eyes fractionally widened. Ram knew an attack was imminent. Matsya lunged forward and thrust his sword at Ram’s chest, using his superior reach. It could have been a kill-wound, but Ram shifted swiftly to his right, avoiding the blow as he flicked his right hand forward, nicking Matsya’s neck.

Matsya stepped back immediately.

‘Why didn’t you slash hard, *Dada!*’ screamed Lakshman. ‘That should have been a kill-wound!’

Matsya smiled appreciatively. He understood what Lakshman hadn’t. Ram was probing him. Being a cautious fighter, he would move into kill strikes only after he knew his opponent’s psyche. Ram didn’t respond to Matsya’s smile of approval. His eyes remained focused, his breathing normal. He had to discern his opponent’s weaknesses. Waiting for the kill.

Matsya charged at him aggressively, bringing in his sword with force from the right. Ram stepped back and fended off the blow with as much strength as his smaller frame could muster. Matsya bent towards the right and brought in his sword from Ram’s left now, belligerently swinging in close to the boy’s head. Ram stepped back again, raising his sword up to block. Matsya kept moving forward, striking repeatedly, hoping to pin Ram against the wall and then deliver a kill-wound. Ram kept retreating as he fended off the blows. Suddenly he jumped to the right, avoiding Matsya’s slash and in the same smooth movement, swung hard, hitting Matsya on the arm, leaving a splash of red paint. It was a ‘wound’ again, but not the one that would finally stop the duel.

Matsya stepped back without losing eye contact with Ram. *Perhaps he’s too cautious.*

‘Don’t you have the guts to charge?’

Ram didn’t respond. He took position once again, bending his knees a little, keeping his left hand lightly on his hips with the right hand extended out, his sword held steady.

‘You cannot win the game if you don’t play the game,’ teased Matsya. ‘Are you simply trying to avoid losing or do you actually want to win?’

Ram remained calm, focused and steady. Silent. He was conserving his energy.

*This kid is unflappable*, Matsya mused. He charged once again, repeatedly striking from above, using his height to try and knock Ram down. Ram bent sideways as he parried, stepping backwards steadily.

Vashishta smiled for he knew what Ram was attempting.

Matsya did not notice the small rocky outcrop that Ram smoothly sidestepped as he slowly moved backwards. Within moments, Matsya stumbled and lost his balance. Not wasting a moment, Ram went down on one knee and struck hard, right across the groin of the tribal warrior. A kill-wound!

Matsya looked down at the red paint smeared across his groin. The wooden sword had not drawn blood but had caused tremendous pain; he was too proud to let it show.

Impressed by the young student, Matsya stepped forward and patted Ram on his shoulder. ‘One must check the layout of the battlefield before a fight; know every nook and cranny. You remembered this basic rule. I didn’t. Well done, my boy.’

Ram put the sword down, clasped his right elbow with his left hand and touched his forehead with the clenched right fist, in the traditional salute typical of the tribe of Matsya, showing respect to the *noble* forest-dweller. ‘It was an honour to battle with you, great *Arya*.’

Matsya smiled and folded his hands into a namaste. ‘No, young man, the honour was mine. I look forward to seeing what you do with your life.’

Varun turned to Vashishta. ‘You have a good student here, Guruji. Not only is he a fine swordsman, he is also noble in his conduct. Who is he?’

Vashishta smiled. ‘You know I’m not going to reveal that, Chief.’

Meanwhile, Matsya and Ram had walked to the edge of the platform. They chucked their swords into a water tank, allowing the paint to wash off. The swords would then be dried, oiled and hammered, ready to be used again.

Varun turned to another warrior of his tribe. ‘Gouda, you are next.’

Vashishta signalled Bharat, addressing him by his *gurukul* name. ‘Vasu!’

Gouda touched the ground with reverence, seeking its blessings before stepping onto the platform. Bharat did no such thing. He simply sprang up and sprinted towards the box that contained the swords. He’d marked a sword for himself already; the longest. It negated the advantage of reach that his opponent, a fully grown man, had.

Gouda smiled indulgently; his opponent was a child after all. The warrior picked up a wooden sword and marched to the centre, surprised to not find Bharat there. The intrepid child was already at the far end of the platform where the red dye and paintbrush brooms were stored. He was painting the edges and point of his sword.

‘No practice?’ asked a surprised Gouda.

Bharat turned around. ‘Let’s not waste time.’

Gouda raised his eyebrows in amusement; he walked up and painted his sword edges as well.

The combatants walked to the centre of the platform. Keeping with tradition, they bowed to each other. Gouda waited for Bharat to state his personal credo, expecting a repeat of that of his elder brother’s.

‘Live free or die,’ said Bharat, thumping his chest with gusto.

Gouda couldn’t contain himself now, and burst into laughter. ‘Live free or die? *That* is your slogan?’

Bharat glared at him with unvarnished hostility. Still smiling broadly, the tribal warrior bowed his head and announced his credo. ‘Victory at all costs.’

Gouda was again taken aback, now by Bharat’s stance. Unlike his brother, he faced his enemy boldly, offering his entire body as target. His sword arm remained casually by his side, his weapon held loose. He wore a look of utter defiance.

‘Aren’t you going to take position?’ asked Gouda, worried now that he might actually injure this reckless boy.

‘I am always battle ready,’ whispered Bharat, smiling with nonchalance.

Gouda shrugged and got into position.

Bharat waited for Gouda to make the first move as he observed the tribal warrior lazily.

Gouda suddenly lunged forward and thrust his sword into Bharat’s abdomen. Bharat smoothly twirled around and brought his sword in from a height, landing a sharp blow at Gouda’s right shoulder. Gouda smiled and retreated, careful not to reveal any pain.

‘I could have disembowelled you,’ said Gouda, drawing the boy’s attention to the red mark smeared across his abdomen.

‘Your arm would be lying on the floor before that,’ said Bharat, pointing at the red mark his wooden sword had made on Gouda’s shoulder.

Gouda laughed and charged in again. To his surprise, Bharat suddenly leapt high to his right, bringing his sword down from a height once again. It was an exquisite manoeuvre. Gouda could not have parried that strike from such height, especially since the attack was not on the side of the sword-arm. It could only have been blocked by a shield. However, Bharat was not tall enough to successfully pull off this ingenious manoeuvre. Gouda leaned back and struck hard, using his superior reach.

Gouda’s sword brutally hit the airborne Bharat’s chest, throwing him backwards. Bharat fell on his back, a kill-wound clearly marking his chest, right where his heart lay encased within.

Bharat immediately got back on his feet. The blood capillaries below the skin had burst, forming a red blotch on his bare chest. Even with a wooden sword, the blow must have hurt. To Gouda’s admiration, Bharat disregarded the pain. He stood his ground, staring defiantly at his opponent.

‘That was a good move,’ said Gouda. ‘I haven’t seen it before. But you need to be taller to pull it off.’

Bharat glared at Gouda, his eyes flashing with anger. ‘I will be taller one day. We will fight again.’

Gouda smiled. ‘We certainly will, boy. I look forward to it.’

Varun turned to Vashishta. ‘*Gurujī*, both are talented. I can’t wait for them to grow up.’

Vashishta smiled with satisfaction. ‘Neither can I.’

Dusk had fallen as a contemplative Ram sat by the stream, which flowed a little away from the *ashram*. Spotting him from a distance as he set out for his evening walk, the guru walked up to his student.

Hearing the quick footsteps of his guru, Ram rose immediately with a namaste. ‘*Guruji*.’

‘Sit, sit,’ said Vashishta, and then lowered himself beside Ram. ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘I was wondering why you did not reveal our identity to Chief Varun,’ said Ram. ‘He seems like a good man. Why do we withhold the truth from him? Why do we lie?’

‘Withholding the truth is different from lying!’ Vashishta remarked with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Not revealing the truth is lying, isn’t it, *Guruji*?’

‘No, it isn’t. Sometimes, truth causes pain and suffering. At such times, silence is preferred. In fact, there may be times when a white lie, or even an outright lie, could actually lead to a good outcome.’

‘But lying has consequences, *Guruji*. It’s bad karma.’

‘Sometimes, the truth may also have consequences that are bad. Lying may save someone’s life. Lying may bring one into a position of authority, which in turn may result in an opportunity to do good. Would you still advocate not lying? It may well be said that a true leader loves his people more than he loves his own soul. There would be no doubt in the mind of such a leader. He would lie for the good of his people.’

Ram frowned. ‘But *Guruji*, people who compel their leaders to lie aren’t worth fighting for...’

‘That’s simplistic, Ram. You lied for Lakshman once, didn’t you?’

‘It was instinct. I felt I had to protect him. But I’ve always felt uneasy about it. That’s the reason why I needed to talk to you about it, *Guruji*.’

‘And, I am repeating what I said then. You needn’t feel guilty. Wisdom lies in moderation, in balance. If you lie to save an innocent person from some bandits, is that wrong?’

‘One odd example, out of context, doesn’t justify lying, *Guruji*,’ Ram wouldn’t give up. ‘Mother lied once to save me from Father’s anger; Father soon discovered the truth. There was a time when he would visit my mother regularly. But after that incident, he stopped seeing her completely. He cut her off.’

The guru observed his student with sadness. *Truth be told, Emperor Dashrath blamed Ram for his defeat at the hands of Raavan. He would have found some excuse or the other to stop visiting Kaushalya, regardless of the incident.*

Vashishta measured his words carefully. ‘I am not suggesting that lying is good. But sometimes, just like a tiny dose of a poison can prove medicinal, a small lie may actually help. Your habit of speaking the truth is good. But what is your reason for it? Is it because you believe it’s the lawful thing to do? Or, is it because this incident has made you fear lying?’

Ram remained silent, almost thoughtful.

‘Now, I am sure you are wondering what this has to do with Chief Varun.’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

‘Do you remember our visit to the chief’s village?’

‘Of course, I do.’

The boys had once accompanied their guru to Varun’s village. With a population of fifty thousand, it was practically a small town. The princes were enchanted by what they saw. Streets were laid out in a semi-urban, well-organised living area in the form of a square grid. The houses were made of bamboo, but were strong and sturdy; they were exactly the same, from the chief’s to the ordinary villager’s. Houses were without doors, each with an open entrance, simply because there was no crime. The children were raised communally by the elders, not just by their own parents.

During their visit, the princes had had a most interesting conversation with an assistant to the chief. They had wanted to know who the houses belonged to: the individual living in that unit, or to the chief, or to the community as a whole. The assistant had answered with the most quizzical response: *‘How can the land belong to any of us? We belong to the land!’*

‘What did you think about the village?’ asked Vashishta, bringing Ram back to the present.

‘What a wonderful way to live. They lead a more civilised life than we city-dwellers do. We could learn so much from them.’

‘Hmm, and what do you think is the foundation of their way of life? Why is Chief Varun’s village so idyllic? Why have they not changed for centuries?’

‘They live selflessly for each other, Guruji. They don’t have a grain of selfishness in them.’

Vashishta shook his head. ‘No, Sudas, it is because at the heart of their society are simple laws. These laws can never be broken, and must be followed, come what may.’

Ram’s eyes opened wide, like he had discovered the secret to life. ‘Laws...’

‘Yes, Ram. Laws! Laws are the foundation on which a fulfilling life is built for a community. Laws are the answer.’

‘Laws...’

‘One might believe that there’s no harm in occasionally breaking a minor law, right? Especially if it’s for the Greater Good? Truth be told, I too have occasionally broken some rules for a laudable purpose. But Chief Varun thinks differently. Their commitment to the law is not based on traditions alone. Or the conviction that it is the right thing to do. It’s based on one of the most powerful impressions in a human being: the childhood memory of guilt. The first time a child breaks a law in their society, however minor and inconsequential it may be, he’s made to suffer; every child. Any recurrent breach of the law results in further shaming. Just like you find it difficult to lie even when it benefits someone because of what your mother suffered, Varun finds it impossible to do the same.’

‘So, not revealing our identity is in some way linked to their laws? Will knowing who we are mean that they’re breaking their laws?’

‘Yes!’

‘What law?’

‘Their law prevents them from coming to the aid of the Ayodhya royalty. I don’t know why. I’m not sure if even they know why. But this law has held for centuries. It serves no purpose now but they follow it strictly. They don’t know where I’m from; I sometimes think they do not want to know. All they know is that my name is Vashishta.’

Ram seemed troubled. ‘Are we safe here?’

‘They are duty-bound to protect those who are accepted into this *gurukul*. That is also their law. Now that they’ve accepted us, they cannot harm us. However, they might expel us if they discover who the four of you are. We’re safe here, though, from other more powerful enemies who are a threat to our cause.’

Ram fell into deep contemplation.

‘So, I haven’t lied, Sudas. I’ve just not revealed the truth. There’s a difference.’



## Chapter 6

Dawn broke over the *gurukul* at the fifth hour of the first *prahar*, to the chirping of birds. Even as the nocturnal forest creatures returned to their daytime shelters, others emerged to face the rigours of another day. The four Ayodhyan princes though, had been up and about for a while. Having swept the *gurukul*, they had bathed, cooked and completed their morning prayers. Hands folded in respect, they sat composed and cross-legged in a semi-circle around Guru Vashishta. The teacher himself sat in *padmaasan*, the *lotus position*, on a raised platform under a large banyan tree.

In keeping with tradition, they were reciting the *Guru Stotram*, the *hymn in praise of the teacher*, before the class commenced.

As the hymn ended, the students rose and ceremoniously touched the feet of their guru, Vashishta. He gave them all the same blessing: ‘May my knowledge grow within you, and may you, one day, become my teacher.’

Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan took their allotted seats. Thirteen years had passed since the terrible battle with Raavan. Ram was thirteen years old, and both Bharat and he were showing signs of adolescence. Their voices had begun to break and drop in pitch. Faint signs of moustaches had made an appearance on their upper lips. They’d suddenly shot up in height, even as their boyish bodies had begun to develop lean muscle.

Lakshman and Shatrughan had now begun combat practice, though their pre-adolescent bodies made fighting a little difficult for them. They’d all learnt the basics of philosophy, science and mathematics. They had mastered the divine language, Sanskrit. The ground work had been done. The guru knew it was time to sow the seed.

‘Do you know the origins of our civilisation?’ asked Vashishta.

Lakshman, always eager to answer but not well read, raised his hand and began to speak. ‘The universe itself began with—’

‘No, Paurav,’ said Vashishta, using Lakshman’s *gurukul* name. ‘My question was not about the universe but about us, the Vedic people of this *yug*.’

Ram and Bharat turned to Shatrughan in unison.

‘*Guruji*,’ began Shatrughan, ‘it goes back to Lord Manu, a prince of the Pandya dynasty, thousands of years ago.’

‘Teacher’s pet,’ whispered Bharat, indulgently. While he teased Shatrughan mercilessly for his bookish ways, he appreciated the fearsome intellect of his youngest brother.

Vashishta looked at Bharat. ‘Do you have something to add?’

‘No, *Guruji*,’ said Bharat, immediately contrite.

‘Yes, Nalatardak,’ said Vashishta, turning his attention back to Shatrughan and using his *gurukul* name. ‘Please continue.’

‘It is believed that thousands of years ago, swathes of land were covered in great

sheets of ice. Since large quantities of water were frozen in solid form, sea levels were a lot lower than they are today.'

'You are correct,' said Vashishta, 'except for one point. It is not a belief, Nalatardak. The "Ice Age" is not a theory. It is fact.'

'Yes, Guruji,' said Shatrughan. 'Since sea levels were a lot lower, the Indian landmass extended a lot farther into the sea. The island of Lanka, the demon-king Raavan's kingdom, was joined to the Indian landmass. Gujarat and Konkan also reached out into the sea.'

'And?'

'And, I believe, there were—'

Shatrughan stopped short as Vashishta cast him a stern look. He smiled and folded his hands into a namaste. 'My apologies, Guruji. Not belief, but fact.'

Vashishta smiled.

'Two great civilisations existed in India during the Ice Age. One in south-eastern India called the Sangamtamil, which included a small portion of the Lankan landmass, along with large tracts of land that are now underwater. The course of the river Kaveri was much broader and longer at the time. This rich and powerful empire was ruled by the Pandya dynasty.'

'And?'

'The other civilisation, Dwarka, spread across large parts of the landmass, off the coast of modern Gujarat and Konkan. It now lies submerged. It was ruled by the Yadav dynasty, the descendants of Yadu.'

'Carry on.'

'Sea levels rose dramatically at the end of the Ice Age. The Sangamtamil and Dwarka civilisations were destroyed, their heartland now lying under the sea. The survivors, led by Lord Manu, the father of our nation, escaped up north and began life once again. They called themselves the people of *vidya*, *knowledge*; the Vedic people. We are their proud descendants.'

'Very good, Nalatardak,' said Vashishta. 'Just one more point. The Ice Age came to an abrupt end in the time-scale that Mother Earth operates in. But in human terms, it wasn't abrupt at all. We had decades, even centuries, of warning. And yet, we did nothing.'

The children listened with rapt attention.

'Why did the Sangamtamil and Dwarka, clearly very advanced civilisations, not take timely corrective actions? Evidence suggests that they were aware of the impending calamity. Mother Earth had given them enough warning signs. They were intelligent enough to either possess or invent the technology required to save themselves. And yet, they did nothing. Only a few survived, under the able leadership of Lord Manu. Why?'

'They were lazy,' said Lakshman, as usual jumping to conclusions.

Vashishta sighed. 'Paurav, if only you'd think before answering.'

A chagrined Lakshman fell silent.

'You have the ability to think, Paurav,' said Vashishta, 'but you're always in a hurry. Remember, it's more important to be right than to be first.'

‘Yes, Guraji,’ said Lakshman, his eyes downcast. But he raised his hand again. ‘Were the people debauched and careless?’

‘Now you’re guessing, Paurav. Don’t try to pry open the door with your fingernails. Use the key.’

Lakshman seemed nonplussed.

‘Do not rush to the “right answer”,’ clarified Vashishta. ‘The key, always, is to ask the “right question”.’

‘Guraji,’ said Ram. ‘May I ask a question?’

‘Of course, Sudas,’ said Vashishta.

‘You said earlier that they had decades, even centuries of warning. I assume their scientists had decoded these warnings?’

‘Yes, they had.’

‘And had they communicated these warnings to everyone, including the royalty?’

‘Yes, they had.’

‘Was Lord Manu the Pandyan king or a prince, at the time? I have heard conflicting accounts.’

Vashishta smiled approvingly. ‘Lord Manu was one of the younger princes.’

‘And yet, it was he and not the king who saved his people.’

‘Yes.’

‘If anyone other than the king was required to lead the people to safety, then the answer is obvious. The king wasn’t doing his job. Bad leadership, then, was responsible for the downfall of Sangamtilam and Dwarka.’

‘Do you think a bad king is also a bad man?’ asked Vashishta.

‘No,’ said Bharat. ‘Even honourable men sometimes prove to be terrible leaders. Conversely, men of questionable character can occasionally be exactly what a nation requires.’

‘Absolutely! A king need be judged solely on the basis of what he achieves for his people. His personal life is of no consequence. His public life, though, has one singular purpose: to provide for his people and improve their lives.’

‘True,’ said Bharat.

Vashishta took a deep breath. The time was ripe. ‘So, does that make Raavan a good king for his people?’

There was stunned silence.

Ram wouldn’t answer. He hated Raavan viscerally. Not only had the Lankan devastated Ayodhya, he had also ruined Ram’s future. His birth was permanently associated with the ‘taint’ of Raavan’s victory. No matter what he did, Ram would always remain inauspicious for his father and the people of Ayodhya.

Bharat finally spoke. ‘We may not want to admit it, but Raavan is a good king, loved by his people. He is an able administrator who has brought prosperity through maritime trade, and he even runs the seaports under his control efficiently. It is fabled that the streets of his capital are paved with gold, thus earning his kingdom the name “Golden Lanka”. Yes, he is a good king.’

‘And what would you say about a very good man, a king, who has fallen into depression? He has converted his personal loss to that of his people. They suffer because he does. Is he, then, a good king?’

It was obvious whom Vashishta was referring to. The students were quiet for a long time, afraid to answer.

It had to be Bharat who raised his hand. ‘No, he is not a good king.’

Vashishta nodded. *Trust the boldness of a born rebel.*

‘That’s it for today,’ Vashishta brought the class to an abrupt end, leaving a lot unsaid. ‘As always, your homework is to mull over our discussion.’



‘My turn, *Dada*,’ whispered Bharat as he softly tapped Ram’s shoulder.

Ram immediately tied his pouch to his waistband. ‘Sorry.’

Bharat turned to the injured rabbit lying on the ground. He first anesthetised the animal and then quickly pulled out the splinter of wood buried in its paw. The wound was almost septic, but the medicine he applied would prevent further infection. The animal would awaken a few minutes later, on the road to recovery, if not immediately ready to face the world.

As Bharat cleaned his hands with medicinal herbs, Ram gently picked up the rabbit and wedged it into a nook in a tree to keep it away from predators. He glanced at Bharat. ‘It will wake up soon. It’ll live.’

Bharat smiled. ‘By the grace of Lord Rudra.’

Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan were on one of their fortnightly expeditions into the jungle, where they tended to injured animals. They did not interfere in a predator’s hunt; it was only its natural behaviour. But, if they came upon an injured animal, they assisted it to the best of their abilities.

‘*Dada*,’ said Shatrughan, standing at a distance, watching his elder brothers with keen concentration.

Ram and Bharat turned around. A dishevelled Lakshman was even farther away, behind Shatrughan. He was distractedly throwing stones at a tree.

‘Lakshman, don’t linger at the back,’ said Ram. ‘We are not in the *ashram*. This is the jungle. There is danger in being alone.’

Lakshman sighed in irritation and walked up to the group.

‘Yes, what is it, Shatrughan?’ asked Ram, turning to his youngest brother.

‘Bharat *Dada* put *jatyadi tel* on the rabbit’s wound. Unless you cover it with neem leaves, the medicine will not be effective.’

‘Of course,’ exclaimed Ram, tapping his forehead. ‘You’re right, Shatrughan.’

Ram picked up the rabbit as Bharat pulled out some neem leaves from his leather pouch.

Bharat looked at Shatrughan, grinning broadly. ‘Is there anything in the world that you do not know, Shatrughan?’

Shatrughan smiled. ‘Not much.’

Bharat applied the neem leaves on the rabbit’s wound, tied the bandage again, and

placed him back in the nook.

Ram said, ‘I wonder if we actually help these animals on our bi-weekly medical tour or are we just assuaging our conscience?’

‘We are assuaging our conscience,’ said Bharat, with a wry smile. ‘Nothing more, but at least we aren’t ignoring our conscience.’

Ram shook his head. ‘Why are you so cynical?’

‘Why are you not cynical at all?’

Ram raised his eyebrows resignedly and began to walk. Bharat caught up with him. Lakshman and Shatrughan fell in line, a few steps behind.

‘Knowing the human race, how can you not be cynical?’ Bharat asked.

‘Come on,’ said Ram. ‘We’re capable of greatness, Bharat. All we need is an inspirational leader.’

‘*Dada*,’ said Bharat, ‘I’m not suggesting that there is no goodness in human beings. There is, and it is worth fighting for. But there is also so much viciousness that sometimes I think it would have been better for the planet if the human species simply did not exist.’

‘That’s too much! We’re not so bad.’

Bharat laughed softly. ‘All I’m suggesting is that greatness and goodness is a potential in a majority of humans, not a reality.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Expecting people to follow rules just because they should is being too hopeful. Rules must be designed to dovetail with selfish interest because people are primarily driven by it. They need to be shepherded into good behaviour through this proclivity.’

‘People also respond to calls for greatness.’

‘No, they don’t, *Dada*. There may be a few who will answer that call. Most won’t.’

‘Lord Rudra led people selflessly, didn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ said Bharat. ‘But many who followed him had their own selfish interests in mind. That is a fact.’

Ram shook his head. ‘We’ll never agree on this.’

Bharat smiled. ‘Yes, we won’t. But I still love you!’

Ram smiled as well, changing the topic. ‘How was your holiday? I never get to speak with you when we are there...’

‘You know why,’ muttered Bharat. ‘But I must admit it was not too bad this time.’

Bharat loved to have his maternal relatives visit Ayodhya. It was an opportunity for him to escape his stern mother. Kaikeyi did not like his spending too much time with his brothers. In fact, if she could have her way, she would keep him to herself exclusively during the times when they were home. To make matters worse, she would insist on endless conversations about the need for him to be great and fulfil his mother’s destiny. The only people Kaikeyi did not mind sharing her son with were her own blood-family. The presence of his maternal grandparents and uncle on this holiday ensured that Bharat was free of his mother. He had spent practically the entire vacation in their indulgent company.

Ram punched Bharat playfully in his stomach. ‘She’s your mother, Bharat. She only wants what is best for you.’

‘I could do with some love instead, *Dada*. You know, I remember when I was three, I once dropped a glass of milk and she slapped me! She slapped me so hard, in the presence of her maids.’

‘You remember stuff from when you were three? I thought I was the only one who did.’

‘How can I forget? I was a little boy. The glass was too big for my hands. It was heavy; it slipped! That’s it! Why did she have to slap me?’

Ram understood his stepmother, Kaikeyi. She had her share of frustrations. She’d been the brightest child in her family. Unfortunately, her brilliance did not make her father proud. Quite the contrary, Ashwapati was unhappy that Kaikeyi outshone his son, Yudhaajit. It appalled Ram that society did not value capable women. And now, the intelligent yet frustrated Kaikeyi sought vicarious recognition through Bharat, her son. She aimed to realise her ambitions through him.

Ram held his counsel though.

Bharat continued, wistfully, ‘If only I had a mother like yours. She would have loved me unconditionally and not chewed my brains.’

Ram did not respond, but he got the feeling that something was playing on Bharat’s mind.

‘What is it, Bharat?’ asked Ram, without turning to look at his younger brother.

Bharat lowered his voice so that Lakshman and Shatrughan wouldn’t overhear. ‘Ram *Dada*, have you thought about what *Guruji* said today?’

Ram held his breath.

‘*Dada?*’ asked Bharat.

Ram stiffened. ‘This is treason. I refuse to entertain such thoughts.’

‘Treason? To think about the good of your country?’

‘He is our father! There are duties that we have—’

‘Do you think he’s a good king?’ Bharat interrupted.

‘There’s a law in the *Manu Smriti* that clearly states a son must—’

‘Don’t tell me what the law says, *Dada*,’ said Bharat, dismissing with a wave of his hand the laws recorded in the *Book of Manu*. ‘I have read the *Manu Smriti* too. I want to know what *you* think.’

‘I think the law must be obeyed.’

‘Really? Is that all you have to say?’

‘I can add to that.’

‘Please do!’

‘The law must *always* be obeyed.’

Bharat rolled his eyes in exasperation.

‘I understand that this might not work under a few exceptional circumstances,’ said Ram. ‘But if the law is obeyed diligently, come what may, then over a period of time a better society *has* to emerge.’

‘Nobody in Ayodhya gives two hoots about the law, *Dada!* We are a civilisation in an

advanced state of decay. We're the most hypocritical people on earth. We criticise corruption in others, but are blind to our own dishonesty. We hate others who do wrong and commit crimes, blithely ignoring our own misdeeds, big and small. We vehemently blame Raavan for all our ills, refusing to acknowledge that we created the mess we find ourselves in.'

'And how will this change?'

'This attitude is basic human nature. We'd rather look outward and blame others for the ills that befall us than point the finger at ourselves. I've said it before and I'll say it again. We need a king who can create systems with which one can harness even selfish human nature for the betterment of society.'

'*Nonsense*. We need a great leader, one who will lead by example. A leader who will inspire his people to discover their godhood within! We don't need a leader who will leave his people free to do whatever they desire.'

'No, *Dada*. Freedom is an ally, if used with wisdom.'

'Freedom is never the ally of the law. You can have freedom to choose whether you want to join or leave a society based on the rule of law. But so long as you live in such a society, you must obey the law.'

'The law is and always will be an ass. It's a tool, a means to an end,' said Bharat.

Ram brought the exchange to an end with a convivial laugh. Bharat grinned and patted his brother on his back.

'So, all these things you say about a great leader being inspirational and enabling the discovery of the God within and other such noble things...' said Bharat. 'You think Father lives up to that ideal?'

Ram cast a reproachful look at his brother, refusing to rise to the bait.

Bharat grinned, playfully boxing Ram on his shoulder. 'Let it be, *Dada*. Let it be.'

Ram was genuinely conflicted. But, as a dutiful son, he would not allow himself, even in his own mind, to entertain rebellious thoughts against his father.

Lakshman, walking a few steps behind, was engrossed in the frenetic activities of the jungle.

Shatrughan, however, was listening in on the conversation with keen interest. *Ram Dada is too idealistic. Bharat Dada is practical and real.*



## Chapter 7

*Another one?* Ram refrained from voicing his thoughts, trying to control his surprise. *This is his fifth girlfriend.*

Seventeen years had gone by since Dashrath lost the Battle of Karachapa. At the age of sixteen, Bharat had discovered the pleasures of love. Charismatic and flamboyant as he was, girls liked Bharat as much as he liked them. Tribal traditions being liberal, the empowered women of the tribe of Chief Varun, the local hosts of the *gurukul*, were free to form relationships with whomever they pleased. And Bharat was especially popular.

He walked up to Ram now, holding hands with an ethereally beautiful maiden who was clearly older than him, perhaps twenty years of age.

‘How are you, Bharat?’

‘Never been better, *Dada*,’ grinned Bharat. ‘Any better and it would be downright sinful.’

Ram smiled politely and turned to the girl with grace.

‘*Dada*,’ said Bharat, ‘allow me to introduce Radhika, the daughter of Chief Varun.’

‘Honoured to make your acquaintance,’ said Ram, formally bringing his hands together in a polite namaste and bowing his head.

Radhika raised her eyebrows, amused. ‘Bharat was right. You are ridiculously formal.’

Ram’s eyes widened at her forthrightness.

‘I did not use the word “ridiculous”,’ protested Bharat, as he let her hand go. ‘How can I use a word like that for *Dada*?’

Radhika ruffled Bharat’s hair affectionately. ‘All right, “ridiculous” was my own addition. But I find your formality charming. So does Bharat, actually. But I’m sure you know that already.’

‘Thank you,’ said Ram, straightening his *angavastram* stiffly.

Radhika giggled at Ram’s obvious discomfort. Even Ram, relatively immune to feminine wiles, was forced to acknowledge that her laughter had a pleasing lilt, like that of the *apsaras, celestial nymphs*.

Ram said to Bharat, careful to speak in old Sanskrit so that Radhika wouldn’t understand, ‘*Saa Vartate Lavanyavati.*’

Though Bharat’s understanding of archaic Sanskrit was not as good as Ram’s, he understood the simple compliment. Ram had said, ‘*She is exquisitely beautiful.*’

Before Bharat could respond, Radhika spoke. ‘*Aham Jaanaami.*’

‘*I know.*’

An embarrassed Ram retorted, ‘By the great Lord Brahma! Your old Sanskrit is perfect.’

Radhika smiled. ‘We may speak new Sanskrit these days, but the ancient scriptures can only be understood in the old language.’

Bharat felt the need to cut in. ‘Don’t be fooled by her intelligence, *Dada*. She is also very beautiful!’

Ram smiled and brought his hands together once again, in a respectful namaste. ‘My apologies if I offended you in any way, Radhika.’

Radhika smiled, shaking her head. ‘No, you didn’t. Why would a girl not enjoy an elegant compliment to her beauty?’

‘My little brother is lucky.’

‘I’m not so unlucky myself,’ assured Radhika, ruffling Bharat’s hair once again.

Ram could see that his brother was besotted. Clearly, this time it was different; Radhika meant a lot more to him than his previous girlfriends. But he was also aware of the traditions of the forest people. Their girls, no doubt, were liberated, but they did not marry outside their community. Their law simply forbade it. Ram did not understand the reason for this. It could be an effort to retain the sense of purity of the forest people, or it might even be that they considered city dwellers inferior for having moved away from Mother Nature. He hoped his brother’s heart would not be broken in the process.



‘How much butter will you eat?!’ Ram could never quite understand Bharat’s addiction.

Evening time, the last hour of the third *prahar*, found Ram and Bharat relaxing under a tree at the *gurukul*. Lakshman and Shatrughan were using their free time for some riding practice; in fact, they were competing fiercely in the open ground. Lakshman, by far the best rider among the four, was beating Shatrughan hollow.

‘I like it, *Dada*,’ shrugged Bharat, butter smeared around his mouth.

‘But it’s unhealthy. It’s fattening!’

Bharat flexed his biceps as he sucked in his breath and puffed up his chest, displaying his muscular and well-toned physique. ‘Do I look fat to you?’

Ram smiled. ‘Girls certainly do not find you unappealing. So my opinion really is of no consequence.’

‘Exactly!’ Bharat chuckled, digging his hand into the clay pot and spooning some more butter into his mouth.

Ram gently put his hand on Bharat’s shoulder. Bharat stopped eating as he read the concerned look on his brother’s face.

Ram spoke softly. ‘Bharat, you do know—’

Bharat interrupted him immediately. ‘It won’t happen, *Dada*.’

‘But Bharat...’

‘*Dada*, trust me. I know girls better than you do.’

‘You’re aware that Chief Varun’s people do not...’

‘*Dada*, she loves me as much as I love her. Radhika will break the law for me. She will not leave me. Trust me.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘*I am!*’

‘But Bharat...’

‘*Dada*, stop worrying about me. Just be happy for me.’

Ram gave up and patted him on his shoulder. ‘Well then, congratulations!’

Bharat bowed his head theatrically, ‘Thank you, kind sir!’

Ram’s face broke into a broad smile.

‘When will I get the opportunity to congratulate *you, Dada?*’ asked Bharat.

Ram looked at Bharat and frowned.

‘Aren’t you attracted to any girl? Here or in Ayodhya? We have met so many on our annual holidays...’

‘Nobody is worth it.’

‘Nobody?’

‘No.’

‘What are you looking for?’

Ram looked into the distance at the forest line. ‘I want a woman, not a girl.’

‘Aha! I always knew there was a naughty devil behind that serious exterior!’

Ram rolled his eyes and punched Bharat playfully on his abdomen. ‘That’s not what I meant. You know that.’

‘Then what did you mean?’

‘I don’t want an immature girl. Love is secondary. It’s not important. I want someone whom I can respect.’

‘Respect?’ frowned Bharat. ‘Sounds boring.’

‘A relationship is not just for fun, it is also about trust and the knowledge that you can depend on your partner. Relationships based on passion and excitement do not last.’

‘Really?’

Ram quickly corrected himself. ‘Of course, Radhika and you will be different.’

‘Of course,’ grinned Bharat.

‘I guess what I’m trying to say is that I want a woman who is better than I am; a woman who will compel me to bow my head in admiration.’

‘You bow to elders and parents, *Dada*. A wife is the one you share your life and passions with,’ said Bharat, a crooked grin on his face, brows arched suggestively. ‘By the great Lord Brahma, I pity the woman you will marry. Your relationship will go down in history as the most boring of them all!’

Ram laughed aloud as he pushed Bharat playfully. Bharat dropped the pot and pushed Ram back, then sprang to his feet and sprinted away from Ram.

‘You can’t outrun me, Bharat!’ laughed Ram, quickly rising to his feet and taking off after his brother.



‘Whom do you favour?’ asked the visitor.

A mysterious stranger had made a quiet entry into the *gurukul*. In keeping with Vashishta’s desire to maintain the secrecy of this visit, he’d arrived late in the night. As luck would have it, the intrepid Lakshman was out riding at the same time, having broken the rule of being in the sleeping quarters at this time of the night. As he traced his way back, he came upon an unknown horse tied discreetly to a tree far from the *ashram* premises.

He led his own animal quietly back into the stable. The Ayodhyan prince then decided to inform his guru of a possible intruder. On finding Vashishta's room empty, Lakshman grew suspicious. Unable to contain himself, he decided to investigate the goings-on. He finally spotted the sage under the bridge, conversing softly with the mysterious visitor. Lakshman crept close, hid behind the bushes, and eavesdropped on the conversation. 'I haven't made up my mind as yet,' answered Vashishta.

'You need to decide quickly, Guraji.'

'Why?'

Though unable to see the visitor clearly, Lakshman was barely able to contain the panic rising within him. Even the failing light couldn't conceal the stranger's unnaturally fair skin, giant size and rippling musculature. His body was covered with fur-like hair, and a peculiar outgrowth emerged from his lower back. Clearly he was a dangerous Naga, the mysterious race of the deformed, which was feared in all of the Sapt Sindhu. He made no attempt to conceal his identity, like most Nagas did, with a face mask or a hooded robe. Notably, his lower body was draped in a *dhoti*, in keeping with traditional Indian custom.

'Because *they* are on to you,' said the Naga, with a meaningful look.

'So?'

'Are you not afraid?'

Vashishta shrugged. 'Why should I be?'

The Naga laughed softly. 'There's a thin line that separates courage from stupidity.'

'And that line is only visible in retrospect, my friend. If I'm successful, people will call me brave. If I fail, I will be called foolish. Let me do what I think is right. I'll leave the verdict to the future.'

The Naga thrust his chin forward in a show of disagreement, but gave up the argument.

'What would you have me do?'

'Nothing for now. Just wait,' answered Vashishta.

'Are you aware that Raavan is—'

'Yes, I know.'

'And you still choose to remain here and not do anything?'

'Raavan...' murmured Vashishta, choosing his words carefully, 'well, he has his uses.'

Lakshman could barely control his shock. Yet, the teenager had the presence of mind to stay silent.

'There are some who are convinced you are preparing for a rebellion against Emperor Dashrath,' said the Naga, his tone clearly indicating his disbelief.

Vashishta laughed softly. 'There is no need to rebel against him. The kingdom is practically out of his hands anyway. He's a good man, but he has sunk into the depths of depression and defeatism. My goal is bigger.'

'Our goal,' corrected the Naga.

'Of course,' smiled Vashishta, patting him on his shoulder. 'Forgive me. It is our collective goal. But if people insist on thinking that our ambitions are limited to Ayodhya, I suggest we let them be.'

‘Yes, that’s true.’

‘Come with me,’ said Vashishta. ‘I have something to show you.’

Lakshman let out a deep breath as the two men walked away. His heart was pounding desperately.

*What is Guruji up to? Are we safe here?*

Checking carefully that the coast was clear, Lakshman slipped away and rushed to Ram’s quarters.



‘Lakshman, go back to sleep,’ admonished an irritated Ram. He had been woken up by a hysterical Lakshman. He’d heard the panic-stricken report, and groggily decided that his brother was once again indulging his love for conspiracy.

‘*Dada*, I’m telling you, there’s something going on. It concerns Ayodhya, and *Guruji* is involved,’ insisted Lakshman.

‘Have you told Bharat?’

‘Of course not! He could be in on it too.’

Ram glared at Lakshman. ‘He too is your *dada*, Lakshman!’

‘*Dada*, you are too simple. You refuse to see the den of conspiracies that Ayodhya is. *Guruji* is in on it. Others could be too. I trust only you. You are supposed to protect us all. I have done my duty by letting you know. Now, it is up to you to investigate this.’

‘There is nothing to investigate, Lakshman. Go back to your room and sleep.’

‘*Dada*...’

‘Back to your room, Lakshman! Now!’



## Chapter 8

‘What is the ideal way of life?’ asked Vashishta.

In the early hours of the morning, the four Ayodhyan princes sat facing their guru, having just completed the *Guru Stotram*.

‘Well?’ prompted Vashishta, having been met with silence.

He looked at Lakshman, expecting him to take the first shot. However, to Vashishta’s surprise, the boy sat tense, barely able to conceal his hostility.

‘Is there a problem, Paurav?’ enquired Vashishta.

Lakshman cast an accusatory glance at Ram, then stared at the ground. ‘No, Guruji. There is no problem.’

‘Do you want to attempt an answer?’

‘I don’t know the answer, Guruji.’

Vashishta frowned. Ignorance had never deterred Lakshman from attempting a response before. He spoke to Bharat. ‘Vasu, can you try and answer?’

‘An ideal way of life, Guruji,’ said Bharat, ‘is one where everyone is healthy, wealthy, happy, and working in consonance with his purpose in life.’

‘And, how does a society achieve this?’

‘It’s probably impossible! But if it were possible at all, it would only be through freedom. Allow people the freedom to forge their own path. They will find their way.’

‘But will freedom help each person realise his dreams? What if one person’s dream is in conflict with that of another’s?’

Bharat gave that question some careful thought before replying. ‘You are right. A strong man’s effort will always overwhelm that of a weak man.’

‘So?’

‘So the government has to ensure that it protects the weak. We cannot allow the strong to keep winning. It would create discontent among the masses.’

‘Why, *Dada*? asked Shatrughan. ‘I would say, allow the strong to win. Will that not be better for the society as a whole?’

‘But isn’t that the law of the jungle?’ asked Vashishta. ‘The weak would die out.’

‘If you call it the law of the jungle, then I say that this is the law of nature, Guruji,’ said Shatrughan. ‘Who are we to judge nature? If the weakest deer are not killed by tigers, the population of deer will explode. They will eat prodigious amounts of greens and the jungle itself may die out, in the long run. It is better for the jungle if only the strong survive — it is nature’s way of maintaining balance. The government should not interfere with this natural process. It should merely establish systems that ensure the protection of the weak, giving them a fair chance at survival. Beyond that, it must get out of the way and let society find its own path. It’s not the government’s job to ensure that all achieve their dreams.’

‘Then why even bother with a government?’

‘It’s needed for a few essentials that individuals cannot provide: an army to protect the borders from external attack, a system of basic education for all. One of the things that differentiates us from animals is that we do not kill our weak. But if the government interferes to such an extent that the weak thrive and the strong are oppressed, society itself will collapse over time. A society should not forget that it thrives on the ideas and performance of the talented among its citizens. If you compromise the prospects of the strong, and lean too much towards the interests of the weak, then your society itself goes into decline.’

Vashishta smiled. ‘You have carefully studied the reasons for the decline of India under the successors of Emperor Bharat, haven’t you?’

Shatrughan nodded. Bharat was a legendary Chandravanshi emperor who lived thousands of years ago. He was one of the greatest rulers since the great Indra of the Devas. He brought all of India under his rule and his government had been the most compassionate and nurturing of all times.

‘Why, then, did Bharat’s successors not change their ways when they could see that it wasn’t working anymore?’ asked Vashishta.

‘I don’t know,’ said Shatrughan.

‘It was because the philosophy that guided Emperor Bharat’s empire was itself a reaction to an equally successful, but radically different one which determined how society was organised earlier. Emperor Bharat’s empire could be described as the apogee of the feminine way of life — of freedom, passion and beauty. At its best, it is compassionate, creative and especially nurturing towards the weak. But as feminine civilisations decline, they tend to become corrupt, irresponsible and decadent.’

‘Guruji,’ said Ram, ‘are you saying there is another way of life? The masculine way?’

‘Yes. The masculine way of life is defined by truth, duty and honour. At its peak, masculine civilisations are efficient, just and egalitarian. But as they decline, they become fanatical, rigid and especially harsh towards the weak.’

‘So when feminine civilisations decline, the masculine way is the answer,’ said Ram. ‘And, as masculine civilisations decline, the feminine way should take over.’

‘Yes,’ said the teacher. ‘Life is cyclical.’

‘Can it be safely said that today’s India is a feminine nation in decline?’ asked Bharat.

Vashishta looked at Bharat. ‘Actually, India is a confused nation today. It does not understand its nature, which seems to be a hotchpotch of the masculine and feminine way. But if you force me to choose, then I would state that, at this point in time, we’re a feminine culture in decline.’

‘Then the question is: is it time to move towards a masculine way of life or a revived feminine culture?’ argued Bharat. ‘I’m not sure India can live without freedom. We’re a nation of rebels. We argue and fight about everything. We can only succeed by walking down the path of femininity, of freedom. The masculine way may work for a short span of time, but it cannot last. We are simply not obedient enough to follow the masculine way for too long.’

‘So it seems today,’ said Vashishta. ‘But it wasn’t always so. There was a time when

the masculine way of life characterised India.'

Bharat was silenced into contemplation.

But Ram was intrigued. 'Guruji, you said that the feminine way of life established by Emperor Bharat was unable to change even when it needed to, because it was a reaction to the ills that an earlier masculine culture had degenerated into. Possibly, to them, the earlier way of life was stamped as evil.'

'You're right, Sudas,' said Vashishta, using Ram's *gurukul* name.

'Can you tell us about this earlier masculine way of life? What was this empire like?' asked Ram. 'Could we find answers in it, to our present-day ills?'

'It was an empire that arose many millennia ago, and conquered practically all of India with stunning swiftness. It had a radically different way of life and, at its peak, it scaled the heights of greatness.'

'Who were these people?'

'Their foundations were laid right here, where we are. It was so long ago that most have forgotten the significance of this *ashram*.'

'Here?'

'Yes. It was here that the progenitors of that empire received their education from their great guru. He taught them the essentials of an enlightened masculine way of life. This was his *ashram*.'

'Who was this great sage?' asked Ram in awe.

Vashishta took a deep breath. He knew that the answer would evoke shock. The name of that ancient *great rishi* was feared today; so much so that it was not even uttered aloud, ever. Keeping his eyes fixed on Ram, he answered, 'Maharishi Shukracharya.'

Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan froze. Shukracharya was the guru of the Asuras, and the Asuras were demonic fanatics who had controlled almost the entire Indian landmass thousands of years ago. They were finally defeated by the *Devas*, respected today as *Gods*, in brutal battles fought over a protracted period of time. Although the Asura Empire was eventually destroyed, the wars took a heavy toll on India. Millions died, and rebuilding civilisation took a very long time. Indra, the leader of the *Devas*, ensured the expulsion of the Asuras from India. Shukracharya's name was reduced to mud, his memory violated by righteous indignation and irrational fear.

The students were too stunned to react. Ram's eyes, though, conveyed curiosity, unlike the others.



Vashishta stepped out late in the night, expecting a tumult among his students; the conversation about Guru Shukracharya had been meant to provoke. Lakshman and Shatrughan were sound asleep in their rooms, but Ram and Bharat were missing. Vashishta decided to walk around the premises in search of them, the moonlight providing adequate illumination. Hearing soft voices ahead, he soon came upon the silhouette of an animated Bharat in the company of a girl.

Bharat seemed to be pleading. 'But why...'

'I'm sorry, Bharat,' the girl said calmly. 'I will not break the laws of my people.'

‘But I love you, Radhika ... I know you love me... Why should we care about what others think?’

Vashishta quickly turned around and began to walk in the other direction. It was inappropriate to intrude on a private and painful moment.

*Where is Ram?*

On a whim, he changed course once again and walked up the stone pathway that led to the small temples built into the central facade of the rock face. He entered the temple of Lord Indra, the king of the Devas; the one who defeated the Asuras. The symbolism of Indra’s temple being in the centre was powerful, for Indra had led the army that obliterated Shukracharya’s legacy.

Vashishta heard a soft sound from behind the massive idol, and instinctively moved towards it. The space at the back was large enough to comfortably accommodate four or five people. The shadows of Vashishta and the idol seemed to dance on the floor as flames leapt from a torch on the wall.

As his gaze travelled beyond the idol, he could vaguely make out the figure of Ram on his knees, rising open with a metal bar a heavy stone that covered an ancient inscription on the floor. Just as he succeeded, Ram sensed Vashishta’s presence.

‘*Guruji*,’ said Ram, as he dropped the tool and stood up immediately.

Vashishta walked up to him, put his arm around his shoulder and gently sat him down again as he bent down to examine the inscription that Ram had uncovered.

‘Can you read what it says?’ asked Vashishta.

It was an ancient, long-forgotten script.

‘I have not seen this script before,’ said Ram.

‘It is particularly ancient, banned in India because the Asuras used it.’

‘The Asuras were the great masculine empire you mentioned today, isn’t it?’

‘That’s obvious!’

Ram gestured towards the inscription. ‘What does it say, *Guruji*?’

Vashishta ran his forefinger along the words of the inscription. “How can the universe speak the name of Shukracharya? For the universe is so small. And Shukracharya is so big.”

Ram touched the inscription lightly.

‘Legend holds that this was his *aasan*, the *seat* that he sat upon as he taught,’ said Vashishta.

Ram looked up at Vashishta. ‘Tell me about him, *Guruji*.’

‘A very small minority still maintains that he probably was one of the greatest Indians that trod the earth. I don’t know much about his childhood; apocryphal accounts suggest that he was born to a slave family in Egypt that abandoned him when he was but an infant. He was then adopted by a visiting Asura princess, who raised him as her own, in India. However, records of his works were deliberately obliterated and the ones that remained were heavily doctored by the powerful and wealthy elite of that time. He was a brilliant, charismatic soul who transformed marginalised Indian royals into the greatest conquering force of his time.’

‘Marginalised Indian royals? But the Asuras were foreigners, weren’t they?’

‘Nonsense. This is propaganda spread by those with an agenda. Most Asuras were actually related to the Devas. In fact, the Devas and Asuras descended from common ancestors, known as the Manaskul. But the Asuras were the poorer, weaker cousins, scorned and half-forgotten members of an extended family. Shukracharya remoulded them with a powerful philosophy of hard work, discipline, unity and fierce loyalty for fellow Asuras.’

‘But that would not add up to a recipe for victory and dominance. So how did they succeed so spectacularly?’

‘The ones who hate them say they succeeded because they were barbaric warriors.’

‘But you obviously disagree with them.’

‘Well, the Devas weren’t cowards either. It was the Age of Kshatriya, warrior-like qualities were highly sought after. They were probably as good as the Asuras in the art of warfare, if not better. The Asuras succeeded because they were united by a common purpose, unlike the Devas who had too many divisions.’

‘Then why did the Asuras eventually decline? Did they become soft? How were the Devas able to defeat them?’

‘As it often happens, the very reason for your success, over a prolonged period of time, can lead to your downfall. Shukracharya united the Asuras with the concept of the *Ekam*, the *One God*. All who worshipped the One God were equal in His eyes.’

Ram frowned. ‘But that was hardly a new idea! Even the *Rig Veda* refers to *Ekam*, the *One Absolute*. To this day we call him the *Sum of all Souls*, the *Parmatma*. Even the followers of the feminine principle, like the Devas, believed in the *Ekam*.’

‘There is a nuance that you’re missing, Sudas. The *Rig Veda* states clearly that while the *Ekam* is the One God, He comes to us in many forms, as many Gods, to help us grow spiritually, in the hope that we will eventually understand Him in His original form. After all, variety is what surrounds us in nature; it is what we relate to. Shukracharya was different. He said that all other manifestations of the *Ekam* were false, leading us into *maya*, the *illusion*. The *Ekam* was the only True God, the only Reality, so to speak. It was a radical thought for that period. Suddenly, there was no hierarchy in the spiritual journey of both, the one who knew no scripture, as well as the one who was an expert on them, simply because they both believed in the *Ekam*.’

‘This would make all human beings equal.’

‘True. And, it worked well for some time for it obliterated all divisions within the Asuras. Furthermore, the dispossessed and oppressed among other groups like the Devas began to join the Asuras; it suddenly raised their social status. But like I’ve said many times, every idea has a positive and a negative. The Asuras thought that everyone who believed in their *Ekam* was equal. And what did they think of those who did not believe in their *Ekam*?’

‘That they were not equal to them?’ asked Ram, tentatively.

‘Yes. All efforts to impose the concept of the One God upon minds that do not respect diversity will only result in intolerance. The *Upanishads* contain this warning.’

‘Yes, I remember the hymn. Especially this couplet: *Giving a sharp sword to a child is not an act of generosity, but irresponsibility*. Is that what happened with the Asuras?’

‘Yes. Shukracharya’s immediate students, having been chosen by him, were intellectually and spiritually equipped to understand the seemingly radical concept of the *Ekam*. But the Asura Empire inevitably expanded, including within its folds increasing multitudes of people. As time went by, these believers held on to their faith in the *Ekam* but became exclusionist, demanding undivided devotion; their God was true, the other Gods were false. They grew to hate those who didn’t believe in their One God, and ultimately began to kill them.’

‘What?’ Ram asked flabbergasted. ‘That’s preposterous! Doesn’t the hymn on the *Ekam* also state that the only marker as to whether one truly understands the One God is that it becomes impossible to hate anyone? The *Ekam* exists in everybody and everything; if you feel any hatred at all towards anything or anyone, then you hate the *Ekam* Himself!’

‘Yes, that’s true. Unfortunately, the Asuras genuinely believed they were doing the right thing. As their numbers grew, their storm troopers let loose a reign of terror, tearing down temples, smashing idols and shrines, slaughtering those who persisted with the practice of worshipping other Gods.’

Ram shook his head. ‘They must have turned everyone against them.’

‘Exactly! And when circumstances changed, as they invariably do, the Asuras had no allies. The Devas, on the other hand, were always divided and hence did not attempt to force their ways on others. How could they? They could not even agree among themselves on what their own way of life was! Fortunately then, they were spoilt for choice when it came to allies. All the non-Asuras were tired of the constant provocation and violence from the Asuras. They joined forces with their enemies, the Devas. Ironically, many Asuras themselves had begun to question this over-reliance on violence. They too changed allegiance and moved over to the other side. Is it any surprise that the Asuras lost?’

Ram shook his head. ‘That is a major risk with the masculine way, isn’t it? Exclusivist thought can easily lapse into intolerance and rigidity, especially in times of trouble. The feminine way will not face this problem.’

‘Yes, rigid intolerance creates mortal enemies with whom negotiation is impossible. But the feminine way has other problems; most importantly, of how to unite their own behind a larger cause. The followers of the feminine way are usually so divided that it takes a miracle for them to come together for any one purpose, under a single banner.’

Ram, who had seen the worst of the divisions and inefficiencies of the feminine way of life in the India of today, appeared genuinely curious about the masculine order. ‘The masculine way needs to be revived. The way of the Asuras is a possible answer to India’s current problems. But the Asura way cannot and should not be replicated. Some improvements and adjustments are necessary. Questioning must be encouraged. And, it has to be tailored to suit our current circumstances.’

‘Why not the feminine way?’ asked the guru.

‘I believe leaders of the feminine way tend to shirk responsibilities. Their message to their followers is: “It’s your decision”. When things go wrong, there’s no one who can be held accountable. In the masculine way, the leader has to assume all the responsibility. And only when leaders assume responsibility can society actually function. There is clear direction and purpose for society as a whole. Otherwise, there is endless debate, analysis and paralysis.’

Vashishta smiled. ‘You are oversimplifying things. But I will not deny that if you want quick improvements, the masculine way works better. The feminine route takes time, but in the long run, it can be more stable and durable.’

‘The masculine way can also prove to be stable, if we learn lessons from the past.’

‘Are you willing to forge such a new path?’

‘I will certainly try,’ said Ram with disarming honesty. ‘It is my duty to my motherland; to this great country of ours.’

‘Well, you are welcome to revive the masculine way. But I suggest you don’t name it Asura. It is such a reviled name today that your ideas will be doomed from the very beginning.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’

‘Names don’t matter. What matters is the philosophy underlying them. There was a time when the Asuras represented the masculine way and the Devas, the feminine. Then, the Asuras were destroyed and only the Devas survived. The Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis are descendants of the Devas; both representatives of the feminine. But, for all you know, if you achieve what I think you can, the Suryavanshis could end up representing the masculine way of life and the Chandravanshis could carry forward the legacy of their ancestors, the Devas. Like I said, names don’t matter.’

Ram looked down again at the inscription as he pondered over the unknown person who had carved this message long ago. It seemed like an act of impotent rebellion. Shukracharya’s name had been banned across the land. His loyal followers were not even allowed to speak his name. Perhaps this was their way of applying a salve to their conscience at not being able to publicly honour their guru.

Vashishta put his hand on Ram’s shoulder. ‘I will tell you more about Shukracharya, his life and his philosophy. He was a genius. You can learn from him and create a great empire. But you must remember that while you can certainly learn from the successes of great men, you can learn even more from their failures and mistakes.’

‘Yes, Guruji.’



## Chapter 9

‘We will not be meeting for a long time after this, Guruji,’ said the Naga.

A few months had elapsed since Ram and Vashishta’s conversation on Shukracharya in the temple of Lord Indra. The formal education of the princes in the *gurukul* was complete, and the boys would be returning home for good the following day. Lakshman had decided to go riding one last time, late in the night. While trying to return undetected, he came upon a replay of the meeting between his guru and the suspicious Naga.

They had met under the bridge, once again.

‘Yes, it will be difficult,’ agreed Vashishta. ‘People in Ayodhya do not know about my other life. But I will find ways to communicate.’

The outgrowth from his lower back flicked like a tail as the Naga spoke. ‘I have heard that your former friend’s alliance with Raavan grows stronger.’

Vashishta closed his eyes and took a deep breath before speaking softly. ‘He will always remain my friend. He helped me when I was alone.’

The Naga narrowed his eyes, his interest piqued. ‘You have to tell me this story sometime, Guruji. What happened?’

Vashishta gave the hint of a wry smile. ‘Some stories are best left untold.’

The Naga realised he had ventured into painful territory and decided not to pry any further.

‘But I know what you’ve come for,’ said Vashishta, changing the topic.

The Naga smiled. ‘I have to know...’

‘Ram,’ said Vashishta, simply.

The Naga seemed surprised. ‘I thought it would be Prince Bharat...’

‘No. It’s Ram. It has to be.’

The Naga nodded. ‘Then, Prince Ram it is. You know you can count on our support.’

‘Yes, I know.’

Lakshman felt his heartbeat quicken as he continued to listen, soundlessly.



‘*Dada*, you really do not understand the world,’ cried Lakshman.

‘In the name of Lord Ikshvaku, just go back to sleep,’ mumbled an exasperated Ram. ‘You see conspiracies everywhere.’

‘But...’

‘Lakshman!’

‘They have decided to kill you, *Dada*! I know it.’

‘When will you believe that nobody is trying to kill me? Why would Guruji want me dead? Why would *anyone* want me dead, for crying out loud?!’ exclaimed Ram.

‘Nobody was trying to kill me then, when we were out riding. And, nobody is trying to kill me now. I am not so important, you know. Now go to sleep!’

‘Dada, you’re just so clueless! At this rate, I don’t know how I’m supposed to protect you.’

‘You will protect me forever, somehow,’ said Ram, softening and smiling indulgently as he pulled his brother’s cheek. ‘Go back to sleep now.’

‘Dada...’

‘Lakshman!’



‘Welcome home, my son,’ cried Kaushalya.

Unable to suppress her tears of joy, the queen looked proudly at her son as he held her awkwardly, slightly embarrassed by her open display of emotion. Like his mother, the eighteen-year-old eldest prince of the Raghu clan of Ayodhya had a dark, flawless complexion, which perfectly set off his sober white *dhoti* and *angavastram*. His broad shoulders, lean body and powerful back were a testimony to his archery skills. Long hair tied neatly in an unassuming bun, he wore simple ear studs and a string of Rudraaksh beads around his neck. The studs were shaped like the sun with streaming rays, which was symbolic of the Suryavanshi rulers, descendants of the sun. The Rudraaksh, brown, elliptical beads derived from the tree of the same name, represented Lord Rudra, who had saved India from Evil some millennia ago.

He stepped away from his mother as she finally stopped crying. He went down on one knee, bowing his head with respect towards his father. A hushed silence descended on the court, in full attendance during this ceremonial occasion. The impressive Great Hall of the Unconquerable hadn’t seen a gathering like this in nearly two decades. This royal court hall, along with the palace, had been built by the charismatic warrior-king Raghu, the great-grandfather of Ram. He had famously restored the power of the Ayodhya royalty through stunning conquests, so much so that the title of the House of Ayodhya had been changed from the ‘Clan of Ikshvaku’, to the ‘Clan of Raghu’. Ram did not approve of this change, for to him it was a betrayal of his lineage. Howsoever great one’s achievements were, they could not overshadow those of one’s ancestors. He would have preferred the use of ‘Clan of Ikshvaku’ for his family; after all, Ikshvaku was the founder of the dynasty. But few were interested in Ram’s opinions.

Ram continued to kneel, but the official acknowledgment was not forthcoming. Vashishta, the raj guru, sat to the right of the emperor, looking at him with silent disapproval.

Dashrath seemed lost in thought as he stared blankly into space. His hands rested on golden armrests shaped like lions. A gold-coloured canopy, embedded with priceless jewels, was suspended over the throne. The magnificent court hall and the throne were symbolic of the power and might of the Ayodhyans; or at least, they had been so, once upon a time. Peeling paint and fraying edges spoke volumes of the decline of this once-great kingdom. Precious stones from the throne had been pulled out, probably to pay the bills. The thousand-pillared hall still appeared grand, but an old eye would know that it had seen better days in years past, when vibrant silk pennants hung from the walls, separating engraved figures of ancient *rishis* — *seers* and *men of knowledge*. The

figures could have certainly done with a thorough cleaning.

Palpable embarrassment spread in the hall as Ram waited. A murmur among the courtiers reaffirmed what was well known: Ram was not the favoured son.

The son remained still and unmoved. Truth be told, he was not the least bit surprised. Used to disdain and calumny, he had learnt to ignore it. Every trip back home from the *gurukul* had been torture. Almost by design, most people found some way to constantly remind him of the misfortune of his birth. The ‘taint of 7,032’, the year of his birth according to the calendar of Manu, would not be forgotten. It had troubled him in his childhood, but he found himself wryly recalling what the man he admired as a father, Guru Vashishta, had said to him once.

*Kimapi Nu Janaahaa Vadishyanti. Tadeva Kaaryam Janaanaam.*

*People will talk nonsense. It is, after all, their job.*

Kaikeyi walked up to her husband, went down on her knees and placed Dashrath’s partially paralysed right leg on the foot stand. Carefully displaying the dutiful and submissive gesture for public consumption, she brought her aggression into full play in private, as she hissed her command. ‘Acknowledge Ram. Remember, descendant, not protector.’

A flicker of life flashed across the emperor’s face. He raised his chin imperiously as he spoke. ‘Rise, Ram Chandra, descendant of the Raghu clan.’

Vashishta narrowed his eyes with disapproval and cast a glance at Ram.

Adorned in rich finery and heavy gold ornaments, prominent among the first row of nobility, was a fair-skinned woman with a bent back. Her face was scarred by an old disease, and along with the hunched back, she had a menacing presence. Turning slightly to the man standing beside her, she whispered, ‘Hmm, did you understand, Druhyu? Descendant, not protector.’

Druhyu bowed his head in deference as he addressed the wealthiest and most powerful merchant of the Sapt Sindhu, ‘Yes, Mantharaji.’

That Dashrath had avoided the word ‘protector’ was a clear indication to all who were present that Ram would not be accorded what was the birthright of the first-born. Ram did not show disappointment as he rose to his feet with stoic decorum. Folding his hands together in a namaste, he bowed his head and spoke with crisp solemnity, ‘May all the Gods of our great land continue to protect you, my father.’ He then stepped back to take his position in single file along with his brothers.

Standing beside Ram, Bharat, though shorter, was heavier in build. Years of hard work showed in his musculature, while the scars he bore gave him a fearsome yet attractive look. He’d inherited his mother’s fair complexion and had set it off with a bright blue *dhoti* and *angavastram*. The headband that held his long hair in place was embellished with an intricate, embroidered golden peacock feather. His charisma, though, lay in his eyes and face; a sharp nose, strong chin and eyes that danced with mischief. At this moment though, they displayed sadness. He cast a concerned look at his brother Ram before turning to Dashrath, visibly angry.

Bharat marched forward with studied nonchalance and went down on one knee.

Shockingly for the assemblage, he refused to bow his head. He stared at his father with open hostility.

Kaikeyi had remained standing next to Dashrath. She glared at her son, willing him into submission. But Bharat was too old for such efforts at intimidation. Imperceptibly, unnoticed by anyone, Kaikeyi bowed her head and whispered to her husband. Dashrath repeated what was told to him.

‘Rise, Bharat, descendant of the Raghu clan.’

Bharat smiled delightedly at not being accorded the title of the ‘protector’ either. He stood up and spoke with casual aplomb, ‘May Lord Indra and Lord Varun grant you wisdom, my father.’

He winked at Ram as he quickly walked back to where his brothers stood. Ram was impassive.

It was then Lakshman’s turn. As he stepped forward, those assembled were struck by his gigantic frame and towering height. Though usually dishevelled, his mother Sumitra had ensured that the fair-complexioned Lakshman had turned up dressed neatly for the ceremony. Much like his beloved brother Ram, Lakshman too avoided wearing jewellery, save for the ear studs and the threaded Rudraaksh beads around his neck. His ceremony was completed without fuss, and he was soon followed by Shatrughan. The diminutive youngest prince was meticulously attired as always, his hair precisely tied, his *dhoti* and *angvastram* neatly pressed, his jewellery sober and minimal. The completion of his ceremony marked his acknowledgement, too, as a descendant of Raghu.

The court crier brought the proceedings of the court to an end. Kaikeyi stepped up to assist Dashrath, signalling an aide who stood next to the emperor. Dashrath placed his hand on the attendant’s shoulder as his eyes fell on Vashishta, who had also risen from his seat. Dashrath folded his hands together into a namaste. ‘Guruji.’

Vashishta raised his right hand and blessed the king. ‘May Lord Indra bless you with a long life, Your Majesty.’

Dashrath nodded and cast a cursory look towards his sons, standing firmly together. His eyes rested on Ram; he coughed irritably, turned and hobbled away with assistance. Kaikeyi followed Dashrath out of the court.

The crier then announced that the emperor had left the court and the courtiers immediately began filing out of the hall.

Manthara remained rooted to her spot, staring intently at the four princes in the distance.

‘What is it, My Lady?’ whispered Druhyu.

The man’s submissive demeanour was a clear indication of the dread he felt for the lady. It was rumoured that Manthara was even wealthier than the emperor. Added to this, she was believed to be a close confidante of the most powerful person in the empire, Queen Kaikeyi. The mischievous even suggested that the demon-king Raavan of Lanka was an ally; the reasonable, however, dismissed the last as fanciful.

‘The brothers are close to each other,’ whispered Manthara.

‘Yes, they appear to be...’

‘Interesting... Unexpected, but interesting...’

Druhyu cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, and then murmured. ‘What are you thinking, My Lady?’

‘I have been thinking about this for some time. I’m not sure we can write Ram off. If, after all the hatred and vilification that he has been subjected to for eighteen years, he is still standing strong, we must assume that he is made of sterner stuff. And Bharat, very obviously, is spirited and devoted to his brother.’

‘So, what should we do?’

‘They are both worthy. It’s difficult to decide which one to bet on.’

‘But Bharat is Queen Kaikeyi’s—’

‘I think,’ said Manthara, cutting off her aide mid-sentence, ‘I will find some way to make Roshni increase her interaction with them. I need to know more about the character of these princes.’

Druhyu was taken aback. ‘My Lady, please accept my sincere apologies, but your daughter is very innocent, almost like *Kanyakumari*, the *Virgin Goddess*. She may not be able to—’

‘Her innocence is exactly what we need, you fool. Nothing disarms strong men like a genuinely innocent and decent woman. It’s the fascination that all strong men have for the Virgin Goddess, who must always be honoured and protected.’



## Chapter 10

‘Thank you,’ smiled Bharat, as he held up his right hand and admired the exquisite golden-thread *rakhi* tied around his wrist. A petite young woman stood by his side; she answered to the name of Roshni.

A few weeks had lapsed since the recognition ceremony of the Ayodhya princes. Lakshman and Shatrughan already wore the *rakhi* thread, signifying a promise of protection made by a brother to his sister. In a break from tradition, Roshni had chosen to tie the *rakhi* threads first to the youngest and then move on, age-wise, towards the eldest. They sat together in the magnificent royal garden of the main Ayodhya palace. Situated high on a hill, the palace afforded a breathtaking view of the city, its walls and the Grand Canal beyond. The garden had been laid out in the style of a botanical reserve, filled with flowering trees from not only the Sapt Sindhu but other great empires around the world as well. Its splendid diversity was also the source of its beauty, reflecting the composite character of the people of the Sapt Sindhu. Winding paths bordered what should have been a carefully laid out lush carpet of dense grass in geometric symmetry. Alas, the depleting resources of Ayodhya had taken a toll on the maintenance of the garden, and ugly bald patches dotted the expanse.

Roshni applied the ceremonial sandalwood paste on Bharat’s forehead. Manthara’s daughter had inherited her mother’s fair complexion, but in all other ways the dissimilarity could not be more obvious. Dainty and small-boned, she was soft-spoken, gentle and childlike. The simplicity of her attire was a subtle rejection of the opulence afforded by her family’s wealth: a white upper garment coupled with a cream-coloured *dhoti*. Tiny studs and a bracelet made from Rudraaksh beads gave a hint of festive gaiety to a solemn face framed by long, wavy hair that was tied, as usual, in a neat ponytail. Her most magical attribute, though, was her eyes: overflowing with innocent tenderness and the unconditional, compassionate love of a true *yogini*; *one who had discovered union with God*.

Bharat pulled out a pouch full of gold coins from his waistband and held it out to Roshni. ‘Here you go, my sister.’

Roshni gave the slightest of frowns. It had become fashionable of late for brothers to offer money or a gift to sisters during the *rakhi* ceremony. Women like Roshni did not approve of this trend. They believed that they were capable of doing the work of Brahmins, Vaishyas and Shudras: disseminating knowledge, trading or performing physical labour. The only task that sometimes proved challenging for them was that of a Kshatriya. They simply did not possess the physical strength and proclivity for violence. Nature had blessed them with other attributes. They believed that accepting anything besides the promise of physical protection during the *rakhi* ceremony was an admission of the inferiority of women. Equally, though, Roshni didn’t want to be rude.

‘Bharat, I’m elder to you,’ smiled Roshni. ‘I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to give

me money. But I most willingly accept your promise of protection.'

'Of course,' said Bharat, quickly tucking the pouch back into his waistband. 'You are Mantharaji's daughter. Why would you need any money?'

Roshni immediately fell silent. Ram could see that she was hurt. He knew she was uncomfortable about the fabulous wealth that her mother possessed. It pained her that many in her country were mired in poverty. Roshni was known to avoid, if possible, the legendary parties that her mother frequently threw. Nor did she move around with an escort. She gave money and time to many charitable causes, especially the education and health of children, considered the worthiest of all by the great law book, *Maitreyi Smriti*. She also frequently used her medical skills as a doctor to help the needy.

'It's a wonder Bharat *Dada* allowed you to tie a *rakhi*, Roshni *Didi*,' Shatrughan broke the awkward silence even as he teased his elder brother.

'Yes,' said Lakshman. 'Our dear *dada* certainly loves women, but not necessarily as a brother.'

'And, from what I have heard, women love him in return,' said Roshni, as she gazed fondly at Bharat. 'Haven't you come across any dream lover yet, someone who will sweep you off your feet and make you want to settle down?'

'I do have a dream lover,' quipped Bharat. 'The problem is, she disappears when I wake up.'

Shatrughan, Lakshman and Roshni laughed heartily, but Ram could not bring himself to join in. He knew Bharat was assiduously hiding the pain in his heart with his jest. He had still not gotten over Radhika. Ram hoped his sensitive brother would not pine for her forever.

'My turn now,' said Ram, as he stepped forward and held out his right hand.

Lakshman spotted Vashishta walking by in the distance. He immediately scanned the area for possible threats, as he had not completely set aside his suspicions regarding their guru.

'I promise to protect you forever, my sister,' said Ram, looking solemnly at the golden *rakhi* tied to his wrist, and then equally, at Roshni.

Roshni smiled and applied some sandalwood paste on Ram's forehead. She turned around and walked towards a bench to put away the *aarti thali*.

'DADA!' screamed Lakshman, as he lunged forward and pushed Ram aside.

Lakshman's tremendous strength threw Ram back. In the same instant, a heavy branch landed with a loud thud at the very spot that Ram had been standing a moment ago. It had first smashed into Lakshman's shoulder, cracking his collar bone in two. Shards of bone jut out as blood gushed in a horrifying flow.

'Lakshman!' screamed his brothers as they rushed towards him.



'He'll be all right,' said Roshni, as she stepped out of the operation theatre. Vashishta, Ram, Bharat and Shatrughan stood anxiously in the lobby of the *ayuralay*. Sumitra sat still on a chair against the wall of the *hospital*, her eyes clouded with tears. She immediately rose and embraced Roshni.

‘There will be no permanent damage, Your Highness,’ assured Roshni. ‘His bone has been set. Your son will recover fully. We are very lucky that the branch missed his head.’

‘We’re also lucky that Lakshman is built like a bull,’ said Vashishta. ‘A lesser man would not have survived that hit.’



Lakshman opened his eyes in a large room, meant for nobility. His bed was big but not too soft, providing the support needed for his injured shoulder. He couldn’t see too well in the dark but he detected a soft sound. Within moments, he found a red-eyed Ram standing by his bedside.

*I woke Dada up,* thought Lakshman.

Three nurses rushed towards the bed. Lakshman shook his head slowly and they stepped back.

Ram touched Lakshman’s head gently. ‘My brother...’

‘*Dada... the tree...*’

‘The branch was rotten, Lakshman. That’s why it fell. It was bad luck. You saved my life once again...’

‘*Dada... Guruji...*’

‘You took the hit for me, my brother... You took the hit that fate had meant for me...’ said Ram, as he bent over and ran his hand over Lakshman’s forehead.

Lakshman felt a tear fall on his face. ‘*Dada...*’

‘Don’t talk. Try to sleep. Relax,’ said Ram, turning his face away.



Roshni entered the *ayuralay* room with some medicines for the prince. A week had elapsed since the accident. Lakshman was stronger now, and restless.

‘Where is everyone?’

‘The nurses are still here,’ said Roshni with a smile, mixing the medicines into a paste in a bowl and handing it over to Lakshman. ‘Your brothers have gone to the palace to bathe and change into fresh clothes. They’ll be back soon.’

Lakshman’s face contorted involuntarily as he ingested the medicine. ‘Yuck!’

‘The yuckier it is, the more effective the medicine!’

‘Why do you doctors torture patients like this?’

‘Thank you,’ Roshni smiled as she handed the bowl to a nurse. Turning her attention back to Lakshman, she asked, ‘How are you feeling now?’

‘There is still a lot of numbness in my left shoulder.’

‘That’s because of the pain-killers.’

‘I don’t need them.’

‘I know you can tolerate any amount of pain. But, for as long as you are my patient, you won’t.’

Lakshman smiled. ‘Spoken like an older sister.’

‘Spoken like a doctor,’ scolded Roshni, as her kindly gaze fell upon the golden *rakhi* still tied around Lakshman’s right wrist. She turned to leave and then stopped.

‘What is it?’ asked Lakshman.

Roshni requested the nurses to leave. She then walked back to his bedside. ‘Your brothers were here for most of the time. Your mother too was here; so were your stepmothers. They came to see you every day, remained here for most of the time and only went back to the palace to sleep. I’d expected that. But you must know that Ram refused to leave for one full week. He slept here in this room. He did a lot of the work that our nurses should have rightfully done.’

‘I know. He’s my *dada*...’

Roshni smiled. ‘I came in late one night to check on you and I heard him talking in his sleep: “Don’t punish my brother for my sins; punish me, punish me”.’

‘He blames himself for everything,’ said Lakshman. ‘Everyone has made his life a living hell.’

Roshni knew what Lakshman was talking about.

‘How can anyone blame *Dada* for our defeat? *Dada* was just born on that day. We lost to Lanka because they fought better than us.’

‘Lakshman, you don’t have to...’

‘Inauspicious! Cursed! Unholy! Is there any insult that has not been heaped upon him? And yet, he stands strong and steadfast. He doesn’t hate, or even resent, anyone. He could have spent a lifetime being angry with the entire world. But he chooses to live a life of honour. He never lies. Did you know that? He never lies!’ Lakshman was crying now. ‘And yet, he lied once, just for me! I was out riding in the night, despite knowing that it wasn’t allowed. I fell and hurt myself pretty badly. My mother was so angry. But *Dada* lied to save me. He said I was in the stable with him and that the horse kicked me. My mother instantly believed him, for *Dada* never lies. In his mind, he tainted his soul, but he did it to save me from my mother’s wrath. And yet, people call him...’

Roshni stepped forward and gently touched Lakshman’s face, wiping away some of his tears.

He continued with fervent vigour, tears streaming down his cheeks, ‘There will come a time when the world will know what a great man he is. Dark clouds cannot hide the sun forever. One day, they will clear and true light will shine through. Everyone will know then, how great my *dada* is.’

‘I already know that,’ said Roshni, softly.



Manthara stood by the window in her office room, built at the far end of the official wing of her palatial residence. The exquisitely symmetrical garden, along with the estate, was appropriately smaller when compared to the emperor’s; a conscious choice. It was also perched on a hill, though lower than the one on which the royal palace stood. Her residence adequately reflected her social status.

She was a brilliant businesswoman, no doubt, and she was no fool. The anti-mercantile atmosphere of the Sapt Sindhu accorded her a low stature, notwithstanding her wealth. None had the courage to say it to her face, but she knew what she was called: a ‘profiteering lackey of the foreign-demon Raavan’. Truth was, all businessmen

had no choice but to trade with Raavan's Lankan traders as the demon-king held a monopoly over external trade with the Sapt Sindhu. This was not a treaty signed by the Sapt Sindhu traders but their kings. Yet, it was the traders who were reviled for playing by the rules of this agreement. Being the most successful businesswoman, Manthara was the prime recipient of the anti-trader prejudice.

But she had suffered enough abuse in her childhood to inure her from bigotry for many a lifetime. Born into a poor family, she was afflicted with smallpox when young, leaving her pallid face scarred for life. As if that wasn't enough, she contracted polio at the age of eleven. The symptoms gradually abated but her right foot remained partially paralysed, giving her an odd limp. At age twenty, owing to her awkward gait, she slipped from the balcony at a friend's house, leaving her back hideously disfigured. She was teased wretchedly when young, and looked at with disdain even today, except that nobody dared to say anything to her face. Her wealth could have easily financed the entire royal expenditure of Kosala, along with a few other kingdoms, without even having to draw on her credit. Needless to say, it brought her immense power and influence.

'My Lady, what did you want to talk about?' asked Druhyu, standing deferentially a few feet away from her.

Manthara limped to her desk and sat on the specially designed padded chair. Druhyu stood at the other end of the desk.

She crooked her finger and he immediately shuffled around the desk, going down on his knees as he reached her. They were alone in the office, and no one would have heard a word of what was exchanged between them. The assistants were on the ground floor in the secretarial annexe. But he understood her silences. And, he didn't dare argue. So he waited.

'I know all there is to know,' declared Manthara. 'My sweet Roshni has unwittingly revealed the character of the princes to me. I've thought hard about this and I've made up my mind. Bharat will be in charge of diplomatic affairs and Ram will look after the city police.'

Druhyu was surprised. 'I thought you had begun to like Prince Ram, My Lady.'

Diplomatic affairs were a perfect opportunity for an Ayodhyian prince to build relations with other kingdoms; and thus, build his base for a future strong empire. Although Ayodhya was still the overlord of the Sapt Sindhu confederacy, it was nowhere near as powerful as it had once been. Building relations with other kings would prove to be advantageous.

The role of the city police chief, on the other hand, would not serve as a suitable training ground for a prince. Crime rates were high, law and order was abysmal, and most rich people maintained their own personal security set-up. The poor suffered terribly as a result. Simplistic explanations would not do justice to the complex picture, though. The people were, to a fairly large extent, themselves responsible for the chaotic state of affairs. Guru Vashishta had once remarked that it was possible for the system to maintain order if a small percentage of the people disobeyed the law, but no system

could prevent upheaval and disruption if practically all the citizens had no respect for the law. And Ayodhyans broke every law with impunity.

If Bharat managed diplomatic relations well, he would be in a strong position to succeed Dashrath eventually, whereas Ram would be left with a thankless job. If he was tough and managed to control crime, people would resent him for his ruthlessness. If he was kind, crime rates would continue to soar and he would be blamed for it. Even if, by some miracle, he managed to control crime and be popular at the same time, then too it would not prove beneficial for him, for the opinion of the people did not matter in the selection of the next king.

‘Oh, I like Ram,’ said Manthara dismissively. ‘I just like profits more. It’ll be good for business if we back the right horse. This is not about choosing between Ram and Bharat, but Kaushalya and Kaikeyi. And, rest assured, Kaikeyi will win. That is a certainty. Ram may well be capable, but he does not have the ability to take on Kaikeyi.’

‘Yes, My Lady.’

‘Also, don’t forget, the nobility hates Ram. They blame him for the defeat at the Battle of Karachapa. So it would cost us more in bribes to secure a good position for Ram. We won’t have to pay that much to the nobility to get them to accept Bharat as the chief of diplomatic affairs.’

‘Our costs go down as well,’ said Druhyu, smiling.

‘Yes. That too is good for business.’

‘And, I think, Queen Kaikeyi will be grateful.’

‘Which will not hurt us either.’

‘I will take care of it, My Lady. Raj Guru Vashishta is away from Ayodhya, and that will make our task easier. He has been a strong supporter of Prince Ram.’

Druhyu regretted mentioning the raj guru as soon as the words escaped his lips.

‘You still haven’t discovered where Guraji is, have you?’ asked an irritated Manthara. ‘Where has he gone for such a long period? When is he returning? You know nothing!’

‘No, My Lady,’ said Druhyu, keeping his head bowed. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Sometimes I wonder why I pay you so much.’

Druhyu remained still, afraid of uttering another sound. Manthara dismissed him from her presence with a wave of the hand.



## Chapter 11

‘You will make an excellent chief of police,’ said Roshni, her eyes glittering with childlike excitement. ‘Crime will decrease and that will be good for our beleaguered people.’

Roshni sat in the palace garden with a restrained but disappointed Ram, who’d been hoping for a greater responsibility, like the deputy chief of the army. But he wasn’t about to reveal this to her.

‘I’m not sure if I’ll be able to handle it,’ said Ram. ‘A good chief of police needs the support of the people.’

‘And, you imagine that you don’t have it?’

Ram smiled wanly. ‘Roshni, I know you don’t lie; do you really think the people will support me? Everyone blames me for the defeat at the hands of Lanka. I am tainted by 7,032.’

Roshni leaned forward and spoke earnestly. ‘You have only interacted with the elite, the ones who were “born-right”, people like us. Yes, they do not like you. But there is another Ayodhya, Ram, where people who were “not born-right” exist. There’s no love lost between them and the elite. And remember, they will be sympathetic towards anyone the elite ostracise, even one from the nobility itself. The common folk will like you simply because the elite don’t like you. They might even follow you for the same reason.’

Ram had lived in the bubble of the royal experience. He was intrigued by this possibility.

‘People like us don’t step out into the real world. We don’t know what’s going on out there. I have interacted with the common people and I think I understand them to some extent. The elite have done you a favour by hating you. They have made it possible for you to endear yourself to the common man. I’m sure you can make them listen to you. I know you can bring crime under control in this city; dramatically so. You can do a lot of good. Believe in yourself as much as I believe in you, my brother.’



Within a year the reforms that Ram instituted began to have a visible effect. He tackled the main problem head on: most people were unaware of the laws. Some did not even know the names of the law books, called *Smritis*. This was because there were too many of them, containing contradictory laws that had accumulated over centuries. The *Manu Smriti* was well known, but most people were unaware that there were versions of it as well, for instance the *BrihadManu Smriti*. There were other popular ones too — the *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, *Narad Smriti*, *Aapastamb Smriti*, *Atri Smriti*, *Yam Smriti* and *Vyas Smriti*, to name a few. The police applied sections from the law that they were familiar with, in an ad hoc fashion. The court judges were sometimes aware of other *Smritis*,

depending on the communities they were born into. Confusion was exacerbated when the police would arrest under a law of one *Smriti*, while the judge would base his judgement on a law from another *Smriti*. The result was almighty chaos. The guilty would escape by exploiting the loopholes and contradictions among the *Smritis*. Many innocents, however, languished in prisons due to ignorance, leading to horrific overcrowding.

Ram understood that he had to simplify and unify the law. He studied the *Smritis* and carefully selected laws that he felt were fair, coherent, simple and relevant to the times. Henceforth, this law code would govern Ayodhya; all the other *Smritis* would be rendered obsolete. The laws were inscribed on stone tablets and put up at all the temples in Ayodhya; the most important among them being engraved at the end: Ignorance of the law is not a legitimate excuse. Town criers were assigned the task of reading the code aloud every morning. It was only a matter of time before the laws were known to all.

Ram was soon given a respectful title by the common people: Ram, the Law Giver.

His second reform was even more revolutionary. He gave the police force the power to implement the law without any fear or favour. Ram understood a simple fact: policemen desired respect from society. They hadn't been given the opportunity to earn it earlier. If they unhesitatingly took action against any law-breaker, high and mighty though he may be, they would be feared and respected. Ram himself repeatedly demonstrated that the law applied equally to him.

In an oft-quoted incident, Ram returned to the city after dusk, when the fort gates had been shut. The gatekeeper opened the gates for the prince. Ram upbraided him for breaking the law: the gates were not to be opened for anyone at night time. Ram slept outside the city walls that night and entered the city the next morning. The ordinary people of Ayodhya talked about it for months, though it was studiously ignored by the nobles.

What did get the elite into a tizzy was Ram's intervention in cases where members of the nobility attempted to browbeat the police when the law caught up with them. They were aghast that they were being brought to book, but soon understood there would be no leniency. Their hatred of Ram increased manifold; they began to call him dictatorial and dangerous. But the people loved him more, this eldest prince of Ayodhya. Crime rates collapsed as criminals were either thrown in jail or speedily executed. Innocents were increasingly spared in a city that steadily became safer. Women began to venture out alone at night. Ram was rightfully credited with this dramatic improvement in their lives.

It would be decades before the name of Ram would transform into a splendid legend. But the journey had begun, for among the common folk, a star was slowly sputtering to life.



‘You are making too many enemies, my son,’ said Kaushalya. ‘You should not be so rigid about enforcing the law.’

Kaushalya had finally summoned Ram to her private chamber, having received too

many complaints from nobles. She was worried that, in his zeal, her son was losing the few allies he still had in court.

‘The rule of law cannot be selective, *Maa*,’ said Ram. ‘The same law has to apply to everyone. If the nobles don’t like it, they should not break the law.’

‘I’m not discussing the law, Ram. If you think that penalising one of General Mrigasya’s key aides will please your father, you’re wrong. He’s completely under Kaikeyi’s spell.’

Mrigasya, the army chief, had become increasingly powerful as Dashrath sank into depression. He was the magnet around whom all those who opposed the powerful Queen Kaikeyi had coalesced. His reputation of fiercely defending his loyalists, even if they committed crimes or were thoroughly incompetent, ensured ferocious allegiance. Kaikeyi intensely disliked him for his wilful disregard of her wishes, which influenced Dashrath’s attitude towards the general.

Recently, Ram had used the law to recover land that one of Mrigasya’s aides had illegally appropriated from poor villagers. Ram had even had the temerity to enforce a penalty on the aide, something nobody had dared to do with the men who surrounded the powerful general.

‘General Mrigasya and Kaikeyi *Maa*’s politics do not interest me. His aide broke the law. That’s all there is to it.’

‘The nobility will do as they please, Ram.’

‘Not if I can help it!’

‘Ram...’

‘Nobility is about being *noble*, *Maa*. It’s about the way of the *Arya*. It’s not about your birth, but how you conduct yourself. Being a noble is a great responsibility, not a birthright.’

‘Ram, why don’t you understand?! General Mrigasya is our only ally. All the other powerful nobles are in Kaikeyi’s camp. He’s the only one who can stand up to her. We are safe for as long as we have Mrigasya and his coterie on our side.’

‘What does this have to do with the law?’

Kaushalya consciously made an effort to contain her irritation. ‘Do you know how difficult it is for me to build support for you? Everyone blames you for Lanka.’

When her comment was met with a stony silence, Kaushalya turned placatory. ‘I’m not suggesting that it was your fault, my child. But this is the reality. We must be pragmatic. Do you want to be king or not?’

‘I want to be a good king. Or else, believe me, I’d rather not be one.’

Kaushalya closed her eyes in exasperation. ‘Ram, you seem to live in your own theoretical world. You have to learn to be practical. Know that I love you and I’m only trying to help you.’

‘If you love me, *Maa*, then understand what I’m made of.’ Ram spoke calmly but there was steely determination in his eyes. ‘This is my *janmabhoomi*, my *land of birth*. I have to serve it by leaving it better than I found it. I can fulfil my karma as a king, a police chief or even a simple villager.’

‘Ram, you don’t—’

Kaushalya was interrupted by a loud announcement. ‘Her Highness Kaikeyi, queen of Ayodhya!’

Ram immediately got to his feet, as did Kaushalya. He discreetly glanced at his mother, noting the impotent anger in her eyes. Kaikeyi approached her with a smile on her lips, her hands folded in a namaste. ‘Namaste, *Didi*. Please accept my sincere apologies for disturbing you during your private time with your son.’

‘That’s quite all right, Kaikeyi,’ remarked Kaushalya with studied affability. ‘I’m sure it’s something important.’

‘Yes, it is, actually,’ said Kaikeyi, turning to Ram. ‘Your father has decided to go on a hunting trip, Ram.’

‘A hunting trip?’ asked a surprised Ram.

Dashrath had not gone big game hunting in Ram’s living memory. His battle injury had precluded even such simple pleasures from the life of the once great hunter.

‘Yes. I would have sent Bharat along with him. I could do with some of my favourite deer meat. But as you know, Bharat is in Branga on a diplomatic mission. I was wondering if I could lay this onerous responsibility on your able shoulders.’

Ram smiled slightly. He knew Kaikeyi wanted him to accompany Dashrath in order to protect him, and not for any choice meats. But Kaikeyi never said anything derogatory about Dashrath in public; and the royal family was ‘public’ for her. Ram folded his hands into a namaste. ‘It will be my honour to serve you, *Chhoti Maa*.’

Kaikeyi smiled. ‘Thank you.’

Kaushalya looked at Ram quietly, her face inscrutable.



‘What is she doing here?’ asked Dashrath gruffly.

Kaushalya had just been announced by the doorman in Kaikeyi’s wing of the royal palace. Dashrath and Kaikeyi lay in bed. She reached out and tucked Dashrath’s long hair behind his ear. ‘Just finish whatever it is and come back quickly.’

‘You will also have to get up, my love,’ said Dashrath.

Kaikeyi sighed in irritation and rolled off the bed. She quickly picked up her *angvastram* and placed it across her shoulder, rolling the other end around her right wrist. She walked over to Dashrath and helped him off the bed. She went down on her knees and straightened his *dhoti*. Finally, she picked up Dashrath’s *angvastram* and placed it across his shoulder. She then helped him walk into the reception room and bade him wait.

‘Let Her Majesty in,’ ordered Kaikeyi.

Kaushalya entered the room with two attendants in tow. One of them carried a large golden plate on which was placed Dashrath’s battle sword. The other attendant carried a small *puja thali*. Kaikeyi straightened up in surprise. Dashrath seemed lost as usual.

‘*Didi*,’ said Kaikeyi, folding her hands together in a namaste. ‘What a pleasure to see you twice in the same day.’

‘The pleasure is all mine, Kaikeyi,’ replied Kaushalya. ‘You mentioned that His

Majesty is going on a hunt. I thought I should perform the proper ceremony.'

The ritual of the chief wife of a warrior ceremonially handing the sword to her departing husband had come down through the ancient times.

'Things have not gone too well whenever I have not presented His Majesty with the sword,' said Kaushalya.

Dashrath's vacant expression changed suddenly. He frowned, as if he was struck by the enormity of the not-so-subtle implication. Kaushalya had not handed him the sword when he had set out for Karachapa, and that had been his first defeat. He slowly took a step towards his first wife.

Kaushalya took the small *puja thali* from her attendant and looped it in small circles around Dashrath's face seven times. Then she took a pinch of vermillion from the plate and smeared it across Dashrath's forehead in a vertical *tilak*. 'Come back victorious...'

Kaikeyi sniggered, interrupting the ceremony. 'He's not going to war, *Didi*.'

Dashrath ignored Kaikeyi. 'Complete the line, Kaushalya.'

Kaushalya swallowed nervously, half convinced now that this was a big mistake; that she should not have listened to Sumitra. But she completed the ritual statement. 'Come back victorious, or do not come back at all.'

Kaushalya thought she detected a flicker of fire in her husband's eyes, reminiscent of the young Dashrath, who lived for thrill and glory. 'Where's my sword?' Dashrath demanded, as he extended his arms solemnly.

Kaushalya immediately turned and handed the *puja thali* back to her attendant. She then picked up the sword with both her hands, faced her husband, bowed ceremonially and handed him the sword. Dashrath held it firmly, as if drawing energy from it.

Kaikeyi looked at Dashrath and then at Kaushalya as she narrowed her eyes, deep in thought.

*This must be Sumitra's doing. Kaushalya couldn't have planned this by herself. Perhaps I've made a mistake in asking Ram to accompany Dashrath.*



Royal hunts were grand affairs that lasted many weeks. A large entourage accompanied the emperor on the expedition, moving the headquarters of the court to a hunting lodge built deep in the great forest to the far north of Ayodhya.

Action commenced on the day after their arrival. The technique involved numerous soldiers spreading out in a giant circle, circumscribing almost fifty kilometres sometimes. They beat loud drums ceaselessly as they slowly moved to the centre, steadily drawing the animals into an increasingly restricted area, at times a watering hole. The animals would then be attacked in the kill-zone, where the emperor and his hunting party would indulge in this royal sport.

Dashrath stood on a howdah atop the royal elephant. Ram and Lakshman were seated behind him. The emperor thought he heard the soft chuff of an unsuspecting tiger; he ordered the mahout to charge forward. Within no time, Dashrath's elephant had separated from the rest of the hunting party. He was alone with his sons.

They were surrounded on all sides by dense vegetation. Many trees were so tall that

they towered over the elephant, blocking out much of the sunlight. It was almost impossible to see beyond the first few lines of trees into the impenetrable darkness.

Lakshman leaned in and whispered to Ram, ‘*Dada*, I don’t think there is any tiger here.’

Ram gestured for Lakshman to remain quiet as he observed his father, standing in front. Dashrath was barely able to contain his enthusiasm. His body weight was on his strong left foot. His inert right foot was stabilised with an innovative mechanism built into the howdah platform: a swivelling circular base with a sturdy column fixed in the centre. Boot straps attached to the base secured his foot as it leaned on the column, the leather support extending all the way to his knee. The circular base allowed him swift movement for shooting his arrows in all directions. Nevertheless, his back showed signs of visible strain as he held the bow aloft with the arrow nocked on the bowstring.

Ram would have preferred it if his father did not exert his weakened body so. But he also admired the spirit that drove him to push his corporeal frame beyond its natural limits.

‘There’s nothing there, I tell you,’ whispered Lakshman.

‘Shh,’ said Ram.

Lakshman fell silent. Suddenly, Dashrath flexed his right shoulder and pulled the bowstring back. Ram winced as he watched the technique. Dashrath’s elbow was not in line with the arrow, which would put greater pressure on his shoulder and triceps. Sweat beads formed on the emperor’s forehead, but he held position. A moment later he released the arrow, and a loud roar confirmed that it had found its mark. Ram revelled in the spirit of the all-conquering hero that his father had once been.

Dashrath swivelled awkwardly on the howdah and looked at Lakshman with a sneer. ‘Don’t underestimate me, young man.’

Lakshman immediately bowed his head. ‘I’m sorry, Father. I didn’t mean to...’

‘Order some soldiers to fetch the carcass of that tiger. They will find it with an arrow pierced through its eye and buried in its brain.’

‘Yes, Father, I’ll—’

‘Father!’ screamed Ram as he lunged forward, drawing a knife quickly from the scabbard tied around his waist.

There was a loud rustle of leaves as a leopard emerged on a branch overhanging the howdah. The sly beast had planned its attack meticulously. Dashrath was distracted as the leopard leapt from the branch. Ram’s timing, however, was perfect. He jumped up and plunged his knife into the airborne animal’s chest. But the suddenness of the charge made Ram miss his mark. The knife didn’t find the leopard’s heart. The beast was injured, but not dead. It roared in fury and slashed with its claws. Ram wrestled with the leopard as he tried to pull the knife out so he could take another stab; but it was stuck. The animal pulled back and sank his teeth into the prince’s left triceps. Ram yelled in pain as he attempted to push the animal out of the howdah. The leopard pulled back its head, ripping out flesh and drawing large spurts of blood. It instinctively struggled to move to Ram’s neck, to asphyxiate the prince. Ram pulled back his right fist and hit the

leopard hard across its head.

Lakshman, in the meantime, was desperately trying to reach Ram even as Dashrath blocked his way, tied as he was to the stationary column. Lakshman jumped high, caught an overhanging branch and swung out of the howdah in an arc. He propelled himself forward and landed in front of the howdah, right behind the leopard. He drew his knife as the leopard pulled back again to bite into Ram. Lakshman thrust brutally and, by good fortune, the blade sank into the leopard's eye. The animal howled in pain as a shower of blood sprang out of its shattered eye-socket. Lakshman strained his mighty shoulder and jammed hard, pushing the knife deep into the animal's brain. The beast struggled for a brief moment and then fell, lifeless.

Lakshman picked up the leopard's body with his bare hands, and threw it to the ground. Ram had collapsed in a pool of blood.

'Ram!' screamed Dashrath, twisting desperately as his right leg remained fixed to the column.

Lakshman turned to the mahout. 'Back to the camp!'

The mahout sat paralysed, shaken by the sudden turn of events. Dashrath bellowed his imperial command. 'Back to the camp! Now!'



Torches were lit across a hunting camp seized with frenetic activity late into the night. The injured prince of Ayodhya lay in the massive and luxurious tent of the emperor. He should have been in the medical tent, but Dashrath had insisted that his son be tended to in the comfort of the emperor's living quarters. Ram's pallid body was covered in bandages, weak from tremendous loss of blood.

'Prince Ram,' whispered the doctor as he touched the prince gently.

'Do you *have* to wake him up?' demanded Dashrath, sitting on a comfortable chair placed to the left of the bed.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' said the doctor. 'He must take this medicine now.'

As the doctor repeated Ram's name, the prince opened his eyes, blinking slowly to adjust to the light. He saw the doctor holding the bowl of medicine. He opened his mouth and swallowed the paste, wincing at the bitter taste. The doctor turned, bowed towards the emperor and left the room. Ram was about to slip back into sleep when he noticed the ceremonial gold umbrella on top of the bed. At its centre was a massive sun in intricate embroidery, with rays streaming boldly out in all directions; the Suryavanshi symbol. Ram's eyes flew open as he struggled to get up. He wasn't supposed to be sleeping on the emperor's bed.

'Lie down,' commanded Dashrath, raising his hand.

Lakshman rushed over to the bed and gently tried to calm his brother down.

'In the name of Lord Surya, lie down, Ram!' said Dashrath.

Ram fell back on the bed as he looked towards Dashrath. 'Father, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be on your—'

Dashrath cut him off mid-sentence with a wave of his hand. Ram couldn't help but notice a subtle change in his father's appearance. A spark in the eyes, steel in the voice,

and an alertness that brought back stories his mother would constantly repeat, about the kind of man Dashrath had once been. Here sat a powerful man who wouldn't take kindly to his orders being disregarded. Ram had never seen him like this.

Dashrath turned to his attendants. ‘Leave us.’

Lakshman rose to join the attendants.

‘Not you, Lakshman,’ said Dashrath.

Lakshman stopped in his tracks and waited for further orders. Dashrath stared at the tiger and leopard skins spread out in the corner of the tent; trophies of the animals he and his sons had hunted.

‘Why?’ asked Dashrath.

‘Father?’ asked Ram, confused.

‘Why did you risk your life for me?’

Ram did not utter a word.

Dashrath continued, ‘I blamed you for my defeat. My entire kingdom blamed you; cursed you. You’ve suffered all your life, and yet you never rebelled. I thought it was because you were weak. But weak people celebrate when twists of fate hurt their tormentors. And yet, you risked your life trying to protect me. Why?’

Ram answered with one simple statement. ‘Because that is my *dharma*, Father.’

Dashrath looked quizzically at Ram. This was the first real conversation he was having with his eldest son. ‘Is that the only reason?’

‘What other reason can there be?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Dashrath, snorting with disbelief. ‘How about angling for the position of crown prince?’

Ram couldn’t help smiling at the irony. ‘The nobility will never accept me, Father, even if I’m able to convince you. It is not in my scheme of things. What I did today, is what I must always do: be true to my *dharma*. Nothing is more important than *dharma*.’

‘So, you don’t believe that you are to blame for my defeat at the hands of Raavan, is it?’

‘It doesn’t matter what I think, Father.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

Ram remained silent.

Dashrath leaned forward. ‘Answer me, prince.’

‘I don’t understand how the universe keeps track of our karma across many births, Father. I know I could not have done anything in this birth to make you lose the battle. Maybe it was something to do with my previous birth?’

Dashrath laughed softly, amazed at his son’s equanimity.

‘Do you know whom I blame?’ asked Dashrath. ‘If I were truly honest, if I had had the courage to look deep into my heart, the answer would have been obvious. It was my fault; only my fault. I was reckless and foolhardy. I attacked without a plan, driven only by anger. I paid the price, didn’t I? My first defeat ever... And, my last battle, forever.’

‘Father, there are many—’

‘Do not interrupt me, Ram. I’m not finished.’ Ram fell silent and Dashrath continued.

‘It was my fault. And I blamed the infant that you were. It was so easy. I just had to say it, and everyone agreed with me. I made your life hell from the day you were born. You should hate me. You should hate Ayodhya.’

‘I don’t hate anyone, Father.’

Dashrath stared hard at his son. After what seemed like eternity, his face broke into a peculiar smile. ‘I don’t know whether you’ve suppressed your true feelings completely or you genuinely don’t care about the ignominy that people have heaped on you. Whatever be the truth, you have held strong. The entire universe conspired to break you, and here you are, still unbowed. What metal have you been forged in, my son?’

Ram’s eyes moistened as emotion welled within him. He could handle disdain and apathy from his father; he was used to it. Respect was difficult to deal with. ‘I was forged from your metal, my father.’

Dashrath laughed softly. He was discovering his son.

‘What are your differences with Mrigasya?’ asked Dashrath.

Ram was surprised to discover that his father kept track of court matters. ‘None at all, Father.’

‘Then why did you penalise one of his men?’

‘He broke the law.’

‘Don’t you know how powerful Mrigasya is? Aren’t you afraid of him?’

‘Nobody is above the law, Father. None can be more powerful than *dharma*.’

Dashrath laughed. ‘Not even me?’

‘A great emperor said something beautiful once: *Dharma* is above all, even the king. *Dharma* is above the Gods themselves.’

Dashrath frowned. ‘Who said this?’

‘You did, Father, when you took your oath at your coronation, decades ago. I was told that you had paraphrased our great ancestor Lord Ikshvaku himself.’

Dashrath stared at Ram as he jogged his memory to remember the powerful man he had once been.

‘Go to sleep, my son,’ said Dashrath. ‘You need the rest.’



## Chapter 12

Ram was awakened by the doctor at the beginning of the second *prahar* for his next dose of medicine. As he looked around the room, his eyes fell on a visibly delighted Lakshman, standing by his bedside bedecked in a formal *dhoti* and *angavastram*. The saffron *angavastram* had a Suryavanshi sun emblazoned across its length.

‘Son?’

Ram turned his head to the left and saw his father attired in regal finery. The emperor sat on his travel-throne; the Suryavanshi crown was placed on his head.

‘Father,’ said Ram. ‘Good morning.’

Dashrath nodded crisply. ‘It will be a fine morning, no doubt.’

The emperor turned towards the entrance of his tent. ‘Is anyone there?’

A guard pulled the curtain aside and rushed in, saluting rapidly.

‘Let the nobles in.’

The guard saluted once again and retraced his steps. Within minutes, the nobles entered the tent in single file. They gathered in a semicircle around the emperor, waiting with a solemn air of ceremony.

‘Let me see my son,’ said Dashrath.

The nobles parted immediately, surprised at the voice of authority emerging from their emperor.

Dashrath looked directly at Ram. ‘Rise.’

Lakshman rushed over to help Ram, but Dashrath raised his hand firmly to stop him from doing so. The assemblage stood rooted as it watched a severely weakened Ram struggle to raise himself, stand on his feet and hobble towards his father. He saluted slowly once he reached the emperor.

Dashrath locked eyes with his son, inhaled deeply and spoke clearly, ‘Kneel.’

Ram was unable to move, overwhelmed by a sense of shocked disbelief. Tears welled up in his eyes, despite his willing them not to do so.

Dashrath’s voice softened slightly. ‘Kneel, my son.’

Ram struggled with emotions as he sought the support of a table close at hand. Laboriously, he went down on one knee, bowed his head and awaited the call of destiny.

Dashrath spoke evenly, his voice reverberating even outside the royal tent. ‘Rise, Ram Chandra, *protector* of the Raghu clan.’

A collective gasp resounded through the tent.

Dashrath raised his head and the courtiers fell into a taut silence.

Ram still had his head bowed, lest his enemies see the tears in his eyes. He stared at the floor till he regained absolute control. Then he looked up at his father and spoke in a calm voice. ‘May all the Gods of our great land continue to protect you, my father.’

Dashrath’s eyes seemed to penetrate the soul of his eldest son. A hint of a smile appeared on his face as he looked towards his nobles. ‘Leave us.’

General Mrigasya attempted to say something. ‘Your Majesty, but—’

Dashrath interrupted him with a glare. ‘What part of “leave us” did you not understand, Mrigasya?’

‘My apologies, Your Majesty,’ said Mrigasya, as he saluted and led the nobles out.

Dashrath, Ram and Lakshman were soon alone in the tent. Dashrath leaned heavily to his left as he made an effort to get up, resisting Lakshman’s offer of help with a brusque grunt. Once on his feet, he beckoned Lakshman, placed his hand on his son’s massive shoulders and hobbled over to Ram. Ram, too, had risen slowly to his feet and stood erect. His face was inscrutable, his eyes awash with emotion, though coupled with surprising tranquillity.

Dashrath placed his hands on Ram’s shoulders. ‘Become the man that I could have become; the man that I did not become.’

Ram whispered softly, his vision clouded, ‘Father...’

‘Make me proud,’ said Dashrath, with tears finally welling up in his eyes.

‘Father...’

‘Make me proud, my son.’



All doubts about the tectonic shifts that had taken place in the royal family were laid to rest when Dashrath moved out of Kaikeyi’s wing of the Ayodhya palace. He had been unable to convincingly answer Kaikeyi’s repeated and forceful questions as to why he had suddenly made Ram the crown prince. Dashrath moved in, along with his personal staff, to Kaushalya’s wing. The bewildered chief queen of Ayodhya had suddenly regained her status. But the timid Kaushalya was careful with her newfound elevation. No changes were attempted, though it was difficult to say whether this was because of her diffidence or fear that the good fortune might not last.

Ram’s brothers were delighted. Bharat and Shatrughan had rushed to his chambers on their return from Branga, word having reached them even as they travelled back home. Roshni had decided to join them.

‘Congratulations, *Dada!*’ said Bharat, embracing his elder brother with obvious delight.

‘You deserve it,’ said Shatrughan.

‘He surely does,’ said Roshni, her face suffused with joy. ‘I ran into Guru Vashishta on my way here. He mentioned that the reduction in the crime rate in Ayodhya is only a tiny example of what Ram can truly achieve.’

‘You bet!’ said Lakshman, enthusiastically.

‘All right, all right,’ said Ram, ‘you’re embarrassing me now!'

‘Aaah,’ grinned Bharat, ‘that’s the point of it all, *Dada!*’

‘As far as I know, speaking the truth has not been banned in any scripture,’ said Shatrughan.

‘And we’d better believe him, *Dada,*’ said Lakshman, laughing heartily. ‘Shatrughan is the only man I know who can recite every single *Veda, Upanishad, Brahmana, Aranyaka, Vedanga, Smriti,* and everything else communicated or known to man!’

‘The weight of his formidable brain pressed so hard upon his body that it arrested his vertical growth!’ Bharat joined in.

Shatrughan boxed Lakshman playfully on his well-toned abdomen, chuckling along good-naturedly.

Lakshman laughed boisterously. ‘Do you really think I can feel your feeble hits, Shatrughan? You may have got all the brain cells created in *Maa’s* womb, but I got all the brawn!’

The brothers laughed even louder. Roshni was happy that, despite all the political intrigue in the Ayodhyan court, the princes shared a healthy camaraderie with each other. Clearly the Gods were looking out for the future of the kingdom.

She patted Ram on his shoulder. ‘I have to go.’

‘Go where?’ asked Ram.

‘Saraiya. You’re aware that I hold a medical camp in our surrounding villages once a month, right? It’s Saraiya’s turn this month.’

Ram looked a little worried. ‘I will send some bodyguards with you. The villages around Saraiya are not safe.’

Roshni smiled. ‘Thanks to you, criminal activity is at an all-time low. Your law enforcement has ensured that. There is nothing to worry about.’

‘I have not been able to achieve that completely, and you know it. Look, there’s no harm in being safe.’

Roshni noticed that Ram was still wearing the *rakhi* she had tied on his wrist a long time ago. She smiled. ‘Don’t worry, Ram. It’s a day trip, I’ll be back before nightfall. And I will not be alone. My assistants will be accompanying me. We will give the villagers free medicines and treatment, if required. Nobody will hurt me. Why would they want to?’

Bharat, who had been listening in on the conversation, stepped up and put his arm around Roshni’s shoulder. ‘You are a good woman, Roshni.’

Roshni smiled in a childlike manner. ‘That I am.’



The blazing afternoon sun did not deter Lakshman, Ayodhya’s finest rider, from honing his skills. He knew that the ability of horse and horseman to come to a sudden halt was of critical advantage in battle. To practise this art he chose a spot some distance away from the city, where sheer cliffs descended into the rapids of the Sarayu deep below.

‘Come on!’ shouted Lakshman, spurring his horse on as it galloped towards the cliff edge.

As his horse thundered dangerously near the edge of the precipice, Lakshman waited till the last moment, leaned forward in his saddle, and wrapped his left arm around the horse’s neck even as he pulled the reins hard with his right. The magnificent beast responded instantly by rearing up on its hind legs. The rear hooves left a mark on the ground as the horse stopped a few feet away from certain death. Gracefully dismounting, Lakshman stroked its mane in appreciation.

‘Well done … well done.’

The horse's tail swished in acknowledgment of the praise.

'Once again?'

The animal had had enough and snorted its refusal with a vigorous shake of its head. Lakshman laughed softly as he patted the horse, remounted and steered the reins in the opposite direction. 'All right. Let's go home.'

As he rode through the woods, a meeting was in progress a short distance away; one he may have liked to eavesdrop on, had he been aware of it. Guru Vashishta was engrossed in deep discussion with the same mysterious Naga.

'That said, I'm sorry you...'

'...failed?' Vashishta completed his sentence. The guru had returned to Ayodhya after a long and unexplained absence.

'That is not the word I would have used, *Guruji*.'

'It's appropriate, though. But it's not just our failure. It's a failure of—'

Vashishta stopped mid-sentence as he thought he heard a sound.

'What is it?' asked the Naga.

'Did you hear something?' asked Vashishta.

The Naga looked around, listened carefully for a few seconds, and then shook his head.

'What about Prince Ram?' asked the Naga, resuming the conversation. 'Are you aware that your friend is on his way here, seeking him?'

'I know that.'

'What do you intend to do?'

'What can I do?' asked Vashishta, raising his hands helplessly. 'Ram will have to handle this himself.'

They heard the unmistakable sound of a twig snapping. Perhaps it was an animal. The Naga murmured cautiously, 'I had better go.'

'Yes,' agreed Vashishta.

He quickly mounted his horse and looked at Vashishta. 'With your permission.'

Vashishta smiled and folded his hands into a namaste. 'Go with Lord Rudra, my friend.'

The Naga returned his namaste. 'Have faith in Lord Rudra, *Guruji*.'

The Naga gently tapped his horse into motion and rode away.



'It's only a sprain,' Roshni reassured the child as she wrapped a bandage around his ankle. 'It will heal in a day or two.'

'Are you sure?' asked the worried mother.

Numerous villagers from the surrounding settlements had gathered at the Saraiya village square. Roshni had patiently attended to them all. This was the last patient.

'Yes,' said Roshni, as she patted the child on his head. 'Now, listen to me,' she cupped the child's face with her hands. 'No climbing trees or running around for the next few days. You have to take it easy till your ankle heals.'

The mother cut in. 'I will ensure that he stays at home.'

‘Good,’ said Roshni.

‘Hey, Roshni *Didi*?’ said the child, pouting with pretend annoyance. ‘Where is my sweet?’

Roshni laughed as she beckoned one of her assistants. She pulled out a sweet from his bag and handed it to the delighted child. She ruffled his hair and then rose from her stool. Stretching her back, she turned to the village chief. ‘If you will excuse me, I should be leaving now.’

‘Are you sure, My Lady?’ asked the chief. ‘It’s late and you may not be able to reach Ayodhya before nightfall. The city gates will be shut.’

‘No, I think I’ll make it in time,’ said a determined Roshni. ‘I have to. My mother wants me back in Ayodhya tonight. She has planned a celebration and I need to be there for it.’

‘All right, My Lady, as you wish,’ said the chief. ‘Thank you so much, once again. I don’t know what we would do without you.’

‘The one you must truly thank is Lord Brahma, for he has given me the skills to be of use to you.’

The chief, as always, bent down respectfully to touch her feet. Roshni, as always, stepped back. ‘Please, don’t embarrass me by touching my feet. I am younger than you.’

The chief folded his hands together in a namaste. ‘May Lord Rudra bless you, My Lady.’

‘May he bless us all!’ said Roshni. She walked up to her horse and mounted swiftly. Her assistants had already gathered all their medical material and had mounted their horses. At a signal from Roshni, the trio rode out of the village.

Moments later, eight horse-mounted men appeared at the chief’s front door. They were from a nearby village called Isla, and had taken some medicines from Roshni earlier in the day. Their village had been struck by an epidemic of viral fever. One of the riders was an adolescent called Dhenuka, the son of the Isla village chief.

‘Brothers,’ said the chief. ‘Have you got everything you need?’

‘Yes,’ said Dhenuka. ‘But where is Lady Roshni? I wanted to thank her.’

The village chief was surprised. Dhenuka was famous for his rude, uncouth behaviour. But then he had met Roshni for the first time today. She must have impressed even this rowdy youth with her decency and goodness. ‘She has ridden out already. She needed to get to Ayodhya before nightfall.’

‘Right,’ said Dhenuka, scanning the road leading out of the village. He smiled and spurred his horse into action.



‘Can I help you, My Lady?’ asked Dhenuka.

Roshni turned around, surprised at the intrusion. They had made good time and she had stopped for some rest near the banks of the Sarayu River. They were an hour’s ride from Ayodhya.

At first she didn’t recognise him, but soon smiled in acknowledgment.

‘That’s all right, Dhenuka,’ said Roshni. ‘Our horses needed some rest. I hope one of

my assistants explained how the medicine should be administered to your people.’

‘Yes, they have,’ said Dhenuka, smiling strangely.

Roshni suddenly felt uneasy. Her gut instinct told her that she must leave. ‘Well, I hope everyone in your village gets better soon.’

She walked up to her horse and reached for the reins. Dhenuka immediately jumped off his horse and held Roshni’s hand, pulling her back. ‘What’s the rush, My Lady?’

Roshni shoved him back and retreated slowly. The other members of Dhenuka’s gang had dismounted by then. Three of them moved towards her assistants.

A terrifying chill went up Roshni’s spine. ‘I... I helped your people...’

Dhenuka grinned ominously. ‘Oh, I know. I’m hoping you can help me too...’

Roshni suddenly turned around and ran. Three men took off after her and caught up in no time. One of them slapped her hard. As blood burst forth from Roshni’s injured lips, the second man twisted her hand brutally behind her back.

Dhenuka ambled up slowly, reached out and caressed her face. ‘A noble woman... Mmm... This is going to be fun.’

His gang burst out laughing.



‘*Dada!*’ screamed Lakshman as he rushed into Ram’s office.

Ram did not raise his eyes as he continued to pore over the documents on his desk. It was the first hour of the second *prahar* and he had expected some peace and quiet.

Ram spoke with casual detachment, continuing to read the document in his hand, ‘What’s the matter now, Lakshman?’

‘*Dada...*’ Lakshman was choked with emotion.

‘Laksh...’ Ram stopped mid-sentence as he looked up and saw the tears streaming down Lakshman’s face. ‘What happened?’

‘*Dada...* Roshni *Didi...*’

Ram immediately stood up, and his chair hurtled back. ‘What happened to Roshni?’

‘*Dada...*’

‘Where is she?’



## Chapter 13

A stunned Bharat stood immobile. Lakshman and Shatrughan were bent over, crying inconsolably. Manthara held her daughter's head in her lap, looking into the distance with a vacant expression, her eyes swollen but dry. She was drained of tears. Roshni's body was covered with a white cloth. She had been found lying next to the Sarayu River by Manthara's men, violated and bare. The corpse of one of her assistants lay a short distance away. He had been brutally bludgeoned to death. The other assistant was found by the side of the road, severely injured but still alive. Doctors tended to him as Ram stood by their side; his face was impassive but his hands shook with fury. He had questions for Roshni's assistant.

When Roshni had not returned by the next morning, Manthara had sent out her men to Saraiya to find and bring back her daughter. They had ridden out at dawn as soon as the city gates were unlocked. An hour's ride away from the city, they had chanced upon Roshni's body. She had been brutally gang-raped. Her head had been banged repeatedly against a flat surface. The marks on her wrist and her back suggested that she had been tied to a tree. Her body was covered with bruises and vicious bite marks. The monsters had ripped off some of her skin with their teeth, around her abdomen and bare arms. She had been beaten with a blunt object all over her body, probably in a sick, sadistic ritual. Her face was torn on one side, from her mouth to the cheekbone, the injuries and blood clots in her mouth suggesting that she was probably alive through this torture. There were semen stains all over her body. She had died in a most gruesome manner, as one of the assailants had poured acid down her throat.

The assistant opened his eyes painfully. Ram bent over him and growled. 'Who were they?'

'I don't think he can speak, My Lord,' said the doctor.

Ram ignored the man as he knelt next to the injured assistant. 'Who were they?' he repeated.

Roshni's assistant barely found the strength to whisper a name before he passed out once again.



Roshni was a rare figure who was popular among the masses as well as the classes. She had devoted her life to charity. She was a woman of impeccable character, a picture of grace and dignity. Many compared her to the fabled *Kanyakumari*, the *Virgin Goddess*. The rage that this brutal crime generated was unprecedented. The city demanded retribution.

The criminals were rounded up quickly from Isla village just as they were planning to escape. The chief of Isla was beaten black and blue by the women of his village when he made vain attempts to protect his son. They had suffered Dhenuka's bestiality in silence

for too long. Even by the standards of Ram's vastly improved police force, the investigations were completed, the case presented in front of judges, and sentences delivered in record time. Within a week, preparations were on to mete out punishment to the perpetrators. They had all been sentenced to death; all except one; all except Dhenuka.

Ram was devastated that Dhenuka, the main perpetrator of the heinous gang rape and murder, had been exempted from maximum punishment on a legal technicality: he was underage. But the law could not be broken. Not on Ram's watch. Ram, the Law Giver, had to do what he had to do. But Ram, the *rakhi*-brother of Roshni, was drowning in guilt, for he was unable to avenge the horrifying death of his sister. He had to punish himself. And he was doing so by inflicting pain on himself.

He sat alone on a chair in the balcony of his private study, gazing out towards the garden where Roshni had tied a *rakhi* on his wrist. He looked down at the golden thread, eyes brimming with tears. The heat of the mid-day sun bore down mercilessly on his bare torso. He shaded his eyes as he looked up at the sun, and inhaled deeply before turning his attention back to his injured right hand. He picked up the wedge of wood placed on the table by his side. Its tip was smouldering.

He looked up at the sky and whispered, 'I'm sorry, Roshni.'

He pressed the burning wood on the inner side of his right arm, the one that still had the sacred thread which represented his solemn promise to protect his sister. He didn't make a sound, his eyes did not flicker. The acrid smell of burning flesh spread through the air.

'I'm sorry...'

Ram closed his eyes as tears flowed freely down his face.



Hours later, Ram sat in his office with a vacant air of misery. His injured arm was covered by his archer's arm band.

'This is wrong, *Dada*!'

Lakshman entered Ram's office, visibly seething with fury. Ram looked up from his desk, the grief in his eyes concealing the rage within.

'It is the law, Lakshman,' said Ram calmly. 'The law cannot be broken. It is supreme, more important than you or me. Even more important than...'

Ram choked on his words as he could not bring himself to take her name.

'Complete your sentence, *Dada*!' Bharat lashed out harshly from near the door.

Ram looked up. He raised his hand towards Bharat, wincing in pain. 'Bharat...'

Bharat strode into the room, his eyes clouded with sorrow, his body taut, his fingers trembling, yet unable to adequately convey the storm that raged within. 'Finish what you were saying, *Dada*. Say it!'

'Bharat, my brother, listen to me...'

'Let it out! Tell us that your damned law is more important than Roshni!' Fierce tears were flowing in a torrent from Bharat's eyes now. 'Say that it matters more to you than that *rakhi* around your wrist.' He leaned over and grabbed Ram's right arm. Ram did not

flinch. ‘Say that the law is more important to you than our promise to protect our Roshni forever.’

‘Bharat,’ said Ram, as he gently freed his arm from his brother’s vice-like grip. ‘The law is clear: minors cannot be executed. Dhenuka is underage and, according to the law, will not be executed.’

‘The hell with the law!’ shouted Bharat. ‘This is not about the law! This is about justice! Don’t you understand the difference, *Dada*? That monster deserves to die!’

‘Yes, he does,’ said Ram, tormented by the guilt that wracked his soul. ‘But a juvenile will not be killed by Ayodhya. That is the law.’

‘Dammit, *Dada*!’ shouted Bharat, banging his hand on the table.

A loud voice boomed from behind them. ‘Bharat!’

The three brothers looked up to find Raj Guru Vashishta standing at the door. Bharat immediately straightened and folded his hands together in a respectful namaste. Lakshman refused to react, his untrammelled anger now focused on his guru.

Vashishta walked in with deliberate, slow-paced footsteps. ‘Bharat, Lakshman, your elder brother is right. The law must be respected and obeyed, whatever the circumstances.’

‘And what about the promise we made to Roshni, *Guruji*? Doesn’t that count?’ asked Bharat. ‘We gave our word that we would protect her. We had a duty towards her too, and we failed in that. Now, we must avenge her.’

‘Your word is not above the law.’

‘*Guruji*, the descendants of Raghu never break their word,’ said Bharat, repeating an ancient family code.

‘If your word of honour is in conflict with the law, then you must break your word and take dishonour upon your name,’ said Vashishta. ‘That is *dharma*.’

‘*Guruji!*’ shouted Lakshman, on the brink of losing all semblance of propriety and control.

‘Look at this!’ said Vashishta, as he walked up to Ram, tore his archer’s band off and raised his arm for all to see. Ram tried to pull it away but Vashishta held firm.

Bharat and Lakshman were shocked. Ram’s right inner arm was badly burnt. The skin around the wound was charred and discoloured.

‘He has been doing this again and again, every single day, ever since the judge announced that Dhenuka will escape death on a legal technicality,’ said Vashishta. ‘I have been trying to get him to stop. But this is his way of punishing himself for having broken his word to Roshni. However, he will not break the law.’



Ram did not attend the execution of the seven rapists.

The judges, in their anger at not being able to put the main accused to death, had, in an act of judicial overreach, prescribed in detail the manner of punishment to be meted out to the seven other accused. Ram’s new law on execution had laid out a quick procedure: to be hanged by the neck till the person is dead. Furthermore, he had decreed that the execution be carried out in a designated area of the prison premises, the clause ending

with giving the judge discretion in matters of procedure. Using this clause, the fuming judges had pronounced a detailed, exceptional procedure for the execution: that it would be carried out in public, that they would be made to bleed to death, and that it would be as painful as can be; they justified their impropriety by asserting that it would serve as a lesson for all time to come. In private they argued that this would also allow people to adequately give vent to their righteous rage. The police had no choice but to obey the ruling.

The execution platform was constructed outside the city walls, built to a height of four feet to enable an adequate view from even a distance. Thousands gathered outside the city walls from early morning to witness the spectacle. Many were armed with eggs and rotten fruit, to be used as missiles.

An angry roar erupted from the crowds as the seven convicts were led out of the mobile prison carts that they had been transported in. It was clear from the injuries on their body that they had already been beaten mercilessly in the prison; despite his best efforts, Ram had not been able to control the moral outrage of not only the prison guards, but also the other prisoners. Without exception, they had all been the recipients, in some form or the other, of Roshni's benevolence. The desire for retribution was strong.

The criminals walked up the steps of the platform. They were first led to wooden pillories erected on a post, with holes where the head and hands were inserted, exposed to the people for ritual public abuse. Having secured the prisoners, the guards marched off the platform.

That was the cue for the crowd. Missiles began to fly with unerring accuracy, accompanied by vehement cursing and spitting. At this distance, even eggs and fruit drew blood, causing tremendous pain. The crowd had been strictly forbidden from hurling any sharp objects or big stones. No one wanted the convicts to die too quickly. They had to suffer. They had to pay.

This lasted for almost a half hour. The executioner finally called the mass attack to an end when the people began to slow down, probably with exhaustion. He stepped onto the platform and walked up to the first convict, whose wild eyes were frantic with terror. With the help of two assistants, he stretched the convict's legs to the maximum, making him almost choke on the pillory. Then the executioner picked up a large nail and an ironsmith's hammer from the floor, with slow, deliberate movements. As his assistants held the splayed legs apart, the executioner calmly nailed the foot into the wooden platform, hammering with rhythmic precision. The convict screamed desperately as the crowd roared its approval. The executioner carefully examined his handiwork before giving it a few more hits. He stepped back with satisfaction. The convict had just about stopped shrieking in agony when the executioner walked up to his other leg.

He then repeated the horror, one by one, with each of the six other miserable convicts, nailing their feet to the wooden platform. The crowd was delirious and roared with each desperate cry of pain that the criminals let out. When finally finished, the executioner moved to the edge of the platform and waved at the crowd as it cheered him on.

He walked up to the first convict he had nailed. The criminal had fainted by now. Some medicine was forced down his throat and he was slapped till he was awake once again.

‘You need to be awake to enjoy this,’ hissed the executioner.

‘Kill ... me,’ pleaded the convict. ‘Please ... mercy...’

The executioner’s face turned to stone. Roshni had helped deliver his baby girl four months back; all she had accepted in return was a meal in his humble abode. ‘Did you have mercy on Lady Roshni, you son of a rabid dog?’

‘Sorry ... sorry ... please ... kill me.’ The criminal burst into tears.

The executioner walked away nonchalantly.

After three hours of brutal, public torture, the executioner pulled out a small, sharp knife from a scabbard tied to his waist. He loosened the pillory hold on the first convict’s right hand and pulled the arm farther out. He examined the wrist closely; he needed to pick the right artery, one that would not bleed out too quickly. He smiled as he found one.

‘Perfect,’ said the executioner, as he brought his knife close and cut delicately, letting the blood spurt out in small bursts. The convict groaned in agony. Death was at least a painful couple of hours away. The executioner moved quickly, slitting the same artery on the wrists of the remaining criminals. The crowd roared and hurled obscenities each time the knife cut.

The executioner gestured to the crowd that he was done for the day, before stepping down from the platform. They began hurling missiles again, only to be interrupted periodically by an official who would check on the flow of blood. It took two-and-a half more hours for the last of the criminals to finally die, all having suffered a slow and painful death that would scar their soul for many rebirths.

As the criminals were declared dead, the crowd roared loudly: ‘Glory to Lady Roshni!’

Manthara sat hunched on an elevated chair, close to the platform. Her eyes still blazed with hatred and fury. She had no doubt the executioner would have tortured the monsters of his own accord; her Roshni was so well loved. Notwithstanding that, she had paid him handsomely to not hold back on the brutality of the execution. She had barely blinked throughout the long and tortuous proceeding, keenly observing each twitch of pain that they had been made to suffer. It was over now, and yet, there was no sense of release, no satisfaction. Her heart had turned to stone.

She clutched an urn close to her chest as she sat. It contained her Roshni’s ashes. She looked down as a tear slipped from one eye. It fell on the urn. ‘I promise you my child, even the last one will be made to pay for what he did to you. Dhenuka too will face the wrath of justice.’



## Chapter 14

‘This is barbaric,’ said Ram. ‘It is against everything Roshni stood for.’

Ram and Vashishta were in the prince’s private office.

‘Why is it barbaric?’ asked Vashishta. ‘Do you think the rapists should not have been killed?’

‘They should have been executed. That is the law. But the way it was done ... at least judges should not give in to anger. It was savage, violent and inhumane.’

‘Really? Is there such a thing as humane killing?’

‘Are you justifying this behaviour, Guruji?’

‘Tell me, will rapists and murderers be terrified of breaking the law now?’

Ram was forced to concede. ‘Yes...’

‘Then, the punishment has served its purpose.’

‘But Roshni wouldn’t have...’

‘There is a school of thought which states that brute force can only be met with equal brute force. One fights fire with fire, Ram.’

‘But Roshni would have said that an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.’

‘There is virtue in non-violence, no doubt, but only when you’re not living in the Age of Kshatriya, of violence. If in the Age of Kshatriya, you are among the very few who believe that “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind”, while everyone else believes otherwise, then you will be the one who is blinded. Universal principles too need to adjust themselves to a changing universe.’

Ram shook his head. ‘Sometimes I wonder if my people are even worth fighting for.’

‘A real leader doesn’t choose to lead only the deserving. He will, instead, inspire his people into becoming the best that they are capable of. A real leader will not defend a monster, but convert that demon into a God; tap into the God that dwells within even him. He takes upon himself the burden of *dharma sankat*, but he ensures that his people become better human beings.’

‘You are contradicting yourself, Guruji. Was this brutal punishment justified, in that case?’

‘According to me, no. But society is not made up of people like you and me. There are all kinds of people with all shades of opinion. A good ruler must prod his people gently in the direction of *dharma*, which lies in the centre, in balance. If there is too much anger in society, leading to chaos and disruptive violence, then the leader needs to move it towards stability and calm. If, on the other hand, a society is passive and uncomplaining, then the leader needs to incite active participation and outrage, even anger, among the people. Every emotion in the universe exists for a purpose; nothing is superfluous in nature’s design. Every emotion also has an opposite: like anger and calm. Society ultimately needs balance. But is this display of anger towards Roshni’s rapists and

murderers the answer to injustice? Maybe, maybe not. We will know for sure in a few decades. For now, it serves as a pressure-release mechanism.'

Ram looked out of the window, deeply unsettled.

Vashishta knew he couldn't afford any further delay. He didn't have much time on his hands. 'Ram, listen to me.'

'Yes, Guruji,' said Ram.

'Someone is on his way here, he's coming for you. He's a great man, and he's going to take you away. I cannot stop it. It is beyond me.'

'Who is this—'

Vashishta cut in. 'I assure you, you will not be in danger. But you may be told things about me. I want you to remember that you are like my son. I want to see you fulfil your *swadharma*, your *true purpose*. My actions have been defined by that goal.'

'Guruji, I don't understand what...'

'Do not believe what you hear about me. You are like my son. That is all I will say for now.'

A confused Ram folded his hands together into a namaste. 'Yes, Guruji.'



'Manthara, please understand, I can do nothing,' said Kaikeyi. 'It is the law.'

Manthara had not wasted any time in seeking an audience with Ayodhya's second queen. Kaikeyi had a determined visitor early the next morning. The queen continued with her breakfast, Manthara having refused the repast; all she sought was her personal brand of justice. But Kaikeyi would never admit to anyone that she had little influence over Dashrath now, much less on Ram. She resorted to blaming the law. To the proud, the pretence of noble compliance is better than admittance of failure.

But Manthara would not be denied. She was aware that Dhenuka was incarcerated in a high-security prison within the city. She also knew that only a member of the royal family could pull off what she had in mind. 'My Lady, I have enough money to buy every nobleman in the kingdom. You know that. It will all be put at your disposal. I promise.'

Kaikeyi's heart skipped a beat. She knew that with Manthara's immense resources on her side, she might even be able to force Bharat onto the throne. She was careful to remain non-committal. 'Thank you for the promise. But it is a promise for tomorrow. And, who has seen tomorrow?'

Manthara reached into the folds of her *angvastram* and pulled out a *hundi*, a *document bearing her official seal*. It promised to honour the debt of a stated sum of money. Kaikeyi was keenly aware that what she was receiving was, for all practical purposes, cash. Anyone in the Sapt Sindhu would give her money against a *hundi* signed by Manthara; her reputation in such matters was unquestionable. Kaikeyi accepted the *hundi* and scanned it quickly as she did so. The queen was shocked. The staggering amount that was neatly inscribed in the document was the equivalent of more than ten years of Ayodhya's royal revenue. In a flash, she had made Kaikeyi richer than the king! The extent of this woman's fabulous wealth was beyond even the queen's imagination.

'I understand that encashing a *hundi* of this large an amount of money might prove

difficult for most merchants, My Lady,’ said Manthara. ‘Whenever you need the money, I will reimburse this *hundi* myself and pay the amount in gold coins.’

Kaikeyi was well aware of another exemplary law: refusal to honour a *hundi* led to many years of imprisonment in a debtor’s prison.

Manthara drove her advantage home. ‘I have a lot more where this came from. It is all at your disposal.’

Kaikeyi held the *hundi* tight. She knew that it was her ticket to realising all her dreams for her son; ones that had started looking distant due to recent events.

Manthara struggled out of her chair, hobbled to Kaikeyi, and leaned over as she hissed, ‘I want him to suffer. I want him to suffer as much as he made my daughter suffer. I am not interested in a speedy death.’

Kaikeyi gripped Manthara’s hands firmly. ‘I swear by the great Lord Indra, that monster shall know what justice means.’

Manthara stared at the queen in stony silence. Her body quivered with cold rage.

‘He will suffer,’ promised Kaikeyi. ‘Roshni will be avenged. That is the word of the queen of Ayodhya.’



‘*Maa*, believe me, I would love to kill that monster with my bare hands,’ said Bharat, earnestly. ‘I know I would be serving the cause of justice if I were to do so. But Ram *Dada*’s new law forbids it.’

Kaikeyi had left for Bharat’s quarters as soon as Manthara exited the palace. She knew exactly what she had to do, and how to go about it. Appealing to her son’s ambition would be a waste of time; he was more loyal to his half-brother than he was to his own mother. She had to appeal to his sense of justice, his righteous anger, his love for Roshni.

‘I fail to understand this new law, Bharat. What kind of justice did it serve?’ asked Kaikeyi passionately. ‘Doesn’t the *Manu Smriti* clearly state that the Gods abandon the land where women are not respected?’

‘Yes, *Maa*, but this is the law! Minors cannot be given the death sentence.’

‘Do you know that Dhenuka is not even underage anymore? He was a minor only when the crime was committed.’

‘I’m aware of that, *Maa*. I’ve had a massive fight with *Dada* over it. I agree with you, justice is far more important than the technicalities of a law. But *Dada* doesn’t understand that.’

‘Yes, he doesn’t,’ fumed Kaikeyi.

‘*Dada* lives in a world that should be, not the world as it is. He wants to enforce the values of an ideal society, but he forgets that Ayodhya is not an ideal society. We are very far from it. And monsters like Dhenuka will always exploit the loopholes in the law and escape. Others will learn from him. A leader has to first make the society worthy of enlightened laws before implementing them.’

‘Then, why don’t you...’

‘I can’t. If I break, or even question *Dada*’s law, I will hurt his credibility. Why will anyone else take him seriously if his own brother doesn’t?’

‘You are missing the point. Criminals who were afraid of Ram’s laws thus far, will now know that there are ways to exploit and work around them. Juveniles will be made to commit crimes planned by adults. There are enough poor, frustrated, underage youths who can easily be influenced into a life of crime for a handful of coins.’

‘It’s possible.’

‘An example must be made of Dhenuka. That will serve as a lesson to others.’

Bharat looked at Kaikeyi quizzically. ‘Why are you so interested in this, *Maa*?’

‘I just want justice for our Roshni.’

‘Really?’

‘She was a noblewoman, Bharat. Your *rakhi*-sister was raped by a bloody villager,’ Kaikeyi drove the point home.

‘I’m curious; would you be thinking differently had it been the other way round? Had a nobleman raped a village woman, would you still be clamouring for justice?’

Kaikeyi remained silent. She knew that if she said yes, Bharat would not believe her.

‘I would want a rapist-murderer from the nobility to be killed as well,’ growled Bharat. ‘Just like I want Dhenuka to be killed. That is true justice.’

‘Then why is Dhenuka still alive?’

‘The other rapists *have* been punished.’

‘This is a first! Partial justice! Disingenuous, isn’t it? There is no such thing as partial justice, son! You either get justice or you don’t!’

‘*Maa*...’

‘The most brutal among them is still alive! What’s more, he’s a guest of Ayodhya! His board and lodging are being financed by the royal treasury; from your coffers. You are personally feeding the man who brutalised your *rakhi*-sister.’

Bharat remained quiet.

‘Maybe Ram did not love Roshni enough,’ ventured Kaikeyi.

‘In the name of Lord Rudra, how can you say that, *Maa*? Ram *Dada* has been punishing himself because...’

‘How does that make any sense?! How does that get her justice?’

Bharat fell silent.

‘You have Kekaya blood in you. You have the blood of Ashwapati coursing through your veins. Have you forgotten our ancient motto? “Blood shall always be answered with blood!” Only then do others learn to be afraid of you.’

‘Of course, I remember that, *Maa*! But I will not hurt Ram *Dada*’s credibility.’

‘I know a way...’

Bharat looked at Kaikeyi, puzzled.

‘You should leave Ayodhya on a diplomatic visit. I will publicise your absence. Double back to Ayodhya incognito; get some of your trusted men to break into prison and escape with Dhenuka. You know what you have to do with him. Resume your foreign visit after the deed is done. Nobody will be any the wiser. Practically the whole city will come under suspicion for the killing, for there is no one in Ayodhya who doesn’t want Dhenuka dead. It will be impossible for Ram to discover who did it. Ram will

escape the stigma of being seen as shielding his brother, for no one will connect you to it. It will just be seen as the one time that Ram was unable to catch the so-called killer. Most importantly, justice will be served.'

'You have really thought this through,' said Bharat. 'And, how do I leave the city without a diplomatic invitation? If I ask for royal permission to leave without one, it will raise suspicion.'

'There is already an invitation for you from Kekaya for a diplomatic visit.'

'No, there isn't.'

'Yes, there is,' said Kaikeyi. 'It did not come to anyone's notice in the chaos and confusion following Roshni's death.' What she did not reveal to Bharat was that she had used some of her newly-acquired wealth to get a back-dated invitation from Kekaya inserted into the Ayodhya diplomatic files. 'Accept the invitation. And then get justice for your sister's soul.'

Bharat sat still, cold as ice, as he contemplated what his mother had just said.

'Bharat?'

He looked at his mother, as if startled by her presence.

'Will you or won't you?'

Bharat murmured, almost to himself, 'Sometimes you have to break the law to do justice.'

Kaikeyi pulled out a piece of bloodied white cloth from the folds of her *angvastram*; it was from the one that had been used to cover Roshni's brutalised body. 'Help her get justice.'

Bharat took the cloth gently from his mother, gazed at it and then at his *rakhi*. He closed his eyes as a tear slid down his cheek.

Kaikeyi came up to her son and held him tight. 'Shakti Maa has her eyes on you, my son. You cannot allow the one who has committed such a heinous crime on a woman to go unpunished. Remember that.'

*Shakti Maa*, the *Mother Goddess*, was a deity that all Indians looked upon with love. And fear.

*Blood shall always be answered with blood.*



Dhenuka was awoken by the sound of a door creaking open in his solitary cell at the royal prison.

There was no light streaming in, even from the high window on this dark, moonless night. He sensed danger. He turned his body towards the door, pretending to be asleep as he clenched his fists tight, ready for attack. He opened his eyes slightly, but it was impossible to see anything in the dark.

He heard a soft whistle above his head. Dhenuka sprang up as he hit out hard. There was nobody there. But the sound *had* come from above. A confused Dhenuka's eyes darted in all directions, desperately trying to see what was going on. The blow came unexpectedly.

He felt a sharp blow on the back of his head and he was thrown to the front. A hand

yanked him by the hair and shoved a wet cloth against his nose. Dhenuka instantly recognised the odour of the sweet-smelling liquid. He himself had used it on his victims on many an occasion. He knew he couldn't fight it. He fell unconscious in a matter of seconds.



Dhenuka awoke to the gentle rolling of wheels on a dirt road. He seemed unhurt, except for the blow to his head, which made it throb unbearably. His kidnappers hadn't injured him. He wondered who they were. Could they be his father's men, helping him escape? Where was he? Now, bumps on the road were making the wheels bounce, and the steady sound of crickets seemed to indicate that they were in a jungle, already outside the city. He tried to raise his head to get a better sense of his whereabouts, but the wet cloth made an appearance again. He fell unconscious.



A splash of water woke Dhenuka up with a start. He shook his head, cursing loudly.

A surprisingly gentle voice was heard. 'Come, now.'

An astonished but wary Dhenuka tried to sit upright. He realised that he was in a covered bullock cart, the kind used to transport hay. He brushed some that was still lying around off his body. He was assisted as he stepped down. It was still pitch dark but some torches had been lit, which allowed him to look around to find his bearings. He still felt groggy and unsteady on his feet; perhaps the after-effects of the sedative that had been administered. He reached out and grabbed the cart to steady himself.

'Drink this,' said a man who silently materialised beside him, holding a cup.

Dhenuka took the cup from his hand but hesitated as he examined the contents warily.

'If I had wanted to kill you, I would have done so already,' said the man. 'This will clear your head. You will need your wits about you for what is to follow.'

Dhenuka drank the contents without a protest. The effect was almost instantaneous. His head cleared and his mind became alert. As his senses stabilised, Dhenuka heard the sound of flowing water.

*Perhaps I'm near the river. The moment the sun rises, I will swim across to safety. But where is Father? Only he could have bribed the officials to engineer my escape.*

'Thank you,' said Dhenuka, as he returned the cup to the man. 'But where is my father?'

The man silently took the cup and melted into the darkness. Dhenuka was left alone. 'Hey! Where are you going?'

A well-built figure emerged from where the man had disappeared. His fair skin shone in the light of the fire torches, as did his bright green *dhoti* and *angavastram*. He wore a small head band that held his long hair in place; it had an intricately-built, golden peacock feather attached to it. His eyes, normally mischievous, were like shards of ice.

'Prince Bharat!' exclaimed Dhenuka, as he quickly went down on one knee.

Bharat walked up to Dhenuka without replying.

Dhenuka had heard of Bharat's popularity with the women of Kosala. 'I knew you would understand me. I didn't expect any better from your strait-laced elder brother.'

Bharat stood still, breathing evenly.

‘I knew you would understand that women have been created for our enjoyment, My Lord. Women are meant to be used by men!’ Dhenuka laughed softly, bowed his head, and reached out to hold Bharat’s *angvastram* in a gesture of humble gratitude.

Bharat moved suddenly, flung Dhenuka’s hand aside, and grabbed his throat, a menacing voice emerging through his gritted teeth. ‘Women are not meant to be used. They are meant to be loved.’

Dhenuka’s expression changed to one of unadulterated terror. Like a trapped animal, he stood rooted to the spot as twenty powerfully-built men emerged, seemingly from nowhere. He struggled to break free of Bharat as the prince began to slowly squeeze his throat.

‘My Lord,’ interrupted a man from behind.

Bharat caught his breath and abruptly released Dhenuka. ‘You will not die so quickly.’

Dhenuka coughed desperately as he strained to recover his breath. All of a sudden he straightened, whirled around and tried to make a dash for it. Two men grabbed him roughly and dragged him back to the cart, kicking and screaming.

‘The law!’ screeched Dhenuka. ‘The law! I cannot be touched. I was a juvenile!’

A third man stepped forward and punched Dhenuka in the jaw, breaking a tooth and drawing blood. ‘You are not a juvenile anymore.’

‘But Prince Ram’s laws—’

Dhenuka’s words were cut short as the man boxed him again in the face, this time breaking his nose. ‘Do you see Prince Ram anywhere?’

‘Tie him up,’ said Bharat.

Some men picked up the torches as two others dragged Dhenuka backwards, to a large tree. They spread his arms wide and tied them around the tree trunk with a rope. They spread his legs apart and repeated the process with his feet. One of them turned around. ‘It is done, My Lord.’

Bharat turned to his side. ‘I’m saying this for the last time, Shatrughan. Leave. You don’t have to be here. Stay away from this...’

Shatrughan cut in. ‘I will always be by your side, *Dada*.’

Bharat stared at Shatrughan with expressionless eyes.

Shatrughan continued. ‘This may be against the law, but it is just.’

Bharat nodded and began to walk forward. As he approached Dhenuka, he pulled out a piece of bloodied white cloth from under his waistband, touched it to his head reverentially, and tied it around his right wrist, above the *rakhi*.

Dhenuka was as desperate as a tethered goat surrounded by a pride of lions. He bleated, ‘My Lord, please, let me go. I swear, I will never touch a woman again.’

Bharat slapped him hard across his face. ‘Do you recognise this place?’

Dhenuka looked around and realisation dawned. This was where he and his gang had raped and murdered Roshni.

Bharat held out his hand. One of his soldiers immediately stepped up and handed him a metallic bottle. Bharat opened the lid and held it close to Dhenuka’s nose. ‘You will

soon know what pain really means.'

Dhenuka burst into tears as he recognised the acidic smell. 'My Lord, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Forgive me... Let me go... Please...'

'Remember Roshni *Didi*'s cries, you filthy dog,' growled Shatrughan.

Dhenuka pleaded desperately, 'Lady Roshni was a good woman, My Lord... I was a monster... I'm sorry... But she wouldn't want you to do this...'

Bharat returned the bottle to the soldier while another soldier handed him a large twisted drill. Bharat placed the sharp end of the drill on Dhenuka's shoulder. 'Maybe you are right. She was so good that she would have forgiven even a monster like you. But I am not as good as she was.'

Dhenuka began wailing in a loud, high-pitched voice as a soldier stepped up and handed Bharat a hammer.

'Scream all you want, you demented bastard,' said the soldier. 'Nobody will hear you.'

'Nooooo! Please...'

Bharat raised his arm and held the hammer high. He positioned the twisted drill on Dhenuka's shoulder. He just wanted a hole large enough to pour some acid into. A quick death would end the suffering and pain too soon.

'Blood shall always be answered with blood...' whispered Bharat.

The hammer came down, the drill penetrated perfectly. Desperate screams rang out loud and clear, above the noise of the raging Sarayu.



## Chapter 15

As the first rays of the sun hesitantly nudged at the darkness, Kaikeyi set off for a rendezvous with Bharat and Shatrughan across the Sarayu River, beyond the northernmost tip of Ayodhya; it was at least a two-hour ride from the southern side, where Dhenuka's corpse lay.

The brothers had assiduously washed off the blood and other signs of the events of the night before. Their blood-stained clothes had been burnt after they donned fresh garments. Kaikeyi was accompanied by Bharat's bodyguards.

She stepped down from her chariot and embraced the two. 'You have served justice, my boys.'

Bharat and Shatrughan did not say anything, their faces a mask that hid the storm still raging within; anger still coursing through them. Sometimes wrath is required to deliver justice. But the strange thing about anger is that it is like fire; the more you feed it, the more it grows. It takes a lot of wisdom to know when to let anger go. The princes, still young, had not yet mastered this.

'And now, you must leave,' said Kaikeyi.

Bharat held out the piece from the blood-stained cloth that had covered Roshni's body.

'I will return this to Manthara personally,' said Kaikeyi, as she took the cloth from Bharat.

Bharat bent down to touch his mother's feet. 'Bye, *Maa*.' Shatrughan followed suit wordlessly.



Dhenuka's body was found by a group of villagers walking by, as they heard the cawing of a murder of crows, fighting over his entrails.

The villagers cut the ropes that still held the body and laid it on the ground. Numerous holes had been viciously hammered into him while he was still alive, judging by the clot formation around the wounds. The burn marks around the holes indicated that something acidic had been poured into each of these wounds.

Death had become inevitable once a sword was rammed into Dhenuka's abdomen, right through to the tree trunk. He must have slowly bled to death; he was probably still alive when the crows had swooped down for a feast.

One of the villagers recognised Dhenuka. 'Why don't we just leave?' he asked.

'No, we'll wait,' said the leader of the group, wiping a tear from his eye as he asked one of his men to walk to Ayodhya and convey the news. He too had known Roshni's kindness. His anger had known no bounds when he had discovered that Dhenuka would be let off on a legal technicality. He wished that he'd been the one who killed this monster. He turned to the Sarayu and thanked the River Goddess, for justice had been served.

He looked down and spat on the corpse.



Manthara rode out of the North Gate on a horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by Druhyu, her man Friday, and some bodyguards. They crossed the Grand Canal, moving steadily till they reached the cremation ground by the river in half an hour. At the far end of the ghats was the temple of the mythical first mortal, Lord Yama. Interestingly, Lord Yama was revered as both the God of Death as well as the God of Dharma. The ancients believed that *dharma* and death were interlinked. In a sense, a tally sheet was drawn at the end of one's mortal life; if there was an imbalance, the soul would have to return to physical form in another mortal body; if the accounts were in balance and karma was in alignment with *dharma*, then the soul would attain ultimate salvation: release from the cycle of rebirth, and reunification with the universal soul, the *Parmatma*, the *Ekam*, the *Brahman*.

Seven pandits conducted the rites in the temple of Lord Yama as Manthara held the urn, within which lay the ashes of her most beauteous creation. In a second urn was the bloodied white cloth that Kaikeyi had handed to her in the morning.

Druhyu sat by the river, quietly contemplating the tumultuous changes that had occurred within a brief span of time. His mistress had changed forever. He had never seen her do the things she had done in the past few days; actions that could directly harm her business and even her personal well-being. She had staked her life's work at the altar of vengeance. Druhyu suspected that his true lord would be incensed by the amount of money that had been thrown away of late. A large portion of it was not Manthara's to do with as she pleased. He was afraid for his own well-being. A movement at the temple door distracted him.

As Manthara walked towards the ghats, her limp seemed more pronounced, her hunched back more bent. Her guards walked silently behind her, followed by the chanting *pandits*. She slowly descended to the river, one step at a time. She sat on the final step, the water from the river edge gently lapping around her feet. She waved the guards away. The *pandits* stood a step above, diligently reciting Sanskrit mantras to help the soul on its journey into the next world, beyond the mythical river Vaitarni. They concluded their prayers by repeating a hymn from the *Isha Vasya Upanishad*, one that had also been recited during the cremation ceremony.

*Vayur anilam amritam; Athedam bhasmantam shariram*

*Let this temporary body be burned to ashes. But the breath of life belongs elsewhere. May it find its way back to the Immortal Breath.*

Druhyu observed the proceedings from a distance, his attention focused on the pathetic shadow of the calculating, sharp woman that Manthara had once been. A single thought kept running in his mind, as if on a loop.

*The old woman has lost it. She is no longer useful to the true lord. I need to take care of myself now.*

Manthara held the urn close to her bosom. Inhaling deeply, she finally mustered the strength to do what had to be done. She opened the lid and turned the urn upside down,

allowing her daughter's ashes to drift away in the river waters. She held the bloodied white cloth close to her face and whispered, 'Don't come back to this ugly world, my child; it has not been created for one as pure as you.'

Manthara stared at her daughter's remains moving steadily away from her. She looked up at the sky, her chest bursting with anger.

*Ram...*

Manthara squeezed her eyes shut, her breath emerging in erratic rasps.

*You protected that monster... You protected Dhenuka... I will remember...*



'Who's responsible for this?' growled Ram, his body taut with tension. He was surrounded by police officials.

Ram had rushed to the scene of the crime as soon as he received intimation of the grisly murder of Dhenuka. The officers were silent, taken aback by the fury of a man who was defined by his composure.

'This is a travesty of the law, a perversion of justice,' said Ram. 'Who did this?'

'I ... I don't know, My Lord,' said one of the officers nervously.

Ram leaned towards the frightened man, stepping closer. 'Do you really expect me to believe that?'

A loud shout was heard from behind. '*Dada!*'

Ram looked up to see Lakshman galloping furiously towards them.

'*Dada,*' said Lakshman, as he pulled up close. 'You need to come with me right away.'

'Not now, Lakshman,' said Ram, waving his hand in dismissal. 'I'm busy.'

'*Dada,*' said Lakshman, 'Guru Vashishta has asked for you.'

Ram looked at Lakshman with irritation. 'I will be back soon. Please tell Guruji that I have to—'

Lakshman interrupted his elder brother. '*Dada,* Maharishi Vishwamitra is here! He is asking for you; specifically for you.'

Ram stared at Lakshman, stunned.

Vishwamitra was the chief of the Malayaputras, the mysterious tribe left behind by the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram. They represented the sixth Vishnu, tasked with carrying forward his mission on earth. The legendary powers of the Malayaputras instilled a sense of awe among the people of the Sapt Sindhu. This effect was further enhanced by Vishwamitra's fearsome reputation. Born as Kaushik, a Kshatriya, he was the son of the great King Gaadhi. Despite being a brave warrior in his youth, his nature drove him towards becoming a *rishi*. Against all odds, he succeeded. Thereafter, he reached the pinnacle of Brahmin ascension when he became the chief of the Malayaputras. After taking over as the chief, he had changed his name to Vishwamitra. The Malayaputras were tasked with assisting the next Mahadev, when he appeared. They believed their primary reason for existing, however, was to give rise to the next Vishnu when the time came.

Ram looked down at Dhenuka's body and then at his brother, torn between the two calls of duty. Lakshman dismounted and caught him by his elbow.

‘Dada, you can come back to this,’ insisted Lakshman, ‘but Maharishi Vishwamitra should not be kept waiting. We have all heard about his legendary temper.’

Ram relented. ‘My horse,’ he ordered.

One of the officers quickly fetched his horse. Ram mounted and swiftly tapped the animal into action; Lakshman followed him. As the horses galloped towards the city, Ram recalled the odd conversation he had had with Vashishta a few days earlier.

*Someone is on his way here... I cannot stop it...*

‘What can Maharishi Vishwamitra possibly want from me?’ whispered Ram to himself.

*...you serve a purpose for him too...*

Ram brought his attention back to the present and made a clicking noise, urging the horse to move quicker.



‘Are you saying no to me, Your Highness?’ asked Vishwamitra in a mellifluous voice. But the underlying threat was unmistakable.

As if his position and reputation were not fearsome enough, Maharishi Vishwamitra’s towering persona added to his indomitable aura. He was almost seven feet in height, of gigantic proportions, with a large belly offset by a sturdy, muscular chest, shoulders and arms. His flowing white beard, Brahmin knotted tuft of hair on an otherwise shaven head, large limpid eyes and the holy *janau*, *sacred thread*, tied over his shoulder, stood in startling contrast to the numerous battle scars that lined his face and body. His dark complexion was enhanced by his saffron *dhoti* and *angvastram*.

Emperor Dashrath and his three queens had received the maharishi in the king’s private office. The maharishi had come straight to the point. One of his *ashrams* was under attack and he needed Ram’s help to defend it; that was it. No explanations were offered as to the nature of the attack, and how exactly the young prince would defend the mighty Malayaputras, who were reputed to have one of the most feared militias in India within their ranks. The great chief of the Malayaputras would not be questioned or denied.

Dashrath swallowed nervously. Even at the peak of his powers, he would have been afraid to take on Vishwamitra; he was frankly terrified now, though thoroughly confused. He had grown increasingly fond of Ram over the last few months and he did not want to part with him. ‘My Lord, I’m not suggesting that I do not want to send him with you. It’s just that, I feel General Mrigasya should be equal to the task. My entire army is at your disposal and...’

‘I want Ram,’ said Vishwamitra, his eyes boring into Dashrath’s, unnerving the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu. ‘And, I also want Lakshman.’

Kaushalya did not know what to make of the offer from Vishwamitra. While, on the one hand, she was delighted with the possibility that Ram would have a chance to get closer to the great sage, on the other, she was concerned that Vishwamitra would simply use Ram’s martial skills for his own ends and then discard him. Moreover, Kaikeyi could easily grab the opportunity presented by Ram’s absence to have Bharat installed

as the crown prince. Kaushalya responded the only way she could when faced with such situations: she shed silent tears.

Kaikeyi felt no such conflict. She already found herself regretting having agreed to Manthara's plotting, and wished her son was here. 'Maharishiji,' said Kaikeyi, 'I would be honoured to send Bharat to accompany you. We may just have to—'

'But Bharat is not in Ayodhya,' said Vishwamitra. It seemed that there was nothing he did not know.

'You are right, Maharishiji,' said Kaikeyi. 'That's what I was about to say. We may have to wait for a few weeks. I can send a message immediately to have Bharat recalled.'

Vishwamitra stared into Kaikeyi's eyes. A nervous Kaikeyi looked down, feeling inexplicably as if her secrets had been suddenly exposed. There was an uncomfortable silence. Then Vishwamitra's booming voice filled the room. 'I want Ram, Your Highness; and Lakshman, of course. I don't need anyone else. Now, are you sending them with me or not?'

'Guriji,' said Sumitra, 'I offer my sincere apologies for interrupting the conversation. But I think that there has been a big protocol blunder. You have already been with us for a while, but our venerated raj guru, Maharishi Vashishta, has still not had the pleasure of meeting you. Should we send word to him to grace us with his presence? We will carry on our discussion once he's here.'

Vishwamitra laughed. 'Hmm! What I've heard is true, after all. The third and junior-most queen is the smartest of them all.'

'Of course I'm not the smartest, Maharishiji,' said Sumitra, feeling her face redden with embarrassment. 'I was just suggesting that protocol...'

'Yes. Yes, of course,' said Vishwamitra. 'Follow your protocol. Bring your raj guru. We shall then talk about Ram.'

The king and his wives rushed out of the room, leaving the maharishi alone with some petrified attendants.



Vashishta entered the private royal office alone and dismissed the attendants. No sooner did they leave than Vishwamitra stood up with a sneer, 'So what arguments will you use to keep him away from me, Divodas?'

Vishwamitra had purposely used the *gurukul* name of Vashishta, a name that the sage had had when he was a child in school.

'I am not a child anymore, Maharishi Vishwamitra,' said Vashishta, with deliberate politeness. 'My name is Vashishta. And I would prefer it if you addressed me as Maharishi Vashishta.'

Vishwamitra stepped close. 'Divodas, what are your arguments? Your royal family is a divided house, in any case. Dashrath does not want to part with his sons. Kaushalya is confused, while Kaikeyi definitely wants Bharat to be the one who accompanies me. And Sumitra, smart Sumitra, is happy come what may, for one of her sons will be aligned to whoever wins. You have done quite a job here, haven't you, *Raj Guru*?'

Vashishta ignored the barb. It was clear to him that there was little he could do. Ram and Lakshman would have to go with Vishwamitra, regardless of the arguments he could make.

‘Kaushik,’ said Vashishta, using Vishwamitra’s childhood name, ‘it looks like you will force your way once again; no matter how unfair it is.’

Vishwamitra took one more step towards Vashishta, looming large over the raj guru. ‘And it looks like you will run away, once again. Still scared of a fight, eh, Divodas?’

Vashishta closed his fist tight, but his face remained deadpan. ‘You will never understand why I did what I did. It was for—’

‘For the greater good?’ sniggered Vishwamitra, stopping him mid-sentence. ‘Do you really expect me to believe that? There is nothing more pathetic than people hiding their cowardice behind seemingly noble intentions.’

‘You haven’t lost any of your haughty Kshatriya ways, have you? It’s amazing that you actually have the temerity to imagine that you represent the great Lord Parshu Ram, the one who destroyed Kshatriya arrogance!’

‘Everyone is aware of my background, Divodas. At least I don’t hide anything.’ Vishwamitra glared at the shorter man. ‘Should I reveal your true origin to your precious little boy? Tell him what I did to—’

‘You didn’t do me any favour!’ shouted Vashishta, finally losing control.

‘I may just do one now,’ smiled Vishwamitra.

Vashishta turned around and stormed out of the room. Despite the passage of time, he felt he still owed the arrogant Vishwamitra a modicum of courtesy for the memory of the friendship they once had.



## Chapter 16

A week later, Ram and Lakshman stood at the balustrade of the ship of the chief of Malayaputras as it sailed down the Sarayu. They were on their way to one of Vishwamitra's several *ashrams* on the banks of the Ganga River.

'Dada, this massive ship belongs to Maharishi Vishwamitra, as do the two that are following us,' whispered Lakshman. 'There are at least three hundred trained and battle-hardened warriors aboard. I have heard stories about thousands more at his secret capital, wherever that is. What in Lord Parshu Ram's name does he need us for?'

'I don't know,' said Ram, as he looked into the dark expanse of water. Everyone aboard kept a safe distance from them. 'This makes no sense. But Father has ordered us to treat Maharishi Vishwamitra as our guru and that is—'

'Dada, I don't think Father had a choice.'

'And neither do we.'



A few days later, Vishwamitra ordered the ships to drop anchor. Boats were quickly lowered and fifty people rowed across to the shore, Ram and Lakshman included.

As the boats banked, the Malayaputras jumped ashore onto the narrow beach and began to prepare the ground for a *puja*.

'What are we planning to do here, Guriji?' asked Ram politely as he folded his hands into a namaste.

'Hasn't your raj guru taught you anything about this place?' asked Vishwamitra, his eyebrows furrowed together, a sardonic smile on his face.

Ram would not say anything uncomplimentary about his guru, Vashishta. But Lakshman had no such compunctions.

'No Guriji, he hasn't,' said Lakshman, shaking his head vigorously.

'Well, this is where Lord Parshu Ram offered a prayer to the fifth Vishnu, Lord Vaaman, before he set out to battle Kaartaveerya Arjun.'

'Wow,' said Lakshman, as he looked around with newfound respect.

'He also performed the *Bal-Atibal puja* here,' continued Vishwamitra, 'which bestowed upon him health, and freedom from hunger and thirst.'

'May I request you, Guriji,' said Ram, his hands held together in respect before Vishwamitra, 'to teach us as well.'

Lakshman became distinctly uncomfortable. He had no desire to be free of hunger and thirst. He quite liked his food and drink.

'Of course,' said Vishwamitra. 'Both of you can sit beside me as I conduct the *puja*. The effect of the *puja* reduces your hunger and thirst for at least one week. The impact on your health is life-long.'



Within a few weeks, the convoy of ships reached the confluence of the Sarayu and the Ganga, after which they steered westwards up the Ganga. They dropped anchor a few days later and secured the vessels to a makeshift jetty. Leaving a skeletal staff behind, Vishwamitra, Ram and Lakshman set off on foot along with two hundred warriors. The entourage finally reached the local *ashram* of the Malayaputras after a four-hour march in a south-easterly direction.

Ram and Lakshman had been told that they were being brought to the *ashram* to bolster the efforts to protect it from enemy attacks. But what they saw was a complete surprise to the brothers. The *ashram* was not designed for any kind of serious defence. A rudimentary fence of hedge and thorny creepers would probably suffice to keep out some animals, but was certainly not enough to stave off well-armed soldiers. The shallow stream near the *ashram* had not been adequately barricaded to prevent a determined attack on the camp. There was no area cleared, either outside or inside the fence, to afford a line of sight. The mud-walled, thatch-roofed huts in the *ashram* were clustered together; a serious fire hazard. All one needed to do was set fire to a single hut, and the blaze would quickly spread through the *ashram*. Even the animals had been housed in the innermost circle of the camp, instead of near the boundary, from where their instinct would provide a timely warning of an attack.

‘Something is not right, *Dada*,’ Lakshman spoke under his breath. ‘This camp looks like it’s a new settlement; recent, in fact. The defences are, quite frankly, useless and...’

Ram signalled him with his eyes to keep quiet. Lakshman stopped talking and turned around to find Vishwamitra walking up to them. The maharishi was slightly taller than even the gigantic Lakshman.

‘Have your lunch, princes of Ayodhya,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘Then we will talk.’



The Ayodhyan princes sat by themselves, ignored by the denizens of the camp who scurried about, implementing the instructions of Arishtanemi, the legendary military chief of the Malayaputras and Vishwamitra’s right-hand man. Vishwamitra sat in *sukhaasan* under a banyan tree: his legs folded in a simple cross-legged position, with each foot tucked beneath the opposite knee. His hands lay on his knees, palms down; his eyes were closed; the relaxed yogic *aasan* for non-rigorous meditation.

Lakshman observed Arishtanemi speaking to an aide as he pointed towards the princes. Within moments, a woman dressed in a saffron *dhoti* and blouse approached Ram and Lakshman with two plantain leaves. She spread them out in front of the princes and sprinkled ritual water on them. She was followed by a couple of young students bearing food bowls. Food was served under the able supervision of the woman.

She smiled, folded her hands together into a namaste and said, ‘Please eat, princes of Ayodhya.’

Lakshman looked suspiciously at the food and then at Vishwamitra in the distance. A banana leaf had been placed in front of the maharishi as well, on which was placed a solitary *jambu* fruit: the fruit that had been consecrated with the ancient name of India, *Jambudweep*.

‘I think they are trying to poison us, *Dada*,’ said Lakshman. ‘As guests we have been served all this food, while Maharishi Vishwamitra is eating just one *jambu* fruit.’

‘That fruit is not for eating, Lakshman,’ said Ram, as he tore a piece of the *roti* and scooped some vegetables with it.

‘*Dada!*’ said Lakshman, as he grabbed Ram’s hand, preventing him from eating.

Ram smiled. ‘If they wanted to kill us, they had better opportunities on the ship. This food is not poisoned. Eat!’

‘*Dada*, you trust every—’

‘Just eat, Lakshman.’



‘This is where they attacked,’ said Vishwamitra, pointing to the partially-burnt hedge fencing.

‘Here, *Guruji?*’ asked Ram, astonished as he cast a quick look at Lakshman before turning his attention back to Vishwamitra.

‘Yes, here,’ said Vishwamitra.

Arishtanemi stood behind Vishwamitra in silence.

Ram’s incredulity was well founded. It didn’t look like much of an attack. A two-metre wide strip of the hedge fencing had been partially burnt. Some miscreants seemed to have poured paraffin and set it on fire; they must not have had sufficient quantities of it, for practically the whole fence was still intact. The vandals must have struck at night time, when dew formation on the hedge had thwarted their amateur attempts at arson.

These were clearly not professionals.

Ram stepped out of the boundary through the small breach in the fencing and picked up a partially burnt piece of cloth.

Lakshman quickly followed his brother, took the cloth from Ram and sniffed it, but detected no flammable substance. ‘It’s a piece of cloth from an *angvastram*. One of them must have accidentally set his own clothes on fire. Idiot!’

Lakshman’s eyes fell on a knife; he examined it closely before handing it to his brother. It was old and rusty, though well sharpened; it clearly did not belong to a professional soldier.

Ram looked at Vishwamitra. ‘What are your orders, *Guruji?*’

‘I need you to find these attackers who disrupt our rituals and other *ashram* activities,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘They must be destroyed.’

An irritated Lakshman butted in. ‘But these people are not even...’

Ram signalled for silence. ‘I will follow your orders, *Guruji*, because that is what my father has asked me to do. But you need to be honest with me. Why have you brought us here when you have so many soldiers at your command?’

‘Because you have something that my soldiers do not possess,’ answered Vishwamitra.

‘What is that?’

‘Ayodhya blood.’

‘What difference does that make?’

‘The attackers are the Asuras of the old code.’

‘They’re Asuras?!’ exclaimed Lakshman. ‘But there are no more Asuras left in India. Those demons were killed by Lord Rudra a long time ago.’

Vishwamitra looked at Lakshman with exasperation. ‘I’m talking to your elder brother.’ Turning back to Ram, he said, ‘The Asuras of the old code would not dream of attacking an Ayodhyan.’

‘Why, Guruji?’

‘Have you heard of Shukracharya?’

‘Yes, he was the guru of the Asuras. He is, or was, worshipped by the Asuras.’

‘And do you know where Shukracharya was from?’

‘Egypt.’

Vishwamitra smiled. ‘Yes, that is technically true. But India has a big heart. If a foreigner comes here and accepts our land as his motherland, he is a foreigner no more. He becomes Indian. Shukracharya was brought up here. Can you guess which Indian city was his home town?’

Ram’s eyes widened with amazement. ‘Ayodhya?!’

‘Yes, Ayodhya. The Asuras of the old code will not attack any Ayodhyan, for that land is sacred to them.’



Ram, Lakshman and Arishtanemi rode out of the *ashram* the following day, at the first hour of the second *prahar*. Accompanied by fifty soldiers, they moved in a southward direction. The local Asura settlement was believed to be a little more than a day’s ride away.

‘Tell me about their leaders, Arishtanemiji,’ Ram respectfully asked the military chief of the Malayaputras.

Arishtanemi was equal in height to Lakshman, but unlike the young prince, was lean, almost lanky. He wore a saffron *dhoti* with an *angvastram* slung over his right shoulder, one end of which was wrapped around his right arm. He wore a *janau* thread; his shaven head and a knotted tuft of hair at the crown were signs of his Brahmin antecedents. Unlike most Brahmins, though, Arishtanemi’s wheat-complexioned body had a profusion of battle scars. It was rumoured that he was more than seventy years of age, although he did not look a day older than twenty. Perhaps Maharishi Vishwamitra had revealed to him the secret of the mysterious Somras, the drink of the Gods. Its anti-ageing properties could keep one healthy till the astounding age of two hundred.

‘The Asura horde is led by a woman called Tadaka, the wife of their deceased chieftain, Sumali,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Tadaka belongs to a Rakshasa clan.’

Ram frowned. ‘I thought the Rakshasas were aligned with the Devas, and by extension, their descendants: us.’

‘The Rakshasas are warriors, Prince Ram. Do you know what the word “Rakshasa” means? It’s derived from the old Sanskrit word for protection, *Raksha*. It is said that the word Rakshasa emerged from their victims asking to “be protected from them”. They were the finest mercenaries of ancient times. Some had allied with the Devas, while others joined the Asuras. Raavan himself is half Rakshasa.’

‘Oh!’ Ram exclaimed, as his eyebrows rose.

Arishtanemi continued. ‘Tadaka maintains a militia of fifteen soldiers, led by her son, Subahu. Along with women, children and the old, the settlement must be made up of not more than fifty people.’

Ram frowned. *Just fifteen soldiers?*



Early next morning, the party left the temporary camp they’d set up the previous night.

‘The Asura camp is an hour’s ride from here,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘I have asked our soldiers to be on the lookout for scouts and possible traps.’

As they rode on, Ram steered his horse towards Arishtanemi’s, clearly intending to impose further conversation on the taciturn soldier. ‘Arishtanemiji,’ said Ram, ‘Maharishi Vishwamitra mentioned the Asuras of the old code. It can’t possibly comprise only this band of fifty. Fifty people cannot keep an ancient code alive. Where are the others?’

Arishtanemi smiled but did not proffer a response. *This boy is smart. I should warn Guruji to be careful with his words.*

Ram persisted with his questioning. ‘Had they been in India, the Asuras would have launched an attack on us, the descendants of the Devas. This suggests that they must not be here. Where are they?’

Arishtanemi sighed imperceptibly and looked up at the dense canopy of trees preventing light from shining through. He decided to oblige the prince with the truth. ‘Have you heard about the Vayuputras?’

‘Of course, I have,’ said Ram. ‘Who hasn’t? They are the tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, just as your people are the ones left behind by the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram. The Vayuputras are tasked with protecting India from Evil whenever it arises. They believe that one among them will rise and become the next Mahadev when the time comes.’

Arishtanemi smiled enigmatically.

‘But what does this have to do with the Asuras?’ asked Ram.

Arishtanemi’s expression did not change.

‘By the great Lord Rudra, are the Vayuputras giving shelter to the Asuras, to India’s enemies?’

Arishtanemi’s smile broadened.

And then, the truth hit Ram. ‘The Asuras have joined the Vayuputras...’

‘Yes, they have.’

Ram was perplexed. ‘But, why? Our ancestors went to great lengths to destroy the Asura Empire in India. They should hate all the Devas and their descendants. And here they are, having joined a group whose sole purpose is to protect India from Evil; why are they protecting the descendants of their mortal enemies?’

‘Yes, they are, aren’t they?’

Ram was stunned. ‘But, why?’

‘Because Lord Rudra ordered them to do so.’

This made no sense anymore! Ram was shocked beyond belief, but more importantly, intellectually provoked. He looked towards the sky with a bemused expression. *The people of the masculine are very strange, no doubt; but also magnificent!* He was on his way now to meet some of these quixotic creatures.

*But why should they be destroyed? What law have they broken? I'm sure Arishtanemiji knows. But he will not tell me. He is loyal to Maharishi Vishwamitra. I need to get some more information about the Asuras, instead of blindly attacking them.*

Ram frowned as he suddenly became aware that Arishtanemi was keenly observing him, almost as if he was attempting to read his mind.



The mounted platoon had ridden for half an hour when Ram silently signalled for them to halt. Everyone immediately pulled their reins. Lakshman and Arishtanemi steered their horses gently towards Ram.

‘Up ahead,’ whispered Ram, ‘high up that tree.’

Around fifty metres ahead, an enemy soldier sat on a *machan* built on a fig tree, around twenty metres from the ground. Some branches had been pulled in front, in a vain attempt to conceal it.

‘The idiot is not even camouflaged properly,’ whispered Lakshman with disgust.

The Asura soldier was dressed in a red *dhoti*; if the intention was to serve as a spy or a lookout, the effect was disastrous, for the colour screamed his presence; like a parrot in a parade of crows.

‘Red is their holy colour,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘They wear it whenever they go into battle.’

Lakshman was incredulous. ‘But he is supposed to be a spy, not a warrior! Amateurs!’

Ram removed the bow slung over his shoulder and tested the pull of the string. He bent forward and rubbed his horse’s neck as he crooned a soft tune; the animal became completely still. Ram pulled an arrow from the quiver tied to his back, nocked it and pulled the string back, aiming quickly. He flicked his releasing thumb and fired the arrow. The missile spun ferociously as it sped to its target, hitting its mark with precision: the thick rope that held the *machan* in place. It immediately gave way and the Asura came crashing down, hitting the branches on his downward journey. This effectively broke his fall and he landed on the ground, reasonably uninjured.

Arishtanemi stared in wonder at Ram’s exquisite archery. *This boy is talented.*

‘Surrender immediately and you will not be harmed,’ Ram reassured. ‘We only need some answers from you.’

The Asura quickly rose to his feet. He was, really, a youth, no more than fifteen years of age. His face was twisted with anger and disgust. He spat loudly and tried to draw his sword. Since he had not held the scabbard with his other hand to steady it, he only succeeded in getting the sword stuck. He cursed and yanked hard and the blade finally came free. Arishtanemi jumped off his horse and casually drew his sword.

‘We don’t want to kill you,’ said Ram. ‘Please surrender.’

Lakshman noticed that the poor boy's grip on the sword hilt was all wrong; it was vice-like, which would quickly tire him out. Also, the weight of the sword was taken by his forearm, instead of his shoulder and triceps, the way it should be. He held the weapon from the farthest edge of the hilt; it would just get knocked out of his hand!

The Asura spat again, before screaming loudly. 'You excreta of vermin! Do you think you can defeat us? The True Lord is with us. Your false gods cannot protect you! You will all die! Die! Die!'

'Why are we here, hunting these imbeciles?' Lakshman threw up his hands.

Ram ignored Lakshman and spoke to the young warrior again, politely. 'I'm requesting you. Throw down your weapon. We don't want to kill you. Please.'

Arishtanemi began to move forward slowly, intending to intimidate the Asura. The effect, however, was quite the opposite.

The Asura screamed loudly. '*Satyam Ekam!*'

*The True One!*

He charged at Arishtanemi. It all happened so quickly that Ram had no time to intervene. The Asura tried to strike Arishtanemi with a standard downward slice, in what was intended to be a kill-strike. But he was not close enough to his opponent. The tall Arishtanemi deftly avoided the blow by swaying back.

'Stop!' warned Arishtanemi.

The young soldier, however, screamed loudly, moved his sword arm, and swung from the left. He should have used both his hands for this backhand attempt. Even then, it would have been a mistake against a man of Arishtanemi's strength. The Malayaputra swung hard, his blow so powerful that the Asura's sword flew out of his hand. Without losing momentum, Arishtanemi sliced from a high angle and nicked the Asura's chest. Perhaps hoping to scare him into surrendering.

Arishtanemi stepped back and drove his sword tip into the soft ground in a gesture that conveyed he meant no harm. He said loudly, 'Just step back. I don't want to kill you. I am a Malayaputra.' Then, under his breath, low enough for only the Asura to hear, Arishtanemi whispered, 'Shukracharya's pig.'

The enraged Asura suddenly pulled out a knife from a scabbard tied to the small of his back and charged forward, screaming, 'Malayaputra dog!'

Arishtanemi instinctively stepped back, bringing his hands up in defence. The sword, held in his right hand, came up horizontal. The Asura simply ran into Arishtanemi's sword, the blade cutting through his abdomen cleanly.

'Dammit!' cursed Arishtanemi as he stepped back and pulled his sword out. He turned towards Ram, eyes filled with remorse.

The stunned Asura dropped his knife and looked down at his abdomen, at the blood that began as a trickle and, within moments, burst forth with steadily increasing intensity. The shock of the trauma had blocked out the pain, and he stared at his body as though it was another's. He collapsed on the ground when it became too much for his brain to handle. He screamed, more with fright than in pain.

Arishtanemi threw his shield to the ground in frustration. 'I told you to stop, Asura!'

Ram held his head. ‘Lord Rudra, be merciful...’

The Asura was bawling helplessly. There was no saving him, now. The force of the blood flow was a clear indication that the sword had pierced many vital organs and arteries. It was only a matter of time before he bled to death.

The Malayaputra turned to Ram. ‘I warned him... You warned him... He just ran into...’

Ram closed his eyes and shook his head in frustration. ‘Put this poor fool out of his misery.’

Arishtanemi looked at the Asura lying prone at his feet. He went down on one knee. He bent close, so that his expression was visible only to the Asura, and sneered slightly before he carried out Ram’s order.

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*... I Love you Rachu ...*

*Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu*

*I thinks see knows my name*

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## Chapter 17

Ram signalled for the party to halt once again.

‘These people are beyond all limits of incompetence,’ said Lakshman, as he steered his horse close to his brother.

Ram, Lakshman and Arishtanemi looked into the distance, at what appeared to be the Asura camp. They had barricaded themselves for a veritable siege, but it was not exactly a sterling example of military genius. The entire camp was surrounded by high wooden palisade fencing, held together with hemp rope. Whereas this provided an adequate defence against arrows, spears and other missiles, a good fire would wreak havoc with this barricade. A stream flowing by the camp had been left unfenced. It was too deep for warriors to wade through on foot, but mounted soldiers could easily ride across.

‘I’m sure they imagine that the unguarded opening at the stream will serve as bait for the unsuspecting,’ laughed Arishtanemi.

As if expecting the enemy cavalry to attempt an attack by riding across the shallow stream, the Asuras had dug a small trench on the far side, just short of the bank, which had been crudely camouflaged. Asura archers, hidden within the trench, could rain a shower of arrows on enemy riders once they were mid-stream. In theory, it was an effective military tactic. The execution, however, was shoddy and amateurish.

A dull splash had sounded from the ground nearby alerting Ram to the possibility of the trench. Owing to its proximity to the stream, water had seeped through, making the trench slippery; it had not been adequately waterproofed. A soldier must have slipped.

In what seemed like another stroke of amateur brilliance, the Asuras had built a *machan* atop a tree, seemingly overlooking the trench. The *machan* had been built with the same idea in mind, to man it with archers who would fire at enemy soldiers crossing the stream. However, the *machan* was empty. This gave Ram an easy solution to the matter of the Asura soldiers hidden in the trench.

Ram crooned gently in the horse’s ear; as the animal became still, he reached for an arrow, nocked it in one fluid movement and took aim.

‘The arrow cannot curve in flight and fall into the trench with force, prince,’ objected Arishtanemi. ‘They are positioned deep in the ground. You cannot hit them this time.’

As Ram adjusted for the wind, he whispered, ‘I’m not aiming for the trench, Arishtanemiji.’

He pulled the string back and released the missile as he flicked the fletching, making the arrow spin furiously as it sped forward. The missile hit the main rope that tethered the *machan*, slashing it cleanly. As the rope snapped, the logs came loose and thundered down, many falling right into the trench.

‘Brilliant!’ Arishtanemi laughed.

These were logs with which a *machan* had been built: good enough to injure, not to kill. Frantic shouts emanated from the trench.

Lakshman looked at Ram. ‘Should we—’

‘No,’ he interrupted Lakshman. ‘We’ll wait and watch. I don’t want to trigger a battle. I hope to take them alive.’

A faint smile played on Arishtanemi’s lips.

Yells of distress and anger continued to emerge from the trench. Perhaps the Asuras were clearing the logs that had landed on them. Soon enough, an Asura popped up, followed by others who dragged themselves out. The tallest, obviously the leader, surveyed his men. He turned around defiantly and stared at his opponents.

‘That is Subahu,’ offered Arishtanemi. ‘Tadaka’s son and their military chief.’

Subahu’s left arm had been dislocated by a fallen log, but the rest of him appeared unharmed. He pulled out his sword; it took some effort to do so, for his left arm was disabled with the injury, and he was unable to hold his scabbard. He held his sword aloft and roared in defiance. His soldiers followed his cue.

Ram was thoroughly bemused now. He did not know whether to laugh at, or applaud, this foolhardy heroism that bordered on unheard-of stupidity.

‘Oh, for Lord Parshu Ram’s sake,’ groaned Lakshman. ‘Are these people mad? Can’t they see that we have fifty mounted soldiers on our side?’

‘*Satyam Ekam!*’ bellowed Subahu.

‘*Satyam Ekam!*’ shouted the other Asuras.

Ram was astonished that the Asuras still persisted with what seemed like foolishness, despite what Guru Vishwamitra had said. He turned around and was annoyed at what he saw. ‘Lakshman, where is the Ayodhya standard? Why haven’t you raised it?’

‘What?’ asked Lakshman. He quickly looked back and realised that the soldiers behind him had raised the banner of the Malayaputras. The mission had been tasked by Vishwamitra, after all.

‘Do it now!’ shouted Ram, not taking his eyes off the Asuras, who appeared to be preparing to charge.

Lakshman pulled out the flag lying folded in the bag attached to the horse saddle. He unfurled it and held high the standard under which the Ayodhyans marched to battle. It was a white cloth with a red circular sun in the centre, its rays streaming out in all directions. At the bottom of the standard, suffused in the brightness of the rays of the sun, was a magnificent tiger appearing to leap out.

‘Charge!’ shouted Subahu.

‘*Satyam Ekam!*’ cried the Asuras as they took off.

Ram raised a balled fist and shouted aloud, ‘*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*’

It was the war cry of the Ayodhyans. *The conquerors from the unconquerable city!*

Lakshman held the standard high and roared. ‘*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*’

The Asuras stopped in their tracks as they gaped at the two princes and the Ayodhya flag. They had come to a halt a mere fifty feet from where Ram’s horse stood still.

Subahu edged forward slowly, holding his sword low, non-threateningly.

‘Are you from Ayodhya?’ asked Subahu, as he reached close enough to be heard.

‘I am the crown prince of Ayodhya,’ said Ram. ‘Surrender and I swear by the honour

of Ayodhya, you will not be harmed.'

Subahu's sword fell from his suddenly limp hand as he went down on his knees. As did the other Asuras. Some of them were whispering to each other. But it was loud enough to reach Ram's ears.

'Shukracharya...'

'Ayodhya...'

'The voice of *Ekam*...'



Ram, Lakshman and the Malayaputras were ceremoniously led into the Asura camp. The fourteen Asura soldiers were received by Tadaka; the women quickly got down to tending to the injuries of their men, who had been disarmed by the Malayaputras.

The hosts and the guests eventually settled down in the central square. After a quick round of meagre refreshments, Ram addressed the Malayaputra military chief. 'Arishtanemiji, please leave me alone with the Asuras.'

'Why?' asked Arishtanemi.

'I would like to speak with them alone.'

Lakshman objected vehemently. 'Dada, when I said that we shouldn't attack these people, I didn't mean that they are good and we should talk to them. I just meant that it is beneath us to attack these morons. Now that they have surrendered, we're done with them. Let's leave them to the Malayaputras and return to Ayodhya.'

'Lakshman,' said Ram. 'I said I would like to speak with them.'

'What will you talk about, *Dada*?' persisted Lakshman, beyond caring that he was within earshot of the Asuras. 'These people are savages. They are animals. They are the remnants of those who survived the wrath of Lord Rudra. Don't waste your time on them.'

Ram's breathing slowed down as his body stiffened imperceptibly. His face acquired an expression of forbidding calm. Lakshman immediately recognised it for what it was: a sign of deep anger welling up beneath the still waters of his brother's essentially cool personality. He also knew that this anger was coupled with unrelenting stubbornness. He threw up his hands in a gesture of frustrated surrender.

Arishtanemi shrugged. 'All right, you can talk to them. But it is not advisable that you do it in our absence.'

'I have taken note of your advice. Thank you! But I trust them,' said Ram.

Tadaka and Subahu heard Ram's words. It took them by surprise because they had been considered the enemy for so long.

Arishtanemi gave in. However, he also made sure the Asuras heard him loud and clear. 'Fine, we'll move away. But we will be battle-ready, mounted on horseback. At the slightest sign of trouble, we'll ride in and kill them all.'

As Arishtanemi turned to leave, Ram repeated his directive, this time to his protective brother. 'I would like to speak to them *alone*, Lakshman.'

'I'm not leaving you alone with them, *Dada*.'

'Lakshman...'

‘I am not leaving you alone, *Dada*!’

‘Listen, brother, I need...’

Lakshman raised his voice. ‘I am not leaving you alone, *Dada*!’

‘All right,’ said Ram, giving in.

— ¶ —

Arishtanemi and the Malayaputra warriors lined up at the border of the camp with the stream behind them, mounted on horses, ready to ride to Ram and Lakshman’s rescue at the first hint of trouble. The brothers were seated on a raised platform in the central square, with the Asuras gathered around them. Subahu wore an arm sling; he sat in front, beside his mother, Tadaka.

‘You are committing slow suicide,’ said Ram.

‘We are only following our law,’ said Tadaka.

Ram frowned. ‘What do you intend to achieve by continually attacking the Malayaputras?’

‘We hope to save them. If they come to our side, reject their false beliefs and listen to the call of the *Ekam*, they will save their own souls.’

‘So, you think you are saving them by persistently harassing them, interfering in their rituals, and even trying to kill them?’

‘Yes,’ said Tadaka, making it obvious that her strange logic was irrefutable to her. ‘And, really, it is not we who are trying to save the Malayaputras. It is, in fact, the True One, the *Ekam* himself! We are mere instruments.’

‘But if the *Ekam* is on your side, how come the Malayaputras have been thriving for centuries? How do you explain that the people of the Sapt Sindhu, almost all of whom reject your interpretation of the *Ekam*, have been dominant for so long? Why haven’t you Asuras conquered India once again? Why isn’t the *Ekam* helping you?’

‘The Lord is testing us. We haven’t been sufficiently true to his path.’

‘Testing you?’ asked Ram. ‘Is the *Ekam* making the Asuras lose every single major battle they have fought for centuries, for millennia actually, just so he can test you?’

Tadaka did not respond.

‘Have you considered that he may not be testing you at all?’ asked Ram. ‘Maybe he is trying to teach you something? Maybe he is trying to tell you that you have to change with the times? Didn’t Shukracharya himself say that if a tactic has led to failure, then persisting with it unquestioningly, in the wild hope of a different outcome, is nothing short of insanity?’

‘But how can we live by the rules of these disgusting, decadent Devas who worship everything in theory but nothing in practice?’ asked Tadaka.

‘These “disgusting, decadent Devas” and their descendants have been in power for centuries,’ said Lakshman aggressively. ‘They have created magnificent cities and a sparkling civilisation, while you have been living in a run-down pathetic camp in the middle of nowhere. Maybe it is you people who need to change your theory *and* practice, whatever it may be!’

‘Lakshman...’ said Ram, raising a hand to silence him.

‘This is nonsense, *Dada*.’ Lakshman would not relent. ‘How delusional can these people be? Don’t they see reality?’

‘Their only reality is their law, Lakshman. Change is difficult for the people of the masculine way of life. They are only guided by their law and, if that is out of sync with the times, it is very difficult for them to accept and initiate change; instead, more often than not, they will cling more strongly to the certainties of their law. We don’t see the attitude of the feminine civilisations towards change as open-minded and liberal; instead, to us, it appears fickle, corrupt and debauched.’

‘*We? Us?*’ asked Lakshman, frowning at Ram identifying himself with the masculine way.

Tadaka and Subahu keenly watched the exchange between the brothers. Subahu raised his balled fist to his heart, in an ancient Asura salute.

Ram asked Lakshman. ‘Do you think what was done to Dhenuka was wrong?’

‘I think the way the Asuras randomly kill people who do not agree with their interpretation of the *Ekam* is even more wrong.’

‘On that I agree with you. The Asura actions were not just wrong, they were evil,’ said Ram. ‘But I was talking about Dhenuka. Do you think what was done to him was wrong?’

Lakshman refused to respond.

‘Answer me, my brother,’ said Ram. ‘Was it wrong?’

‘You know I will not oppose you, *Dada*...’

‘I’m not asking what you will do. What do you *think*, Lakshman?’

Lakshman remained silent. But his answer was obvious.

‘Who is Dhenuka?’ asked Subahu.

‘A hardened criminal, a blot on society whose soul will atone for his deed for at least a million births,’ said Ram. ‘But the law did not allow for his execution. Had Shukracharya’s law not permitted it, no matter how heinous the crime, should he have been executed?’

Subahu didn’t need a moment to think. ‘No.’

Ram smiled ever so slightly as he turned to Lakshman. ‘The law applies equally to all. No exceptions. And the law cannot be broken. Except when...’

Lakshman turned away from him. He remained convinced that in Dhenuka’s case, justice had been served.

Ram turned to address the small band of Asuras. ‘Try to understand what I am saying to you. You are law-abiding people; you follow the masculine way. But your laws are not working anymore. They haven’t been for centuries, because the world has changed. That is what karma is trying to teach you, again and again. If karma is giving you a negative signal repeatedly, then it is not testing you, it is trying to teach you. You need to tap into the disciple in you and find a new Shukracharya. You need a new masculine way. You need new laws.’

Tadaka spoke up. ‘Guru Shukracharya had said that he would reincarnate when the time was ripe, to lead us to a new way...’

There was a long silence in the assemblage.

Tadaka and Subahu suddenly stood up in unison. They brought their balled right fists to their heart, as they bowed low to Ram; the traditional full Asura salute. Their soldiers sprang to their feet and followed suit, as did the women, children and the old.

Ram felt as if a crushing weight was suddenly placed on his chest and the wind knocked out of him. Guru Vashishta's words entered his mind of their own volition. *Your responsibility is great; your mission is all-important. Stay true to it. Stay humble, but not so humble that you don't accept your responsibilities.*

Lakshman glared at the Asuras, and then at Ram, scarcely believing what was going on.

'What would you have us do, My Lord?' asked Tadaka.

'Most Asuras live with the Vayuputras today, far beyond the western borders of India, in a land called Pariha,' said Ram. 'I want you to seek refuge there, with the help of the Malayaputras.'

'But why would the Malayaputras help us?'

'I will request them.'

'What will we do there?'

'Honour the promise that your ancestors made to Lord Rudra. You will work with the Vayuputras to protect India.'

'But protecting India today means protecting the Devas...'

'Yes, it does.'

'Why should we protect them? They are our enemies. They are...'

'You will protect them because that is what Lord Rudra ordered you to do.'

Subahu held his mother's hand to restrain her. 'We will do as you order, My Lord.'

Uncertain, Tadaka yanked her wrist out of her son's grip. 'But this is our holy land. We want to live in India. We cannot be happy outside of its sacred embrace.'

'You will return eventually. But you cannot come back as Asuras. That way of life is over. You will return in a new form. This is my promise to you.'



## Chapter 18

Lakshman had expected anger from the volatile Vishwamitra, instead he looked intrigued; even impressed. Lakshman did not know what to make of it.

The maharishi sat in *padmaasana* on the platform built around a banyan tree. His feet were placed on opposite thighs, facing upwards; the knotted tuft of hair at the back of his shaven head fluttered in the strong breeze. His white *angvastram* had been placed on the side.

‘Sit,’ commanded Vishwamitra. ‘This will probably take some time.’

Ram, Lakshman and Arishtanemi took their seats around him. Vishwamitra observed the Asuras standing quietly in the distance. They had not been tied up; Ram had insisted on that, to the consternation of the camp denizens. But it appeared that shackling them was not required, after all. They stood in a disciplined line, not moving from their positions. Arishtanemi had nevertheless kept thirty guards stationed around them, just in case.

Vishwamitra addressed Ram. ‘You have surprised me, prince of Ayodhya. Why did you disobey my direct order to kill all the Asuras? And what did you tell them to bring about this dramatic transformation? Is there some secret mantra that can suddenly civilise the uncivilised?’

‘I know even you don’t believe what you have just said, *Guruji*,’ said Ram in a calm voice. ‘You don’t really think the Asuras are uncivilised; you cannot, for I have seen you worship Lord Rudra, and I know that the Asuras have joined the Vayuputras, the tribe that he left behind. The Vayuputras are your *partners in deed*, your *karmasaathis*. So, my suspicion is that you were trying to provoke me with what you just said. I find myself wondering, why?’

Vishwamitra’s eyes widened fractionally as they focused on Ram, to the exclusion of all others. But he did not give him an answer. ‘Do you really think these imbeciles are worth the effort of rescuing?’

‘But that question is immaterial, *Guruji*. The question really is: why should they be wiped out? What law have they broken?’

‘They attacked my camp repeatedly.’

‘But they didn’t kill anyone. All they did the last time was burn a small portion of the hedge fencing. And they broke some of your mining equipment. Do these crimes deserve the death sentence under the laws of any *Smriti*? No. The laws of Ayodhya, which I always obey, clearly state that if the weak have not broken any law, then it is the duty of the strong to protect them.’

‘But my orders were explicit.’

‘Forgive me for being explicit too, *Guruji*, but if you genuinely intended to kill these Asuras, then Arishtanemiji would have easily done it for you. Your warriors are trained professionals. These Asuras are amateurs. I believe you brought us here because you

knew that they would listen to the princes of Ayodhya, and no one else. You wanted to find a practical, non-confrontational solution to the problem they posed. Not only have I followed the law, but I've also delivered on what you truly wanted. What I fail to understand is why you did not want to reveal your true intentions to me.'

Vishwamitra wore an expression that was rare for this great Brahmin: one of bemused respect. He also felt outfoxed. He smiled. 'Do you always question your guru like this?'

Ram remained silent. The unspoken answer was obvious. Vashishta, not Vishwamitra, was his guru. Ram was merely following the orders of his father in according Vishwamitra that stature.

'You are right,' Vishwamitra continued, ignoring the subtle slight. 'The Asuras are not bad people; they just have an understanding of *dharma* that is not valid for today's world. Sometimes, the followers are good but the leaders let them down. Sending them to Pariha is a good idea. They will find some purpose. We'll arrange for their departure.'

'Thank you, Guruji,' said Ram.

'As for your original question, I'm not going to give you an answer right now. Maybe later.'



Within two weeks, a small group of Malayaputras had been readied, along with the Asuras, to undertake the journey to the hidden city of the Vayuputras, beyond the western borders of India. The Asuras had recovered completely from their injuries.

Vishwamitra stood at the gate of the Malayaputra camp, giving last-minute instructions to his men. Arishtanemi, Ram and Lakshman stood beside him. As the Malayaputra group walked away to mount their horses, Tadaka and Subahu approached Vishwamitra.

'Thank you for this,' said Tadaka, bowing her head low and folding her hands together into a namaste.

As Vishwamitra broke into a smile at the surprising display of manners from the Asura woman, Tadaka turned to Ram, her eyes seeking approval. Ram smiled his gentle appreciation.

'Your fellow Asuras live in the west,' said Vishwamitra. 'They will keep you safe. Follow the setting sun and it will guide you home.'

Tadaka stiffened. 'Pariha is not our home. This is our home, right here, in India. We have lived here for as long as the Devas have. We've lived here from the very beginning.'

Ram cut in. 'And you will return when the time is right. For now, follow the path of the sun.'

Vishwamitra looked at Ram with surprise, but remained silent.



'It didn't work out the way we had planned, Guruji,' said Arishtanemi.

Vishwamitra was sitting by a lake, not far from the Malayaputra camp. Arishtanemi, as was his practice whenever he was alone with his master, had kept his sword close at hand, unsheathed and ready. He would need to move fast if anyone dared attack

Vishwamitra.

‘You don’t seem particularly unhappy,’ said Vishwamitra.

Arishtanemi looked into the distance, avoiding eye contact with his leader. He was hesitant. ‘Honestly, Guruji... I like the boy... I think he has...’

Vishwamitra narrowed his eyes and glared at Arishtanemi. ‘Don’t forget the one we have committed ourselves to.’

Arishtanemi bowed his head. ‘Of course, Guruji. Can I ever go against your wishes?’

There was an uncomfortable silence. Vishwamitra took a deep breath and looked across the vast expanse of water. ‘Had the Asuras been killed in their camp by him, it would have proved ... useful.’

Arishtanemi, wisely, did not contradict him.

Vishwamitra laughed ruefully, shaking his head. ‘Outwitted by a boy who wasn’t even trying to outwit me. He was just following his “rules”.’

‘What do we do?’

‘We follow plan B,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘Obvious, isn’t it?’

‘I have never been too sure about the other plan, Guruji. It’s not like we have complete control over matters of—’

Vishwamitra did not allow him to complete his statement. ‘You are wrong.’

Arishtanemi remained silent.

‘That traitor Vashishta is Ram’s guru. I can never trust Ram as long as he continues to trust Vashishta.’

Arishtanemi had his misgivings, but kept quiet. He knew any discussion on the subject of Vashishta was one that was fraught with danger.

‘We will go ahead with the other plan,’ said Vishwamitra, with finality.

‘But will he do what we expect him to?’

‘We will have to use his beloved “rules” on him. Once it is done, I will have complete control over what will follow. The Vayuputras are wrong. I will show them that I am right.’



Two days after the Asuras left for Pariha, Ram and Lakshman woke up to feverish activity in the camp. Keeping to themselves, they stepped out of their hut and set out for the lake to offer early morning prayers to the Sun God and Lord Rudra.

Arishtanemi fell into step alongside them. ‘We’ll be leaving soon.’

‘Thank you for letting us know, Arishtanemiji,’ said Ram.

Ram noticed an unusually large trunk being carried out with great care. It evidently contained something heavy, for it was placed on a metallic palanquin which was being carried on the shoulders of twelve men.

‘What is that?’ asked Lakshman, frowning and instantly suspicious.

‘Something that is both Good and Evil,’ said Arishtanemi mysteriously, as he placed his hand on Ram’s shoulder. ‘Where are you going?’

‘For our morning prayers.’

‘I’ll come with you.’



Arishtanemi normally prayed to Lord Parshu Ram every morning. In the company of Ram and Lakshman, he also decided to pray to the great Mahadev, Lord Rudra. All Gods trace their divinity to the same source, after all.

They sat together on a large boulder on the banks of the lake, once the prayers were done.

‘I wonder whether Tadaka and her tribe will be able to cope with Pariha,’ said Arishtanemi.

‘I’m sure they will,’ said Ram. ‘They are easy to manage if they see you as one of their own.’

‘That appears to be the only way to handle them: keep them among their own. They find it impossible to get along with outsiders.’

‘I have been giving their ideas a lot of thought. The problem lies in the way they look upon the *Ekam*.’

‘The One God...?’

‘Yes,’ Ram said. ‘We’ve been told repeatedly that the *Ekam* lives beyond our world of illusion. He is beyond *gunas*, the *characteristics* of created things. For isn’t it *gunas* that create this world of illusion, of temporary existence, illusive because no moment in time lasts? Isn’t that why he is not only called *niraakaar, formless*; but also *nirguna, beyond characteristics*?’

‘Exactly,’ said Arishtanemi.

‘And if the *Ekam* is beyond all this, how can He pick a side?’ asked Ram. ‘If He is beyond *form* then how can He have a preference for any one form? He can, therefore, never belong to any one specific group. He belongs to all, and at the same time, to none. And this is not just applicable to human beings but to every created entity in the universe: animals, plants, water, earth, energy, stars, space, everything. Regardless of what they do or think or believe, all created entities belong to, and are drawn from, the *Ekam*.’

Arishtanemi nodded. ‘This fundamental misunderstanding between our world of forms, and the *Ekam’s* formless world, makes them believe in the lie that my God is the true God and your God is a false God. Just like a wise human will have no preference for his kidneys over his liver, the One God will not pick one group over another. It’s stupid to even think otherwise.’

‘Exactly!’ said Ram. ‘If He is *my* God, if He picks my side over someone else’s, He is *not* the *One God*. The only true One God is the one who picks no sides, who belongs to everything, who doesn’t demand loyalty or fear; in fact, who doesn’t demand anything at all. Because the *Ekam* just exists; and His existence allows for the existence of all else.’

Arishtanemi was beginning to respect this wise young prince of Ayodhya. But he was afraid to admit this to Vishwamitra.

Ram continued. ‘Shukracharya was right in wanting to create a perfect masculine society. Such a society is efficient, just, and honourable. The mistake he made was that

he based it on faith. He should have built it purely on laws, keeping the spiritual separate from the material. When times change, as they inevitably do, one finds it impossible to give up on one's faith; in fact, one clings to it with renewed vigour. Difficult times make men cling to their faith even more strongly. But if you base a masculine way of life on laws, then, possibly, when needed, the laws can be changed. The masculine way of life should be built on laws, not faith.'

'Do you actually believe that it is possible to save the Asuras? There are many of them in India. Hidden in small groups, but they are there.'

'I think they will make disciplined followers. Certainly better than the rebellious, law-breaking people I call my own. The problem with the Asuras is that their laws are obsolete. The people are good; what they need is enlightened and effective leadership.'

'Do you think you can be that leader? Can you create a new way of life for them?'

Ram inhaled deeply. 'I don't know what role fate has in store for me but—'

Lakshman cut in. 'Guru Vashishta believes Ram *Dada* can be the next Vishnu. He will not just provide leadership for the Asuras, but everyone; all of India. I believe that too. There is nobody like Ram *Dada*.'

Ram looked at Lakshman, his face inscrutable.

Arishtanemi leaned back, sucking in a deep breath. 'You are a good man; in fact, a special man. And I can certainly see that you will play an important role in history. Though what exactly, I do not know.'

Ram's face remained expressionless.

'My suggestion to you is to listen to Maharishi Vishwamitra,' said Arishtanemi. 'He is the wisest and most powerful among the *rishis* today, bar none.'

Ram didn't react, though his face hardened imperceptibly.

'Bar none,' repeated Arishtanemi for emphasis, clearly referring to Vashishta.



The group rode unhurriedly through the jungle. Vishwamitra and Arishtanemi rode in front, at the head of the caravan, right behind the cart cradling the heavy trunk. Ram and Lakshman had been asked to ride at the back, with the rest of the Malayaputras marching on foot. It would take a few hours for them to reach the ships anchored on the Ganga.

Vishwamitra beckoned Arishtanemi with a nod. He immediately pulled the reins to the right and drew close.

'So?' asked Vishwamitra.

'He knows,' said Arishtanemi. 'Maharishi Vashishta has told him.'

'Why, that conniving two-faced upstart; that rootless piece of...'

Arishtanemi kept his gaze pinned to the distance as Vishwamitra vented his fury. It was followed by a charged silence. Finally the disciple gathered the courage to ask, 'So, what do we do now, Guruji?'

'We will do what we have to do.'



## Chapter 19

Ram and Lakshman stood on the deck of the lead vessel as the three-ship convoy sailed smoothly down the Ganga. Vishwamitra chose to stay ensconced in his cabin for most of the trip. Arishtanemi made the most of this opportunity; the Ayodhya princes aroused inordinate interest in this Malayaputra.

‘How are the princes doing today?’ asked Arishtanemi, as he approached them.

Ram had washed his long hair and left it loose, struggling to dry it in the sultry air.

‘Suffering in this oppressive heat,’ said Lakshman.

Arishtanemi smiled. ‘It has only just begun. The rains are months away. It’ll get worse before it gets better.’

‘Which is why we are on the open deck; any draught is a gift from the Gods!’ said Lakshman, as he dramatically fanned his face with his hands. Many had gathered on the deck, seeking a brief, post-lunch break before descending to the lower deck and on to their assigned tasks.

Arishtanemi stepped closer to Ram. ‘I was surprised by what you said about our ancestors. Are you against the Devas?’

‘I was wondering when you were going to bring that up,’ said Ram, with a sense of wry inevitability.

‘Well, you can stop wondering now.’

Ram laughed. ‘I’m not against the Devas. We are their descendants, after all. But I am an admirer of the way of the masculine, a life of laws, obedience, honour and justice. I prefer and advocate it as opposed to a life of freedom without end.’

‘There is more to the way of the feminine than just passion and freedom, prince,’ Arishtanemi said. ‘There is unbridled creativity as well.’

‘That, I concede; but when civilisation goes into decline, the people of the feminine are prone to divisiveness and victim-mongering. In the middle ages of the Devas, the caste system, which was originally based on karma and not birth, became rigid, sectarian and politicised. This allowed the Asuras to easily defeat them. When the later Devas reformed and made the caste system flexible again, they regained their strength and defeated the Asuras.’

‘Yes, but the masculine way can also become rigid and fanatical when such a society goes into a decline. That the Asuras relentlessly attacked the Devas, just because the Devas had a different interpretation of the *Ekam*, was inexcusable.’

‘I agree. But didn’t these attacks unite the Devas? Maybe the Devas should acknowledge the few positives that emerged from that horrific violence. They were forced to confront the evil that the caste system had descended into; they needed unity. In my opinion, the most important reform that Lord Indra was able to carry out was making the caste system flexible once again. The united later-age Devas finally defeated the Asuras, who lost because of their fanatical rigidity.’

‘Are you suggesting that the Devas should be grateful to the Asuras for all that brutal violence?’

‘No, I’m not,’ said Ram. ‘What I’m suggesting is that some good can emerge from the most horrific of events. There is something positive hidden in every negative, and something negative hidden in every positive. Life is complicated, and a balanced person can see both sides. For instance, can you deny that, with the Asura experience long forgotten, the caste system has become rigid once again? A man’s status in society today is determined by his birth and not his karma. Will you deny that this evil is ravaging the vitals of the modern Sapt Sindhu?’

‘All right!’ said Lakshman. ‘Enough of this philosophical stuff; you will make my head explode!’

Arishtanemi laughed uproariously, while Ram gazed indulgently at Lakshman.

‘Thankfully, this will all end as soon as we disembark at Ayodhya,’ said Lakshman.

‘Uhh,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘There may be a little delay, prince.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Ram.

‘Guru Vishwamitra intends to visit Mithila en route to Ayodhya. He has an important mission there as well.’

‘When were you planning to tell us about this?’ asked Lakshman, irritated.

‘I’m telling you now,’ said Arishtanemi.

Signalling Lakshman to be patient, Ram said, ‘It’s all right, Arishtanemiji. Our father commanded us to remain with Guru Vishwamitra till he sees fit. A delay of a few months will not harm us in any way.’

‘Mithila...’ groaned Lakshman. ‘It’s the back of beyond!’

Unlike most big cities of the Sapt Sindhu, *Mithila*, the *city for the sons of the soil* or the *city founded by King Mithi*, was not a river-town; at least not after the Gandaki River had changed course westwards a few decades ago. This altered the fate of Mithila dramatically. From being counted among the great cities of the Sapt Sindhu, it speedily declined. Most trade in India was conducted through riverine ports. With Gandaki turning its face away, Mithila’s fortunes collapsed overnight. Raavan’s nifty traders withdrew the appointed sub-traders from Mithila; the minuscule volume of trade simply didn’t justify their presence anymore.

The city was ruled by King Janak, a devout, decent and spiritual man. He was a classic example of a good man, albeit not for the job at hand. Had Janak chosen to be a spiritual guru, he would have been among the finest in the world. However, fate had decreed that he would be king. Even as a monarch, he assiduously guided the spiritual growth of his people through his *dharma sabhas*, or *spiritual gatherings*. Material growth and security, though, had been severely neglected.

To add to Mithila’s woes, power within the royal family had decidedly shifted to Janak’s younger brother, Kushadhwaj. The Gandaki River’s new course skirted the border of Sankashya, whose ruler was Kushadhwaj. Mithila’s loss was Sankashya’s gain. Easy availability of water led to a boom in trade as well as a dramatic increase in the population of Sankashya. Armed with the heft of both money and numbers,

Kushadhwaj made moves to establish himself as the representative of his royal family within the Sapt Sindhu. Careful to maintain appearances, he remained outwardly deferential towards his saintly elder brother. Despite this, rumours abounded that this was just a charade; that Kushadhwaj plotted to absorb Mithila and bring it under his own rule.

‘That’s where we’re headed, Lakshman, if that is what Guruji wants,’ said Ram. ‘We will need an escort from Sankashya, right? I have heard that there are no proper roads that lead to Mithila from Sankashya.’

‘There used to be one,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘It was washed away when the river changed course. There were no efforts made to rebuild it. Mithila is ... short of funds. But their prime minister has been informed and she has arranged for an escort party.’

‘Is it true that King Janak’s daughter is his prime minister?’ asked Lakshman. ‘We found that hard to believe. Is her name Urmila?’

‘Why is it hard to believe that a woman could be prime minister, Lakshman?’ Ram asked, before Arishtanemi could reply. ‘Women are equal to men in mental abilities.’

‘I know, *Dada*,’ said Lakshman. ‘It’s unusual, that’s all.’

‘Lady Mohini was a woman,’ continued Ram. ‘And she was a Vishnu. Remember that.’ Lakshman fell silent.

Arishtanemi touched Lakshman’s shoulder in a kindly way as he said, ‘You are right, Prince Lakshman. King Janak’s daughter is his prime minister. But it’s not Princess Urmila, who incidentally is his biological daughter. It’s his adopted daughter who is the prime minister.’

‘Adopted daughter?’ asked Ram, surprised. Adopted children were rarely given equal rights in India these days. He had it in mind to set this right by changing the law.

‘Yes,’ said Arishtanemi.

‘I wasn’t aware of that. What’s her name?’

‘Her name is Sita.’



‘Are we not going to meet the king of Sankashya?’ asked Ram.

Vishwamitra’s ships had docked at the port of Sankashya, a few kilometres from the city. They were met by officials from Mithila, led by Samichi, the police and protocol chief of the city. Samichi and her team would lead a small band of one hundred Malayaputras to Mithila. The others would remain aboard the anchored ships.

‘No,’ said Arishtanemi, as he mounted his horse. ‘Guru Vishwamitra would prefer to pass this town incognito. In any case, King Kushadhwaj is travelling right now.’

Lakshman surveyed the simple white garments that Ram and he had been asked to wear. Clearly, the princes were supposed to pass off as commoners.

‘Incognito?’ asked Lakshman, his suspicions immediately aroused as he sceptically gazed upon the Malayaputra party. ‘You could have fooled me.’

Arishtanemi smiled and squeezed his knees; his horse began to move. Ram and Lakshman mounted their horses and followed him. Vishwamitra had already left, at the head of the convoy, accompanied by Samichi.

The pathway through the jungle was so narrow that only three horses could ride abreast. At some spots glimpses of an old cobble-stoned road would emerge where the pathway suddenly got broader. For the most part though, the jungle had aggressively reclaimed the land. Often, the convoy rode single file for long stretches.

‘You have not visited Mithila, have you?’ asked Arishtanemi.

‘There was never any need to go there,’ answered Ram.

‘Your brother Bharat did visit Sankashya a few months ago.’

‘He is in charge of diplomatic relations for Ayodhya. It’s natural that he would meet with kings from across the Sapt Sindhu.’

‘Oh? I thought he may have visited King Kushadhwaj for a marriage alliance.’

Lakshman frowned. ‘Marriage alliance? If Ayodhya wanted a marriage alliance, it would be with one of the more powerful kingdoms. Why ally with Sankashya?’

‘Nothing prevents you from forming multiple marriage alliances. After all, some say marriages are a way to build political alliances by strengthening personal ties.’

Lakshman cast a furtive glance at Ram.

‘What is it?’ asked Arishtanemi, following Lakshman’s gaze. ‘You disagree?’

Lakshman butted in. ‘Ram *Dada* believes marriage is sacred. It should not be treated as a political alliance.’

Arishtanemi raised his eyebrows. ‘That was the way it was in the ancient world, yes. Nobody really believes in those values anymore.’

‘I’m not a fan of everything that our ancestors did,’ said Ram. ‘But some practices are worth reviving. One of them is looking upon marriage as a sacred partnership between two souls; not as a political alliance between two power centres.’

‘You are, perhaps, among the very few people who think this way.’

‘That doesn’t mean that I am wrong.’

Lakshman interrupted the conversation again. ‘*Dada* also believes that a man must marry only one woman. He believes that polygamy is unfair to women and must be banned.’

‘That’s not exactly what I believe, Lakshman,’ said Ram. ‘I say that the law must be equal for all. If you allow a man to marry many women, then you should also allow a woman to marry many men if she so chooses. What is wrong is that the current law favours men. Polygamy is allowed but polyandry is not. That is simply wrong. Having said that, my personal preference is for a man to find one woman, and remain loyal to her for the rest of his life.’

‘I thank Lord Brahma that your preference doesn’t extend to a man being loyal to the same woman for many lifetimes!’ Arishtanemi chuckled.

Ram smiled.

‘But Prince Ram,’ said Arishtanemi, ‘I’m sure you must be aware that polygamy as a practice rose a few centuries ago with good reason. We had survived the fifty-year war between the Suryavanshis and the Chandravanshis. Millions of men died. There were simply not enough bridegrooms left, which is why men were encouraged to marry more than one woman. Quite frankly, we also needed to repopulate our country. Thereafter,

more and more people began to practice polygamy.'

'Yes, but we don't have that problem now, do we?' asked Ram. 'So why should men continue to be allowed this privilege?'

Arishtanemi fell silent. After a few moments, he asked Ram, 'Do you intend to marry only one woman?'

'Yes. And I will remain loyal to her for the rest of my life. I will not look at another woman.'

'*Dada*,' said Lakshman, grinning slyly, 'how can you avoid looking at other women? They're everywhere! Are you going to shut your eyes every time a woman passes by?'

Ram laughed. 'You know what I mean. I will not look at other women the way I would look at my wife.'

'So, what are you looking for in a woman?' asked Arishtanemi, intrigued.

Ram was about to start speaking when Lakshman promptly jumped in. 'No. No. No. I have to answer this.'

Arishtanemi looked at Lakshman with an amused grin.

'*Dada* had once said,' continued Lakshman, 'that he wants a woman who can make him bow his head in admiration.'

Lakshman smiled proudly as he said this. Proud that he knew something so personal about his elder brother.

Arishtanemi cast a bemused look at Ram and smiled. 'Bow your head in admiration?'

Ram had nothing to say.

Arishtanemi looked ahead. He knew a woman who Ram would almost certainly admire.



## Chapter 20

Vishwamitra and his entourage reached Mithila a week later. Being a fertile, marshy plain that received plentiful monsoonal rain, the land around Mithila was productive beyond measure. It was said that all a Mithila farmer needed to do was fling some seeds and return a few months later to harvest the crop. The land of Mithila would do the rest. But since the farmers of Mithila had not cleared too much land or flung too many seeds, the forest had used the bounty of nature and created a dense barrier all around the city. The absence of a major river added to its isolation. Mithila was cut off from most other Indian cities, which were usually accessed by river.

‘Why are we so dependent on rivers?’ Ram asked. ‘Why don’t we build roads? A city like Mithila need not be cut off.’

‘We did have good roads once upon a time,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Maybe you can rebuild them.’

As the convoy broke through the forest line, they came upon what must have served as a defensive moat once, but had now been converted into a lake to draw water from. The lake circumscribed the entire city within itself so effectively that Mithila was like an island. There were no animals, like crocodiles, in the lake, for it no longer served a military purpose. Steps had been built on the banks for easy access to water. Giant wheels drew water from the lake, which was carried into the city through pipes.

‘It is incredibly dim-witted to use the moat as your main water supply,’ said Lakshman. ‘The first thing a besieging army would do is to cut it off. Or worse; they may even poison the water.’

‘You are right,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘The prime minister of Mithila realised this. That is why she had a small, but very deep lake constructed, within the city walls.’

Ram, Lakshman and Arishtanemi dismounted at the outer banks of the lake. They had to cross a pontoon bridge to enter the city. Because a pontoon bridge is essentially a floating platform supported by parallel lines of barges or boats, making the structure shaky and unstable, it was wiser to walk across on foot, leading your horse.

Arishtanemi explained enthusiastically, ‘Not only is it cheaper than a conventional bridge, it can also be destroyed easily if the city is attacked. And, of course, be rebuilt just as easily.’

Ram nodded politely, wondering why Arishtanemi felt the need to talk up Mithila. In any case, the city was obviously not wealthy enough to convert the temporary bridge into a more permanent structure.

*But then, which kingdom in India, besides Lanka, is wealthy today? The Lankans have taken away all our wealth.*

After they crossed over, they came upon the gates of Mithila’s fort walls. Interestingly, there were no slogans or military symbols of royal pride emblazoned across the gate. Instead, there was a large image of Lady Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge, which

had been carved into the top half of the gate. Below it was a simple couplet:

*Swagruhe Pujyate Murkhaha; Swagraame Pujyate Prabhuhu  
Swadeshe Pujyate Raja; Vidvaansarvatra Pujyate.*

A fool is worshipped in his home.

A chief is worshipped in his village.

A king is worshipped in his kingdom.

A knowledgeable person is worshipped everywhere.

Ram smiled. *A city dedicated to knowledge.*

‘Shall we enter?’ asked Arishtanemi, pulling his horse’s lead rope and clicking as he stepped forward.

Ram nodded to Lakshman, and they led their horses behind Arishtanemi as he entered the city. Behind the gates, a simple road led to another fort wall, at a distance of a kilometre from the outer wall. The rest of the area between the two walls was neatly partitioned into plots of agricultural land. Food crops were ready for harvest.

‘Smart,’ said Ram.

‘Yes *Dada*, growing crops within the fort walls secures their food supply,’ said Lakshman.

‘More importantly, there’s no human habitation here. This area would be a killing field for an enemy who manages to breach the outer fort wall. An attacking force will lose too many men in the effort to reach the second wall, without any hope of a quick retreat. It’s militarily brilliant — two fort walls with uninhabited land in between. We should replicate this in Ayodhya as well.’

Arishtanemi quickened his footsteps as they approached the inner fort wall.

‘Are those windows I see?’ asked Lakshman, pointing towards the top section of the inner fort wall.

‘Yes,’ said Arishtanemi.

‘Do people use the fort wall as a part of their accommodation?’ asked Lakshman, surprised.

‘Yes, they do,’ said Arishtanemi.

‘Oh,’ said Lakshman, shrugging.

Arishtanemi smiled as he looked ahead again.



‘What the hell!’ said Lakshman, stopping short as soon as he passed the gates of the inner city walls of Mithila. He reached for his sword, instinctively. ‘We’ve been led into a trap!’

‘Calm down, prince,’ said Arishtanemi, with a broad smile. ‘This is not a trap. This is just the way Mithila is.’

They had walked into a large, single-walled structure that lay on the other side of the gate; it was a continuous line of homes that shared a huge wall. All the houses were built against each other, like a honeycomb, with absolutely no divisions or space in between. There was a window high on the wall for each individual home, but no doors existed at the street level. It was no surprise that Lakshman thought they had been led into a dead

end, a perfect trap or ambush. The fact that most of Vishwamitra's convoy was missing only added to his suspicions.

'Where are the streets?' asked Ram.

Since all the houses were packed against each other in one continuous line, there was no room for streets or even small paths.

'Follow me,' said Arishtanemi, enjoying the obvious befuddlement of his fellow travellers. He led his horse to a stone stairway built into the structure of a house.

'Why on earth are you climbing up to the roof?! And that too, with your horse!' Lakshman exclaimed.

'Just follow me, prince,' said Arishtanemi calmly.

Ram patted Lakshman, as though to soothe him, and started walking up the steps. Lakshman reluctantly followed, leading his horse. They reached the rooftop to confront a scene that was simply unimaginable.

The 'rooftops' of all the houses was in fact a single smooth platform; a 'ground' above the 'ground'. 'Streets' had been demarcated with paint, and they could see people headed in different directions, purposefully or otherwise. Vishwamitra's convoy could be seen far ahead.

'My God! Where are we? And where are those people headed?' asked Lakshman, who had never seen anything like this.

'But how do these people enter their houses?' asked Ram.

As if in answer, a man pulled open a flat door on what evidently was the 'sidewalk' on the roof, and then stepped down, into his house, shutting the door behind him. Ram could now see that, at regular intervals on the sidewalks, where no traffic was allowed, were trapdoors to allow residents access to their homes. Small vertical gaps between some lines of houses exposed grilled windows on the side walls, which allowed sunlight and air into some of the homes.

'What do they do during the monsoon?' asked Lakshman.

'They keep the doors and windows closed when it rains,' said Arishtanemi.

'But what about light, air?'

Arishtanemi pointed to ducts that had been drilled at regular intervals. 'Ducts have been built for a group of four houses each. Windows from inside the houses open up into these ducts to allow in air and light. Rainwater run-off collects in drains below the duct. The drains run under the "Bees Quarter" and lead into either the moat outside the walls, or the lake inside the city. Some of it is used for agriculture.'

'By the great Lord Parshu Ram,' said Lakshman. 'Underground drains. What a brilliant idea! It's the perfect way to control disease.'

But Ram had caught on to something else. 'Bees Quarter? Is that what this area is called?'

'Yes,' answered Arishtanemi.

'Why? Because it is built like a honeycomb?'

'Yes,' smiled Arishtanemi.

'Someone obviously has a sense of humour.'

‘I hope you have one as well, because this is where we will be living.’

‘What?’ asked Lakshman.

‘Prince,’ said Arishtanemi apologetically, ‘the Bees Quarter is where the workers of Mithila live. As we move inwards, beyond the gardens, streets, temples and mercantile areas, we arrive at the abodes and palaces of the rich, including the royalty. But, as you’re aware, Guru Vishwamitra wants you to travel incognito.’

‘How exactly do we do that if the prime minister knows we are here?’ asked Lakshman.

‘The prime minister only knows that Guru Vishwamitra has arrived with his companions. She doesn’t know about the princes of Ayodhya. At least, not as yet.’

‘We’re the princes of Ayodhya,’ said Lakshman, his fists clenched tight. ‘A kingdom that is the overlord of the Sapt Sindhu. Is this how we will be treated here?’

‘We’re only here for a week,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Please...’

‘It’s all right,’ said Ram, cutting in. ‘We’ll stay here.’

Lakshman turned to Ram. ‘But *Dada*...’

‘We have stayed in simpler quarters before, Lakshman; it’s just for a short while. Then we can go home. We have to honour our father’s wishes.’



‘I hope you both are comfortable,’ said Vishwamitra, as he stepped down into the apartment through the roof door.

In the afternoon, the third hour of the third *prahar*, Vishwamitra had finally visited the Bees Quarter. The brothers had been given accommodation in an apartment at the inner extreme end, beyond which lay a garden; one of the many that proliferated the inner, more upmarket parts of the city. Being at one end of the massive Bees Quarter structure, they were lucky to have a window on the outer wall, which overlooked the garden. Ram and Lakshman had not visited the inner city as yet.

Vishwamitra had been housed in the royal palace, within the heart of the city. It used to be a massive structure once upon a time, but the kindly King Janak had gradually given away parts of the palace to be used as residences and classrooms for *rishis* and their students. The philosopher-king wanted Mithila to serve as a magnet for men of knowledge from across the land. He showered gifts from his meagre treasury upon these great teachers.

‘Well, certainly less comfortable than you must be, *Guruji*,’ said Lakshman, a sneer on his face. ‘I guess only my brother and I need to remain incognito.’

Vishwamitra ignored Lakshman.

‘We are all right, *Guruji*,’ said Ram. ‘Perhaps the time has come for you to guide us on the mission we have to complete in Mithila. We are eager to return to Ayodhya.’

‘Right,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘Let me get to the point straight away. The king of Mithila has organised a *swayamvar* for his eldest daughter, Sita.’

A *swayamvar* was an ancient tradition in India. The father of the bride organised a gathering of prospective bridegrooms, from whom his daughter was free to either select her husband, or mandate a competition. The victor would win her hand.

Mithila did not figure in the list of powerful kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu. The prospect of the overlord kingdom of Ayodhya making a marriage alliance with Mithila was remote at best. Even Ram was at a loss for words. But Lakshman had had enough by now.

‘Have we been brought here to provide security for the *swayamvar*?’ asked Lakshman. ‘This is even more bizarre than making us fight with those imbecile Asuras.’

Vishwamitra turned towards Lakshman and glared, but before he could say anything Ram spoke up.

‘*Gurujī*,’ said Ram politely, although even his legendary patience was running thin, ‘I do not think that Father would want a marriage alliance with Mithila. I, too, have sworn that I will not marry for politics but for—’

Vishwamitra interrupted Ram. ‘It may be a little late to refuse participation in the *swayamvar*, prince.’

Ram immediately understood what had been implied. With superhuman effort, he maintained his polite tone. ‘How could you have nominated me as a suitor without checking with my father or me?’

‘Your father designated me your guru. You’re aware of the tradition, prince; a father, a mother or a guru can make the decision on a child’s marriage. Do you want to break this law?’

A stunned Ram stood rooted to the spot, his eyes blazing with anger.

‘Furthermore, if you refuse to attend the *swayamvar* despite your name being listed among the suitors, then you will be breaking the laws in *Ushna Smriti* and *Haarit Smriti*. Are you sure you want to do that?’

Ram did not utter a word. His body shook with fury. He had been cleverly trapped by Vishwamitra.

‘Excuse me,’ said Ram, abruptly, as he walked up the steps, lifted the roof door and climbed out. Lakshman followed his elder brother, banging the door shut behind him.

Vishwamitra laughed with satisfaction. ‘He’ll come around. He has no choice. The law is clear.’

Arishtanemi looked at the door sadly and then back at his guru, choosing silence.



## Chapter 21

Ram walked down the stairway and reached the lower ‘ground’ level. He entered a public garden and sat on the first available bench, alive only to his inner turmoil. To the casual passer-by, his eyes seemed focused on the ground, his breathing slow and even, as though he was meditating deeply. But Lakshman knew his brother and his signs of anger. The deeper *Dada*’s anger, the calmer he appeared. Lakshman felt the pain acutely, for his brother became distant and shut him out on such occasions.

‘The hell with this, *Dada*!’ Lakshman lashed out. ‘Tell that pompous guru to take a hike and let’s just leave.’

Ram did not react. Not a muscle twitched to suggest that he had even heard his brother’s rant.

‘*Dada*,’ continued Lakshman, ‘it’s not as if you and I are particularly popular among the royal families in the Sapt Sindhu. Let Bharat *Dada* handle them. One of the few advantages of being disliked is that you don’t need to fret over what others think about you.’

‘I don’t care what others think of me,’ said Ram, his voice startlingly calm. ‘But it is the law.’

‘It’s not your law. It’s not our law. Forget it!’

Ram turned to look into the distance.

‘*Dada*...’ said Lakshman, placing his hand on Ram’s shoulder.

Ram’s body tensed in protest.

‘*Dada*, whatever you decide, I am with you.’

His shoulder relaxed. Ram finally looked at his woebegone brother. He smiled. ‘Let’s take a walk into the city. I need to clear my head.’



Beyond the Bees Quarter, the city of Mithila was relatively more organised, with well-laid out streets lined by luxurious buildings; luxurious in a manner of speaking, for it would be unfair to compare them to the grand architecture of Ayodhya. Dressed in the coarse, un-dyed garments of the common class, the brothers did not attract any attention.

Their aimless wandering led them into the main market area, built in a large, open square. It was lined by *pucca* stone-structured expensive shops, with temporary stalls occupying the centre, offering a low-cost option. The neatly numbered stalls were covered by colourful cloth awnings held up by upright bamboo poles. They were organised in a grid layout, marked by chalk lines with adequate lanes for people to walk around.

‘*Dada*,’ said Lakshman as he picked up a mango. He knew his brother loved the fruit. ‘These must be among the early harvests of the season. It may not be the best, but it’s still a mango!’

Ram smiled faintly. Lakshman immediately purchased two mangoes, handed one to Ram and set about devouring the other, biting and sucking the succulent pulp with gusto. It made Ram laugh.

Lakshman looked at him. ‘What’s the point of eating mangoes if you cannot make a mess of it?’

Ram set upon his own mango, joining his brother as he slurped noisily. Lakshman finished first and his brother stopped him in time from casually chucking the mango stone by the sidewalk. ‘Lakshman...’

Lakshman pretended as if nothing was amiss and, equally casually, walked up to a garbage collection pit dug next to a stall and dropped the mango stone in the rightful place. Ram followed suit. As they turned around to retrace their steps to the apartment, they heard a loud commotion from farther ahead in the same lane. They quickened their pace as they walked towards the hubbub.

They heard a loud, belligerent voice. ‘Princess Sita! Leave this boy alone!’

A firm feminine voice was heard in reply. ‘I will not!’

Ram looked at Lakshman, surprised.

‘Let’s see what’s going on,’ said Lakshman.

Ram and Lakshman pushed forward through the crowd that had gathered in a flash. As they broke through the first line of the throng, they came upon an open space, probably the centre of the square. They stood at the rear of a corner stall, beyond which their eyes fell on a little boy’s back, probably seven or eight years of age. He held a fruit in his hand, as he cowered behind a woman, also facing the other way. The woman confronted a large and visibly angry mob.

‘That’s Princess Sita?’ asked Lakshman, his eyes widening as he turned to look at Ram. His brother’s visage knocked the breath out of him. Time seemed to inexplicably slow down, as if Lakshman was witnessing a cosmic event.

Ram stood still as he looked intently, his face calm. Lakshman detected the flush on his brother’s dark-skinned face; his heart had clearly picked up pace. Sita stood with her back towards them, but Ram could see that she was unusually tall for a Mithilan woman, almost as tall as he was. She looked like a warrior in the army of the Mother Goddess, with her lean and muscular physique. She was wheatish-complexioned; she wore a cream-coloured *dhoti* and a white single-cloth blouse. Her *angvastram* was draped over her right shoulder, with one end tucked into her *dhoti* and the other tied around her left hand. Ram noticed a small knife scabbard tied horizontally to the small of her back. It was empty. He had been told that Sita was a little older than he was—she was twenty-five years of age.

Ram felt a strange restlessness; he felt a strong urge to behold her face.

‘Princess Sita!’ screamed a man, possibly the leader of the mob. Their elaborate attire suggested that this crowd was made up of the well-to-do. ‘Enough of protecting these scum from the Bees Quarter! Hand him over!’

‘He will be punished by the law!’ said Sita. ‘Not by you!’

Ram smiled slightly.

‘He is a thief! That’s all we understand. We all know whom your laws favour. Hand him over!’ The man inched closer, breaking away from the crowd. The air was rife with tension; nobody knew what would happen next. It could spiral out of control any moment. Crazed mobs can lend a dangerous courage to even the faint-hearted.

Sita slowly reached for her scabbard, where her knife should have been. Her hand tensed. Ram watched with keen interest: no sudden movements, not a twitch of nervous energy when she realised she carried no weapon.

Sita spoke evenly. ‘The law does not make any distinction. The boy will be punished. But if you try to interfere, so will you.’

Ram was spellbound. *She’s a follower of the law...*

Lakshman smiled. He had never thought he would find another as obsessed with the law as his brother.

‘Enough already!’ shouted the man. He looked at the mob and screamed as he swung his hand. ‘She’s just one! There are hundreds of us! Come on!’

‘But she’s a princess!’ Someone from the back tried to reason weakly.

‘No, she’s not!’ shouted the man. ‘She is not King Janak’s real daughter. She’s adopted!’

Sita suddenly pushed the boy out of the way, stepped back and dislodged with her foot an upright bamboo stick that held the awning of a shop in place. It fell to the ground. She flicked the stick with her foot, catching it with her right hand in one fluid motion. She swung the stick expertly in her hand, twirling it around with such fearsome speed that it whipped up a loud, humming sound. The leader of the mob remained stationary, out of reach.

‘*Dada*,’ whispered Lakshman. ‘We should step in.’

‘She has it under control.’

Sita stopped swinging and held the stick to her side, one end tucked under her armpit, ready to strike. ‘Go back quietly to your houses, nobody will get hurt. The boy will be punished according to the law; nothing more, nothing less.’

The mob leader pulled out a knife and swiftly moved forward. Sita swerved back as he swung the blade wildly. In the same movement, she steadied herself by going back one step and then down on one knee, swinging her stick with both her hands. The weapon hit the man behind his knee. Even before his knee buckled, she transferred her weight to her other foot and yanked the stick upwards, using his own legs as leverage as his feet went up in the air. His legs flew upwards and he fell hard, flat on his back. Sita instantly rose, held the stick high above her head with both her hands, and struck his chest hard; one brutal strike. Ram heard the sound of the rib cage cracking with the fierce blow.

Sita twirled the stick and held it out, one end tucked under her armpit again; her left hand stretched out, her feet spread wide, offering her the balance she needed to move to either side swiftly. ‘Anyone else?’

The crowd took one step back. The swift and brutal downing of their leader seemed to

have driven some sense into them. Sita forced the point home. ‘Anyone else wants a cracked rib, free of charge?’

They began to move backwards, even as the people in the back melted away.

Sita summoned a man who stood to the right of Ram, pointing towards the one who lay prone on the ground. ‘Kaustav! Round up a few men and take Vijay to the *ayuralay*. I will check on him later.’

Kaustav and his friends rushed forward. As she turned, Ram finally beheld her visage.

Had the entire universe garnered all its talents into creating a perfect feminine face — of delicate beauty and ferocious will — this would be it. Her round face was a shade lighter than the rest of her body, with high cheekbones and a sharp, small nose; her lips were neither thin nor full; her wide-set eyes were neither small nor large; strong brows arched in a perfect curve above creaseless eyelids, and a limpid fire shone in her eyes, enhanced right now by what she had unleashed. A faint birthmark on her right temple made real a face that to Ram was both flawless and magnificent. She had the look of the mountain people from the Himalayas; Ram had fond memories of them from his short visit to the valley of Kathmandu, when he was young. Her straight, jet-black hair was braided and tied into a neat bun. Her warrior’s body carried the proud scars from battle wounds.

‘*Dada...*’ Lakshman’s voice seemed to have travelled from a distant land. It was, quite simply, almost inaudible to him.

Ram stood as if he was carved from marble. Lakshman knew his brother so well; the more transfixed his face, the deeper the tumult of emotions within.

Lakshman touched Ram’s shoulder. ‘*Dada...*’

Ram still could not respond. He was mesmerised. Lakshman turned his attention back to Sita.

She threw the stick away and caught hold of the boy-thief. ‘Come on.’

‘My Lady,’ pleaded the boy. ‘I’m sorry. This will be the last time. I’m really sorry.’

Sita tugged at the boy’s hand and began to walk briskly towards Ram and Lakshman. Lakshman took hold of Ram’s elbow and attempted to step aside. But Ram seemed to be in the grip of a higher power. His face was expressionless, his body still, his eyes almost unblinking, his breathing even and regular. The only movement was his *angvastram* fluttering in the breeze; exaggerated by his immobility.

Almost as if it was beyond his control, Ram bowed his head.

Lakshman held his breath as his mouth fell open. He had never thought he’d see this day; after all, which woman would inspire the admiration of a man such as his brother? That love would slam into a heart that had only known obedience to, and strict control of, his mind? That a man whose mission was to raise every person’s head with pride and purpose would find comfort in bowing to another?

A line from an ancient poem came floating into his mind; one that his romantic heart had found ethereal. But he had never thought his staid elder brother would find meaning in that line before he did.

*She has that something, like the thread in a crystal-bead necklace. She holds it all*

*together.*

Lakshman could see that his brother had found the thread that would hold the disparate beads of his life together.

Ram's heart, despite the fact that it had never been given free rein due to his immense self-control, was probably aware that it had just found its greatest ally. It had found Sita.

She came to a standstill, surprised by these two strangers blocking her path; one looked like a giant but loveable ruffian, and the other was too dignified for the coarse clothes he wore. Strangely, for some reason, he was bowing to her.

'Out of my way!' snapped Sita, as she pushed past Ram.

Ram stepped aside, but she had already whizzed past, dragging the boy-thief along.

Lakshman immediately stepped up and touched Ram on his back. '*Dada...*'

Ram hadn't turned to see Sita walking away. He stood mystified, almost as if his disciplined mind was trying to analyse what had just happened; what his heart had just done to him. He seemed surprised beyond measure; by himself.

'Umm, *Dada...*' said Lakshman, smiling broadly now.

'Hmm?'

'*Dada*, she's gone. I think you can raise your head now.'

Ram finally looked at Lakshman, a hint of a smile on his face.

'*Dada!*' Lakshman gave a loud laugh, stepped forward and embraced his brother. Ram patted him on his back. But his mind was preoccupied.

Lakshman stepped back and said, 'She'll make a great *bhabhi*!'

Ram frowned, refusing to acknowledge his brother's unbridled enthusiasm in referring to the princess as his *sister-in-law*.

'I guess we will be going to the *swayamvar* now,' said Lakshman, winking.

'Let's go back to our room for now,' said Ram, his expression calm again.

'Right!' said Lakshman, still laughing. 'Of course, we should behave maturely about this! Mature! Calm! Stoic! Controlled! Have I forgotten any word, *Dada*?!'

Ram tried to keep his face expressionless but it was obviously a bigger struggle than usual. He finally surrendered to his inner joy and his face lit up with a dazzling smile.

The brothers began to walk back to the Bees Quarter.

'We must tell Arishtanemiji that you will, after all, be participating in the *swayamvar* willingly!' said Lakshman.

As Ram fell a few steps behind Lakshman, he allowed himself another full smile. His mind had probably begun to understand what had just happened to him. What his heart had done to him.



'This is good news,' said Arishtanemi. 'I'm delighted that you have decided to obey the law.'

Ram maintained a calm demeanour. Lakshman couldn't seem to control his smile.

'Yes, of course, Arishtanemiji,' said Lakshman. 'How can we disregard the law? Especially one that has been recorded in two *Smritis*!'

Arishtanemi frowned, not really understanding Lakshman's sudden about-turn. He

shrugged and turned to address Ram. ‘I will inform Guruji right away that you are willing to participate in the *swayamvar*.’



‘*Dada!*’ said Lakshman, rushing into their room.

It had been just five days since Ram had seen Sita. And there were less than two days to go for the *swayamvar*.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Ram, putting down the palm-leaf book he had been reading.

‘Just come with me, *Dada*,’ insisted Lakshman, as he grabbed Ram by the hand.



‘What is it, Lakshman?’ asked Ram once again.

They were on top of the Bees Quarter, walking down the streets. They moved in the direction away from the city. This section of the Bees Quarter actually merged with the inner fort wall, making it a fantastic lookout point to see the fields up to the outer wall and beyond at the land outside the city. A massive crowd had gathered, many of them pointing and gesticulating wildly as they spoke to each other.

‘Lakshman... Where are you taking me?’

He did not get an answer.

‘Move aside,’ said Lakshman harshly as he pushed his way through the throng, leading Ram by the hand. People got out of the way at the sight of the muscular giant, and soon the brothers were at the wall.

As soon as they reached the edge, Ram’s attention was caught by what he saw. Beyond the second wall and the lake-moat, in the clearing ahead of the forest line, a small army seemed to be gathering with devastating precision and discipline. There were ten standard bearers at regular intervals, holding their flags high. Waves of soldiers emerged from the forest in neat rows and, within a few minutes, they were all in formation, approximately a thousand behind each standard. Intriguingly, they had left a large area clear, right in the centre of their formation.

Ram noticed that the colour of the *dhotis* that the soldiers wore was the same as their standards. He estimated that there must be ten thousand soldiers. Not a very large number, but enough to cause serious trouble to a city like Mithila, which was not a garrison city.

‘Which kingdom has sent this army?’ asked Ram.

‘It’s apparently not an army,’ remarked the man standing next to Lakshman. ‘It’s a bodyguard corps.’

Ram was about to pose another question to the man when they were all distracted by the reverberating sounds of conch shells being blown by the soldiers in the clearing. A moment later, even this sound was drowned out by one that Ram had not heard before. It almost seemed like a giant demon was slicing through the air with quick strokes from a gigantic sword.

Lakshman looked up, tracing the source of the sound. ‘What the...’

The crowd watched in awe. It must be the legendary flying vehicle that was the proud possession of Lanka, the *Pushpak Vimaan*. It was a giant conical craft, made of some

strange, unknown metal. Massive rotors attached to the top of the vehicle, right at its pointed end, were swinging with a powerful force in a right to left, circular motion. A few smaller rotors were attached close to the base, on all sides. The body of the craft had many portholes, each of which was covered with thick glass.

The vehicle made a noise that could overpower that of trumpeting elephants in hot pursuit. It appeared to intensify as it hovered above the trees for a bit. As it did so, small circular metal screens descended over the portholes, covering them completely, blocking any view of the insides of the *Vimaan*. The crowd gaped in unison at this outlandish sight as they covered their ears. So did Lakshman. But Ram did not. He stared at the craft with a visceral anger welling up deep inside him. He knew whom it belonged to. He knew who was in there. The man responsible for having destroyed all possibilities of a happy childhood before Ram was even born. He stood amidst the throng as if he was alone. His eyes burned with fearsome intensity.

The sound of the rotors suddenly dipped as the craft began its descent. The *Pushpak Vimaan* landed perfectly in the clearing designated for it, in the centre of the formations of the Lankan soldiers. The Mithilans of the Bees Quarter spontaneously broke into applause. For the soldiers of Lanka though, they may not have existed at all. They stood absolutely straight, rooted to their positions, in a remarkable display of raw discipline.

A few minutes later, a section of the conical *Vimaan* swung open, revealing a perfectly concealed door. The door slid aside and a giant of a man filled the doorway. He stepped out and surveyed the ground before him. A Lankan officer ran up to him and gave him a crisp salute. They exchanged some quick words and the giant looked intently towards the wall, at the avid spectators. He abruptly turned around and walked back into the *Vimaan*. After a while, he appeared again, this time walking out, followed by another man.

The second man was distinctly shorter than the first, and yet taller than the average Mithilan; probably of the same height as Ram. But unlike Ram's lean muscular physique, this Lankan was of gigantic proportions. His swarthy skin, handlebar moustache, thick beard and pock-marked face lent him an intimidating air. He wore a violet *dhoti* and *angvastram*, a colour-dye that was among the most expensive in the Sapt Sindhu. He wore a large headgear with two threatening six-inch curved horns stretching out from either side. He stooped a bit as he walked.

'Raavan...' whispered Lakshman.

Ram did not respond.

Lakshman looked at Ram. 'Dada...'

Ram remained silent, looking intently at the king of Lanka in the distance.

'Dada,' said Lakshman. 'We should leave.'

Ram looked at Lakshman. There was fire in his eyes. He then turned back to look at the Lankans beyond the second wall of Mithila; to the Lankan beyond the second wall of Mithila.



## Chapter 22

‘Please don’t leave,’ pleaded Arishtanemi. ‘Guruji is as troubled as you are. We don’t know how or why Raavan landed up here. But Guruji thinks it’s safer for the two of you to remain within the fort walls.’

Ram and Lakshman sat in their room in the Bees Quarter. Arishtanemi had returned with a plea from Vishwamitra to the princes of Ayodhya: *please do not leave*. Raavan had set up camp outside the walls of Mithila. He had not entered the city, though a few of his emissaries had. They had gone straight to the main palace to speak to King Janak and his younger brother King Kushadhwaj; the latter had newly arrived in the city to attend the *swayamvar*.

‘Why should I bother about what Guru Vishwamitra thinks?’ asked Lakshman aggressively. ‘I only care about my elder brother! Nobody can guess what this demon from Lanka will do! We have to leave! Now!’

‘Please think about this with a calm mind. How will you be safe all alone in the jungle? You are better off within the walls of the city. The Malayaputras are here for your defence.’

‘We cannot just sit here, waiting for events to unfold. I am leaving with my brother. You Malayaputras can do whatever the hell you want to!’

‘Prince Ram,’ Arishtanemi turned to Ram, ‘please, trust me. What I am advising is the best course of action. Do not withdraw from the *swayamvar*. Do not leave the city.’

Ram’s external demeanour was calm as usual, and yet Arishtanemi sensed a different energy; the inner serenity, so typical of Ram, was missing.

Had Ram been truly honest with himself, he would admit that there were many who had hurt him, who he should have at least resented, if not hated, with equal ferocity. Raavan, after all, had simply done his job; he had won a battle that he had fought. However, the child that Ram had once been was incapable of such rationalisation. That lonely and hurt child had focused all his frustration and anger at the injustices that he had faced on the iconic, invisible demon who had wrought such a devastating change in his father, turning him into a bitter man who constantly put his eldest son down and neglected him. As a child, he had convinced himself that Raavan had triggered all his misfortunes; that if Raavan had not won that battle on that terrible day in Karachapa, Ram would not have suffered so.

The anger that Ram reserved for Raavan stemmed from that childhood memory — it was overwhelming and beyond reason.



Arishtanemi had left for Vishwamitra’s guest quarters, leaving Ram and Lakshman to themselves.

‘Dada, trust me, let’s just escape from here,’ said Lakshman. ‘There are ten thousand

Lankans; we're only two. I'm telling you, if push comes to shove, even the Mithilans and Malayaputras will side with Raavan.'

Ram stared at the garden beyond, through the only window in the room.

'Dada,' said Lakshman, insistent. 'We need to make a run for it. I've been told there's a second gate at the other end of the city-wall. Nobody, except for the Malayaputras, knows who we are. We can escape quietly and return with the Ayodhya army. We will teach the damned Lankans a lesson, but for now, we need to run.'

Ram turned to Lakshman and spoke with eerie calm. 'We are the descendants of Ikshvaku, the descendants of Raghu. We will not run away.'

'Dada...'

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. He cast a quick look at Ram and drew his sword. Ram frowned. 'Lakshman, if someone wanted to assassinate us, he wouldn't knock. He would just barge in. There is no place to hide in here.'

Lakshman continued to stare at the door, unsure whether he should sheath his sword.

'Just open the door, Lakshman,' said Ram.

Lakshman crept up the stairs to the horizontal door on the roof. He held his sword to his side, ready to strike if the need so arose. There was another knock, more insistent this time. Lakshman pushed the door open to find Samichi, the police and protocol chief of Mithila, peering down at him. She was a short-haired, tall, dark-skinned and muscular woman, and her soldier's body bore scars of honour from battles well fought. She wore a blouse and *dhoti* made from the same green cloth. She had on leather armbands and a leather under-blouse; a sheathed long sword hung by her waist.

Lakshman gripped his sword tight. 'Namaste, Chief Samichi. To what do we owe this visit?' he asked gruffly.

Samichi grinned disarmingly. 'Put your sword back in the scabbard, young man.'

'Let me decide what I should or should not do. What is your business here?'

'The prime minister wants to meet your elder brother.'

Lakshman was taken aback. He turned to Ram, who signalled his brother to let them in. He immediately slipped his sword in its scabbard and backed up against the wall, making room for the party to enter. Samichi stepped in and descended the stairs, followed by Sita. As Sita stepped down through the door hole, she gestured behind her. 'Stay there, Urmila.'

Lakshman instinctively looked up to see Urmila, even as Ram stood up to receive the prime minister of Mithila. The two women climbed down swiftly but Lakshman remained rooted, entranced by the vision above. Urmila was shorter than her elder sister Sita, much shorter. She was also fairer; so fair that she was almost the colour of milk. She probably remained indoors most of the time, keeping away from the sun. Her round, baby face was dominated by her large eyes, which betrayed a sweet, childlike innocence. Unlike her warrior-like elder sister, Urmila was clearly a very delicate creature, aware of her beauty, yet childlike in her ways. Her hair was arranged in a bun with every strand neatly in place. The *kaajal* in her eyes accentuated their exquisiteness;

the lips were enhanced with some beet extract. Her clothes were fashionable, yet demure: a bright pink blouse was complemented by a deep red *dhoti* which was longer than usual — it reached below her knees. A neatly pressed *angvastram* hung from her shoulders. Anklets and toe-rings drew attention to her lovely feet, while rings and bracelets decorated her delicate hands. Lakshman was mesmerised. The lady sensed it, smiled genially, and looked away with shy confusion.

Sita turned and saw Lakshman looking at Urmila. She had noticed something that Ram had missed.

‘Shut the door, Lakshman,’ said Ram.

Lakshman reluctantly did as ordered.

Ram turned towards Sita. ‘How may I help you, princess?’

Sita smiled. ‘Excuse me for a minute, prince.’ She looked at Samichi. ‘I’d like to speak to the prince alone.’

‘Of course,’ said Samichi, immediately climbing out of the room.

Ram was surprised by Sita’s knowledge of their identity. He revealed nothing as he nodded at Lakshman, who turned to leave with alacrity. Ram and Sita were alone in no time.

Sita smiled and pointed towards a chair in the room. ‘Please sit, Prince Ram.’

‘I’m all right.’

*Is it Guru Vishwamitra himself who revealed my identity to her? Why is he so hell-bent on this alliance?*

‘I insist,’ said Sita, as she sat down herself.

Ram sat on a chair facing Sita. There was an awkward silence for some time before Sita spoke up. ‘I believe you were tricked into coming here.’

Ram remained silent, but his eyes gave the answer away.

‘Then why haven’t you left?’ asked Sita.

‘Because it would be against the law.’

Sita smiled. ‘And is it the law that will make you participate in the *swayamvar* day after tomorrow?’

Ram chose silence, for he would not lie.

‘You are Ayodhya, the overlord of Sapt Sindhu. I am only Mithila, a small kingdom with little power. What purpose can possibly be served by this alliance?’

‘Marriage has a higher purpose; it can be more than just a political alliance.’

Sita smiled enigmatically. Ram felt like he was being interviewed; this, strangely enough, did not stop him from noticing that an impertinent strand had slipped out of Sita’s neatly braided hair. The gentle breeze wafting in from the window lifted the wisp of hair playfully. His attention shifted seamlessly to the perfect curve of her neck. He noticed his heart begin to race. He smiled to himself ruefully and tried to restore his inner calm as he admonished himself. *What is wrong with me? Why can’t I control myself?!*

‘Prince Ram?’

‘Excuse me?’ asked Ram, bringing his focus back to what she was saying.

‘I asked, if marriage is not a political alliance, then what is it?’

‘Well, to begin with, it is not a necessity; there should be no compulsion to get married. There’s nothing worse than being married to the wrong person. You should only get married if you find someone you admire, who will help you understand and fulfil your life’s purpose. And you, in turn, can help her fulfil her life’s purpose. If you’re able to find that one person, then marry her.’

Sita raised her eyebrows. ‘Are you advocating just one wife? Not many? Most people think differently.’

‘Even if *all* people think polygamy is right, it doesn’t make it so.’

‘But most men take many wives; especially the nobility.’

‘I won’t. You insult your wife by taking another.’

Sita drew back her head, raising her chin in contemplation; as though she was assessing him. Her eyes softened in admiration. A charged silence filled the room. As she gazed at him, her expression changed with sudden recognition.

‘Wasn’t it you at the market place the other day?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t you step in to help me?’

‘You had the situation under control.’

Sita smiled slightly.

It was Ram’s turn to ask questions. ‘What is Raavan doing here?’

‘I don’t know. But it makes the *swayamvar* more personal for me.’

Ram was shocked, but his expression remained impassive. ‘Has he come to participate in your *swayamvar*?’

‘So I have been told.’

‘And?’

‘And, I have come here.’

Ram waited for her to continue.

‘How good are you with a bow and arrow?’ asked Sita.

Ram allowed himself a faint smile.

Sita raised her eyebrows. ‘That good?’

Sita arose from her chair, as did Ram. The prime minister of Mithila folded her hands into a namaste. ‘May Lord Rudra continue to bless you, prince.’

Ram returned Sita’s namaste. ‘And may He bless you, princess.’

Ram’s eyes fell on the bracelet made of Rudraaksh beads that Sita wore on her wrists; she was a fellow Lord Rudra devotee. His eyes involuntarily strayed from the beads to her perfectly formed, artistically long fingers. They could have belonged to a surgeon. The battle scar on her left hand suggested, though, that Sita’s hands used tools other than scalpels.

‘Prince Ram,’ said Sita, ‘I asked—’

‘I’m sorry, can you repeat that?’ asked Ram, refocusing on the here and now, on what Sita was saying.

‘Can I meet with you and your brother in the private royal garden tomorrow?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Good,’ said Sita, as she turned to leave. Then she stopped, as if remembering something. She reached into the pouch tied to her waistband and pulled out a red thread. ‘It would be nice if you could wear this. It’s for good luck. It is a representation of...’

But Ram’s attention was seized by another thought; his mind wandering once again, drowning out what Sita was saying. He remembered a couplet; one he had heard at a wedding ceremony long ago.

*Maangalyatantunaanena bhava jeevanahetuh may.* A line from old Sanskrit, it translated into: *With this holy thread that I offer to you, please become the purpose of my life...*

‘Prince Ram...’ said Sita, loudly.

Ram suddenly straightened up as the wedding hymn playing in his mind went silent. ‘I’m sorry. What?’

Sita smiled politely, ‘I was saying...’ She stopped just as suddenly. ‘Never mind. I’ll leave the thread here. Please wear it if it pleases you.’

Placing the thread on the table, Sita began to climb up the stairs. As she reached the door, she turned around for a last look. Ram was holding the thread in the palm of his right hand, gazing at it reverentially, as if it was the most sacred thing in the world.



The city of Mithila became increasingly more visually appealing as one moved beyond the main market to the enclaves of the upper classes. This was where Ram and Lakshman had decided to walk, late the following evening.

‘It’s pretty, isn’t it, *Dada?*’ remarked Lakshman, as he looked around in appreciation.

Ram had been noting the sudden change in Lakshman’s attitude towards Mithila since the previous day. The road they were on was relatively broad but meandering, much like village roads. Trees and flower beds lined dividers made of stone and mortar, around three to four feet in height. Beyond the road edge were an array of trees, gardens and the stately mansions of the wealthy. Idols of various personal and family deities were placed above the boundary walls of the mansions. Incense sticks and fresh flowers were placed as offerings to the deities, indicating the spiritual inclinations of the citizens; Mithila was a bastion of the devout.

‘Here we are,’ pointed Lakshman.

Ram followed his brother into a narrow, circuitous lane on the right. The sidewalls being higher, it was difficult to see what lay beyond.

‘Should we just jump over?’ asked Lakshman, grinning mischievously.

Ram frowned at him and continued walking. A few metres ahead lay an ornate wrought-iron gate. Two soldiers stood at the entrance.

‘We have come to meet the prime minister,’ said Lakshman, handing over a ring that had been given to him by Samichi.

The guard examined the ring, was seemingly satisfied, and signalled to the other to help him open the gates.

Ram and Lakshman quickly walked into the resplendent garden. Unlike the royal

gardens of Ayodhya, this one was less variegated; it only contained local trees, plants and flower beds. It was a garden whose beauty could be attributed more to the ministrations of talented gardeners than to the impressive infusion of funds. The layout was symmetrical and well-manicured. The thick green carpet of grass was thrown into visual relief by the profusion of flowers and trees of all shapes and colours. Nature expressed itself in ordered harmony.

‘Prince Ram,’ Samichi walked up to them from the shadows behind a tree. She bowed low with a respectful namaste.

‘Namaste,’ said Ram, as he folded his hands together.

Lakshman too returned Samichi’s greeting and then handed the ring back to her. ‘The guards recognise your mark.’

‘As they should,’ said the police chief, before turning to Ram. ‘Princesses Sita and Urmila await you. Follow me, princes.’

Lakshman beamed with delight as he followed Ram and Samichi.



Ram and Lakshman were led into a clearing at the back of the garden; below their feet was plush grass, above them the open evening sky.

‘Namaste, princess,’ said Ram to Sita.

‘Namaste, prince,’ replied Sita, before turning to her sister. ‘May I introduce my younger sister, Urmila?’ Gesturing towards Ram and Lakshman, Sita continued, ‘Urmila, meet Prince Ram and Prince Lakshman of Ayodhya.’

‘I had occasion to meet her yesterday,’ said Lakshman, grinning from ear to ear.

Urmila smiled politely at Lakshman, with her hands folded in a namaste, then turned towards Ram and greeted him.

‘I would like to speak with the prince privately, once again,’ said Sita.

‘Of course,’ said Samichi immediately. ‘May I have a private word before that?’

Samichi took Sita aside and whispered in her ear. Then she cast a quick look at Ram before walking away, leading Urmila by the hand. Lakshman followed Urmila.

Ram felt as if his interview from yesterday would proceed from where they had left off. ‘Why did you want to meet me, princess?’

Sita made sure that Samichi and the rest had indeed left. She was about to begin when her eyes fell on the red thread tied around Ram’s right wrist. She smiled. ‘Please give me a minute, prince.’

Sita went behind a tree, bent and picked up a very long package covered in cloth. She walked back to Ram. He frowned, intrigued. Sita pulled the cloth back to reveal an intricately carved, unusually long bow. An exquisite piece of weaponry, it was a composite bow with recurved ends, which must give it a very long range. Ram carefully examined the carvings on the inside face of the limbs, both above and below the grip of the bow. It was the image of a flame, representative of Agni, the God of Fire. The first hymn of the first chapter of the *Rig Veda* was dedicated to the deeply revered deity. However, the shape of this particular flame seemed familiar to Ram, in the way its edges leapt out.

Sita pulled a flat wooden base platform out of the cloth bag and placed it on the ground ceremonially. She looked up at Ram. ‘This bow cannot be allowed to touch the ground.’

Ram frowned, wondering what made it so important. Sita placed the lower limb of the bow on the platform, steadyng it with her foot. She used her right hand to pull down the other end with force. Judging by the strain on her shoulder and biceps, Ram knew it was a very strong bow with tremendous resistance. With her left hand, Sita pulled the bowstring up and quickly strung it. She let the upper limb extend up and relaxed as she let out a long breath. The mighty bow adjusted to the constraints of the potent bowstring. She held the bow with her left hand and pulled the bowstring with her fingers, letting it go with a loud twang.

Ram knew from the sound of the string that this bow was special. It was the strongest he had ever heard. ‘Wow. That’s a good bow.’

‘It’s the best.’

‘Is it yours?’

‘I cannot own a bow like this. I am only its caretaker, for now. When I die, someone else will be deputed to take care of it.’

Ram narrowed his eyes as he closely examined the image of the flames around the grip of the bow. ‘These flames look a little like—’

Sita interrupted him. ‘This bow once belonged to the one whom we both worship. It still belongs to him.’

Ram stared at the bow with a mixture of shock and awe, his suspicion confirmed.

Sita smiled. ‘Yes, it is the *Pinaka*.’

The *Pinaka* was the legendary bow of the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, considered the strongest bow ever made. Legend held that it was a composite, a mix of many materials, which had been given a succession of specific treatments to arrest its degeneration. It was also believed that maintaining this bow was not an easy task. The grip, the limbs and the recurved ends needed regular lubrication with special oil. Sita was obviously up to the task, for the bow was as good as new.

‘How did Mithila come into the possession of the *Pinaka*? ’ asked Ram, unable to take his eyes off the beautiful weapon.

‘It’s a long story,’ said Sita, ‘but I want you to practice with it. This is the bow which will be used for the *swayamvar* competition tomorrow.’

Ram took an involuntary step back. There were many ways in which a *swayamvar* was conducted, two of them being: either the bride could directly select her groom; or she could mandate a competition. The winner would marry the bride. But this was unorthodox, to say the least: for a groom to be given advance notice and help. In fact, it was against the rules.

Ram shook his head. ‘It would be an honour to even touch the *Pinaka*, much less hold the bow that Lord Rudra himself graced with his touch. But I will only do so tomorrow. Not today.’

Sita frowned. ‘I thought you intended to win my hand.’

‘I do. But I will win it the right way. I will win according to the rules.’

Sita smiled, shaking her head as she experienced a peculiar sense of fear mixed with elation.

‘Do you disagree?’ asked Ram, seeming a bit disappointed.

‘No, I don’t. I’m just impressed. You are a special man, Prince Ram.’

Ram blushed. His heart, despite his mental admonishments, picked up pace once again.

‘I look forward to seeing you fire an arrow tomorrow morning,’ said Sita.



## Chapter 23

The *swayamvar* was held in the Hall of *Dharma* instead of the royal court. This was simply because the royal court was not the biggest hall in Mithila. The main building in the palace complex, which housed the Hall of *Dharma*, had been donated by King Janak to the Mithila University. The hall hosted regular debates and discussions on various esoteric topics: the nature of *dharma*, karma's interaction with *dharma*, the nature of the divine, the purpose of the human journey... King Janak was a philosopher-king who focused all his kingdom's resources on matters that were spiritual and intellectual.

The Hall of *Dharma* was in a circular building, built of stone and mortar, with a massive dome; quite rare in India. The delicate elegance of the dome was believed to represent the feminine, while the typical temple spire represented the masculine. The Hall of *Dharma* embodied King Janak's approach to governance: an intellectual love of wisdom and respectful equality accorded to all points of view. The hall, therefore, was circular. All *rishis* sat as equals, without a moderating 'head', debating issues openly and without fear; freedom of expression at its zenith.

However, today was different. There were no manuscripts lying on low tables, or *rishis* moving to the centre in a disciplined sequence, to deliver speeches or debate their points. The Hall of *Dharma* was set to host a *swayamvar*.

Temporary three-tiered spectator stands stood near the entrance. At the other end, on a wooden platform, was placed the king's throne. A statue of the great King Mithi, the founder of Mithila, stood on a raised pedestal behind the throne. Two thrones, only marginally less grand, were placed to the left and right of the king's throne. A circle of comfortable seats lined the middle section of the great hall, where kings and princes, the potential suitors, would sit.

The spectator stands were already packed when Ram and Lakshman were led in by Arishtanemi. Most contestants too had taken their seats. Not many recognised the two princes of Ayodhya, dressed as they were as hermits. A guard gestured for them to move towards the base platform of a three-tiered stand, occupied by the nobility and rich merchants of Mithila. Arishtanemi informed the guard that he accompanied a competitor. The guard was surprised but he did recognise Arishtanemi, the lieutenant of the great Vishwamitra, and stepped aside to let them proceed. After all, it would not be unusual for the devout King Janak to invite even Brahmin *rishis*, not just Kshatriya kings, for his daughter's *swayamvar*.

The walls of the Hall of *Dharma* were decorated by portraits of the greatest *rishis* and *rishikas* of times past: Maharishi Satyakam, Maharishi Yajnavalkya, Maharishika Gargi, and Maharishika Maitreyi, among others. Ram mused: *How unworthy are we, the descendants of these great ancestors. Maharishikas Gargi and Maitreyi were rishikas, and today there are fools who claim that women are not to be allowed to study the scriptures or to write new ones. Maharishi Satyakam was the son of a Shudra single*

*mother. His profound knowledge and wisdom is recorded in our greatest Upanishads; and today there are bigots who claim that the Shudra-born cannot become rishis.*

Ram bowed his head and brought his hands together, paying obeisance to the great sages of yore. *A person becomes a Brahmin by karma, not by birth.*

‘*Dada*,’ said Lakshman, touching Ram’s back.

Ram followed Arishtanemi to the allotted seat.

He seated himself as Lakshman and Arishtanemi stood behind him. All eyes turned to them. The contestants wondered who these simple mendicants were, who hoped to compete with them for Princess Sita’s hand. A few, though, recognised the princes of Ayodhya. A conspiratorial buzz was heard from a section of the contestants.

‘Ayodhya...’

‘Why does Ayodhya want an alliance with Mithila?’

Ram, however, was oblivious to the stares and whispers of the assembly. He had eyes only for the centre of the hall; placed ceremonially on a table top was the bow. Next to the table, at ground level, was a large copper-plated basin.

Ram’s eyes first lingered on the *Pinaka*. It was unstrung. An array of arrows was placed by the side of the bow.

Competitors were first required to pick up the bow and string it, which itself was no mean task. But it was then that the challenge truly began. The contestant would move to the copper-plated basin. It was filled with water, with additional drops trickling in steadily from the rim of the basin, attached to which was a thin tube. Excess water was drained out of the basin by another thin tube, attached to the other side. This created subtle ripples within the bowl, which spread out from the centre towards the edge. Agonisingly, the drops of water were released at irregular intervals, making the ripples, in turn, unpredictable.

A hilsa fish was nailed to a wheel, fixed to an axle that was suspended from the top of the dome, a hundred metres above the ground. The wheel, thankfully, revolved at a constant speed. The contestants were required to look at the reflection of the fish in the unstill water below, disturbed by ripples generated at irregular intervals, and use the *Pinaka* bow to fire an arrow into the eye of the fish, fixed on the revolving wheel high above them. The first to succeed would win the hand of the bride.

‘This is too simple for you, *Dada*,’ said Lakshman, mischievously. ‘Should I ask them to make the wheel revolve at irregular intervals, too? Or twist the feather-fletching on the arrow? What do you think?’

Ram looked up at Lakshman, narrowed his eyes and glared at his brother.

Lakshman grinned. ‘Sorry, *Dada*.’

He stepped back as the king was announced.

‘The Lord of the Mithi clan, the wisest of the wise, beloved of the *rishis*, King Janak!’

The court arose to welcome their host, Janak, the king of Mithila. He walked in from the far end of the hall. Interestingly, in a deviation from tradition, he followed Vishwamitra, who was in the lead. Behind Janak was his younger brother, Kushadhwaj, the king of Sankashya. Even more interestingly, Janak requested Vishwamitra to occupy

the throne of Mithila, as he moved towards the smaller throne to the right. Kushadhwaj walked towards the seat on the left of the great maharishi. A flurry of officials scuttled all over the place, for this was an unexpected breach of protocol.

A loud buzz ran through the hall at this unorthodox seating arrangement, but Ram was intrigued by something else. He turned towards Lakshman, seated behind him. His younger brother verbalised Ram's thought. 'Where is Raavan?'

The court crier banged his staff against the large bell at the entrance of the hall, signalling a call for silence.

Vishwamitra cleared his throat and spoke loudly. The superb acoustics of the Hall of *Dharma* carried his voice clearly to all those present. 'Welcome to this august gathering called by the wisest and most spiritual of rulers in India, King Janak.'

Janak smiled genially.

Vishwamitra continued. 'The princess of Mithila, Sita, has decided to make this a *gupt swayamvar*. She will not join us in the hall. The great kings and princes will, on her bidding, compete—'

The maharishi was interrupted by the ear-splitting sounds of numerous conch shells; surprising, for conch shells were usually melodious and pleasant. Everyone turned to the source of the sound: the entrance of the great hall. Fifteen tall, muscular warriors strode into the room bearing black flags, with the image of the head of a roaring lion emerging from a profusion of fiery flames. The warriors marched with splendid discipline. Behind them were two formidable men. One was a giant, even taller than Lakshman. He was corpulent but muscular, with a massive potbelly that jiggled with every step. His whole body was unusually hirsute — he looked more like a giant bear than human. Most troubling, for all those present, were the strange outgrowths on his ears and shoulders. He was a Naga. Ram recognised him as the first to have emerged from the *Pushpak Vimaan*.

Walking proudly beside him was Raavan, his head held high. He moved with a minor stoop; perhaps a sign of increasing age.

The two men were followed by fifteen more warriors, or more correctly, bodyguards.

Raavan's entourage moved to the centre and halted next to the bow of Lord Rudra. The lead bodyguard made a loud announcement. 'The king of kings, the emperor of emperors, the ruler of the three worlds, the beloved of the Gods, Lord Raavan!'

Raavan turned towards a minor king who sat closest to the *Pinaka*. He made a soft grunting sound and flicked his head to the right, a casual gesture which clearly communicated what he expected. The king immediately rose and scurried away, coming to a standstill behind another competitor. Raavan walked to the chair, but did not sit. He placed his right foot on the seat and rested his hand on his knee. His bodyguards, including the giant bear-man, fell in line behind him. Raavan finally cast a casual glance at Vishwamitra. 'Continue, great Malayaputra.'

Vishwamitra, the chief of the Malayaputras, was furious. He had never been treated so disrespectfully. 'Raavan...' he growled.

Raavan stared at Vishwamitra with lazy arrogance.

Vishwamitra managed to rein in his temper; he had an important task at hand. He would deal with Raavan later. ‘Princess Sita has decreed the sequence in which the great kings and princes will compete.’

Raavan began to walk towards the *Pinaka* while Vishwamitra was still speaking. The chief of the Malayaputras completed his announcement just as Raavan was about to reach for the bow. ‘The first man to compete is not you, Raavan. It is Ram, the prince of Ayodhya.’

Raavan’s hand stopped a few inches from the bow. He looked at Vishwamitra, and then turned around to see who had responded to the sage. He saw a young man, dressed in the simple white clothes of a hermit. Behind him stood another young, though gigantic man, next to whom was Arishtanemi. Raavan glared first at Arishtanemi, and then at Ram. If looks could kill, Raavan would have certainly felled a few today. He turned towards Vishwamitra, Janak and Kushadhwaj, his fingers wrapped around the macabre, finger-bone pendant that hung around his neck. He growled in a loud and booming voice, ‘I have been insulted!’

Ram noticed that the giant bear-man, who stood behind Raavan’s chair, was shaking his head imperceptibly; seemingly rueing being there.

‘Why was I invited at all if you planned to make unskilled boys compete ahead of me?!’ Raavan’s body shook with fury.

Janak looked at Kushadhwaj with irritation before turning to Raavan and interjecting weakly, ‘These are the rules of the *swayamvar*, Great King of Lanka...’

A voice that sounded more like the rumble of thunder was finally heard; it was the giant bear-man. ‘Enough of this nonsense!’ He turned towards Raavan. ‘*Dada*, let’s go.’

Raavan suddenly bent and picked up the *Pinaka*. Before anyone could react, he had strung it and nocked an arrow on the string. Everyone sat paralysed as Raavan pointed the arrow directly at Vishwamitra. Lakshman was forced to acknowledge the strength as well as the skill of this man.

The crowd gasped collectively in horror as Vishwamitra stood up, threw his *angvastram* aside, and banged his chest with his closed fist. ‘Shoot, Raavan!’

Ram was stunned by the warrior-like behaviour of this *rishi*. Raw courage in a man of knowledge was a rarity. But then, Vishwamitra had been a warrior once.

The sage’s voice resounded in the great hall. ‘Come on! Shoot, if you have the guts!’

Raavan released the arrow. It slammed into the statue of Mithi behind Vishwamitra, breaking off the nose of the ancient king. Ram stared at Raavan; his fists were, uncharacteristically, clenched. This insult to the founder of the city was not challenged by a single Mithilan.

Raavan dismissed King Janak with a wave of his hand as he glared at King Kushadhwaj. He threw the bow on the table and began to walk towards the door, followed by his guards. In all this commotion, the giant bear-man stepped up to the table, unstrung the *Pinaka*, and reverentially brought it to his head as he held it with both hands; almost like he was apologising to the bow. He turned around and briskly walked out of the room, behind Raavan. Ram’s eyes remained pinned on him till he left the

room.

As the last of the Lankans exited, the people within the hall turned in unison from the doorway to those seated at the other end of the room: Vishwamitra, Janak and Kushadhwaj.

*What are they going to do now?*

Vishwamitra spoke as if nothing had happened. ‘Let the competition begin.’

The people in the room sat still, as if they had turned to stone, en masse. Vishwamitra spoke once again, louder this time. ‘Let the competition begin. Prince Ram, please step up.’

Ram rose from his chair and walked up to the *Pinaka*. He bowed with reverence, folded his hands together into a namaste, and softly repeated an ancient chant: ‘*Om Rudrāya Namah.*’ *The universe bows to Lord Rudra. I bow to Lord Rudra.*

He raised his right wrist and touched both his eyes with the red thread tied around it. He felt a charge run through his body as he touched the bow. Was this his devotion towards Lord Rudra, or did the bow unselfishly transmit its accumulated power to the prince of Ayodhya? Those seeking only factual knowledge would analyse what happened. Those in love with wisdom would simply enjoy the moment. Ram savoured the moment as he touched the bow again. He then brought his head down and placed it on the bow; he asked to be blessed.

He breathed steadily as he lifted the bow with ease. Sita, hidden behind a latticed window next to Kushadhwaj, looked at Ram intently with bated breath.

Ram placed one arm of the bow on a wooden stand placed on the ground. His shoulders, back and arms strained visibly as he pulled down the upper limb of the *Pinaka*, simultaneously pulling up the bowstring. His body laboured at the task, but his face remained serene. He bent the upper limb farther with a slight increase in effort as he tied the bowstring. His muscles relaxed as he let go of the upper limb and held the bow at the grip. He brought the bowstring close to his ear and plucked; the twang was perfect.

He picked up an arrow and walked to the copper-plated basin with deliberate, unhurried footsteps. He went down on one knee, held the bow horizontally above his head and looked down at the water; at the reflection of the fish that moved in a circle above him. The rippling water in the basin danced as if to tantalise his mind. Ram focused on the image of the fish to the exclusion of all else. He nocked the arrow on the string of the bow and pulled slowly with his right hand, his back erect, the core muscles activated with ideal tension. His breathing was steady and rhythmic. As was his consciousness, so was the response from the universe. He handed himself over to a higher force as he pulled the string all the way back and released the arrow. It shot up, as did the vision of each person in the room. The unmistakable sound of a furiously speeding arrow crashing into wood reverberated in the great hall. It had pierced the right eye of the fish, and lodged itself into the wooden wheel. The wheel swirled rhythmically as the shaft of the arrow drew circles in the air. Ram’s mind reclaimed its awareness of the surroundings as his eyes continued to study the rippling water; he smiled. Not because he had hit the target. He had, in fact, earned a sense of completion of his being,

with that shot. From this moment on, he was no longer alone.

He whispered, in the confines of his mind, a tribute to the woman he admired; Lord Rudra had said the same words to Lady Mohini, the woman he loved, many many centuries ago.

*I have become alive. You have made me alive.*



## Chapter 24

The wedding was a simple set of solemn rituals, observed in the afternoon of the day that Ram won the *swayamvar*. To Ram's surprise, Sita had suggested that Lakshman and Urmila get married in the same auspicious hour of the day. To Ram's further disbelief, Lakshman had enthusiastically agreed. It was decided that while both the couples would be married in Mithila — to allow Sita and Urmila to travel with Ram and Lakshman to Ayodhya — a set of grand ceremonies would be held in Ayodhya as well; ones befitting the scions of the clan of Raghu.

Sita and Ram were alone at last. They sat on floor cushions in the dining hall, their dinner placed on a low stool. It was late in the evening, the sixth hour of the third *prahar*. Despite the fact that their relationship had been sanctified by *dharma* a few hours earlier, there was an awkwardness that underlined their ignorance of each other's personalities.

'Umm,' said Ram, as he stared at his plate.

'Yes, Ram?' asked Sita. 'Is there a problem?'

'I'm sorry, but ... the food...'

'Is it not to your liking?'

'No, no, it's good. It's very good. But...'

'Yes?'

'It needs a bit of salt.'

Sita immediately pushed her plate aside, rose and clapped her hands. An attendant came rushing in.

'Get some salt for the prince, please.' As the attendant turned, Sita ordered with emphasis, 'Quickly!'

The attendant broke into a run.

Ram cleaned his hand with a napkin as he waited for the salt. 'I'm sorry to trouble you.'

Sita frowned as she resumed her seat. 'I'm your wife, Ram. It's my duty to take care of you.'

Ram smiled. 'Umm, may I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'Tell me something about your childhood.'

'You mean, before I was adopted? You do know that I was adopted, right?'

'Yes... I mean, you don't have to talk about it if it troubles you.'

Sita smiled. 'No, it doesn't trouble me, but I don't remember anything. I was too young when I was found by my adoptive parents.'

Ram nodded.

Sita answered the question that she thought was on his mind. 'So, if you ask me who my birth-parents are, the short answer is that I don't know. But the one I prefer is that I

am a daughter of the earth.'

'Birth is completely unimportant. It is just a means of entry into this *world of action*, into this *karmaboomi*. Karma is all that matters. And your karma is divine.'

Sita smiled. Ram was about to say something when the attendant came rushing in with the salt. Ram added some to his food and resumed eating as the attendant retreated from the room.

'You were saying something,' said Sita.

'Yes,' said Ram, 'I think that...'

Ram was interrupted again, this time by the doorkeeper announcing loudly, 'The chief of the Malayaputras, the *Saptrishi Uttradhikari*, the protector of the way of the Vishnus, Maharishi Vishwamitra.'

Sita frowned and looked at Ram. Ram shrugged, clearly conveying he did not know what this visit was about.

Ram and Sita rose as Vishwamitra entered the room, followed by Arishtanemi. Sita gestured to her attendant to get some washing bowls for Ram and herself.

'We have a problem,' said Vishwamitra, not feeling the need to exchange pleasantries.

'What happened, Guruji?' asked Ram.

'Raavan is mobilising for an attack.'

Ram frowned. 'But he doesn't have an army. What's he going to do with ten thousand bodyguards? He can't hold a city of even Mithila's size with that number. All he'll achieve is getting his men killed in battle.'

'Raavan is not a logical man,' proffered Vishwamitra. 'His ego is hurt. He may lose his bodyguard corps, but he will wreak havoc on Mithila.'

Ram looked at Sita, who shook her head with irritation and addressed Vishwamitra. 'Why in Lord Rudra's name was that demon invited for the *swayamvar*? I know it was not my father.'

Vishwamitra took a deep breath as his eyes softened. 'That's water under the bridge, Sita. The question is, what are we going to do now?'

'What is your plan, Guruji?'

'I have with me some important material that was mined at my *ashram* by the Ganga. I needed it to conduct a few science experiments at Agastyakootam. This was why I had visited my *ashram*.'

Agastyakootam was the capital of the Malayaputras, deep in the south of India, beyond the Narmada River. In fact, it was very close to Lanka itself.

'Science experiments?' asked Ram.

'Yes, experiments with the *daivi astras*.'

Sita drew a sharp breath for she knew the power and ferocity of the *divine weapons*. 'Guruji, are you suggesting that we use *daivi astras*?'

Vishwamitra nodded in confirmation as Ram spoke up. 'But that will destroy Mithila as well.'

'No, it won't. This is not a traditional *daivi astra*. What I have is the *Asuraastra*.'

'Isn't that a biological weapon?' asked Ram, deeply troubled now.

‘Yes. Poisonous gas and a blast wave from the *Asuraastra* will incapacitate the Lankans, paralysing them for days on end. We can easily imprison them in that state and end this problem.’

‘Just paralyse, Guruji?’ asked Ram. ‘I have learnt that, in large quantities, the *Asuraastra* can kill as well.’

Vishwamitra knew that only one man could have possibly taught this to Ram. None of the other *daivi astra* experts had ever met this young man. He was immediately irritated. ‘Do you have any better ideas?’

Ram fell silent.

‘But what about Lord Rudra’s law?’ asked Sita.

Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev who was the Destroyer of Evil, had banned the unauthorised use of *daivi astras* many centuries ago. Practically everyone obeyed this diktat from the fearsome Lord Rudra. Those who broke the law he had decreed would be punished with banishment for fourteen years. Breaking the law for the second time would be punishable by death.

‘I don’t think that law applies to the use of the *Asuraastra*,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘It is not a weapon of mass destruction, just mass incapacitation.’

Sita narrowed her eyes. Clearly, she wasn’t convinced. ‘I disagree. A *daivi astra* is a *daivi astra*. We cannot use it without the authorisation of the Vayuputras, Lord Rudra’s tribe. I am a Lord Rudra devotee. I will not break his law.’

‘Do you want to surrender, then?’

‘Of course not! We will fight!’

Vishwamitra laughed derisively. ‘Fight, is it? And who, please explain, will fight Raavan’s hordes? The namby-pamby intellectuals of Mithila? What is the plan? Debate the Lankans to death?’

‘We have our police force,’ said Sita quietly.

‘They’re not trained or equipped to fight the troops of Raavan.’

‘We are not fighting his troops. We are fighting his bodyguard platoons. My police force is enough for them.’

‘They are not. And you know that.’

‘We will not use the *daivi astras*, Guruji,’ said Sita firmly, her face hardening.

Ram spoke up. ‘Samichi’s police force is not alone. Lakshman and I are here, and so are the Malayaputras. We’re inside the fort, we have the double walls; we have the lake surrounding the city. We can hold Mithila. We can fight.’

Vishwamitra turned to Ram with a sneer. ‘*Nonsense!* We are vastly outnumbered. The double walls...’ He snorted with disgust. ‘It seems clever. But how long do you think it will take a warrior of Raavan’s calibre to figure out a strategy that works around that obstacle?’

‘We will not use the *daivi astras*, Guruji,’ said Sita, raising her voice. ‘Now, if you will excuse me, I have a battle to prepare for.’



It was late at night; the fourth hour of the fourth *prahar*. Ram and Sita had been joined by

Lakshman and Samichi on top of the Bees Quarter, close to the inner wall edge. The entire Bees Quarter complex had been evacuated as a precautionary step. The pontoon bridge that spanned the moat-lake had been destroyed.

Mithila had a force of four thousand policemen and policewomen, enough to maintain law and order for the hundred thousand citizens of the small kingdom. Notwithstanding the strategic advantage of the double walls, would they be able to thwart an attack from the Lankan bodyguards of Raavan? They were outnumbered five to two.

Ram and Sita had abandoned any plans of securing the outer wall. They wanted Raavan and his soldiers to scale it and launch an assault on the inner walls; the Lankans would, then, be trapped between the two walls, which the Mithilan arrows would convert into a killing field. They expected a volley of arrows from the other side, in preparation for which the police had been asked to carry their wooden shields, normally used for crowd control within Mithila. Lakshman had taught them some basic manoeuvres with which they could protect themselves from the arrows.

‘Where are the Malayaputras?’ Lakshman asked Ram.

The Malayaputras had, much to Ram’s surprise, not come to the battle-front. Ram whispered, ‘I think it’s just us.’

Lakshman shook his head and spat. ‘Cowards.’

‘Look!’ said Samichi.

Sita and Lakshman looked in the direction that Samichi had pointed. Ram, on the other hand, was drawn to something else: a hint of nervousness in Samichi’s voice. Unlike Sita, she appeared troubled. Perhaps she was not as brave as Sita believed her to be. Ram turned his attention to the enemy.

Torches lined the other side of the moat-lake that surrounded the outer wall of Mithila. Raavan’s bodyguards had worked feverishly through the evening, chopping down trees from the forest and building rowboats to carry them across the lake.

Even as they watched, the Lankans began to push their boats into the moat-lake. The assault on Mithila was being launched.

‘It’s time,’ said Sita.

‘Yes,’ said Ram. ‘We have maybe another half hour before they hit our outer wall.’



Conch shells resounded through the night, by now recognised as the signature sound of Raavan and his men. As they watched in the light of the flickering flames of torches, the Lankans propped giant ladders against the outer walls of Mithila.

‘They are here,’ said Ram. Messages were relayed quickly down the line to the Mithila police-soldiers. Ram expected a shower of arrows now from Raavan’s archers. The Lankans would fire their arrows only as long as their soldiers were outside the outer wall. The shooting would stop the moment the Lankans climbed over. The archers would not risk hitting their own men.

A loud whoosh, like the sudden onrush of a gale, heralded the release of the arrows.

‘Shields!’ shouted Sita.

The Mithilans immediately raised their shields, ready for the Lankan arrows that were

about to rain down on them. But Ram was perturbed. Something about the sound troubled him. It was much stronger than the sound of a thousand arrows being fired. It sounded like something much bigger. He was right.

Huge missiles rammed through the Mithilan defences with massive force. Desperate cries of agony mixed with sickening thuds as shields were ripped through and many in the Mithilan ranks were brought down in a flash.

‘What is that?’ screamed Lakshman, hiding behind his shield.

Ram’s wooden shield snapped into two pieces as a missile tore through it like a knife through butter. It missed him by a hair’s breadth. Ram looked at the fallen missile.

*Spears!*

Their wooden shields were a protection against arrows, not large spears.

*How in Lord Rudra’s name are they throwing spears over this distance? It’s impossible!*

The first volley was over and Ram knew they had but a few minutes of respite before the next. He looked around him.

‘Lord Rudra, be merciful...’

The destruction was severe. At least a quarter of the Mithilans were either dead or severely injured, impaled on massive spears that had brutally ripped through their shields and bodies.

Ram looked at Sita as he commanded, ‘Another volley will be fired any moment! Into the houses!’

‘Into the houses!’ shouted Sita.

‘Into the houses!’ repeated the lieutenants, as everybody ran towards the doors, lifted them and jumped in. It was one of the most disorganised retreats ever seen, but it was effective. In a few minutes, practically every surviving Mithilan police-soldier had jumped to safety within the houses. As the doors closed, the volley of spears resumed on the roofs of the Bees Quarter. A few stragglers were killed as the rest made it to safety; for now.

Lakshman did not say anything as he looked at Ram. But his eyes sent out a clear message. *This is a disaster.*

‘What now?’ Ram asked Sita. ‘Raavan’s soldiers must be scaling the outer walls. They will be upon us soon. There’s no one to stop them.’

Sita was breathing hard, her eyes flitting like that of a cornered tigress, anger bursting through every pore. Samichi stood behind her princess, helplessly rubbing her forehead.

‘Sita?’ prompted Ram.

Sita’s eyes suddenly opened wide. ‘The windows!’

‘What?’ asked Samichi, surprised by her prime minister.

Sita immediately gathered her lieutenants around her. She ordered them to get the surviving Mithilans to break the wood-panel-sealed windows of the houses in the Bees Quarter; the ones that shared the inner wall, or opened into the narrow gaps between some of the houses; like the one they were in. Their window overlooked the ground between the two fort walls. Arrows would be fired at the charging Lankans, after all.

‘Brilliant!’ shouted Lakshman, as he rushed to a barricaded window. He pulled back his arm, flexed his muscles, and punched hard at the wood, smashing the barricade with one mighty blow.

All the houses in this section of the Bees Quarter were internally connected through corridors. The message travelled rapidly. Within moments, the Mithilans smashed open the sealed windows and fired arrows at the Lankans, caught between the outer and inner wall. The Lankans had expected no resistance. They were effectively caught off-guard and arrows shredded through their lines. The losses were heavy. The Mithilans fired arrows without respite, killing as many of the Lankans as they could, slowing the charge dramatically.

Suddenly, the conch shells sounded; but this time, they played a different tune. The Lankans immediately turned and ran, retreating as rapidly as they had arrived.

A loud cheer went up from the Mithilan quarters. They had beaten back the first attack.



Ram, Sita and Lakshman stood on the roof of the Bees Quarter as dawn broke through. The gentle rays of the sun threw into poignant contrast the harsh devastation of the Lankan spears. The damage was heart-rending.

Sita stared at the mutilated bodies of the Mithilans strewn all around her: heads hanging by a sinew to bodies, some with their guts spilled out, many simply impaled on spears, having bled to death. ‘At least a thousand of my soldiers...’

‘We too have hit them hard, *Bhabhi*,’ said Lakshman to his *sister-in-law*. ‘There are at least a thousand dead Lankans lying between the inner and the outer wall.’

Sita looked at Lakshman, her usually limpid eyes now brimming with tears. ‘Yes, but they have nine thousand left. We have only three thousand.’

Ram surveyed the Lankan camp on the other side of the moat-lake. Hospital-tents had been set up to tend to the injured. Many Lankans, though, were furiously at work: hacking trees and pushing the forest line farther with mathematical precision. Clearly they did not intend to retreat.

‘They will be better prepared next time,’ said Ram. ‘If they manage to scale the inner wall ... it’s over.’

Sita placed her hand on Ram’s shoulder and sighed as she stared at the ground. Ram found himself being momentarily distracted by her nearness. He looked at Sita’s hand on his shoulder, then closed his eyes. He had to focus, teach his mind to re-learn the art of mastering his emotions.

Sita turned around and looked towards her city. Her eyes rested on the steeple of the massive temple dedicated to Lord Rudra, which loomed beyond the garden of the Bees Quarter. Fierce determination blazed from her eyes, resolve pouring steel into her veins. ‘It’s not over yet. I’ll call upon the citizens to join me. Even if my people stand here with kitchen knives, we will outnumber the Lankan scum ten to one. We can fight them.’

Ram could not bring himself to share her confidence.

Sita nodded, like she had made up her mind, and rushed away, signalling other Mithilans to follow her.



## Chapter 25

‘Where have you been, Guriji?’ asked Ram, in a polite voice that belied the fury that defined his stony face and rigid body.

Vishwamitra had finally arrived in the fifth hour of the first *prahar*. The early morning light sharply outlined the frenetic activity in the Lankan camp. Sita was still trying to rally a citizen-army. Arishtanemi stood at a distance, strangely choosing to remain out of earshot.

‘Where were the Malayaputra cowards, actually?’ growled Lakshman, who did not feel the need for any attempt at politeness.

Vishwamitra cast Lakshman a withering look before addressing Ram. ‘Someone has to be the adult here and do what must be done.’

Ram frowned.

‘Come with me,’ said Vishwamitra.



In a hidden section of the roof of the Bees Quarter, far from the scene of the Lankan attack, Ram finally confronted what the Malayaputras had been busy with all night: the *Asuraastastra*.

A simple weapon to configure, it had still taken a long time to set up. Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras had worked through the night, in minimal light. The missile and its launch stand were finally assembled and ready. The stand was a little taller than Lakshman and was made of wood. The outer body of the missile was made of lead. Its components, along with the core material that had been mined at the Ganga *ashram*, had been brought along by Vishwamitra and his party to Mithila. The core material was now loaded in the detonation chamber.

The missile was ready but Ram was unsure.

He looked across the outer wall.

The Lankans were hard at work, clearing the forest. They were building something.

‘What are those people doing at the far end of the forest line?’ asked Lakshman.

‘Look closely,’ said Vishwamitra.

A group of Lankans were working with planks fashioned from the trees that had been cut. At first Lakshman thought they were building boats, but a careful examination proved him wrong. They were linking these planks into giant rectangular shields with sturdy handles on the sides as well as at the base end. Each shield was capable of protecting twenty men, if they were lined up two abreast.

‘Tortoise shields,’ said Ram.

‘Yes,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘They will return once they build enough of these. They will break the outer wall without any resistance from us; why scale it? They will move towards our inner wall, protected by their tortoise shields. Successive waves of attacks

will breach our walls. You know what will be done to the city. Even the rats will not be spared.'

Ram stood quietly. He knew that Vishwamitra was right. They could see that fifteen or twenty of these massive shields were already ready. The Lankans had worked at a prodigious pace. An attack was imminent, probably as early as tonight. Mithila would certainly not be ready.

'You need to understand that firing the *Asurastra* is the only solution available,' said Vishwamitra. 'Fire it right now, when they're still not ready, and are farthest away from the city. Once they launch the attack and breach the outer wall, we will not be able to do even this, without risking Mithila; the detonation would be too close.'

Ram stared at the Lankans.

*This is the only way!*

'Why don't you fire the weapon, *Guruji*?' asked Lakshman, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

'I am a Malayaputra; the leader of the Malayaputras,' said Vishwamitra. 'The Vayuputras and the Malayaputras work in partnership, just as the Vishnus and the Mahadevs did over millennia. I cannot break the Vayuputra law.'

'But my brother choosing to do so is okay?'

'You can also choose to die. That option is always available,' Vishwamitra said caustically. Then he turned and spoke to Ram directly, 'So, what will it be, Ram?'

Ram turned around and looked in the direction of the Mithila palace, where Sita was probably trying desperately to convince her reluctant citizens to fight.

Vishwamitra stepped close to the prince of Ayodhya. 'Ram, Raavan will probably torture and kill every single person in this city. The lives of a hundred thousand Mithilans are at stake. Your wife's life is at stake. Will you, as a husband, protect your wife or not? Will you take a sin upon your soul for the good of others? What does your *dharma* say?'

*I will do it for Sita.*

'We will warn them first,' said Ram. 'Give them a chance to retreat. I have been told that even the Asuras followed this protocol before firing any *daivi astra*.'

'Fine.'

'And if they don't heed our warning,' said Ram, his fingers wrapping themselves around his Rudraaksh pendant, as if for strength, 'then I will fire the *Asurastra*.'

Vishwamitra smiled with satisfaction, as though Ram's compliance was a trophy he had just earned.



The giant bear-man moved among the men, checking the tortoise shields. He heard the arrow a second before it slammed into the plank of wood close to his feet. He looked up in surprise.

*Who in Mithila can fire an arrow that could travel this distance with such unerring accuracy?*

He stared at the walls. All he could make out were two very tall men standing close to

the inner wall, and a third, a trifle shorter. The third man held a bow; he seemed to be staring directly at him.

The bear-man immediately stepped forward to examine the arrow that had buried itself into the tortoise shield. It had a piece of parchment tied around its shaft. He yanked it out and untied the note.



'You actually believe they will do this, Kumbhakarna?' asked Raavan, snorting with disgust as he threw the note away.

'*Dada*,' said the bear-man, his voice booming even at its lowest amplitude, due to his massive vocal chords. 'If they fire an *Asurastra*, it could be—'

'They don't have an *Asurastra*,' interrupted Raavan. 'They're bluffing.'

'But *Dada*, the Malayaputras do have—'

'Vishwamitra is bluffing, Kumbhakarna!'

Kumbhakarna fell silent.



'They haven't retreated an inch,' said Vishwamitra, with urgency. 'We need to fire the weapon.'

By the end of the third hour of the second *prahar*, the sun had risen high enough to afford good visibility. Three hours earlier, Ram had shot the warning message to the Lankans. It had clearly made no impact.

The Malayaputras had already rolled the missile tower to the section of the rooftop that faced the main body of the Lankan troops.

'We gave them a warning of one hour,' continued Vishwamitra. 'We have waited for three. They probably think we are bluffing by now.'

Lakshman looked at Vishwamitra. 'Don't you think we should check with Sita *Bhabhi*, first? She had clearly said that—'

Vishwamitra suddenly interrupted Lakshman. 'Look!'

Lakshman and Ram immediately turned in the direction Vishwamitra had pointed.

'Are they boarding their boats?' asked Ram.

'They could be testing them,' said Lakshman, hoping against hope. 'In which case, we still have some time.'

'Do you think we should take that chance, Ram?' asked Vishwamitra.

Ram did not move a muscle.

'We need to fire now!' said Vishwamitra, forcefully.

Ram lifted his bow from his shoulders, brought it close to his ear, and plucked the bowstring. *Perfect*.

'Bravo!' said Vishwamitra.

Lakshman glared at the maharishi. He touched his brother's shoulder. '*Dada...*'

Ram turned around and began walking away. Everyone followed him. Most *daivi astras* were fired from a distance by shooting a flaming arrow into a target on the launch pad. This protected the people igniting the weapon from getting incinerated in the initial launch explosion of the missile. Only a skilled archer could fire an arrow from a great

distance and hit a target that was no larger than a fruit.

Vishwamitra halted Ram when they reached a distance of over five hundred metres from the *Asurastra* stand. ‘That’s enough, Prince of Ayodhya.’

Arishtanemi handed him an arrow. Ram sniffed its tip; it had been coated with a combustible paste. He examined the fletching and was momentarily surprised. Arishtanemi had, clearly, used one of Ram’s own arrows. He didn’t stop to think too deeply if Arishtanemi had learnt Ram’s secret of the spinning arrow. This was not the time. He nodded to Arishtanemi and faced the missile launch tower.

‘*Dada...*’ murmured Lakshman. He was visibly distressed at what he knew would take an immense toll on his law-abiding brother.

‘Step back, Lakshman,’ said Ram, as he flexed forward to stretch his back. Lakshman, Vishwamitra and Arishtanemi moved away. Ram slowed down his breathing without forcing the process; it reduced his heart rate in tandem. He stared at the missile launch tower as his mind drowned out the sounds around him. He squeezed his eyes as the rhythm of time slowed down, as if to keep pace with his heart beats; everything around him seemed to shift into slow motion. A crow flew over the *Asurastra* tower, flapping its wings as it attempted to fly higher. Ram followed the movement of the crow’s wings. It seemed to require less effort for the bird to gain height; it had wind beneath its wings.

Ram’s mind processed this new information: the wind was blowing leftwards close to the tower. He flicked his thumb on the arrow tip and the flames burst through. He shifted his hand to hold the arrow by its fletching. He nocked it on the bowstring, allowing the shaft to rest between his left thumb and forefinger as his hand gripped the bow firmly. Ram tipped the bow slightly upwards, factoring in the parabolic movement that the arrow would need. Arishtanemi knew this was unorthodox; the angle of the arrow was a lot lower than he would have kept. But he was also aware of Ram’s immense talent with the bow and arrow; and, of course, of the brilliant design of the arrow fletching. He did not say a word.

Ram took aim and focused on the target; it was a pineapple-sized red square, over five hundred metres away. The waving windsock next to the target was within his concentration zone; all else faded into nothingness. The sock had been pointing left, but it suddenly drooped completely. The wind had stopped.

Ram pulled the string back in that instant, but held steady. His forearm was at a slight angle upwards from the ground, his elbow aligned with the arrow, the weight of the bow transferred to the back muscle. His forearm was rigid, the bowstring touching his lips. The bow was stretched to its maximum capacity, the flaming arrowhead now touching his left hand. The windsock remained slumped. Ram released the arrow, flicking the fletching as he did, making the arrow spin rapidly as it sped forward. The spin made it face less wind resistance. Arishtanemi savoured the archery skill on display; it was almost poetic. This was why Ram could fire the arrow at a lower height despite the distance. The parabola was sharper as the arrow moved at a faster pace, the spin maintaining its fearsome speed as it tore through the air.

Kumbhakarna saw the flaming arrow being released by the archer. His instincts kicked in as he turned around, screaming loudly. ‘*Dada!*’

He charged towards his brother; Raavan stood at the massive door of the *Pushpak Vimaan*.



The arrow slammed into the small red square on the *Asurastra* tower, pushing it backwards instantly. The fire from the arrow was captured in a receptacle behind the red square, and then it spread rapidly into the fuel chamber that powered the missile. In a flash, the initial launch explosions of the *Asurastra* were heard. A few seconds later, heavy flames gathered near the base of the missile and then rose, steadily picking up pace.

Kumbhakarna threw his weight on his brother, who went flying backwards into the *Pushpak Vimaan*.

The *Asurastra* flew in a mighty arc, covering the distance across the walls of Mithila in a few short seconds. None on the roof of the Mithila Bees Quarter could tear their eyes away from the spectacle. As the missile flew high above the moat-lake, there was a small, almost inaudible explosion, like that of a fire cracker meant for a child.

Lakshman’s awe was quickly replaced by disappointment. He frowned. ‘That’s it? Is that the famed *Asurastra*?’

Vishwamitra answered laconically. ‘Cover your ears.’

Kumbhakarna, meanwhile, rose from the floor of the *Pushpak Vimaan* even as Raavan lay sprawled inside. He rushed to the door and hit the metallic button on the sidewall with his full body weight. The door of the *Pushpak Vimaan* began to slide as the bear-man watched, straining his muscles as if to lend it speed.

The *Asurastra* hovered above the Lankans and exploded with an ear-shattering boom that shook the very walls of Mithila. Many Lankan soldiers felt their eardrums burst, sucking the air from their mouths. But this was only a prelude to the devastation that would follow.

Even as an eerie silence followed the explosion, the spectators on the Mithila rooftop saw a bright green flash of light emerge from where the missile had splintered. It burst with furious intensity as it hit the Lankans below like a flash of lightning. They stayed rooted, stunned into a temporary paralytic immobility. Fragments of the exploded missile showered on them mercilessly.

Kumbhakarna saw the flash of green light as the door of the *Pushpak Vimaan* slid shut. Even as the door sealed and locked automatically, saving those inside the flying vehicle from any further damage by the *Asurastra*, Kumbhakarna collapsed, unconscious. Raavan rushed to his younger brother, screaming loudly.

‘By the great Lord Rudra,’ whispered Lakshman, cold fear having gripped his heart. He looked at his brother, similarly staggered by what he was witnessing.

‘It’s not over,’ warned Vishwamitra.

A dreadful hissing sound became suddenly audible, like the battle-cry of a gigantic snake. Simultaneously, the fragments of the *Asurastra* missile that had fallen to the

ground emitted demonic clouds of green gas, which spread like a shroud over the stupefied Lankans.

‘What is that?’ asked Ram.

‘That gas,’ said Vishwamitra, ‘is the *Asuraastra*.’

The deathly, thick gas gently enveloped the Lankans. It would put them in a coma that would last for days, if not weeks. It would possibly kill some of them. But there were no screams, no cries for mercy. None made an attempt to escape. They simply lay on the ground, motionless, waiting for the fiendish *Asuraastra* to push them into oblivion. The only sound in the otherwise grim silence was the hiss...

Ram touched his Rudraaksh pendant, his heart benumbed.

An agonising fifteen minutes later, Vishwamitra turned to Ram. ‘It’s done.’



Sita bounded up the stairway of the Bees Quarter, three steps at a time. She had been passionately conversing with the citizens of Mithila in the market square when she heard the explosion and saw the sudden flash in the sky. She had immediately known that the *Asuraastra* had been fired. She knew she had to rush back.

She first encountered Arishtanemi and the Malayaputras, standing in a huddle, away from Vishwamitra, Ram and Lakshman. A grim-faced Samichi followed Sita.

‘Who shot it?’ demanded Sita.

Arishtanemi just stepped aside, and Ram came into Sita’s view, the only one holding a bow.

Sita cursed loudly as she ran towards her husband; she knew that he must be shattered. Ram, with his moral clarity and obsession with the law, would have been hurting inside at the sin he had been forced to commit. Forced by his sense of duty towards his wife and her people.

Vishwamitra smiled as he saw her approach. ‘Sita, it is all taken care of! Raavan’s forces are destroyed. Mithila is safe.’

Sita glared at Vishwamitra, too furious to say anything. She ran right up to her husband and embraced him. A shocked Ram dropped his bow. He had never been embraced by Sita. He knew that she was trying to comfort him. Yet, as he held his hands to the side, his heartbeat started picking up. The emotional overload drained him of energy as he felt a solitary tear trickle down his face.

Sita pulled her head back as she held Ram and looked deep into his empty eyes. Her face was creased with concern. ‘I am with you, Ram.’

Ram remained silent. Strangely, a long-forgotten image entered his mind: of the *arya* concept of Emperor Prithu; Prithvi, the earth, had been named after him. Prithu had spoken of the ideal human archetype of the *aryaputra*, a ‘gentleman’, and the *aryaputri*, a ‘lady’, a prototypical human partnership of two strong individuals, who didn’t compete for exact equality but were complementary, completing each other. Two souls that were dependent on each other, giving each other purpose; two halves of a whole.

Ram felt like an *aryaputra*, being held, being supported, by his lady.

Sita continued to hold Ram in a tight embrace. ‘I am with you, Ram. We will handle

this together.'

Ram closed his eyes. He wrapped his arms around his wife. He rested his head on her shoulder. *Paradise*.

Sita looked over her husband's shoulder and glared at Vishwamitra. It was a fearsome look, like the wrathful fury of the Mother Goddess.

Vishwamitra glared right back, unrepentant.

A loud sound disturbed them all. They looked beyond the walls of Mithila. Raavan's *Pushpak Vimaan* was sputtering to life. Its giant rotor blades had begun to spin. Within moments they picked up speed and the flying vehicle rose from the earth, hovering just a few feet above the ground. Then, with a great burst of sound and energy, it soared into the sky; away from Mithila, and the devastation of the *Asuraastra*.



## Chapter 26

Sita cast an eye over her husband as he rode beside her. Lakshman and Urmila rode behind them. Lakshman was talking non-stop with his wife as she gazed at him earnestly. Urmila's thumb kept playing with the massive diamond ring on her left forefinger; an expensive gift from her husband. Behind them were a hundred Mithilan soldiers. Another hundred soldiers rode ahead of Ram and Sita. The convoy was on its way to Sankashya, from where it would sail to Ayodhya.

Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Urmila had set off from Mithila two weeks after the *Asuraashtra* laid waste the Lankan camp. King Janak and his brother, King Kushadhwaj, had authorised the imprisonment of the Lankan prisoners-of-war left behind by Raavan. Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras left for their own capital, Agastyakootam, taking the Lankan prisoners with them. The sage intended to negotiate with Raavan on Mithila's behalf, guaranteeing the kingdom's safety in return for the release of the prisoners-of-war. It was a difficult decision for Sita to leave her friend Samichi behind, but the police force of Mithila could not afford a change in leadership at this vulnerable moment of time.

‘Ram...’

Ram turned to his wife with a smile as he pulled his horse close to hers. ‘Yes?’

‘Are you sure about this?’

Ram nodded. There was no doubt in his mind.

‘But you are the first in a generation to defeat Raavan. And, it wasn’t really a *daivi astra*. If you—’

Ram frowned. ‘That’s a technicality. And you know it.’

Sita took a deep breath and continued. ‘Sometimes, to create a perfect world, a leader has to do what is necessary at the time; even if it may not appear to be the “right” thing to do in the short term. In the long run, a leader who has the capacity to uplift the masses must not deny himself that opportunity. He has a duty to not make himself unavailable. A true leader will even take a sin upon his soul for the good of his people.’

Ram looked at Sita. He seemed disappointed. ‘I have done that already, haven’t I? The question is, should I be punished for it or not? Should I do penance for it? If I expect my people to follow the law, so must I. A leader is not just one who leads. He must also be a role model. He must practise what he preaches, Sita.’

Sita smiled. ‘Well, Lord Rudra had said: “A leader is not just one who gives his people what they want. He must also be the one who teaches his people to be better than they imagined themselves to be”.’

Ram smiled too. ‘And I’m sure you will tell me Lady Mohini’s response to this as well.’

Sita laughed. ‘Yes. Lady Mohini said that people have their limitations. A leader should not expect more from them than what they are capable of. If you stretch them

beyond their capacity, they will break.'

Ram shook his head. He did not really agree with the great Lady Mohini, respected by many as a Vishnu; though many others believed that she should not be called a Vishnu. Ram expected people to rise above their limitations and better themselves; for only then is an ideal society possible. But he didn't voice his disagreement aloud.

'Are you sure? Fourteen years outside the boundaries of the Sapt Sindhu?' Sita looked at Ram seriously, returning to the original discussion.

Ram nodded. He had already made his decision. He would go to Ayodhya and seek permission from his father to go on his self-imposed exile. 'I broke Lord Rudra's law. And this is his stated punishment. It doesn't matter whether the Vayuputras pass the order to punish me or not. It doesn't matter whether my people support me or not. I must serve my sentence.'

Sita leaned towards him and whispered, 'We ... not I.'

Ram frowned.

Sita reached out and placed her palm on Ram's hand. 'You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is.' She entwined her fingers through his. 'Ram, I am your wife. We will always be together; in good times and bad; through thick and thin.'

Ram squeezed her hand as he straightened his back. His horse snorted and quickened its pace. Ram pulled back the reins gently, keeping his horse in step with his wife's steed.



'I'm not sure this will work,' said Ram.

The newly-wed couples, Ram-Sita and Lakshman-Urmila, were on the royal ship of Ayodhya, sailing up the Sarayu, on their way home. They would probably reach Ayodhya within a week.

Ram and Sita sat on the deck discussing what an ideal society meant, and the manner in which a perfect empire must be governed. For Ram, an ideal state was one which treated everyone as equal before the law.

Sita had thought long and hard about the meaning of equality. She felt that just promoting equality before the law would not solve society's problems. She believed that true equality existed only at the level of the soul. But in this material world, everyone was, in fact, not equal. No two created entities were exactly the same. Among humans, some were better at knowledge, others at warfare, some at trading and others offered their manual skills and hard work. However, the problem, according to Sita, was that in the present society, a person's path in life was determined by his birth, not by his karma. She believed that a society would be perfect only if people were free to do what they actually wanted to, based on their karma, rather than following the diktats of the caste they were born into.

And where did these diktats come from? They came from parents, who forced their values and ways on their children. Brahmin parents would encourage and push their child towards the pursuit of knowledge. The child, on the other hand, may have a passion for trade. These mismatches led to unhappiness and chaos within society. Furthermore,

the society itself suffered as its people were forced to work at jobs they didn't want to do. The worst end of this stick was reserved for the poor Shudras. Many of them could have been capable Brahmins, Kshatriyas or Vaishyas, but the rigid and unfair birth-based caste system forced them to remain skill-workers. In an earlier era, the caste system had been flexible. The best example of that was from many centuries ago: Maharishi Shakti, now known as Ved Vyas, a title used through successive ages for those who compiled, edited or differentiated the Vedas. He was born a Shudra, but his karma turned him into not just a Brahmin, but a *rishi*. A *rishi* was the highest status, below Godhood, that any person could achieve. However, today, due to the rigid birth-based caste system, a Maharishi Shakti emerging from among the Shudras was almost impossible.

'You may think this is unworkable; you may even consider it harsh. I concede your point that all should be equal before the law and equally deserving of respect. But just that is not enough. We need to be harsh to destroy this birth-based caste system,' said Sita. 'It has weakened our *dharma* and our country. It must be destroyed for the good of India. If we don't destroy the caste system as it exists today, we will open ourselves to attacks from foreigners. They will use our divisions to conquer us.'

Sita's solution, which indeed seemed harsh to Ram, would be complicated to implement. She proposed that all the children of a kingdom must be compulsorily adopted by the state at the time of birth. The birth-parents would have to surrender their children to the kingdom. The kingdom would raise these children, educate and hone the natural skills that they were born with. At the age of fifteen, they would appear for an examination that would test them on their physical, psychological and mental skills. Based on the result, appropriate castes would be allocated to the children. Subsequent training would further polish their natural talent, after which the children would be put up for adoption by citizens from the same caste as the ones assigned to the adolescents through the examination process. The children would never know their birth-parents, only their caste-parents.

'I agree that this system would be exceedingly fair,' conceded Ram. 'But I can't imagine parents willingly giving up their birth-children to the kingdom permanently, making the decision never to meet them again, or even know them. Is it even natural?'

'Humans moved away from the "natural way" when we began to wear clothes, cook our food and embraced cultural norms over instinctive urges. This is what civilisation does. Among the "civilised", right and wrong is determined by cultural conventions and rules. There were times when polygamy was considered abhorrent, and other times when it was considered a solution when there was a shortage of men due to war. And now, for all you know, you may succeed in bringing monogamy back in fashion!'

Ram laughed. 'I'm not trying to start a trend. I don't want to marry another woman because I will be insulting you by doing so.'

Sita smiled as she pushed her long, straight hair away from her face as it dried in the breeze. 'But polygamy is unfair only according to you; others may disagree. Remember, justice in terms of "right" or "wrong" is a man-made concept. It is entirely up to us to define justice in new terms of what is fair or unfair. It will be for the greater good.'

‘Hmm, but it will be very difficult to implement, Sita.’

‘No more difficult than getting the people of India to actually respect laws!’ laughed Sita, for she knew that was Ram’s pet obsession.

Ram laughed loudly. ‘*Touché!*’

Sita moved close to Ram and held his hand. Ram bent forward and kissed her, a slow, gentle kiss that filled their souls with deep happiness. Ram held his wife as they observed the Sarayu waters flowing by and the green riverbanks in the distance.

‘We didn’t finish that Somras conversation... What were you thinking?’ asked Sita.

‘I think it should either be made available to all or to none. It’s not fair that a few chosen ones from the nobility get to live so much longer, and be healthier, than most others.’

‘But how would you ever be able to produce enough Somras for everyone?’

‘Guru Vashishta has invented a technology that can mass-produce it. If I rule Ayodhya —’

‘When,’ interrupted Sita.

‘Sorry?’

‘When you rule Ayodhya,’ said Sita. ‘Not “if”. It will happen, even if it is fourteen years from now.’

Ram smiled. ‘All right, *when* I rule Ayodhya, I intend to build this factory that Guru Vashishta has designed. We will offer the Somras to all.’

‘If you are going to create an entirely new way of life, then you must have a new name for it as well. Why carry the karma of the old?’

‘Something tells me you have thought of a name already?’

‘A land of pure life.’

‘That’s the name?’

‘No. That is simply what the name will mean.’

‘So, what will be the new name of my kingdom?’

Sita smiled. ‘It will be Meluha.’



‘Are you insane?’ shouted Dashrath.

The emperor was in his new private office in Kaushalya’s palace. Ram had just informed Dashrath about his decision to banish himself from the Sapt Sindhu to atone for the sin of firing a *daiyi astra* without the permission of the Vayuputras; a decision that had not gone down too well with Dashrath, to say the least.

A worried Kaushalya hurried to her husband and tried to get him to remain seated. His health had been deteriorating rapidly of late. ‘Please calm down, Your Majesty.’

Kaushalya, still unsure of the influence that Kaikeyi exercised over Dashrath, had remained careful in her dealings with her husband. She wasn’t sure how long she would remain Dashrath’s favourite queen. To her, he was still ‘His Majesty’. But this kid-glove treatment only agitated Dashrath further.

‘In Lord Parshu Ram’s name, Kaushalya, stop mollycoddling me and knock some sense into your son,’ screamed Dashrath. ‘What do you think will happen if he is gone for

fourteen years? Do you think the nobles will just wait around patiently for his return?’

‘Ram,’ said Kaushalya. ‘Your father is right. Nobody has asked for you to be punished. The Vayuputras have not made any demands.’

‘They will,’ said Ram in a steady voice. ‘It’s only a matter of time.’

‘But we don’t have to listen to them. We do not follow their laws!’

‘If I expect others to follow the law, then so should I.’

‘Are you trying to be suicidal, Ram?’ asked Dashrath, his face flushed, his hands trembling in anger.

‘I am only following the law, Father.’

‘Can’t you see what my health is like? I will be gone soon. If you are not here, Bharat will become king. And, if you are out of the Sapt Sindhu for fourteen years, by the time you return Bharat will have consolidated his rule. You will not even get a village to govern.’

‘Firstly, Father, if you pronounce Bharat crown prince when I am gone, then it is his right to become king. And I think Bharat will make a good ruler. Ayodhya will not suffer. But if you continue with me as the crown prince even while I’m in exile, I am sure that Bharat will give back the throne to me when I return. I trust him completely.’

Dashrath laughed harshly. ‘You actually think it will be Bharat ruling Ayodhya once you’re gone? No! It will be his mother. And Kaikeyi will have you killed in exile, son.’

‘I will not allow myself to be killed, Father. But if I am killed, maybe that is what fate has in store for me.’

Dashrath banged his fist on his head, his frustration ringing loudly through the angry grunt he let out.

‘Father, my mind is made up,’ said Ram with finality. ‘But if I leave without your permission, it will be an insult to you; and an insult to Ayodhya. How can a crown prince disobey the king’s orders? That’s why I am asking you to please banish me.’

Dashrath turned to Kaushalya, throwing up his hands in frustration.

‘This is going to happen, Father, whether you like it or not,’ said Ram. ‘Your banishing me will keep Ayodhya’s honour intact. So, please do it.’

Dashrath’s shoulders drooped in resignation. ‘At least agree with my other suggestion.’

Ram stood resolute, but with an apologetic expression on his face. No.

‘But Ram, if you marry a princess from a powerful kingdom, then you will have a strong ally when you return to claim your inheritance. Kekaya will never side with you. Ashwapati is Kaikeyi’s father after all. But if you marry a princess from another powerful kingdom, then—’

‘My apologies for interrupting you, Father. But I have always maintained that I will marry only one woman. And I have. I will not insult her by marrying another.’

Dashrath stared at him helplessly.

Ram felt he needed to clarify further. ‘And if my wife dies, I will mourn her for the rest of my life. But I will never ever marry again.’

Kaushalya finally lost her temper. ‘What do you mean by that, Ram? Are you trying to

imply that your own father will get your wife killed?’

‘I didn’t say that, Mother,’ said Ram, calmly.

‘Ram, please understand,’ pleaded Dashrath, desperately trying to keep his temper in check. ‘She is the princess of Mithila, a minor kingdom. She will not prove to be of any use in the struggle you will face ahead.’

Ram stiffened, but kept his voice polite. ‘She is my wife, Father. Please speak of her with respect.’

‘She is a lovely girl, Ram,’ said Dashrath. ‘I have been observing her for the last few days. She is a good wife. She will keep you happy. And you can remain married to her. But if you marry another princess, then—’

‘Forgive me, Father. But no.’

‘Dammit!’ screamed Dashrath. ‘Get out of here before I burst a blood vessel!’

‘Yes, Father,’ said Ram, and calmly turned to leave.

‘And you are not leaving this city without my order!’ yelled Dashrath at Ram’s retreating form.

Ram looked back, his face inscrutable. With deliberate movements, he bowed his head, folded his hands into a namaste, and said, ‘May all the Gods of our great land continue to bless you, Father.’ And then, with equal lack of haste, he turned and walked out.

Dashrath glared at Kaushalya, rage pouring out of his eyes. His wife cowered with an apologetic expression on her face, as though she had somehow failed him in this show of will by Ram.



## Chapter 27

On returning to his section of the palace, Ram was told that his wife was out, visiting the royal garden. He decided to join her, and found her in conversation with Bharat. Just like everyone else, his brother had initially been shocked when he heard about Ram's marriage to an adopted princess from a small kingdom. However, within a short span of time, Bharat had grown to respect Sita, her intelligence and strength of character. The two had spent a lot of time with each other, finding a deep sense of appreciation for the qualities they discovered in the other.

'...Which is why I think freedom is the most important attribute of life, *Bhabhi*,' said Bharat.

'More important than the law?' asked Sita.

'Yes. I believe there should be as few laws as possible; enough just to provide a framework within which human creativity can express itself in all its glory. Freedom is the natural way of life.'

Sita laughed softly. 'And what does your elder brother have to say about your views?'

Ram walked up to them from behind and placed his hands on his wife's shoulders. 'His elder brother thinks that Bharat is a dangerous influence!'

Bharat burst out laughing as he rose to embrace his brother. '*Dada...*'

'Should I be thanking you for entertaining your *bhabhi* with your libertarian views?!'

Bharat smiled as he shrugged. 'At least I won't convert the citizens of Ayodhya into a bunch of bores!'

Ram laughed and said, tongue in cheek, 'That's good then!'

Bharat's expression instantly transformed and became sombre. 'Father is not going to let you go, *Dada*. Even you know that. You're not going anywhere.'

'Father doesn't have a choice. And neither do you. You will rule Ayodhya. And you will rule it well.'

'I will not ascend the throne this way,' said Bharat, shaking his head. 'No, I will not.'

Ram knew that there was nothing he could say that would ease Bharat's pain.

'*Dada*, why are you insisting on this?' asked Bharat.

'It's the law, Bharat,' said Ram. 'I fired a *daivi astra*.'

'The hell with the law, *Dada*! Do you actually think your leaving will be in the best interests of Ayodhya? Imagine what the two of us can achieve together; your emphasis on rules and mine on freedom and creativity. Do you think either you or I can be as effective alone?'

Ram shook his head. 'I'll be back in fourteen years, Bharat. Even you just conceded that rules have a significant place in a society. How can I convince others to follow the law if I don't do so myself? The law must apply equally and fairly to every single person. It is as simple as that.' Then Ram stared directly into Bharat's eyes. 'Even if it helps a heinous criminal escape death, the law should not be broken.'

Bharat stared right back, his expression inscrutable.

Sita, sensing that the brothers were talking about something else and that things were getting decidedly uncomfortable, rose from the bench and said to Ram, ‘You have a meeting with General Mrigasya.’



‘I don’t mean to be rude, but are you sure that your wife should be here?’ asked Mrigasya, the general of the Ayodhyan army.

Ram and Sita had received the general in their private office.

‘There are no secrets between us,’ said Ram. ‘In any case, I would tell her what has been discussed. She may as well hear it directly from you.’

Mrigasya cast an enigmatic look at Sita, and let out a long breath before addressing Ram. ‘You can be emperor right away.’

The king of Ayodhya automatically became the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu; this had been the privilege of the Suryavanshi clan that ruled Kosala, since the days of Raghu. Mrigasya was offering to smoothen the path for Ram to ascend the throne of Ayodhya.

Sita was stunned, but kept her face deadpan. Ram frowned.

Mrigasya misunderstood what was going through Ram’s mind. He assumed that Ram was wondering why the general would help him, when one of his officials had been penalised on the orders of the prince, for what Mrigasya thought was a minor crime of land-grabbing.

‘I am willing to forget what you did to me,’ said Mrigasya, ‘if you are willing to remember what I am doing for you right now.’

Ram remained silent.

‘Look, Prince Ram,’ continued Mrigasya, ‘the people love you for your police reforms. There is the matter of Dhenuka, for which you became unpopular for a while, but that has been forgotten in the glow of your victory over Raavan in Mithila. In fact, you may not know this, but you have become popular among the common people across India, not just Kosala. Nobody is hated more in the Sapt Sindhu than Raavan, and you defeated him. I can bring the nobles of Ayodhya to your side. Most of the major kingdoms in the Sapt Sindhu will swing towards the eventual winner. The only one we need to worry about is Kekaya and the kingdoms under its influence. But even those kingdoms, the descendants of King Anu, have differences among themselves that we could easily exploit. In short, what I’m telling you is that the throne is yours for the taking.’

‘What about the law?’ asked Ram.

Mrigasya looked baffled, like someone had spoken in an unknown language. ‘The law?’

‘I have fired the *Asurastra* and I have to serve my sentence.’

Mrigasya laughed. ‘Who will dare punish the future emperor of the Sapt Sindhu?’

‘Maybe the present emperor of the Sapt Sindhu?’

‘Emperor Dashrath wants you to ascend the throne. Trust me. He will not send you off on some ludicrous exile.’

Ram’s expression did not change but Sita could sense that her husband was getting

deeply irritated as he closed his eyes.

‘Prince?’ asked Mrigasya.

Ram ran his hand across his face. His fingers rested on his chin as he opened his eyes and stared into Mrigasya’s; he whispered, ‘My father is an honourable man. He is a descendant of Ikshvaku. He will do the honourable thing; as will I.’

‘Prince, I don’t think you understand—’

Ram interrupted Mrigasya. ‘I don’t think *you* understand, General Mrigasya. I am a descendant of Ikshvaku. I am a descendant of Raghu. My family would rather die than bring disrepute to our clan’s honour.’

‘Those are mere words...’

‘No. It is a code; a code that we live by.’

Mrigasya leaned forward, adopting a manner as if he was speaking to a child not familiar with the ways of the world. ‘Listen to me, Prince Ram. I have seen a lot more of this world than you have. Honour is for the textbooks. In the real world...’

‘I think we are done, General,’ said Ram, rising with a polite namaste.



‘What?’ asked Kaikeyi. ‘Are you sure?’

Manthara had rushed to Kaikeyi’s chamber, secure in the knowledge that neither Dashrath nor any of his personal staff would be present. Kaikeyi’s staff was not a concern; originally from her parental home in Kekaya, they were fiercely loyal to her. Seating herself beside the queen, she nevertheless exercised abundant caution and commanded the queen’s maids to leave the room, ordering them to shut the door on their way out.

‘I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t sure,’ said Manthara, as she shifted in her chair to ease the discomfort to her back. The royal furniture was a travesty compared to the well-designed, ergonomic furniture in Manthara’s opulent home. ‘Money opens all mouths; everyone has a price. The emperor is all set to announce in court tomorrow that Ram will be king in his stead, and that he will take *Vanvaas* in the forests. *Vanvaas* with all his queens, I might add. You too may have to live in some jungle hut, from now on.’

Kaikeyi scowled at her, as she gritted her teeth.

‘Gritting your teeth will only wear out the enamel,’ said Manthara. ‘If you think you should do something more practical, then today is the day. The time is right now. You will never get an opportunity like this again.’

Kaikeyi was annoyed at Manthara’s tone; her demeanour had changed from the day she had given her that money to carry out her vengeance. But she needed the powerful trader for now, so she exercised restraint. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘You once mentioned the promise that Dashrath made to you after you saved him at the Battle of Karachapa.’

Kaikeyi leaned back in her chair as she remembered the long-forgotten promise, a debt she never really believed she would need to collect. She had saved his life in that disastrous battle with Raavan, losing a finger and getting seriously injured herself. When Dashrath had regained consciousness, he had, in his gratitude, made an open-ended

promise to Kaikeyi that he would honour any two wishes she made, anytime in life. ‘The two boons! I can ask for anything!’

‘And he has to honour it. *Raghukul reet sadaa chali aayi, praan jaaye par vachan naa jaaye.*’

Manthara had recited the motto of the Suryavanshi clan that ruled Ayodhya; or at least, what had been their motto since the days of the great Emperor Raghu. It translated as: The clan of Raghu has always followed a tradition; they would much rather die than dishonour their word.

‘He cannot say no...’ whispered Kaikeyi, a glint in her eye.

Manthara nodded.

‘Ram should be banished for fourteen years,’ said Kaikeyi. ‘I’ll tell him to say publicly that he is doing so to punish him according to the rules of Lord Rudra.’

‘Very wise. That will make the public accept it. Ram is popular with the people now, but nobody will want to break Lord Rudra’s rule.’

‘And he has to declare Bharat the crown prince.’

‘Perfect! Two boons; the solution to all problems.’

‘Yes...’



As she rode over the bridge that spanned the Grand Canal, Sita looked around to check that she was not being followed. She had covered her face and upper body with a long *angvastram*, as if protecting herself from the cold, late evening breeze.

The road stretched into the distance, heading east towards lands that Kosala controlled directly. A few metres ahead, she looked back again, and steered the reins to the left, off the road. She rode into the jungle and immediately made a clicking sound, making her horse break into a swift gallop. She had to cover an hour’s distance in just half the time.



‘But what will your husband say?’ asked the Naga.

Sita stood in a small clearing in the jungle, her hand on the hilt of her knife, encased within a small scabbard; a precaution against wild animals.

She did not need any protection from the man she had just met, though. He was a Malayaputra, and she trusted him like an elder brother. The Naga had a hard and bony mouth, extending out of his face like a beak. His head was bare but his face was covered with fine downy hair. He looked like a man with the face of a vulture.

‘Jatayuji,’ said Sita, respectfully, ‘my husband is not just unusual, he’s the kind of man who comes along once in a millennium. Sadly, he doesn’t realise how important he is. As far as he is concerned, he simply thinks he’s doing the right thing by asking to be exiled. But in doing so, he is also putting himself in serious danger. The moment we cross the Narmada, I suspect we will face repeated attacks. They will try every trick in the book to kill him off.’

‘You have tied a *rakhi* on my hand, my sister,’ said Jatayu. ‘Nothing will happen to you or the one you love, for as long as I am alive.’

Sita smiled.

‘But you should tell your husband about me, about what you are asking me to do. I don’t know if he dislikes the Malayaputras. But if he does, it would not be completely unfair. He may harbour some ill-will about what happened at Mithila.’

‘Let me worry about how to handle my husband.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I know him quite well by now. He won’t understand at present that we might need some protection in the forest; maybe later. For now, I just need your soldiers to keep a constant but discreet watch on our positions and prevent any attacks.’

Jatayu thought he heard a sound. He pulled out his knife and stared into the darkness beyond the trees. A few seconds later he relaxed and turned his attention back to Sita.

‘It’s nothing,’ said Sita.

‘Why is your husband insisting on being punished?’ asked Jatayu. ‘It can be argued against. The *Asuraastraa* is not really a weapon of mass destruction. He can get away on a technicality, if he chooses to.’

‘He is insisting on being punished because that is the law.’

‘He can’t be so...’ Jatayu didn’t complete his statement. But it was obvious what he wanted to say.

‘People see my husband as a naive and blind follower of the law. But a day will come when the entire world will see him as one of the greatest leaders ever. It is my duty to protect him and keep him alive till then.’

Jatayu smiled.

Sita was embarrassed by her next request, as it seemed selfish. But she had to be sure. ‘And the...’

‘The Somras will be arranged. I agree that you and your husband will need it, especially if you have to be strong enough to complete your mission when you return fourteen years later.’

‘But won’t you face difficulties in getting the Somras out? What about...’

Jatayu laughed. ‘Let me worry about that.’

Sita had heard all that she needed to. She knew that Jatayu would come through.

‘Goodbye. Go with Lord Parshu Ram, my brother.’

‘Go with Lord Rudra, my sister.’

Jatayu lingered for a bit after Sita mounted her horse and rode away. Once sure that she was gone, he touched the ground she had been standing on, picked up some of the dust that had been touched by her sandals, and then brought it reverentially to his forehead; a mark of respect for a great leader.



‘*Chhoti Maa* is in the *kopa bhavan!*’ exclaimed a surprised Ram, referring to his stepmother, Kaikeyi.

‘Yes,’ said Vashishta.

Ram had earlier been informed that his father would announce the ascension of the prince to the throne the next day. He had determined his next course of action. He was planning to abdicate the throne and install Bharat as king instead. He would then leave

for the forest. But Ram had misgivings about this plan as it would, in effect, mean publicly dishonouring his father's wishes.

Therefore, when Vashishta came in and told Ram about his stepmother's move, his first reaction was not negative.

Kaikeyi had lodged herself in the *kopa bhavan*, the *house of anger*. This was an institutionalised chamber created in royal palaces many centuries ago, once polygamy became a common practice among the royalty. Having multiple wives, a king was naturally unable to spend enough time with all of them. A *kopa bhavan* was the assigned chamber a wife would go to if angry or upset with her husband. This would be a signal for the king that the queen needed redressal for a complaint. It was believed to be inauspicious for a husband to allow his wife to stay overnight in the *kopa bhavan*.

Dashrath had no choice but to visit his aggrieved spouse.

'Even if her influence has reduced, if there's one person who can force my father to change his mind, it would be *Chhoti Maa*,' said Ram.

'It looks like your wish will come true after all.'

'Yes. And, if ordered so, Sita and I will leave immediately.'

Vashishta frowned. 'Isn't Lakshman going with you?'

'He wants to, but I don't think that's necessary. He needs to stay here, with his wife, Urmila. She is delicate. We should not impose a harsh forest-life on her.'

Vashishta nodded in agreement. Then he leaned over and spoke earnestly. 'I will spend the next fourteen years preparing the ground for you.'

Ram smiled at his guru.

'Remember your destiny. You will be the next Vishnu, regardless of what anyone else says. You have to rewrite the future of our nation. I will work towards that goal and make sure that we are ready for you when you return. But you have to ensure that you remain alive.'

'I will certainly try my best.'



## Chapter 28

Dashrath stepped out of the palanquin with assistance and hobbled into the *kopa bhavan*. He seemed to have aged a decade; the stress of the last few days had been immense. He sat on his usual rocking chair and dismissed the attendant with a wave of his hand.

He raised his eyes and observed his wife; Kaikeyi had not acknowledged his entry into the room. She sat on a divan, her hair undone, unkempt. Not a speck of jewellery on her person, her *angvastram* lay on the ground. She wore a white *dhoti* and blouse, and sat with an appearance of calm that belied the fury that raged within; he knew her well; he also knew what was going to happen and that he couldn't say no.

'Speak,' said Dashrath.

Kaikeyi looked at him with sorrow-filled eyes. 'You may not love me anymore, Dashrath, but I still love you.'

'Oh, I know you love me. But you love yourself more.'

Kaikeyi stiffened. 'And are you any different? Are you going to teach me about selflessness? Seriously?'

Dashrath smiled ruefully. '*Touché*.'

Kaikeyi seethed with the anger of a woman scorned.

'You were always the smartest of all my wives. I enjoyed my verbal battles with you the way I enjoyed duelling with a warrior. I miss those sharp, acerbic words that could even draw blood.'

'I can bleed you with a sword, too.'

Dashrath laughed. 'I know.'

Kaikeyi leaned back on the divan, trying to slow down her breathing, trying to control herself. But the hurt still showed through. 'I dedicated my life to you. I nearly died for you. I disfigured myself in saving your life. I never ever humiliated you in public, unlike your precious Ram.'

'Ram has never—'

Kaikeyi interrupted Dashrath. 'He has, now! You know that he will not follow your order tomorrow. He will dishonour you. And Bharat would never—'

It was Dashrath's turn to interrupt. 'I am not choosing between Bharat and Ram. You know they have no problems with each other.'

Kaikeyi leaned forward and hissed, 'This is not about Ram and Bharat. This is about Ram and me. You have to choose between Ram and me. What has he ever done for you? He saved your life once. That's it. I have saved your life every day, for the last so many years! Do my sacrifices count for nothing?'

Dashrath refused to succumb to her emotional blackmail.

Kaikeyi laughed contemptuously. 'Of course! When you don't have any counter argument, all you do is clam up!'

'I do have an answer, but you will not like it.'

Kaikeyi laughed harshly. ‘All my life, I have tolerated things that I don’t like. I submit to the insults of my father. I tolerate your selfishness. I live with my son’s disdain for me. I can tolerate a few words. Tell me!’

‘Ram offers me immortality.’

Kaikeyi was confused. And it showed on her face. She had always managed to get large quantities of Somras for Dashrath, repeatedly haranguing Raj Guru Vashishta for the legendary drink of the Gods. It dramatically increased the life-spans of those who consumed it. For some reason, it had not worked its wonders on Dashrath.

Dashrath explained. ‘Not immortality for my body. The last few days have made me fully aware of my mortality. I’m talking about immortality for my name. I know that I have wasted my life and my potential. People compare me to my great ancestors and find me wanting. But Ram... He will go down in history as one of the greatest ever. And he will redeem my name. I will be remembered as Ram’s father for all time to come. Ram’s greatness will rub off on me. He has already defeated Raavan!’

Kaikeyi burst out laughing. ‘That was pure luck, you fool. It was sheer chance that Guru Vishwamitra happened to be there with the *Asurastra*!’

‘Yes, he got lucky. That means the Gods favour him.’

Kaikeyi cast him a dark look. This was getting nowhere. ‘The hell with this. Let’s get this over with. You know you cannot refuse me.’

Dashrath sat back and smiled sadly. ‘Just when I was beginning to enjoy our conversation...’

‘I want my two boons.’

‘Both of them?’ asked Dashrath, surprised. He had expected only one of them to be called.

‘I want Ram banished from the Sapt Sindhu for fourteen years. You can announce at court that this is because he broke Lord Rudra’s law. You will be praised for it. Even the Vayuputras will applaud you.’

‘Yes, I know how concerned you are about my prestige!’ said Dashrath caustically.

‘You cannot say no!’

Dashrath sighed. ‘And the second?’

‘You will declare Bharat the crown prince tomorrow.’

Dashrath was shocked. This was unexpected. The implication was obvious. He growled softly, ‘If Ram is killed in exile, people will lynch you.’

Kaikeyi was aghast. She shouted, ‘Do you really think I could shed royal blood? The blood of Raghu?’

‘Yes, I think you could. But I know that Bharat won’t. I will warn him about you.’

‘You do what you want. Just honour my two boons.’

Dashrath stared at Kaikeyi with anger. He suddenly looked towards the door. ‘Guards!’

Four guards rushed in with Dashrath’s attendant.

‘Order my palanquin,’ said Dashrath, brusquely.

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ said his attendant, as they all scurried out.

As soon as they were alone, Dashrath said. ‘You can leave the *kopa bhavan*. You will get your two boons. But I am warning you, if you do anything to Ram, I will...’

‘I will not do anything to your precious Ram!’ screamed Kaikeyi.



The royal court assembled in the massive Great Hall of the Unconquerable in the second hour of the second *prahar*. Dashrath sat on his throne, visibly tired and unhappy, but dignified. Not one of the queens was present. Vashishta, the raj guru, sat on the throne to the right of the emperor. The court was packed with not just the nobility, but also as many of the common people as could be accommodated in the hall.

Except for a few, most were unaware of what was to transpire that morning. They simply couldn’t understand why Ram should be punished for defeating Raavan. In fact, the crown prince deserved to be commended for restoring Ayodhya’s glory and washing away the taint on his birth.

‘Silence!’ announced the court crier.

Dashrath sat with heartbreakingly majestic dignity upon the throne, as if seeking honour from his son. Ram stood in the middle of the great hall, directly in his line of sight. The emperor coughed softly as his eyes fell on the lion-shaped armrest. He tightened his hold around it as he felt an overpowering temptation to change his mind. Realising the futility of the sentiment, he closed his eyes in resignation.

*How do you save someone who thinks that doing so is an act of dishonour?*

Dashrath looked straight into the eyes of his insanely virtuous son. ‘The law of Lord Rudra has been broken. Some good did come of it, for Raavan’s bodyguard corps was destroyed. By all accounts, he is licking his wounds in Lanka!'

The audience broke into a loud cheer. Everybody hated Raavan; almost everybody.

‘Mithila, the kingdom of our Princess Sita, the wife of my beloved son Ram, was saved from annihilation.’

The crowd cheered once again, but it was more muted this time. Very few knew Sita, and most did not understand why their crown prince had forged an alliance with a deeply spiritual but powerless kingdom.

Dashrath’s voice shook as he continued. ‘But the law has been broken. And Lord Rudra’s word has to be honoured. His tribe, the Vayuputras, have not yet asked for Ram to be punished. But that will not stop the Raghuvanshis from doing the right thing.’

A hushed silence descended on the hall. The people felt a dread as they steeled themselves to hear what they now feared their king would say to them.

‘Ram has accepted the punishment that must be his. He will leave Ayodhya, for I banish him from the Sapt Sindhu for fourteen years. He will return to us after cleansing himself with the fire of penance. He is a true follower of Lord Rudra. Honour him!’

A loud cry rent the air: of dismay from the commoners and shock from the nobility.

Dashrath raised his hands and the crowds fell silent. ‘My other beloved son, Bharat, will now be the crown prince of Ayodhya, the kingdom of Kossala and the Sapt Sindhu Empire.’

Silence. The mood in the hall had turned sombre.

Ram held his hands together in a formal namaste as he spoke in a loud and clear voice. ‘Father, even the Gods in the sky marvel at your wisdom and justice today!’

Many among the common folk were openly crying now.

‘The golden spirit of the greatest Suryavanshi, Ikshvaku himself, lives strong in you, my father!’ said Ram loudly. ‘Sita and I will leave Ayodhya within a day.’

In the far corner of the hall, standing unobtrusively behind a pillar, was a tall, unusually fair-skinned man. He wore a white *dhoti* and *angavastram*; he seemed visibly uncomfortable in the *dhoti*, though — perhaps it wasn’t his normal attire. His most distinguishing features were his hooked nose, beaded full beard, and drooping moustache. His wizened face creased into a smile as he heard Ram’s words.

*Guru Vashishta has chosen well.*



‘I must say that I am surprised by the emperor,’ said the fair-skinned man with the hooked nose, adjusting his uncomfortable *dhoti*.

He sat with Vashishta in the raj guru’s private chamber.

‘Do not forget where the real credit lies,’ said Vashishta.

‘I think that’s obvious. I must say you have chosen well.’

‘And will you play your role?’

The fair-skinned man sighed. ‘You know we cannot get involved too deeply, Gurujī. It is not our decision to make.’

‘But...’

‘But we will do all that we can. That is our promise. And you know that we don’t break our promises.’

Vashishta nodded. ‘Thank you, my friend. That is all I ask. Glory to Lord Rudra.’

‘Glory to Lord Parshu Ram.’



Bharat walked into Ram and Sita’s sitting room even as he was being announced. They had already changed into the garb of hermits, made from rough cotton and bark. It made Bharat wince.

‘We have to dress the way forest people do, Bharat,’ said Sita.

Tears sprang into his eyes. He looked at Ram as he shook his head. ‘*Dada*, I don’t know whether to applaud you or try and knock some sense into you.’

‘You needn’t do either,’ said Ram, smiling. ‘Just embrace me and wish me goodbye.’

Bharat rushed towards his brother and gathered him in his arms as a torrent of tears ran down his face. Ram held him tight.

As Bharat stepped back, Ram said, ‘Don’t worry. Sweet are the fruits of adversity. I will return with more sense knocked into me, I assure you.’

Bharat laughed softly. ‘One of these days, I’ll stop speaking to you for the fear of being understood.’

Ram laughed as well. ‘Rule well, my brother.’

There were some who believed that Bharat’s emphasis on liberty was more suited to the temperament of Ayodhya citizens, indeed the people of the Sapt Sindhu.

‘I won’t lie that I did not want it,’ said Bharat. ‘But not this way ... not this way...’

Ram put his hands on Bharat’s strong muscular shoulders. ‘You will rule well. I know that. Make our ancestors proud.’

‘I don’t care what our ancestors think.’

‘Then make *me* proud,’ said Ram.

Bharat’s face fell, along with a fresh stream of tears. He embraced his brother again and they held each other for a long time. Ram overcame his natural reserve as he held on to Bharat. He knew his brother needed this.

‘Enough,’ said Bharat, pulling back, wiping his tears and shaking his head. He turned to Sita. ‘Take care of my brother, *Bhabhi*. He does not know how unethical this world is.’

Sita smiled. ‘He knows. But he still tries to change things.’

Bharat sighed. Then he turned towards Ram as an idea struck him. ‘Give me your slippers, *Dada*.’

Ram frowned as he looked down at his simple hermit slippers.

‘Not these,’ said Bharat. ‘Your royal slippers.’

‘Why?’

‘Just give them to me, *Dada*.’

Ram walked to the side of the bed, where his recently discarded royal garments lay. On the floor was a pair of gold-coloured slippers, with exquisite silver and brown embroidery. Ram picked them up and handed them to Bharat.

‘What are you going to do with these?’ asked Ram.

‘When the time comes, I will place these rather than myself on the throne,’ said Bharat.

Ram and Sita immediately understood the implication. With this one gesture, Bharat would effectively declare that Ram was the king of Ayodhya and that he, Bharat, was only a caretaker in his elder brother’s absence. Any attempts to murder the king of Ayodhya would invite the wrath of the mighty empire of the Sapt Sindhu. This was mandated by the treaties between the various kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu. Added to the cold reality of treaty obligations was the superstition that it was bad karma to kill kings and crown princes, except in battle or open combat. It would offer a powerful shield of protection to Ram, though it would severely undercut Bharat’s own authority and power.

Ram embraced his Bharat again. ‘My brother...’



‘Lakshman?’ said Sita. ‘I thought I’d told you...’

Lakshman had just entered Ram and Sita’s sitting room. He wore the same attire that his elder brother and sister-in-law did: one of a forest hermit.

Lakshman dared Sita with determination blazing in his eyes. ‘I’m coming, *Bhabhi*.’

‘Lakshman...’ pleaded Ram.

‘You will not survive without me, *Dada*,’ said Lakshman. ‘I’m not letting you go without me.’

Ram laughed. ‘It’s touching to see the faith my family has in me. No one seems to trust me to be able to keep myself alive.’

Lakshman laughed too, but turned serious in a flash. ‘You’re free to laugh or cry about it, *Dada*. But I am coming with you.’

— ¶ ☀ —

An excited Urmila greeted Lakshman as he entered his private chamber. She was dressed in simple, yet fashionable attire. Her *dhoti* and blouse were dyed in the common colour brown, but an elegant gold border ran along its edges. She wore simple, modest gold jewellery, unlike what she normally favoured.

‘Come, my darling,’ said Urmila, smiling with childlike enthusiasm. ‘You must see this. I have single-handedly supervised the packing and most of it is done already.’

‘Packing?’ asked a surprised Lakshman, with a fond smile.

‘Yes,’ said Urmila, taking his hand and pulling him into the wardrobe room. Two massive trunks made of teak were placed in the centre. Urmila quickly opened both. ‘This one has my clothes and that one has yours.’

Lakshman stood nonplussed, not knowing how to react to his innocent Urmila.

She pulled him into their bed chamber, where lay another trunk, packed and ready. It was full of utensils. A small container in one corner caught her attention. Urmila opened it to reveal small packets of spices. ‘See, the way I understand it, we should be able to get meat and vegetables easily in the jungle. But spices and utensils will be difficult. So...’

Lakshman stared at her, bemused and a trifle dismayed.

Urmila moved towards him and embraced her husband, smiling fondly. ‘I will cook the most divine meals for you. And for Sita *Didi* and Ram *Jijaji* also, of course. We will return fat and healthy from our fourteen-year holiday!’

Lakshman returned his wife’s embrace gently; her head reached his muscular barrel-chest. *Holiday?*

He looked down at his excited wife, who was obviously trying very hard to make the best of what was a bewildering situation for her. *She has been a princess all her life. She assumed that she would be living in an even more luxurious palace in Ayodhya. She is not a bad soul. She just wants to be a good wife. But is it right of me, her husband, to agree to her following me into the jungle, even if she wants to do so? Isn’t it my duty to protect her, just like it is my duty to protect my Ram Dada?*

*She will not last a day in the jungle. She won’t.*

A heavy weight settled on Lakshman’s heart as it became obvious what he had to do. But he knew he must do so gently so it would not break his Urmila’s tender heart.

Keeping one arm around her, he raised her chin with his other hand. Urmila gazed at him lovingly with her childlike innocence. He spoke tenderly, ‘I’m worried, Urmila.’

‘Don’t be. We’ll handle it together. The forest will be...’

‘It’s not about the forest. I’m worried about what will happen here, in the palace.’

Urmila arched her spine and threw her head back so she could get a better look at her extremely tall husband. ‘In the palace?’

‘Yes! Father’s not keeping too well. *Chhoti Maa Kaikeyi* will be controlling everything now. And, frankly, I don’t think Bharat *Dada* can stand up to her. My mother

will at least have Shatrughan to look after her. But who will look after *Badi Maa* Kaushalya? What will happen to her?’

Urmila nodded. ‘True...’

‘And if *Chhoti Maa* Kaikeyi can do this to Ram *Dada*, can you imagine what she will do to *Badi Maa*?’

Urmila’s open face was guileless.

‘Someone has to protect *Badi Maa*,’ Lakshman repeated, as if to drive home his point.

‘Yes, that’s true, but there are so many people in the palace. Hasn’t Ram *Dada* made any arrangements?’ asked Urmila.

Lakshman smiled sadly. ‘Ram *Dada* is not the most practical of men. He thinks everyone in the world is as ethical as he is. Why do you think I’m going with him? I need to protect him.’

Urmila’s face fell as she finally understood what Lakshman was trying to say. ‘I’m not living here without you, Lakshman.’

He pulled his wife close. ‘It will be for a short time, Urmila.’

‘Fourteen years? No, I’m not...’ Urmila burst into helpless tears as she hugged him tight.

Lakshman eased his hold as he gently raised her chin again. He wiped away her tears. ‘You are a Raghuvanshi now. We hold duty above love; we uphold honour, even at the cost of happiness. This is not a matter of choice, Urmila.’

‘Don’t do this, Lakshman. Please. I love you. Don’t leave me.’

‘I love you too, Urmila. And I cannot force you to do anything you don’t want to do. I am only requesting you. But before you give me your answer, I want you to think of Kaushalya *Maa*. Think of the love she has showered upon you over the last few days. Didn’t you tell me that after a long time, you felt as if you had a mother again, in Kaushalya *Maa*? Doesn’t she deserve something in return?’

Urmila burst out crying and embraced Lakshman tightly again.



A cool evening breeze blew through the palace at the fifth hour of the third *prahar*, as Sita walked towards Lakshman and Urmila’s private chambers. The guards immediately stood at attention. As they turned to announce her, they were halted by a pensive Lakshman emerging from the chambers. Sita felt a lump in her throat as she looked at his face.

‘I’ll sort this out,’ said Sita sternly, as she attempted to walk past him and enter her sister’s chambers.

Lakshman stopped her, holding her hand with a pleading expression in his eyes. ‘No, *Bhabhi*.’

Sita looked at her giant brother-in-law, who suddenly seemed so vulnerable and alone.

‘Lakshman, my sister listens to me. Trust me—’

‘No, *Bhabhi*,’ interrupted Lakshman, shaking his head. ‘Forest life will not be easy. We will face death every day. You know that. You are tough, you can survive. But she is...’ Tears welled up in his eyes. ‘She wanted to come, *Bhabhi*, but I don’t think she

should. I convinced her not to... This is for the best.'

'Lakshman...'

'This is for the best, *Bhabhi*,' repeated Lakshman, almost as though he was convincing himself. 'This is for the best.'



## Chapter 29

It had been an eventful six months since Ram, Lakshman and Sita had left Ayodhya. Word that Dashrath had passed away had made Ram repeatedly curse his fate for not being able to perform the duties of an eldest son and conduct the funeral rites of his father. It broke Ram's heart that he had discovered his father so late in his life. Returning to Ayodhya was not possible, but he had performed a *yagna* in the forests for the journey his father's soul had undertaken. Bharat had remained true to his word. He had placed Ram's slippers on the throne of Ayodhya, and had begun governing the empire as his brother's regent. It could be said that Ram was appointed emperor in absentia. It was an unorthodox move but Bharat's liberal and decentralising style of governance made the decision palatable to the kingdoms within the Sapt Sindhu.

Ram, Lakshman and Sita had travelled south, primarily walking by the banks of rivers, moving inland only when necessary. They had finally reached the borders of the Sapt Sindhu, near the kingdom of South Kosala, ruled by Ram's maternal grandfather.

Ram went down on both knees and touched the ground with his forehead; this was the land that had nurtured his mother. As he straightened, he looked at his wife and smiled, as if he knew her secret.

'What?' asked Sita.

'There are people who have been shadowing us for weeks,' said Ram. 'When do you plan to tell me who they are?'

Sita shrugged delicately and turned to the forest line in the distance, where she knew Jatayu and his soldiers walked stealthily. They had remained out of sight, though close enough to quickly move in if the need arose. Evidently, they were not as discreet as she would have liked them to be; more likely, she had underestimated her husband's abilities and keen awareness of his surroundings. 'I will tell you,' said Sita, with a broad smile, 'when the time is right. For now, know that they are here for our protection.'

Ram gave her a piercing look, but let it go for now.

'Lord Manu banned the crossing of the Narmada,' said Lakshman. 'If we cross, then we cannot return, according to the law.'

'There is a way,' said Sita. 'If we travel south along *Maa Kaushalya*'s father's kingdom, we may not have to "cross" the Narmada. The entire kingdom of South Kosala lies to the east of the origin of the Narmada River. And the river itself flows west. If we simply keep travelling south, we will reach the *Dandakaranya* without "crossing" the Narmada. So, we would not be violating Lord Manu's ban, right?'

'That's a technicality, *Bhabhi*, and you know it. It may work for you and me, but it won't for Ram *Dada*.'

'Hmm, should we travel east and leave the Sapt Sindhu by boat then?' asked Ram.

'We can't do that,' said Sita. 'The seas are ruled by Raavan. He has dotted the Indian peninsula with port-forts. It is common knowledge that he dominates the western coast,

but the fact is, he has outposts on the eastern coast as well. That rules out the sea routes. But Raavan doesn't hold sway in the hinterland. We will be safe south of the Narmada, in the forests of Dandak.'

'But *Bhabhi*,' argued Lakshman, 'Lord Manu's laws clearly state—'

'Which Lord Manu?'

Lakshman was shocked. *Didn't Bhabhi know who Lord Manu was?* 'The founder of the Vedic way of life, *Bhabhi*. Everyone knows...'

Sita smiled indulgently. 'There have been many Manus, Lakshman, not just one. Each age has its own Manu. So when you speak of the laws of Manu, you will have to also specify which Lord Manu.'

'I didn't know this...' said Lakshman.

Sita shook her head, as she teased the men affectionately. 'Did you boys learn anything at all in your *gurukul*? You know very little.'

'I knew that,' Ram protested. 'Lakshman never paid attention in class. Don't lump me with him.'

'Shatrughan was the one who knew everything, *Dada*,' said Lakshman. 'All of us depended on him.'

'You more than the others,' joked Ram, as he stretched his back.

Lakshman laughed as Ram turned to Sita. 'Okay, I concede your point. But it was the Manu of our age who decreed that we cannot cross the Narmada. And, that if we do, we cannot return. So...'

'It wasn't a law. It was an agreement.'

'An agreement?' asked Ram and Lakshman together, surprised.

Sita continued. 'I'm sure you're aware that Lord Manu was a prince from the kingdom of Sangamtamil, deep in the south of India. He led many of his own people, and those of Dwarka, up north into the Sapt Sindhu, when their own lands were swallowed by the rising sea.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that,' said Ram.

'But all the people from these two lands did not leave with Lord Manu. The majority remained behind in Sangamtamil and Dwarka. Lord Manu had radical ideas about how a society should be organised, which many did not agree with. He had his share of enemies. He was allowed to leave with his followers, from both Sangamtamil and Dwarka, on the condition that he would never venture back. In those days, Narmada formed the upper boundary of Dwarka, with Sangamtamil of course being in the deep south. In effect, they promised to leave each other in peace and part ways. The Narmada was to be the natural boundary under the agreement. It was not a law, but an agreement.'

'But if we are his descendants, then we need to honour the agreement that he made,' said Ram.

'Valid point,' said Sita. 'But tell me, what does an agreement require at the very least?'

'It needs two parties to agree on something.'

'And, if one of the parties doesn't exist anymore, is the agreement still valid?'

Ram and Lakshman were stumped.

‘Many parts of Sangamtamil were already submerged by the time Lord Manu left. The rest went underwater soon after. The seas rose rapidly. Dwarka survived for longer. Progressively though, as the seas rose, the large land mass of Dwarka that had been attached to India was reduced to a long, lonely island.’

‘Dwaravati?’ asked Ram, incredulously.

Dwaravati had been a long, narrow island off the coast of western India, running north to south for nearly five hundred kilometres. The island was swallowed by the sea over three thousand years ago. The survivors from Dwaravati dispersed all over the mainland, and frankly, no one took their claims of being the descendants of the original Dwarkans seriously. This was mainly because the Yadavs, belonging to a powerful kingdom based near the banks of the Yamuna, stridently claimed that they were the sole direct descendants of the Dwarkans. The truth was that the intermingling among the different tribes across India had been so widespread, everybody could claim descent from both the Sangamtamils and the Dwarkans.

Sita nodded. ‘The island of Dwaravati was home to the true survivors of Dwarka. Today, they exist among us all.’

‘Wow.’

‘So the pure descendants of the Sangamtamils and Dwarkans are long gone. The only ones around are us, their common descendants. How will we breach an agreement we made with ourselves? There’s no other party anymore!’

The logic was irrefutable.

‘So, *Bhabhi*,’ said Lakshman, ‘should we be heading south and staying in the forests of Dandak?’

‘Well, yes. It is the safest place for us.’



Ram, Lakshman and Sita stood on the southern banks of the Narmada River. Ram went down on one knee and reverentially picked up a fistful of soil. He smeared it across his forehead in three horizontal lines, like the followers of Lord Rudra did with the holy ashes consecrated by the Gods. He whispered, ‘May the land of our ancestors … the soil that was witness to great karma … bless us.’

Sita and Lakshman followed Ram’s example as they smeared a *tilak* across their foreheads.

Sita smiled at Ram. ‘You do know what Lord Brahma said about this land, right?’

Ram nodded. ‘Yes; more often than not, whenever India faces an existential crisis, our regeneration emerges from the Indian peninsula, from the land that is to the south of the Narmada.’

‘Do you know why he said that?’

Ram shook his head.

‘Our scriptures tell us that the south is the direction of death, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Death is believed to be inauspicious in some foreign lands to the west of us; to them it

signifies the end of everything. But nothing ever really dies. No material can ever truly escape the universe. It just changes form. In that sense, death is actually also the beginning of regeneration; the old form dies and a new form is born. If the south is the direction of death, then it is also the direction of regeneration.'

Ram was intrigued by this thought. 'The Sapt Sindhu is our *karmaboomi*, the *land of our karma*. And the land to the south of the Narmada is our *pitrboomi*, the *land of our ancestors*. This is the land of our regeneration.'

'And, one day, we will return from the south to drive the regeneration of India.' Saying so, Sita held out two cups made of dried clay. They contained a bubbly milk-white liquid. She handed one to Lakshman and the other to Ram.

'What is it, *Bhabhi*?' asked Lakshman.

'It's for your regeneration,' said Sita. 'Drink it.'

Lakshman took a sip and grimaced. 'Yuck!'

'Just drink it, Lakshman,' ordered Sita.

He held his nose as he drained the liquid. He walked to the river and rinsed his mouth as well as the cup.

Ram looked at Sita. 'I know what this is. Where did you get it from?'

'From the people who protect us.'

'Sita...'

'You are important to India, Ram. You have to remain healthy. You have to stay alive. We have a lot to do when we return, fourteen years from now. You cannot be allowed to age. Please drink it.'

'Sita,' laughed Ram, 'one cup of Somras is not going to achieve much. We need to drink it regularly for years for it to be effective. And you know how difficult it is to procure Somras. There will never be enough.'

'Leave that to me.'

'I'm not drinking it without you. What's the point of my long life, if I don't have you to share it with?'

Sita smiled. 'I have already had mine, Ram. I had to, as one normally falls ill the first time one drinks the Somras.'

'Is that why you were ill last week?'

'Yes. If all three of us were to fall ill at the same time, it would be difficult to manage, right? You looked after me when I was unwell. And I will take care of Lakshman and you now.'

'I wonder why the Somras makes one fall ill the first time.'

Sita shrugged. 'I don't know. That is a question for Lord Brahma and the *Saptrishis*. But don't worry about the illness; I have enough medicines in my bag.'



Sita and Ram were both poised on one knee, staring intently at the wild boar. Ram held his bow with the arrow nocked, ready to fire.

'Sita,' whispered Ram, 'I have the animal in perfect sight. I can finish it immediately. Are you sure you want to do this?'

‘Yes,’ whispered Sita. ‘Bows and arrows are your thing. Swords and spears are mine. I need the practice.’

Ram, Sita and Lakshman had been in exile for eighteen months now. Sita had finally introduced Jatayu to Ram some months back. Trusting Sita, Ram had accepted the Malayaputra and his fifteen soldiers as members of his team. Together they were one short of twenty now; more defendable than a group of three. Ram understood this, as well as the importance of allies in the situation they were in. But he remained wary of the Malayaputras.

Admittedly, Jatayu had given him no reason to be suspicious, but Ram could not ignore the fact that he and his people were followers of Guru Vishwamitra. Ram shared his guru Vashishta’s misgivings about the chief of the Malayaputras; he baulked at the ease with which Vishwamitra had been willing to use the *Asurastra*, with little regard for the law.

The members of the party had settled into established routines as they moved deeper into the forests of Dandak. Still not having found a suitable enough permanent camp, they usually stayed in one place for around two to three weeks before moving on. Standard perimeter and security formations had been agreed upon. Cooking and cleaning duties were shared by rotation, as was the task of hunting. But since not everyone in the camp ate meat, hunting wasn’t something that was required often.

‘These beasts are dangerous when they charge,’ warned Ram, looking at Sita with concern.

Sita smiled at her husband’s protectiveness as she drew her sword. ‘Which is why I want you to stay behind me once you fire the arrow,’ she teased.

Ram smiled in return. He focused his attention on the wild boar as he took aim. He pulled the bowstring back and released the arrow. The missile flew in a neat arc, brushed past its head and landed to its left. The animal jerked its head in the direction of the intruders who had dared to disturb its peace. It grunted aggressively but did not move.

‘Once more,’ said Sita as she slowly rose, her knees slightly bent, her feet spread wide, the sword held to the side.

Ram quickly nocked another arrow and fired. It whizzed past the boar’s ear and buried itself into the ground.

Another belligerent grunt was accompanied by a stomping of its feet, this time. It lowered its head threateningly as it stared in the direction that the arrow had come from. Its curved tusks projected from below the snout, like two long knives, ready to strike.

‘Now, get behind me,’ whispered Sita.

Ram dropped his bow, quickly slipped a few feet behind her, and drew his sword as well; he wouldn’t lose a second if she needed his help.

Sita screamed loudly as she jumped into view. The beast immediately took up the challenge that was thrown. It charged towards her with fearsome speed, its head low, its tusks jutting out like menacing swords. Sita stood her ground, breathing steadily as the wild boar speedily moved towards her. At the last second, when it appeared that it was

upon her and would gore her to death, Sita took a few quick steps and leapt high into the air; an exquisite leap with which she flew horizontally above the charging boar. As she did, she struck her sword vertically down, stabbing the animal's neck. Her suspended body-weight made the blade sink deep into the neck, shattering the cervical vertebrae. She superbly leveraged the sword hilt to flip forward and land on her feet, just as the boar collapsed, dead, in front of Ram.

Ram's eyes widened with wonder. Sita strode back to the boar, breathing hard. 'The sword needs to simply break the neck and the animal dies instantly. No pain.'

'Clearly,' said Ram, sheathing his sword.

Sita bent down, touched the boar's head, and whispered, 'Forgive me for killing you, O noble beast. May your soul find purpose again, while your body sustains my soul.'

Ram held the hilt of Sita's sword in a firm grip and attempted to prise the blade out of the beast's body. It was stuck. He looked at Sita. 'It has gone in deep!'

Sita smiled. 'Let me retrieve your arrows while you pull it out.'

Ram began the delicate operation of extracting Sita's sword from the boar's neck. He needed to make sure that the blade didn't get damaged by rubbing against the hard bone. After extricating it he sat on his haunches and wiped it clean with some leaves; he checked the edges; they remained sharp; there was no damage. He looked up to see Sita approaching him from the distance, with the arrows that he had fired in the beginning. He pointed at her sword and raised his thumb, signalling that it was still in fine fettle. Sita smiled. She was still some distance away from him.

'My Lady!'

A loud shout rang through the jungle. Ram's eyes flew towards Makrant, a Malayaputra, as he raced towards Sita. Ram looked in the direction that the man was pointing. His heart jumped into his mouth as he saw two wild boars emerge from the thick of the woods, charging straight at Sita. Her sword was with him. All she had was her knife. Ram sprang to his feet and sprinted towards his wife. 'Sita!'

Alerted by the panic in his voice, Sita whirled around. The boars were almost upon her. She drew her knife and faced the animals. It would have been suicidal to make a dash for it, away from them; she could not outrun them; better to look them in the eye. Sita stood steady, took quick deep breaths and waited.

'My Lady!' shouted Makrant, as he leapt in front of Sita just in time, swinging his sword as he successfully deflected the first attack. The first boar swerved away but the second charged in, even as Makrant struggled to regain his balance. Its tusk pierced his upper thigh.

'Sita!' screamed Ram, as he threw her sword to her, drawing his own as he rushed towards Makrant.

Sita caught the sword deftly and turned to the first beast, which had turned around now and was charging down at her again. Makrant, impaled momentarily on the other boar's tusk, had been flung into the air by its fearsome momentum. But the weight of his body had thrown the boar off balance as well, making him tip to the right, exposing its underbelly. Ram chose that moment to stab it viciously. The blade sank into the beast's

chest, right through to its heart. It collapsed to the ground, dead.

Meanwhile, the first boar swung its head fiercely as it closed in on Sita. She jumped up high, tucking her feet up, neatly avoiding the boar. On her way down, she swung her sword, partially decapitating the beast. It wasn't clean, but was enough to incapacitate the animal; it fell to the ground. Sita yanked her sword out as she landed. She went down on one knee and struck hard again, beheading the beast completely, putting it out of its misery.

She turned around to see that Ram was rushing towards her, his sword held to the side. 'I'm all right!' she reassured him.

He nodded and headed towards Makrant as Sita also ran to the injured Malayaputra. Ram hastily tied the soldier's *angvastram* around the injury, barely staunching the blood that continued to gush out. He quickly came to his feet and picked up Makrant.

'We have to get back to the camp right away!' Ram said.



The wild boar's tusk had cut through his upper quadriceps, piercing the femoral artery. Fortunately, the tusk had come into contact with the hard pelvic bone, flinging him off as the beast's jangled nerves made it shake its head on impact. This had probably saved his life, for if the tusk had pushed through and penetrated deeper, it would have ruptured his intestines. The resultant infection would have been impossible to treat in the jungle; it would have meant certain death. The man had lost a lot of blood, though, and was not yet out of danger.

Ram, mindful that Makrant had unselfishly risked his life to save his wife, worked tirelessly to nurse the soldier back to health, ably assisted by Sita. For Ram, it was the most natural thing to do. But it surprised the Malayaputras to see a Sapt Sindhu royal willingly doing work that was not, customarily, his domain.

'He is a good man,' said Jatayu.

Jatayu and two Malayaputra soldiers were outside the camp's main tent, cooking the evening meal.

'I'm surprised that, despite being a prince, he is willing to do the work that mere soldiers and medical assistants should be doing,' said one of the Malayaputras, stirring the contents of a pot on a low flame.

'I have always found him impressive,' said the other soldier, chopping some herbs on a wooden block. 'He has absolutely no airs, unlike the other royal Sapt Sindhu brats.'

'Hmm,' said Jatayu. 'I have also heard how he effectively saved Makrant's life by acting quickly. If he had not killed the boar immediately, it could have gored Makrant again, possibly killing him, apart from harming Lady Sita as well.'

'He's always been a great warrior. We have seen and heard enough instances of that,' said the second soldier. 'But he is also a good man.'

'Yes, he treats his wife well. He is calm and clear-headed. He leads well. He is a good warrior. But most importantly, it is clear that he has a heart of gold,' said the first Malayaputra soldier, full of praise. 'I think Guru Vashishta probably chose well.'

Jatayu glared at the soldier, almost daring him to say another word. The poor man knew that he had gone too far. He immediately fell silent as he shifted his attention to the task of stirring the pot.

Jatayu understood that he could not afford any doubts among his men regarding this issue. Their loyalty was to lie exclusively with the Malayaputra goal. ‘No matter how trustworthy Prince Ram may appear, always remember, we are the followers of Guru Vishwamitra. We have to do what he has ordered us to do. He is our chief and he knows best.’

The two Malayaputra soldiers nodded.

‘Of course, we can trust him,’ said Jatayu. ‘And it is good that he also appears to trust us now. But do not forget where our loyalties lie. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, Captain,’ said both the soldiers simultaneously.



Six years had lapsed since Ram, Sita and Lakshman had left Ayodhya.

The band of nineteen had finally settled along the western banks of the early course of the mighty Godavari River, at *Panchavati*, or the *place with five banyan trees*. The river provided natural protection to the small, rustic, yet comfortable camp. The main mud hut at the centre of the camp had two rooms—one for Ram and Sita, and the other for Lakshman—and an open clearing for exercise and assembly. A rudimentary alarm system had been set around the far perimeter as warning against wild animals.

The perimeter of this camp was made of two circular fences. The one on the outside was covered with poisonous creepers to keep animals out. The fence on the inside comprised nagavalli creepers, rigged with an alarm system consisting of a continuous string that ran all the way to a very large wooden cage, filled with birds. The birds were well looked after, and replaced every month with new ones that were caught, as the old ones were released. If anyone made it past the outer fence and attempted to enter the nagavalli hedge, the alarm system would trigger the opening of the birdcage roof. The noisy flutter of the escaping birds would offer a few precious minutes of warning to the inmates of the camp.

Another cluster of huts to the east housed Jatayu and his band of soldiers. Despite Ram’s trust in Jatayu, Lakshman remained suspicious of the Malayaputra. Like most Indians, he held strong superstitions about the Nagas. He simply could not bring himself to trust the ‘vulture-man’, the name Lakshman had given to Jatayu behind his back.

They had faced dangers, no doubt, in these six years, but these had not been due to any human intervention. The occasional scars served as reminders of their adventures in the jungle, but the Somras had ensured that they looked and felt as young as the day they had left Ayodhya. Exposure to the harsh sun had darkened their skin. Ram had always been dark-skinned, but even the fair-skinned Sita and Lakshman had acquired a dusky appearance. Ram and Lakshman had grown beards and moustaches, making them look like warrior-sages.

Life had fallen into a predictable pattern. Ram and Sita liked to go to the Godavari River in the early morning hours, to bathe and spend some private time together. It was

their favourite time of the day.

This was one such day. They washed their hair in the clear waters of the Godavari, and then sat on the banks of the river, indulging themselves with conversation over an array of fresh berries, as they dried their hair in the early morning breeze. Ram combed Sita's hair and braided it. Sita then moved behind her husband and ran her fingers through his half-dry hair, untangling the strands.

'Ouch!' protested Ram, as his head was jerked back.

'Sorry,' said Sita.

Ram smiled.

'What are you thinking?' asked Sita, as she gingerly untangled another knot.

'Well, they say the jungles are dangerous and it is the cities where you find comfort and security. It has been exactly the other way round for me. I have never been more relaxed and happy in my life than in the *Dandakaranya*.'

Sita murmured in agreement.

Ram turned his head to look at his wife. 'I know that you suffered, too, in the world of the "civilised" ...'

'Yeah, well,' said Sita, shrugging. 'They say it takes immense pressure to create diamonds.'

Ram laughed softly. 'You know, Guru Vashishta had said to me, when I was a child, that compassion is sometimes an overrated virtue. He told me the story of the butterfly emerging from the hard pupa. Its life begins as an "ugly" caterpillar. When the time is right, it forms a pupa and retreats behind its hard walls. Within its shell, it transforms into a butterfly, unseen, unheard. When ready, it uses its tiny, sharp claws at the base of its forewings to crack a small opening in the hard, protective outer shell. It squeezes through this tiny opening and struggles to make its way out. This is a difficult, painful and prolonged process. Misguided compassion may make us want to enlarge the hole in the pupa, imagining that it would ease the butterfly's task. But that struggle is necessary; as the butterfly squeezes its body out of the tiny hole, it secretes fluids within its swollen body. This fluid goes to its wings, strengthening them; once they've emerged, as the fluid dries, the delicate creatures are able to take flight. Making the hole bigger to "help" the butterfly and ease its struggle will only debilitate it. Without the struggle, its wings would never gain strength. It would never fly.'

Sita nodded and smiled. 'I was told a different story. Of small birds being pushed out of their nests by their parents so that they are forced to fly. But yes, the point was the same.'

Ram smiled. 'Well, wife! This struggle has made us stronger.'

Sita picked up the wooden comb and began running it through Ram's hair.

'Who told you about the little birds? Your guru?' asked Ram.

Since Ram was looking ahead, he didn't see the split-second of hesitation that flitted across her face. 'I've learnt from many people, Ram. But none was as great as your guru, Vashishtaji.'

Ram smiled. 'I was lucky to have him as my guru.'

‘Yes, you were. He has trained you well. You will be a good Vishnu.’

Ram felt a flush of embarrassment. While he was certainly willing to shoulder any responsibility for the sake of his people, the great title that Vashishta felt certain Ram would achieve left him humbled. He doubted his capability, and wondered if he was even ready for it. He had shared these doubts with his wife.

‘You will be ready,’ said Sita, smiling, almost reading her husband’s mind. ‘Trust me. You don’t know how rare a person you are.’

Ram turned to Sita and touched her cheek gently as he looked deep into her eyes. He smiled faintly as he turned his attention back to the river. She tied a knot on top of his head, the way he always liked it, then wrapped threaded beads around the knot to hold it in place. ‘Done!’



## Chapter 30

Ram and Sita had returned from a hunt with the body of a deer tied to a long wooden pole. They balanced the pole on their shoulders. Lakshman had stayed behind, it being his turn to cook. They had lived outside the Sapt Sindhu for thirteen years now.

‘Just one more year, Ram,’ said Sita, as the pair walked into the compound of their camp.

‘Yes,’ said Ram. They set down the pole. ‘That’s when our real battle begins.’

Lakshman walked up as he unsheathed a long knife from the scabbard tied horizontally across the small of his back. ‘The two of you can begin your philosophy and strategy discussions while I attend to some womanly chores!’

Sita gently tapped Lakshman on his cheek. ‘Men are also counted among the best chefs in India, so what’s so womanly about cooking? Everyone should be able to cook!’

Lakshman bowed theatrically, laughing. ‘Yeessss, *Bhabhi*!’

Ram and Sita laughed as well.



‘The sky is beautiful this evening, isn’t it?’ remarked Sita, admiring the handiwork of *Dhyauspita*, the *Sky Father*. Ram and Sita lay on the floor outside the main hut.

It was the fifth hour of the third *prahar*. The chariot of *Surya*, the Sun God, had left a trail of vivid colours behind as he blazed though the sky. A cool evening breeze blew in from the west, giving respite at the end of an unseasonal, oppressively hot day. The monsoon months had ended, heralding the beginning of winter.

‘Yes,’ smiled Ram, as he reached for her hand, pulled it close to his lips and kissed her fingers, gently.

Sita turned towards Ram and smiled. ‘What’s on your mind, husband?’

‘Very husbandly things, wife...’

A loud clearing of the throat was heard. Sita and Ram looked up to find an amused Lakshman standing before them. They stared at him with mock irritation.

‘What?’ shrugged Lakshman. ‘You’re blocking the entry into the hut. I need my sword. I have to go for a practice session with Atulya.’

Ram shifted to the right and made room for Lakshman. Lakshman walked in. ‘I’ll be gone soon...’

No sooner had he stepped into the hut than he stopped in his tracks. The flock of birds in the cage linked to the alarm had suddenly fluttered noisily. Lakshman whirled around as Ram and Sita sprang to their feet.

‘What was that?’ asked Lakshman.

Ram’s instincts told him that the intruders were not animals.

‘Weapons,’ ordered Ram calmly.

Sita and Lakshman tied their sword scabbards around their waist. Lakshman handed

Ram his bow, before picking up his own. The brothers quickly strung their bows. Jatayu and his men rushed in, armed and ready, just as Ram and Lakshman tied quivers full of arrows to their backs. Sita picked up a long spear, as Ram tied his sword scabbard to his waist. They already wore a smaller knife scabbard, tied horizontally across the small of their backs; a weapon they kept on their person at all times.

‘Who could they be?’ asked Jatayu.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ram.

‘Lakshman’s Wall?’ asked Sita.

Lakshman’s Wall was an ingenious defensive feature designed by him to the east of the main hut. It was five feet in height; it covered three sides of a small square completely, leaving the inner side facing the main hut partially open; like a cubicle. The entire structure gave the impression that it was an enclosed kitchen. In actual fact, the cubicle was bare, providing adequate mobility to warriors — though they would have to be on their knees — unseen by enemies on the other side of the wall. A small *tandoor*, a *cooking platform*, emerged on the outside from the south-facing wall. Half the enclosure was roof-covered, completing the camouflage of a cooking area; it afforded protection from enemy arrows. The south, east and north-facing walls were drilled with well-spaced holes. These holes were narrow on the inner side and broad on the outer side, giving the impression of ventilation required for cooking. Their actual purpose was to give those on the inside a good view of the approaching enemy, while preventing those on the outside from looking in. The holes could also be used to fire arrows.

Made from mud, it was not strong enough to withstand a sustained assault by a large force. Having said that, it was good enough for defence against small bands sent on assassination bids, which is what Lakshman suspected they would face. Designed by Lakshman, it had been built by everyone in the camp; Makrant had named it ‘Lakshman’s Wall’.

‘Yes,’ said Ram.

Everyone rushed to the wall and crouched low, keeping their weapons ready; they waited.

Lakshman hunched over and peeped through a hole in the south-facing wall. As he strained his eye, he detected a small band of ten people marching into the camp premises, led by a man and a woman.

The man in the lead was of average height and unusually fair-skinned. His reed-thin physique was that of a runner; this man was no warrior. Despite his frail shoulders and thin arms, he walked as if he had boils in his armpits, pretending to accommodate impressive biceps. Like most Indian men, he had long, jet black hair that was tied in a knot at the back of his head. His full beard was neatly-trimmed, interestingly coloured a deep brown. He wore a classic brown *dhoti* and an *angvastram* that was a shade lighter. His jewellery was rich but understated: pearl ear studs and a thin, copper bracelet. He looked dishevelled right now, as though he had been on the road for too long, without a change of clothes.

The woman beside him faintly resembled the man, but was bewitching; she was

possibly his sister. Almost as short as Urmila, her skin was as white as snow; it should have made her look pale and sickly, instead, she was distractingly beautiful. Her sharp, slightly upturned nose and high cheekbones made her look like a Parihan. Unlike them, though, her hair was blonde, a most unusual colour; every strand of it was in place. Her eyes were magnetic. Perhaps she was the child of *Hiranyaloman Mlechchas*; *fair-skinned, light-eyed and light-haired foreigners who lived half a world away towards the north-west*; their violent ways and incomprehensible speech had led to the Indians calling them barbarians. But this lady was no barbarian. Quite the contrary, she was elegant, slim and petite, except for breasts that were disproportionately large for her body. She wore a classic, expensively-dyed purple *dhoti*, which shone like the waters of the Sarayu. Perhaps it was the legendary silk cloth from the east, one that only the richest could afford. The *dhoti* was tied fashionably low, exposing her flat tummy and slim, curvaceous waist. Her blouse, also made of silk, was a tiny sliver of cloth, affording a generous view of her cleavage. Her *angvastram* had deliberately been left hanging loose from a shoulder, instead of across the body. Extravagant jewellery completed the picture of excess. The only incongruity was the knife scabbard tied to her waist. She was a vision to behold.

Ram cast a quick glance at Sita. ‘Who are they?’

Sita shrugged.

‘Lankans,’ whispered Jatayu.

Ram turned to Jatayu, crouching a few feet away. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. The man is Raavan’s younger half-brother Vibhishan, and the woman is his half-sister Shurpanakha.’

‘What are they doing here?’ asked Sita.

Atulya had been observing the approaching party through a hole in the wall. He turned towards Ram. ‘I don’t think they have come to make war. Look...’ He gestured towards the hole.

Everyone looked through the peepholes. A soldier next to Vibhishan held aloft a white flag, the colour of peace. They obviously wanted to parley. The mystery was: what did they want to talk about?

‘Why the hell would Raavan want to speak with us?’ asked Lakshman, ever suspicious.

‘According to my sources, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha don’t always see eye to eye with Raavan,’ said Jatayu. ‘We shouldn’t assume that Raavan has sent them.’

Atulya cut in. ‘Apologies for disagreeing with you, Jatayuji. But I cannot imagine Prince Vibhishan or Princess Shurpanakha having the courage to do something like this on their own. We must assume that they have been sent by Lord Raavan.’

‘Time to stop wondering and start asking some questions,’ said Lakshman. ‘*Dada?*’

Ram looked through the hole again, and then turned towards his people. ‘We will all step out together. It will stop them from attempting something stupid.’

‘That is wise,’ said Jatayu.

‘Come on,’ said Ram, as he stepped out from behind the protective wall with his right hand raised, signifying that he meant no harm. Everyone else followed Ram’s example

and trooped out to meet the half-siblings of Raavan.

Vibhishan nervously stopped in his tracks the moment his eyes fell on Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and their soldiers. He looked sideways at his sister, as if uncertain as to the next course of action. But Shurpanakha had eyes only for Ram. She stared at him, unashamedly. A look of recognition flashed across a surprised Vibhishan's face when he saw Jatayu.

Ram, Lakshman and Sita walked in the lead, with Jatayu and his soldiers following close behind. As the forest-dwellers reached the Lankans, Vibhishan straightened his back, puffed up his chest, and spoke with an air of self-importance. 'We come in peace, King of Ayodhya.'

'We want peace as well,' said Ram, lowering his right hand. His people did the same. He made no comment on the 'King of Ayodhya' greeting. 'What brings you here, Prince of Lanka?'

Vibhishan preened at being recognised. 'It seems Sapt Sindhuans are not as ignorant of the world as many of us like to imagine.'

Ram smiled politely. Meanwhile, Shurpanakha pulled out a small violet kerchief and covered her nose delicately.

'Well, even I respect and understand the ways of the Sapt Sindhuans,' said Vibhishan.

Sita watched Shurpanakha, hawk-eyed, as the lady continued to stare at her husband unabashedly. Up close, it was clear that the magic of Shurpanakha's eyes lay in their startling colour: bright blue. She almost certainly had some *Hiranyaloman Mlechcha* blood. Practically nobody, east of Egypt, had blue eyes. She was bathed in fragrant perfume that overpowered the rustic, animal smell of the Panchavati camp; at least for those in her vicinity. Not overpowering enough for her, evidently. She continued to hold the stench of her surroundings at bay, with the kerchief pressed against her nose.

'Would you like to come inside, to our humble abode?' asked Ram, gesturing towards the hut.

'No, thank you, Your Highness,' said Vibhishan. 'I'm comfortable here.'

Jatayu's presence had thrown him off-guard. Vibhishan was unwilling to encounter other surprises that may lay in store for them, within the closed confines of the hut, before they had come to some negotiated terms. He was the brother of the enemy of the Sapt Sindhu, after all. It was safer here, out in the open; for now.

'All right then,' said Ram. 'To what do we owe the honour of a visit from the prince of golden Lanka?'

Shurpanakha spoke in a husky, alluring voice. 'Handsome one, we come to seek refuge.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' said Ram, momentarily flummoxed by the allusion to his good looks by a woman he did not know. 'I don't think we are capable of helping the relatives of...'

'Who else can we go to, O Great One?' asked Vibhishan. 'We will never be accepted in the Sapt Sindhu because we are Raavan's siblings. But we also know that there are many in the Sapt Sindhu who will not deny you. My sister and I have suffered Raavan's

brutal oppression for too long. We needed to escape.’

Ram remained silent, contemplative.

‘King of Ayodhya,’ continued Vibhishan, ‘I may be from Lanka but I am, in fact, like one of your own. I honour your ways, follow your path. I’m not like the other Lankans, blinded by Raavan’s immense wealth into following his demonic path. And Shurpanakha is just like me. Don’t you think you have a duty towards us, too?’

Sita cut in. ‘An ancient poet once remarked, “When the axe entered the forest, the trees said to each other: do not worry, the handle in that axe is one of us”.’

Shurpanakha sniggered. ‘So the great descendant of Raghu lets his wife make decisions for him, is it?’

Vibhishan touched Shurpanakha’s hand lightly and she fell silent. ‘Queen Sita,’ said Vibhishan, ‘you will notice that only the handles have come here. The axe-head is in Lanka. We are truly like you. Please help us.’

Shurpanakha turned to Jatayu. It had not escaped her notice that, as usual, every man was gaping intently at her; every man, that is, except Ram and Lakshman. ‘Great Malayaputra, don’t you think it is in your interest to give us refuge? We could tell you more about Lanka than you already know. There will be more gold in it for you.’

Jatayu stiffened. ‘We are the followers of Lord Parshu Ram! We are not interested in gold.’

‘Right...’ said Shurpanakha, sarcastically.

Vibhishan appealed to Lakshman. ‘Wise Lakshman, please convince your brother. I’m sure you will agree with me when I say that we can be of use to you in your fight when you get back.’

‘I could agree with you, Prince of Lanka,’ said Lakshman, smiling, ‘but then we would both be wrong.’

Vibhishan looked down and sighed.

‘Prince Vibhishan,’ said Ram, ‘I am truly sorry but—’

Vibhishan interrupted Ram. ‘Son of Dashrath, remember the battle of Mithila. My brother Raavan is your enemy. He is my enemy as well. Shouldn’t that make you my friend?’

Ram kept quiet.

‘Great King, we have put our lives at risk by escaping from Lanka. Can’t you let us be your guests for a while? We will leave in a few days. Remember what the *Taitreya Upanishad* says: “*Athithi Devo Bhava*”. Even the many *Smritis* say that the strong should protect the weak. All we are asking for is shelter for a few days. Please.’

Sita looked at Ram. A law had been invoked. She knew what was going to happen next. She knew Ram would not turn them away now.

‘Just a few days,’ pleaded Vibhishan. ‘Please.’

Ram touched Vibhishan’s shoulder. ‘You can stay here for a few days; rest for a while, and then continue on your journey.’

Vibhishan folded his hands together into a namaste and said, ‘Glory to the great clan of Raghu.’

‘I think that spoilt princess fancies you,’ said Sita.

Ram and Sita sat alone in their room in the second hour of the fourth *prahar*, having just finished their evening meal. Shurpanakha had complained bitterly about the food that Sita had cooked that day. Sita had told her to remain hungry if the food was not to her liking.

Ram shook his head, his eyes clearly conveying he thought this was silly. ‘How can she, Sita? She knows I’m married. Why should she find me attractive?’

Sita lay down next to her husband on the bed of hay. ‘You should know that you are more attractive than you realise.’

Ram frowned and laughed. ‘Nonsense.’

Sita laughed as well and put her arms around him.



The guests had been staying in Panchavati with the forest-dwellers for a week now. They had not been troublesome at all, except for the Lankan princess. However, Lakshman and Jatayu remained suspicious of the Lankans. They had disarmed the visitors on the first day itself, and locked up their weapons in the camp armoury. They also maintained a strict but discreet and staggered twenty-four-hour vigil, keeping a constant watch on the guests.

Having stayed awake the previous night with his sword and warning conch shell ready by his side, a tired Lakshman had slept through the morning. He awoke in the afternoon to observe unusual activity in the camp.

As he stepped out of the hut, he came upon Jatayu and the Malayaputras emerging from the armoury with the Lankan weapons. Vibhishan and his party were ready to leave. Having collected their weaponry, they waited for Shurpanakha, who had gone to the Godavari to bathe and get ready. She had requested Sita to accompany her, for help with her clothes and hair. Sita was happy to finally be rid of the troublesome diva whose demands in this simple jungle camp were never-ending. She had readily agreed to this last request.

‘Thank you for all your help, Prince Ram,’ said Vibhishan.

‘It was our pleasure.’

‘And may I request you and your followers to not reveal to anyone where we are headed?’

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you,’ said Vibhishan, folding his hands into a namaste.

Ram looked towards the dense forest line, beyond which lay the Godavari. He expected his wife Sita and Vibhishan’s sister Shurpanakha to emerge from that direction any moment now.

Instead, a loud female scream emanated from the forest. Ram and Lakshman cast a quick glance at each other and then moved rapidly in the direction of the sound. They came to a standstill as Sita emerged from the woods, tall, regal but dripping wet and furious. She dragged a struggling Shurpanakha mercilessly by her arm. The Lankan princess’ hands had been securely tied.

Lakshman immediately drew his sword, as did everyone else present. The younger prince of Ayodhya was the first to find his voice. Looking at Vibhishan accusingly, he demanded, ‘What the hell is going on?’

Vibhishan couldn’t take his eyes off the two women. He seemed genuinely shocked for a moment, but quickly gathered his wits and replied. ‘What is your sister-in-law doing to my sister? She is the one who has clearly attacked Shurpanakha.’

‘Stop this drama!’ shouted Lakshman. ‘*Bhabhi* would not do this unless your sister attacked her first.’

Sita walked into the circle of people and let go of Shurpanakha. The Lankan princess was clearly livid and out of control. Vibhishan immediately rushed to his sister, drew a knife and cut the ropes that bound her. He whispered something into her ear. Lakshman couldn’t be sure what Vibhishan said, but it sounded like ‘Quiet’.

Sita turned to Ram and gestured towards Shurpanakha, as she held out some herbs in the palm of her hand. ‘That pipsqueak Lankan stuffed this in my mouth as she pushed me into the river!’

Ram recognised the herbs. It was normally used to make people unconscious before conducting surgeries. He looked at Vibhishan, his piercing eyes red with anger. ‘What is going on?’

Vibhishan stood up immediately, his manner placatory. ‘There has obviously been some misunderstanding. My sister would never do something like that.’

‘Are you suggesting that I imagined her pushing me into the water?’ asked Sita, aggressively.

Vibhishan stared at Shurpanakha, who had also stood up by now. He seemed to be pleading with her to stay quiet. But the message was clearly lost on the intended recipient.

‘That is a lie!’ screeched Shurpanakha. ‘I didn’t do anything like that!’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ growled Sita.

What happened next was so sudden that very few had the time to react. With frightening speed, Shurpanakha reached to her side and drew her knife. Lakshman, who was standing to the left of Sita, saw the quick movement and rushed forward, screaming, ‘*Bhabhi!*’

Sita quickly moved in the opposite direction to avoid the strike. In that split second, Lakshman lunged forward and banged into a charging Shurpanakha, seizing both her arms and pushing her back with all his force. The elfin princess of Lanka went flying backwards, her own hand, which held the knife, striking her face as she crashed into the Lankan soldiers who stood transfixed behind her. The knife struck her face horizontally, cutting deep into her nose. It fell from her hand as she lay sprawled on the ground, the shock having numbed any sensation of pain. As blood gushed out alarmingly, her conscious mind asserted control and the horror of it all reverberated through her being. She touched her face and looked at her blood-stained hands. She knew she would be left with deep scars on her face. And that painful surgeries would be required to remove them.

She screeched with savage hate and lunged forward again, this time going for Lakshman. Vibhishan rushed to her and caught hold of his maddened sister.

‘Kill them!’ screamed Shurpanakha in agony. ‘Kill them all!’

‘Wait!’ pleaded Vibhishan, stricken with visceral fear. He knew they were outnumbered. He didn’t want to die. And he feared something even worse than death. ‘Wait!’

Ram held up his left hand, his fist closed tight, signalling his people to stop but be on guard. ‘Leave now, prince. Or there will be hell to pay.’

‘Forget what we were told!’ screeched Shurpanakha. ‘Kill them all!’

Ram spoke to a clearly stunned Vibhishan, who held on to a struggling Shurpanakha for all he was worth. ‘Leave now, Prince Vibhishan.’

‘Retreat,’ whispered Vibhishan.

His soldiers began stepping back, their swords still pointed in the direction of the forest-dwellers.

‘Kill them, you coward!’ Shurpanakha lashed out at her brother. ‘I am your sister! Avenge me!’

Vibhishan dragged a flailing Shurpanakha, his eye on Ram, mindful of any sudden movement.

‘Kill them!’ shouted Shurpanakha.

Vibhishan continued to pull his protesting sister away as the Lankans left the camp and escaped from Panchavati.

Ram, Lakshman and Sita stood rooted to their spot. What had happened was an unmitigated disaster.

‘We cannot stay here anymore,’ Jatayu stated the obvious. ‘We don’t have a choice. We need to flee, *now*.’

Ram looked at Jatayu.

‘We have shed Lankan royal blood, even if it is that of the royal rebels,’ said Jatayu. ‘According to their customary law, Raavan has no choice but to respond. It would be the same among many Sapt Sindhu royals as well, isn’t it? Raavan will come. Have no doubt about that. Vibhishan is a coward, but Raavan and Kumbhakarna aren’t. They will come with thousands of soldiers. This will be worse than Mithila. There it was a battle between soldiers; a part and parcel of war; they understood that. But here it is personal. His sister, a member of his family, has been attacked. Blood was shed. His honour will demand retribution.’

Lakshman stiffened. ‘But I didn’t attack her. She—’

‘That’s not how Raavan will see it,’ interrupted Jatayu. ‘He will not quibble with you over the details, Prince Lakshman. We need to run. Right now.’



Around thirty warriors sat together in a small clearing in the forest, briskly shovelling food into their mouths. They appeared to be in a tearing hurry. All of them were dressed alike: a long brownish-black cloak covered their bodies, held together across the waist by a thick cord. The cloaks could not conceal the fact that each carried a sword. The

men were all unnaturally fair-skinned, an unusual sight in the hot plains of India. Their hooked noses, neatly beaded full beards, sharp foreheads, lengthy locks emerging from under square white hats, and drooping moustaches made it clear who these people were: Parihans.

Pariha was a fabled land beyond the western borders of India. It was the land that was home to the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra.

The most intriguing member of this motley group was its leader, clearly a Naga. He too was fair-skinned, just like the Parihans. But in every other respect, he stood apart from them. He was not dressed like them. He was, in fact, dressed like an Indian: in a *dhoti* and *angvastram*, both dyed saffron. An outgrowth jutted out from his lower back, almost like a tail. It flapped in constant rhythm, as though it had a mind of its own. The hirsute Naga leader of the Parihans was very tall. His massive build and sturdy musculature gave him an awe-inspiring presence and a godly aura. He could probably break an unfortunate's back with his bare hands. Unlike most Nagas, he did not cover his face with a mask or his body with a hooded robe.

'We have to move quickly,' said the leader.

His nose was flat, pressed against his face. His beard and facial hair surrounded the periphery of his face, encircling it with neat precision. Strangely though, the area above and below his mouth was silken smooth and hairless; it had a puffed appearance and was light pink in colour. His lips were a thin, barely noticeable line. Thick eyebrows drew a sharp curve above captivating eyes that radiated intelligence and a meditative calm; they also held a promise of brutal violence, if required. His furrowed brow gave him a naturally intellectual air. It almost seemed like the Almighty had taken the face of a monkey and placed it on a man's head.

'Yes, My Lord,' said a Parihan. 'If you could give us a few minutes more... The men have been marching continuously and some rest will...'

'There is no time for rest!' growled the leader. 'I have given my word to Guru Vashishta! Raavan cannot be allowed to reach them before we do! We need to find them now! Tell the men to hurry!'

The Parihan rushed off to carry out the orders. Another Parihan, who had finished his meal, walked up to the Naga. 'My Lord, the men need to know: Who is the primary person?'

The leader didn't hesitate even for a second. 'Both. They are both vital. Princess Sita is important to the Malayaputras, and Prince Ram is to us.'

'Yes, Lord Hanuman.'



They had been on the run for thirty days. Racing east through the *Dandakaranya*, they had moved a reasonable distance parallel to the Godavari, so that they couldn't be easily spotted or tracked. But they couldn't afford to stray too far from the tributary rivers or other water bodies, for the best chance of hunting animals would be lost.

Ram and Lakshman had just hunted a deer and were making their way back to the temporary camp through the dense jungle. They carried a long staff between them, Ram

in front, carrying one end on his shoulder, and Lakshman behind, balancing the other. The deer's body dangled from the wooden pole.

Lakshman was arguing with Ram. 'But why do you think it's irrational to think Bharat Dada could...'

'Shhh,' said Ram, holding his hand up to silence Lakshman. 'Listen.'

Lakshman strained his ears. A chill ran down his spine. Ram turned towards Lakshman with terror writ large on his face. They had both heard it. *A forceful scream!* It was Sita. The distance made faint her frantic struggle. But it was clearly Sita. She was calling out to her husband.

Ram and Lakshman dropped the deer and dashed forward desperately. They were still some distance away from their temporary camp.

Sita's voice could be heard above the din of the disturbed birds.

'... Raaam!'

They were close enough now to hear the sounds of battle as metal clashed with metal.

Ram screamed as he ran frantically through the forest. 'Sitaaaa!'

Lakshman drew his sword, ready for battle.

'... Raaaam!'

'Leave her alone!' shouted Ram, cutting through the dense foliage, racing ahead.

'... Raaam!'

Ram gripped his bow tight. They were just a few minutes from their camp. 'Sitaaaa!'

'... Raa...'

Sita's voice stopped mid-syllable. Trying not to imagine the worst, Ram kept running, his heart pounding desperately, his mind clouded with worry.

They heard the loud whump, whump of rotor blades. It was Raavan's legendary *Pushpak Vimaan*, his flying vehicle.

'Nooo!' screamed Ram, wrenching his bow forward as he ran. Tears were streaming down his face.

The brothers broke through to the clearing that was their temporary camp. It stood completely destroyed. There was blood everywhere.

'Sitaaaa!'

Ram looked up and shot an arrow at the *Pushpak Vimaan*, which was rapidly ascending into the sky. It was a shot of impotent rage, for the flying vehicle was already soaring high above.

'Sitaaaa!'

Lakshman frantically searched the camp. Bodies of dead soldiers were strewn all over. But there was no Sita.

'Pri... nce... Ram...'

Ram recognised that feeble voice. He rushed forward to find the bloodied and mutilated body of the Naga.

'Jatayu!'

The badly wounded Jatayu struggled to speak. 'He's...'

'What?'

‘Raavan’s... kidnapped... her.’

Ram looked up enraged at the speck moving rapidly away from them. He screamed in anger, ‘SITAAAAA!’

‘Prince...’

Jatayu could feel life slipping away. Using his last reserves of will, he raised his body, reached his hand out and pulled Ram towards him.

With his dying breaths, Jatayu whispered, ‘Get ... her back ... I ... failed... She’s important ... Lady Sita ... must be saved ... Lady Sita ... must be saved ... Vishnu ... Lady Sita ...’

*... to be continued*

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Amish lives in Mumbai with his wife Preeti and son Neel.

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To Himanshu Roy  
My brother-in-law,  
A man who exemplifies the ancient Indian path of Balance,  
    A proud Lord Ganesh devotee who also respects  
        all other faiths,  
    A sincere Indian patriot,  
A man with wisdom, courage, and honour.  
    A hero.

Om Namah Shivāya  
*The universe bows to Lord Shiva.*  
*I bow to Lord Shiva.*

From the Adbhuta Rāmāyana  
(credited to Maharishi Valmikiji)

*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glanirbhavati suvrata |  
Abhyutthānamadharmasya tadā prakṛtsambhavah ||*

O keeper of righteous vows, remember this,  
Whenever dharma is in decline,  
Or there is an upsurge of adharma;  
The Sacred Feminine will incarnate.

She will defend dharma.  
She will protect us.

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## **List of Characters and Important Tribes (In Alphabetic Order)**

**Arishtanemi:** Military chief of the Malayaputras; right-hand man of Vishwamitra

**Ashwapati:** King of the northwestern kingdom of Kekaya; father of Kaikeyi and a loyal ally of Dashrath

**Bharat:** Ram's half-brother; son of Dashrath and Kaikeyi

**Dashrath:** Chakravarti king of Kosala and emperor of the Sapt Sindhu; husband of Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra; father of Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan

**Hanuman:** Radhika's cousin; son of Vayu Kesari; a Naga and a member of the Vayuputra tribe

**Janak:** King of Mithila; father of Sita and Urmila

**Jatayu:** A captain of the Malayaputra tribe; Naga friend of Sita and Ram

**Kaikeyi:** Daughter of King Ashwapati of Kekaya; the second and favourite wife of Dashrath; mother of Bharat

**Kaushalya:** Daughter of King Bhanuman of South Kosala and his wife Maheshwari; the eldest queen of Dashrath; mother of Ram

**Kumbhakarna:** Raavan's brother; also a Naga

**Kushadhwaj:** King of Sankashya; younger brother of Janak

**Lakshman:** One of the twin sons of Dashrath; born to Sumitra; faithful to Ram; later married to Urmila

**Malayaputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu

**Manthara:** The richest merchant of the Sapt Sindhu

**Mara:** An independent assassin for hire

**Naarad:** A trader from Lothal; Hanuman's friend

**Nagas:** Human beings born with deformities

**Raavan:** King of Lanka; brother of Vibhishan, Shurpanakha and Kumbhakarna

**Radhika:** Sita's friend; Hanuman's cousin

**Ram:** Son of Emperor Dashrath of Ayodhya (capital city of Kosala) and his eldest wife Kaushalya; eldest of four brothers, later married to Sita

**Samichi:** Police and protocol chief of Mithila

**Shatrughan:** Twin brother of Lakshman; son of Dashrath and Sumitra

**Shurpanakha:** Half-sister of Raavan

**Shvetaketu:** Sita's teacher

**Sita:** Adopted daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila; also the prime minister of Mithila; later married to Ram

**Sumitra:** Daughter of the king of Kashi; the third wife of Dashrath; mother of the twins Lakshman and Shatrughan

**Sunaina:** Queen of Mithila; mother of Sita and Urmila

**Vali:** The king of Kishkindha

**Varun Ratnakar:** Radhika's father; chief of the Valmikis

**Vashishtha:** Raj guru, the royal priest of Ayodhya; teacher of the four Ayodhya princes

**Vayu Kesari:** Hanuman's father; Radhika's uncle

**Vayuputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev

**Vibhishan:** Half-brother of Raavan

**Vishwamitra:** Chief of the Malayaputras, the tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu; also temporary guru of Ram and Lakshman

**Urmila:** Younger sister of Sita; blood-daughter of Janak and Sunaina; later married to Lakshman



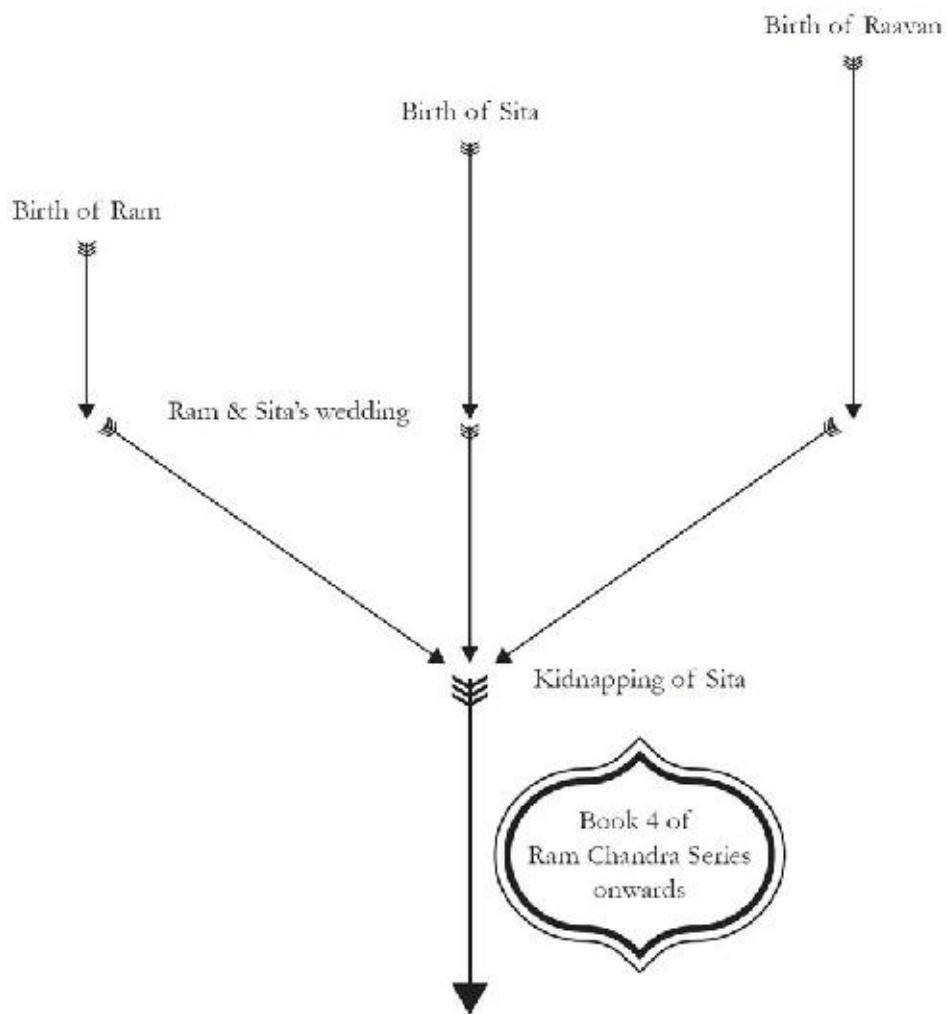
## Note on the Narrative Structure

Thank you for picking up this book and giving me the most important thing you can share: your time.

I know this book has taken long to release, and for that I offer my apologies. But when I tell you the narrative structure of the Ram Chandra Series, perhaps you will understand why it took so long.

I have been inspired by a storytelling technique called hyperlink, which some call the multilinear narrative. In such a narrative, there are many characters; and a connection brings them all together. The three main characters in the Ram Chandra Series are Ram, Sita, and Raavan. Each character has life experiences which mould who they are and their stories converge with the kidnapping of Sita. And each has their own adventure and riveting back-story.

So, while the first book explored the tale of Ram, the second and third will offer a glimpse into the adventures of Sita and then Raavan respectively, before all three stories merge from the fourth book onwards into a single story.



I knew it would be a complicated and time consuming affair, but I must confess, it was thoroughly exciting. I hope this will be as rewarding and thrilling an experience for you as it was for me. Understanding Sita and Raavan as characters helped me inhabit their worlds and explore the maze of plots and stories that make this epic come alive. I feel truly blessed for this.

Since this was the plan, I had left clues in the first book (**Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku**) which will tie up with the stories in the second and third books. Needless to say, there are surprises and twists in store for you in books 2 and 3 as well!

In fact, there was a very big clue in the last paragraph of ***Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku***. Some had caught on to it. And for those who didn't, a big revelation awaits you in the first chapter of the second book, ***Sita – Warrior of Mithila***.

I hope you like reading ***Sita – Warrior of Mithila***. Do tell me what you think of it, by sending me messages on my Facebook or Twitter accounts listed below.

Love,  
Amish

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## Acknowledgements

When one writes, one pours one's soul out on paper. They say it takes courage to do that. They also say that courage comes only when one knows that many stand with him. I'd like to acknowledge those who stand with me: Who give me courage: Who make me realise that I am not alone.

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And last, but certainly not the least, you, the reader. It is only due to your support that I have been given the privilege of living the kind of life I do; where I can do what I love and actually earn my living from it. I can never thank you enough!



## Chapter 1

*3400 BCE, somewhere near the Godavari River, India*

Sita cut quickly and efficiently, slicing through the thick leaf stems with her sharp knife. The dwarf banana trees were as tall as she was. She did not need to stretch. She stopped and looked at her handiwork. Then she cast a look at Makrant, the Malayaputra soldier, a short distance away. He had cut down perhaps half the number of leaves that Sita had.

The weather was calm. Just a little while ago, the wind had been howling through this part of the forest. Unseasonal rain had lashed the area. Sita and Makrant had stood under a thick canopy of trees to save themselves from the rain. The winds had been so loud that it had been almost impossible for them to talk to each other. And just as suddenly, calm had descended. The rain and winds had vanished. They'd quickly headed to a patch of the woods with an abundance of dwarf banana trees. For the entire purpose of the excursion was to find these leaves.

‘That’s enough, Makrant,’ said Sita.

Makrant turned around. The wetness had made it hard to cut the leaf stems. Under the circumstances, he had thought that he had done a good job. Now, he looked at the stack of leaves by Sita’s side. And then down at his own much smaller pile. He smiled sheepishly.

Sita smiled broadly in return. ‘That’s more than enough. Let’s go back to the camp. Ram and Lakshman should be returning from their hunt soon. Hopefully, they would have found something.’

Sita, along with her husband Prince Ram of Ayodhya and her brother-in-law Lakshman, had been racing through the *Dandakaranya*, or forest of Dandak, to escape the expected vengeance of the demon-king of Lanka, Raavan. Captain Jatayu, leading a small company of the Malayaputra tribe, had sworn to protect the three Ayodhya royals. He had strongly advised that flight was the only available course of action. Raavan would certainly send troops to avenge his

sister, Princess Shurpanakha, who had been injured by Lakshman.

Secrecy was essential. So, they were cooking their food in pits dug deep into the ground. For fire, they used a specific type of coal — anthracite. It let out smokeless flames. For abundant caution, the sunk cooking pot was covered with a thick layer of banana leaves. It ensured that no smoke escaped even by accident. For that could give their position away. It was for this reason that Sita and Makrant had been cutting down banana leaves. It was Sita's turn to cook.

Makrant insisted on carrying the larger pile, and she let him. It made the Malayaputra soldier feel like he was balancing his contribution. But it was this act that would eventually prove fatal for poor Makrant.

Sita heard it first. A sound that would have been inaudible a little while ago, with the howling winds. It was unmistakable now: the menacing creak of a bow being stretched. A common bow. Many of the more accomplished soldiers and senior officers used the more expensive composite bows. But the frontline soldiers used the common variety, made entirely of wood. These bows were usually more rigid. And, they made a distinct sound when stretched.

'Makrant, duck!' screamed Sita, dropping the leaves as she leapt to the ground.

Makrant responded quickly enough, but the heavier load made him trip. An arrow shot in quickly, slamming into his right shoulder as he fell forward. Before he could react, a second arrow struck his throat. A lucky shot.

Sita rolled as she fell to the ground and quickly steadied herself behind a tree. She stayed low, her back against the tree, protected for now. She looked to her right. The unfortunate Makrant lay on the ground, drowning rapidly in his own blood. The arrow point had exited through the back of his neck. He would soon be dead.

Sita cursed in anger. And then realised it was a waste of energy. She began to breathe deeply. Calming her heart down. Paying attention. She looked around carefully. Nobody ahead of her. The arrows had come from the other direction, obscured by the tree that protected her. She knew there had to be at least two enemies. There was no way a single archer could have shot two arrows in such rapid succession.

She looked at Makrant again. He had stopped moving. His soul had moved on. The jungle was eerily quiet. It was almost impossible to believe that just a few short moments ago, brutal violence had been unleashed.

*Farewell, brave Makrant. May your soul find purpose once again.*

She caught snatches of commands whispered in the distance. 'Go to ... Lord Kumbhakarna ... Tell ... she's ... here ...'

She heard the hurried footsteps of someone rushing away. There was

probably just one enemy now. She looked down at the earth and whispered, ‘Help me, mother. Help me.’

She drew her knife from the scabbard tied horizontally to the small of her back. She closed her eyes. She couldn’t afford to look around the tree and expose herself. She would probably be shot instantly. Her eyes were useless. She had to rely on her ears. There were great archers who could shoot arrows by relying on sound. But very few could throw knives at the source of a sound. Sita was one of those very few.

She heard a loud yet surprisingly gentle voice. ‘Come out, Princess Sita. We don’t want to hurt you. It’s better if ...’

The voice stopped mid-sentence. It would not be heard ever again. For there was a knife buried in the throat that had been the source of that voice. Sita had, without bringing herself into view, turned quickly and flung the knife with unerring and deadly accuracy. The Lankan soldier was momentarily surprised as the knife thumped into his throat. He died in no time. Just like Makrant had, drowning in his own blood.

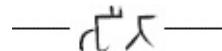
Sita waited. She had to be sure there was no one else. She had no other weapon. But her enemies didn’t know that. She listened intently. Hearing no sound, she threw herself to the ground, rolling rapidly behind low shrubs. Still no sign of anyone.

*Move! Move! There’s nobody else!*

Sita quickly rose to her feet and sprinted to the slain Lankan, surprised that his bow was not nocked with an arrow. She tried to pull her knife out, but it was lodged too deep in the dead Lankan’s vertebra. It refused to budge.

*The camp is in trouble! Move!*

Sita picked up the Lankan’s quiver. It contained a few arrows. She quickly tied it around her back and shoulder. She lifted the bow. And ran. Ran hard! Towards the temporary camp. She had to kill the other Lankan soldier before he reached his team and warned them.



The temporary camp showed signs of a massive struggle. Most of the Malayaputra soldiers, except Jatayu and two others, were already dead. Lying in pools of blood. They had been ruthlessly massacred. Jatayu was also badly injured. Blood seeped out from numerous wounds that covered his body. Some made by blades, some by fists. His arms were tied tightly behind his back. Two Lankan soldiers held him up in a tight grip. A giant of a man loomed in front, questioning the great Naga.

Naga was the name given to people of the Sapt Sindhu born with deformities. Jatayu's malformation gave his face the appearance of a vulture.

The other two Malayaputras knelt on the ground, also bloodied. Their hands were similarly tied at the back. Three Lankan soldiers surrounded each one, while two more held them down. The Lankan swords were dripping with blood.

Raavan and his younger brother, Kumbhakarna, stood at a distance. Looking intently at the interrogation. Focused. Their hands clean of any blood.

'Answer me, Captain,' barked the Lankan. 'Where are they?'

Jatayu shook his head vehemently. His lips were sealed.

The Lankan leaned within an inch of the Naga's ear and whispered, 'You were one of us, Jatayu. You were loyal to Lord Raavan once.'

Jatayu cast a malevolent look at the Lankan. His smouldering eyes gave the reply.

The Lankan continued. 'We can forget the past. Tell us what we want to know. And come back to Lanka with honour. This is the word of a Lankan. This is the word of Captain Khara.'

Jatayu looked away and stared into the distance. Anger fading. A blank expression on his face. As if his mind was somewhere else.

The Lankan interrogator signalled one of his soldiers.

'As you command, Captain Khara,' said the soldier, wiping his sword clean on his forearm band and slipping it back into his scabbard. He walked up to an injured Malayaputra, and drew out his serrated knife. He positioned himself behind the youth, yanked his head back and placed the knife against his throat. Then he looked at Khara, awaiting the order.

Khara took hold of Jatayu's head such that his eyes stared directly at his fellow Malayaputra. The knife at his throat.

'You may not care for your own life, Captain Jatayu,' said Khara, 'but don't you want to save at least two of your soldiers?'

The Malayaputra looked at Jatayu and shouted, 'I am ready to die, my Captain! Don't say anything!'

The Lankan hit the young soldier's head with the knife hilt. His body slouched and then straightened again with courage. The blade swiftly returned to his throat.

Khara spoke with silky politeness, 'Come on, Captain. Save your soldier's life. Tell us where they are.'

'You will never catch them!' growled Jatayu. 'The three of them are long gone!'

Khara laughed. 'The two princes of Ayodhya can keep going, for all I care.'

We are only interested in the Vishnu.'

Jatayu was shocked. *How do they know?*

'Where is the Vishnu?' asked Khara. 'Where is she?'

Jatayu's lips began to move, but only in prayer. He was praying for the soul of his brave soldier.

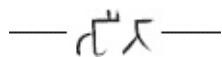
Khara gave a curt nod.

Jatayu suddenly straightened and loudly rent the air with the Malayaputra cry. '*Jai Parshu Ram!*'

'*Jai Parshu Ram!*' shouted both the Malayaputras. The fear of death could not touch them.

The Lankan pressed the blade into the throat of the Malayaputra. Slowly. He slid the serrated knife to the side, inflicting maximum pain. Blood spurted out in a shower. As the youth collapsed to the ground, life slowly ebbing out of him, Jatayu whispered within the confines of his mind.

*Farewell, my brave brother ...*



Sita slowed as she approached the camp. She had already killed the other Lankan soldier. He lay some distance away. An arrow pierced in his heart. She had grabbed his arrows and added them to her quiver. She hid behind a tree and surveyed the camp. Lankan soldiers were everywhere. Probably more than a hundred.

All the Malayaputra soldiers were dead. All except Jatayu. Two lay close to him, their heads arched at odd angles. Surrounded by large pools of blood. Jatayu was on his knees, held by two Lankans. His hands were tied behind his back. Brutalised, injured and bleeding. But not broken. He was defiantly staring into the distance. Khara stood near him, his knife placed on Jatayu's upper arm. He ran his knife gently along the triceps, cutting into the flesh, drawing blood.

Sita looked at Khara and frowned. *I know him. Where have I seen him before?*

Khara smiled as he ran the knife back along the bloodied line he had just drawn, slicing deep into some sinew.

'Answer me,' said Khara, as he slid the knife along Jatayu's cheek this time, drawing some more blood. 'Where is she?'

Jatayu spat at him. 'Kill me quickly. Or kill me slowly. You will not get anything from me.'

Khara raised his knife in anger, about to strike and finish the job. It was not to be. An arrow whizzed in and struck his hand. The knife fell to the ground as

he screamed aloud.

Raavan and his brother Kumbhakarna whirled around, startled. Many Lankan soldiers rushed in and formed a protective cordon around the two royals. Kumbhakarna grabbed Raavan's arm to restrain his impulsive elder brother.

Other soldiers raised their bows and pointed their arrows in the direction of Sita. A loud 'Don't shoot!' was heard from Kumbhakarna. The bows were swiftly lowered.

Khara broke the shaft, leaving the arrowhead buried in his hand. It would stem the blood for a while. He looked into the impenetrable line of trees the arrow had emerged from, and scoffed in disdain. 'Who shot that? The long-suffering prince? His oversized brother? Or the Vishnu herself?'

A stunned Sita stood rooted to the spot. *Vishnu?! How do the Lankans know? Who betrayed me?!*

She marshalled her mind into the present moment. This was not the time for distractions.

She moved quickly, without a sound, to another location.

*They must not know that I'm alone.*

'Come out and fight like real warriors!' challenged Khara.

Sita was satisfied with her new position. It was some distance away from where she had shot her first arrow. She slowly pulled another arrow out of her quiver, nocked it on the bowstring and took aim. In the Lankan army, if the commander fell, the rest of the force was known to quickly retreat. But Raavan was well protected by his soldiers, their shields raised high. She could not find an adequate line of sight.

*Wish Ram was here. He would have gotten an arrow through somehow.*

Sita decided to launch a rapid-fire attack on the soldiers to create an opening. She fired five arrows in quick succession. Five Lankans went down. But the others did not budge. The cordon around Raavan remained resolute. Ready to fall for their king.

Raavan remained protected.

Some soldiers began to run in her direction. She quickly moved to a new location.

As she took position, she checked the quiver. Three arrows left.

*Damn!*

Sita deliberately stepped on a twig. Some of the soldiers rushed towards the sound. She quickly moved again, hoping to find a breach in the protective circle of men around Raavan. But Khara was a lot smarter than she had suspected.

The Lankan stepped back and, using his uninjured left hand, pulled out a

knife from the sole of his shoe. He moved behind Jatayu and held the knife to the Naga's throat.

With a maniacal smile playing on his lips, Khara taunted, 'You could have escaped. But you didn't. So I'm betting you are among those hiding behind the trees, *great* Vishnu.' Khara laid sarcastic emphasis on the word 'great'. 'And, you want to protect those who worship you. So inspiring ... so touching ...'

Khara pretended to wipe away a tear.

Sita stared at the Lankan with unblinking eyes.

Khara continued, 'So I have an offer. Step forward. Tell your husband and that giant brother-in-law of yours to also step forward. And we will let this captain live. We will even let the two sorry Ayodhya princes leave unharmed. All we want is your surrender.'

Sita remained stationary. Silent.

Khara grazed the knife slowly along Jatayu's neck, leaving behind a thin red line. He spoke in a sing-song manner, 'I don't have all day ...'

Suddenly, Jatayu struck backwards with his head, hitting Khara in his groin. As the Lankan doubled up in pain, Jatayu screamed, 'Run! Run away, My Lady! I am not worth your life!'

Three Lankan soldiers moved in and pushed Jatayu to the ground. Khara cursed loudly as he got back on his feet, still bent over to ease the pain. After a few moments, he inched towards the Naga and kicked him hard. He surveyed the treeline, turning in every direction that the arrows had been fired from. All the while, he kept kicking Jatayu again and again. He bent and roughly pulled Jatayu to his feet. Sita could see the captive now. Clearly.

This time Khara held Jatayu's head firmly with his injured right hand, to prevent any headbutting. The sneer was back on his face. He held the knife with his other hand. He placed it at the Naga's throat. 'I can cut the jugular here and your precious captain will be dead in just a few moments, great Vishnu.' He moved the knife to the Malayaputra's abdomen. 'Or, he can bleed to death slowly. All of you have some time to think about it.'

Sita was still. She had just three arrows left. It would be foolhardy to try anything. But she could not let Jatayu die. He had been like a brother to her.

'All we want is the Vishnu,' yelled Khara. 'Let her surrender and the rest of you can leave. You have my word. You have the word of a Lankan!'

'Let him go!' screamed Sita, still hidden behind the trees.

'Step forward and surrender,' said Khara, holding the knife to Jatayu's abdomen. 'And we will let him go.'

Sita looked down and closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped with helpless rage. And then, without giving herself any time for second thoughts, she

stepped out. But not before her instincts made her nock an arrow on the bow, ready to fire.

‘Great Vishnu,’ sniggered Khara, letting go of Jatayu for a moment, and running his hand along an ancient scar at the back of his head. Stirring a not-so-forgotten memory. ‘So kind of you to join us. Where is your husband and his giant brother?’

Sita didn’t answer. Some Lankan soldiers began moving slowly towards her. She noticed that their swords were sheathed. They were carrying *lathis*, *long bamboo sticks*, which were good enough to injure but not to kill. She stepped forward and lowered the bow. ‘I am surrendering. Let Captain Jatayu go.’

Khara laughed softly as he pushed the knife deep into Jatayu’s abdomen. Gently. Slowly. He cut through the liver, a kidney, never stopping ...

‘Nooo!’ screamed Sita. She raised her bow and shot an arrow deep into Khara’s eye. It punctured the socket and lodged itself in his brain, killing him instantly.

‘I want her alive!’ screamed Kumbhakarna from behind the protective Lankan cordon.

More soldiers joined those already moving toward Sita, their bamboo *lathis* held high.

‘Raaaam!’ shouted Sita, as she pulled another arrow from her quiver, quickly nocked and shot it, bringing another Lankan down instantly.

It did not slow the pace of the others. They kept rushing forward.

Sita shot another arrow. Her last. One more Lankan sank to the ground. The others pressed on.

‘Raaaam!’

The Lankans were almost upon her, their bamboo *lathis* raised.

‘Raaam!’ screamed Sita.

As a Lankan closed in, she lassoed her bow, entangling his *lathi* with the bowstring, snatching it from him. Sita hit back with the bamboo *lathi*, straight at the Lankan’s head, knocking him off his feet. She swirled the *lathi* over her head, its menacing sound halting the suddenly wary soldiers. She stopped moving, holding her weapon steady. Conserving her energy. Ready and alert. One hand held the stick in the middle, the end of it tucked under her armpit. The other arm was stretched forward. Her feet spread wide, in balance. She was surrounded by at least fifty Lankan soldiers. But they kept their distance.

‘Raaaam!’ bellowed Sita, praying that her voice would somehow carry across the forest to her husband.

‘We don’t want to hurt you, Lady Vishnu,’ said a Lankan, surprisingly polite. ‘Please surrender. You will not be harmed.’

Sita cast a quick glance at Jatayu. *Is he still breathing?*

‘We have the equipment in our *Pushpak Vimaan* to save him,’ said the Lankan. ‘Don’t force us to hurt you. Please.’

Sita filled her lungs with air and screamed yet again, ‘Raaaam!’

She thought she heard a faint voice from a long distance. ‘Sita...’

A soldier moved suddenly from her left, swinging his *lathi* low. Aiming for her calves. Sita jumped high, tucking her feet in to avoid the blow. While in the air, she quickly released the right-hand grip on the *lathi* and swung it viciously with her left hand. The *lathi* hit the Lankan on the side of his head. Knocking him unconscious.

As she landed, she shouted again, ‘Raaaam!’

She heard the same voice. The voice of her husband. Soft, from the distance. ‘Leave ... her ... alone ...’

As if electrified by the sound of his voice, ten Lankans charged in together. She swung her *lathi* ferociously on all sides, rapidly incapacitating many.

‘Raaaam!’

She heard the voice again. Not so distant this time. ‘Sita...’

*He’s close. He’s close.*

The Lankan onslaught was steady and unrelenting now. Sita kept swinging rhythmically. Viciously. Alas, there were one too many enemies. A Lankan swung his *lathi* from behind. Into her back.

‘Raaa...’

Sita’s knees buckled under her as she collapsed to the ground. Before she could recover, the soldiers ran in and held her tight.

She struggled fiercely as a Lankan came forward, holding a neem leaf in his hand. It was smeared with a blue-coloured paste. He held the leaf tight against her nose.

As darkness began to envelop her, she sensed some ropes against her hands and feet.

*Ram ... Help me ...*

And the darkness took over.



## Chapter 2

*38 years earlier, North of Trikut Hills, Deoghar, India*

‘Wait a minute,’ whispered Sunaina, as she pulled the reins on her horse.

Janak, the king of Mithila, and his wife, Sunaina, had travelled a long way to the Trikut Hills, nearly a hundred kilometres south of the Ganga River. They sought to meet the legendary *Kanyakumari*, the *Virgin Goddess*. A divine child. It was believed across the *Sapt Sindhu, land of the seven rivers*, that the blessings of the Living Goddess helped all who came to her with a clean heart. And the royal family of Mithila certainly needed Her blessings.

Mithila, founded by the great king Mithi, on the banks of the mighty Gandaki River, was once a thriving river-port town. Its wealth was built on agriculture, owing to its exceptionally fertile soil, as well as river trade with the rest of the Sapt Sindhu. Unfortunately, fifteen years ago, an earthquake and subsequent flood had changed the course of the Gandaki. It also changed the fortunes of Mithila. The river now flowed farther to the west, by the city of Sankashya. Ruled by Janak’s younger brother Kushadhwaj, Sankashya was a nominally subsidiary kingdom of Mithila. To add to the woes of Mithila, the rains had failed repeatedly for a few years after the change of Gandaki’s course. Mithila’s loss was Sankashya’s gain. Kushadhwaj rapidly rose in stature as the *de facto* representative of the clan of Mithi.

Many had suggested that King Janak should invest some of the old wealth of Mithila in an engineering project to redirect the Gandaki back to its old course. But Kushadhwaj had advised against it. He had argued that it made little sense to spend money on such a massive engineering project. After all, why waste money to take the river from Sankashya to Mithila, when the wealth of Sankashya was ultimately Mithila’s.

Janak, a devout and spiritual man, had adopted a philosophical approach to his kingdom’s decline in fortune. But the new queen, Sunaina, who had married Janak just two years earlier, was not the idle sort. She planned to restore

Mithila to its old glory. And a big part of that plan was to restore the old course of the Gandaki. But after so many years, it had become difficult to find logical reasons to justify the costly and difficult engineering project.

When logic fails, faith can serve a purpose.

Sunaina had convinced Janak to accompany her to the temple of the *Kanyakumari* and seek her blessings. If the Child Goddess approved of the Gandaki project, even Kushadhwaj would find it difficult to argue against it. Not just the Mithilans, but many across the length and breadth of India believed the *Kanyakumari*'s word to be that of the Mother Goddess Herself. Unfortunately, the *Kanyakumari* had said no. 'Respect the judgement of nature,' she had said.

It was a disappointed Sunaina and a philosophical Janak, along with their royal guard, who were travelling north from the Trikut Hills now, on their way home to Mithila.

'Janak!' Sunaina raised her voice. Her husband had ridden ahead without slowing.

Janak pulled his horse's reins and looked back. His wife pointed wordlessly to a tree in the distance. Janak followed her direction. A few hundred metres away, a pack of wolves had surrounded a solitary vulture. They were trying to close in and were being pushed back repeatedly by the huge bird. The vulture was screaming and squawking. A vulture's squawk is naturally mournful; but this one sounded desperate.

Sunaina looked closely. It was an unfair fight. There were six wolves, weaving in and out, attacking the vulture in perfect coordination. But the brave bird stood its ground, pushing them back repeatedly. The aggressors were gradually drawing close. A wolf hit the vulture with its claws, drawing blood.

*Why isn't it flying away?*

Sunaina began to canter towards the fight, intrigued. Her bodyguards followed at a distance.

'Sunaina ...' cautioned her husband, staying where he was, holding his horse's reins tight.

Suddenly, using the distraction of the vulture with another attack from the left, a wolf struck with lethal effect. It charged in from the right and bit the bird's left wing brutally. Getting a good hold, the wolf pulled back hard, trying to drag the vulture away. The bird squawked frantically. Its voice sounding like a wail. But it held strong. It did not move, pulling back with all its strength. However, the wolf had strong jaws and a stronger grip. Blood burst forth like a fountain. The wolf let go, spitting parts of the severed wing as it stepped back.

Sunaina spurred her horse and began to gallop towards the scene. She had

expected the vulture to escape through the opening the two wolves had provided. But, surprisingly, it stood in place, pushing another wolf back.

*Use the opening! Get away!*

Sunaina was speeding towards the animals now. The royal bodyguards drew their swords and raced after their queen. A few fell back with the king.

‘Sunaina!’ said Janak, worried about his wife’s safety. He spurred his horse, but he was not the best of riders. His horse blithely continued its slow trot.

Sunaina was perhaps fifty metres away when she noticed the bundle for the first time. The vulture was protecting it from the pack of wolves. It was lodged in what looked like a little furrow in the dry mud.

The bundle moved.

‘By the great *Lord Parshu Ram!*’ exclaimed Sunaina. ‘That’s a baby!'

Sunaina pressed forward, rapidly goading her horse into a fierce gallop.

As she neared the pack of wolves, she heard the soft, frantic cries of a human baby, almost drowned out by the howling animals.

‘*Hyaah!*’ screamed Sunaina. Her bodyguards rode close behind.

The wolves turned tail and scampered into the woods as the mounted riders thundered towards the wounded bird. A guard raised his sword to strike the vulture.

‘Wait!’ ordered Sunaina, raising her right hand.

He stopped in his tracks as his fellow bodyguards reined their horses to a halt.

Sunaina was raised in a land to the east of Branga. Her father was from Assam, sometimes called by its ancient name, *Pragjyotisha*, the land of *Eastern Light*. And her mother belonged to *Mizoram*, the land of the *High People of Ram*. Devotees of the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram, the Mizos were fierce warriors. But they were most well known for their instinctive understanding of animals and the rhythms of nature.

Sunaina intuitively knew that the ‘bundle’ was not food for the vulture, but a responsibility to be protected.

‘Get me some water,’ ordered Sunaina, as she dismounted her horse.

One of the guards spoke up as the group dismounted. ‘My Lady, is it safe for you to ...’

Sunaina cut him short with a withering look. The queen was short and petite. Her round, fair-complexioned face conveyed gentleness to the observer. But her small eyes betrayed the steely determination that was the core of her being. She repeated softly, ‘Get me some water.’

‘Yes, My Lady.’

A bowl filled with water appeared in an instant.

Sunaina locked her eyes with the vulture's. The bird was breathing heavily, exhausted by its battle with the wolves. It was covered in blood from the numerous wounds on its body. The wound on its wing was especially alarming, blood gushing out of it at a frightening rate. Loss of blood made it unsteady on its feet. But the vulture refused to move, its eyes fixed on Sunaina. It was squawking aggressively, thrusting its beak forward. Striking the air with its talons to keep the Queen of Mithila away.

Sunaina pointedly ignored the bundle behind the vulture. Focused on the massive bird, she began to hum a soft, calming tune. The vulture seemed to ease a bit. It withdrew its talons. The squawking reduced in volume and intensity.

Sunaina crept forward. Gently. Slowly. Once close, she bowed her head and submissively placed the bowl of water in front of the bird. Then she crept back just as slowly. She spoke in a mellifluous voice. 'I have come to help ... Trust me ...'

The dumb beast understood the tone of the human. It bent to sip some water, but instead, collapsed to the ground.

Sunaina rushed forward and cradled the head of the now prone bird, caressing it gently. The child, wrapped in a rich red cloth with black stripes, was crying desperately. She signalled a soldier to pick up the precious bundle as she continued to soothe the bird.

## —रुद्र—

'What a beautiful baby,' cooed Janak, as he bent his tall, wiry frame and edged close to his wife, his normally wise but detached eyes full of love and attention.

Janak and Sunaina sat on temporarily set up chairs. The baby slept comfortably in Sunaina's arms, swaddled in a soft cotton cloth. A massive umbrella shaded them from the scorching sun. The royal doctor had examined the baby, and bandaged a wound on her right temple with some herbs and neem leaves. He had assured the royal couple that the scar would largely disappear with time. Along with the other physician, the doctor now tended to the vulture's wounds.

'She's probably just a few months old. She must be strong to have survived this ordeal,' said Sunaina, gently rocking the baby in her arms.

'Yes. Strong and beautiful. Just like you.'

Sunaina looked at her husband and smiled as she caressed the baby's head. 'How can anyone abandon a child like her?'

Janak sighed. 'Many people are not wise enough to count life's blessings.

They keep focusing instead on what the world has denied them.'

Sunaina nodded at her husband and turned her attention back to the child.  
'She sleeps like an angel.'

'That she does,' said Janak.

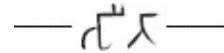
Sunaina pulled the baby up close and kissed her gently on the forehead, careful to avoid the injured area.

Janak patted his wife's back warmly. 'But are you sure, Sunaina?'

'Yes. This baby is ours. Devi *Kanyakumari* may not have given us what we wanted. But she has blessed us with something much better.'

'What will we call her?'

Sunaina looked up at the sky and drew in a deep breath. She had a name in mind already. She turned to Janak. 'We found her in a furrow in Mother Earth. It was like a mother's womb for her. We will call her Sita.'



Sunaina rushed into Janak's private office. Reclining in an easy chair, the king of Mithila was reading the text of the *Jabali Upanishad*. It was a treatise on wisdom by the great Maharishi Satyakam Jabali. Shifting attention to his wife, he put down the text. 'So, has the Emperor won?'

It had been five years since Sita had entered their lives.

'No,' said a bewildered Sunaina, 'he lost.'

Janak sat up straight, stunned. 'Emperor Dashrath lost to a trader from Lanka?'

'Yes. Raavan has almost completely massacred the Sapt Sindhu Army at Karachapa. Emperor Dashrath barely escaped with his life.'

'Lord Rudra be merciful,' whispered Janak.

'There's more. Queen Kaushalya, the eldest wife of the Emperor, gave birth to a son on the day that he lost the Battle of Karachapa. And now, many are blaming the little boy for the defeat. Saying that he's an ill omen. For the Emperor had never lost a battle till this boy was born.'

'What nonsense!' said Janak. 'How can people be so stupid?'

'The little boy's name is Ram. Named after the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram.'

'Let's hope it's lucky for him. Poor child.'

'I am more concerned about the fate of Mithila, Janak.'

Janak sighed helplessly. 'What do you think will happen?'

Sunaina had been governing the kingdom practically singlehandedly, of late. Janak was spending more and more time lost in the world of philosophy. The

queen had become increasingly popular in the kingdom. Many believed that she had been lucky for Mithila. For the rains had poured down in all their glory every year since she had come to the city as King Janak's wife.

'I am worried about security,' said Sunaina.

'And what about money?' asked Janak. 'Don't you think Raavan will enforce his trade demands on all the kingdoms? Money will flow out of the Sapt Sindhu into Lanka's coffers.'

'But we hardly trade these days. He cannot demand anything from us. The other kingdoms have a lot more to lose. I am more worried about the decimation of the armies of the Sapt Sindhu. Lawlessness will increase everywhere. How safe can we be if the entire land falls into chaos?'

'True.'

A thought crossed Janak's mind. *Who can prevent that which is written by Fate, be it of people or of countries? Our task is but to understand, not fight, what must be; and learn the lessons for our next life. Or prepare for moksha.*

But he knew Sunaina disliked 'helplessness'. So he remained silent.

The queen continued, 'I did not expect Raavan to win.'

Janak laughed. 'It's all very well to be a victor. But the vanquished get more love from their women!'

Sunaina narrowed her eyes and stared at Janak. Not impressed by her husband's attempt at wit. 'We must make some plans, Janak. We must be ready for the inevitable.'

Janak was tempted to respond with another humorous remark. Wisdom dictated restraint.

'I trust you completely. You'll think of something, I'm sure,' smiled Janak, as he turned his attention back to the *Jabali Upanishad*.



## Chapter 3

While the rest of India was suffering the aftershocks of Dashrath's defeat to Raavan, Mithila itself was relatively unaffected. There was not much trade in any case to be negatively impacted. Sunaina had initiated some reforms that had worked well. For instance, local tax collection and administration had been devolved to the village level. It reduced the strain on the Mithila bureaucracy and improved efficiency.

Using the increased revenue from agriculture, she had restrained the excess bureaucracy and expanded the Mithila police force, thus improving security within the kingdom. Mithila had no standing army and did not need one; by treaty, the Sankashya Army of Kushadhwaj was supposed to fight the external enemies of Mithila, when necessary. These were not major changes and were implemented relatively smoothly, without disturbing the daily life of the Mithilans. There were mass disturbances in the other kingdoms though, which required gut-wrenching changes to comply with the treaties imposed by Raavan.

Sita's birthday had been established as a day of celebration by royal decree. They didn't know her actual date of birth. So they celebrated the day she had been found in the furrow. Today was her sixth birthday.

Gifts and alms were distributed to the poor in the city. Like it was done on every special day. With a difference. Until Sunaina had come and toned up the administration, much of the charity was grabbed by labourers who were not rich, but who were not exactly poor either. Sunaina's administrative reforms had ensured that the charity first went to those who were truly poor and needy; those who lived in the slums close to the southern gate of the inner, secondary fort wall.

After the public ceremonies, the royal couple had arrived at the massive temple of Lord Rudra.

The Lord Rudra temple was built of red sandstone. It was one of the tallest structures in Mithila, visible from most parts of the city. It had a massive

garden around it — an area of peace in this crowded quarter of the city. Beyond the garden were the slums, spreading all the way to the fort walls. Inside the main *garba griha*, the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, a large idol of Lord Rudra and Lady Mohini had been consecrated. Seemingly in consonance with a city that had come to symbolise the love of knowledge, peace, and philosophy, the image of Lord Rudra was not in his normally fierce form. In this form, he looked kind, almost gentle. He held the hand of the beauteous Lady Mohini, who sat next to him.

After the prayers, the temple priest offered *prasad* to the royal family. Sunaina touched the priest's feet and then led Sita by the hand to a wall by the side of the *garba griha*. On the wall, a plaque had been put up in memory of the vulture that had valiantly died defending Sita from a pack of wolves. A death mask of its face had been made before the bird was cremated with honour. Cast in metal, the mask recorded the last expression of the vulture as it left its mortal body. It was a haunting look: determined and noble. Sita had made her mother relate the entire story on several occasions. Sunaina had been happy to oblige. She wanted her daughter to remember. To know that nobility came in many a form and face. Sita touched the death mask gently, reverentially. And as always, she shed a tear for the one who had also given her the gift of life.

'Thank you,' whispered Sita. She said a short prayer to the great God *Pashupati, Lord of the Animals*. She hoped the vulture's brave soul had found purpose again.

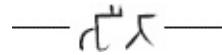
Janak discreetly signalled his wife, and the royal family slowly walked out of the Lord Rudra temple. The priests led the family down the flight of steps. The slums were clearly visible from the platform height.

'Why don't you ever let me go there, *Maa?*' asked Sita, pointing at the slums.

Sunaina smiled and patted her daughter's head. 'Soon.'

'You always say that,' Sita protested, a grumpy expression on her face.

'And, I mean it,' laughed Sunaina. 'Soon. I just didn't say how soon!'



'Alright,' said Janak, ruffling Sita's hair. 'Run along now. I have to speak with Guruji.'

The seven-year-old Sita had been playing with her father in his private office when Janak's chief guru, Ashtaavakra, had walked in. Janak had bowed to his guru, as was the tradition, and had requested him to sit on the throne assigned for him.

Mithila, not being a major player in the political arena of the Sapt Sindhu anymore, did not have a permanent *raj guru*. But Janak's court hosted the widest range of eminent seers, scholars, scientists and philosophers from India. Intellectuals loved the Mithilan air, wafting with the fragrance of knowledge and wisdom. And one of the most distinguished of these thinkers, Rishi Ashtaavakra, was Janak's chief guru. Even the great Maharishi Vishwamitra, Chief of the Malayaputra tribe, visited Mithila on occasion.

'We can speak later, if you so desire, Your Highness,' said Ashtaavakra.

'No, no. Of course not,' said Janak. 'I need your guidance on a question that has been troubling me, Guruji.'

Ashtaavakra's body was deformed in eight places. His mother had met with an accident late in her pregnancy. But fate and karma had balanced the physical handicap with an extraordinary mind. Ashtaavakra had shown signs of utter brilliance from a very young age. As a youth, he had visited Janak's court and defeated the king's then chief guru, Rishi Bandi, in a scintillating debate. In doing so, he had redeemed his father, Rishi Kahola, who had lost a debate to Bandi earlier. Rishi Bandi had gracefully accepted defeat and retired to an ashram near the Eastern Sea to acquire more knowledge. Thus it was that the young Ashtaavakra became Janak's chief guru.

Ashtaavakra's deformities did not attract attention in the liberal atmosphere of Mithila, the kingdom of the pious king, Janak. For the sage's luminous mind was compelling.

'I will see you in the evening, *Baba*,' said Sita to her *father* as she touched his feet.

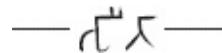
Janak blessed her. She also touched the feet of Rishi Ashtaavakra and walked out of the chamber. As she crossed the threshold, Sita stopped and hid behind the door. Out of Janak's eyesight, but within earshot. She wanted to hear what question had been troubling her father.

'How do we know what reality is, Guruji?' asked Janak.

The young Sita stood nonplussed. Confused. She had heard whisperings in the corridors of the palace. That her father was becoming increasingly eccentric. That they were lucky to have a pragmatic queen in Sunaina to look after the kingdom.

*What is reality?*

She turned and ran towards her mother's chambers. '*Maa!*'



Sita had waited long enough. She was eight years old now. And her mother had

still not taken her to the slums adjoining the fort walls. The last time she had asked, she had at least been offered an explanation. She had been told that it could be dangerous. That some people could get beaten up over there. Sita now believed that her mother was just making excuses.

Finally, curiosity had gotten the better of her. Disguised in the clothes of a maid's child, Sita slipped out of the palace. An oversized *angvastram* was wrapped around her shoulder and ears, serving as a hood. Her heart pounded with excitement and nervousness. She repeatedly looked behind to ensure that no one noticed her embark on her little adventure. No one did.

Late in the afternoon, Sita passed the Lord Rudra temple gardens and stole into the slums. All alone. Her mother's words ringing in her ears, she had armed herself with a large stick. She had been practising stick-fighting for over a year now.

As she entered the slum area, she screwed up her nose. Assaulted by the stench. She looked back at the temple garden, feeling the urge to turn back. But almost immediately, the excitement of doing something forbidden took over. She had waited a long time for this. She walked farther into the slum quarters. The houses were rickety structures made of bamboo sticks and haphazardly spread cloth awnings. The cramped space between the wobbly houses served as the 'streets' on which people walked through the slums. These streets also served as open drains, toilets, and open-air animal shelters. They were covered with garbage. There was muck and excreta everywhere. A thin film of animal and human urine made it difficult to walk. Sita pulled her *angvastram* over her nose and mouth, fascinated and appalled at the same time.

*People actually live like this? Lord Rudra be merciful.*

The palace staff had told her that things had improved in the slums after Queen Sunaina had come to Mithila.

*How much worse could it have been for this to be called an improvement?*

She soldiered on, gingerly side-stepping the muck on the muddy walkways. Till she saw something that made her stop.

A mother sat outside a slum house, feeding her child from a frugal plate. Her baby was perhaps two or three years old. He sat in his mother's lap, gurgling happily as he dodged the morsels from her hand. Every now and then, he obliged the mother and opened his mouth with theatrical concession, allowing her to stuff small morsels of food into his mouth. It would then be the mother's turn to coo in delight. Pleasing as it was, this wasn't what fascinated Sita. A crow sat next to the woman. And she fed every other morsel to the bird. The crow waited for its turn. Patiently. To it, this wasn't a game.

The woman fed them both. Turn by turn.

Sita smiled. She remembered something her mother had said to her a few days back: *Often the poor have more nobility in them than the actual nobility.*

She hadn't really understood the words then. She did now.

Sita turned around. She'd seen enough of the slums for her first trip. She promised herself that she would return soon. Time to go back to the palace.

There were four tiny lanes ahead. *Which one do I take?*

Uncertain, she took the left-most one and began to walk. She kept moving. But the slum border was nowhere in sight. Her heartbeat quickened as she nervously hastened her pace.

The light had begun to fade. Every chaotic lane seemed to end at a crossroads of several other paths. All haphazard, all disorganised. Confused, she blindly turned into a quiet lane. Beginning to feel the first traces of panic, she quickened her steps. But it only took her the wrong way, faster.

'Sorry!' cried Sita, as she banged into someone.

The dark-skinned girl looked like an adolescent; perhaps older. She had a dirty, unkempt look about her. The stench from her tattered clothes suggested that she had not changed them for a while. Lice crawled over the surface of her matted, unwashed hair. She was tall, lean, and surprisingly muscular. Her feline eyes and scarred body gave her a dangerous, edgy look.

She stared at Sita's face and then at her hands. There was a sudden flash of recognition in her eyes, as though sensing an opportunity. Sita, meanwhile, had darted into an adjacent lane. The Princess of Mithila picked up pace, almost breaking into a desperate run. Praying that this was the correct path out of the slum.

Sweat beads were breaking out on her forehead. She tried to steady her breath. She couldn't.

She kept running. Till she was forced to stop.

'Lord Rudra be merciful.'

She had screeched to a halt, confronted by a solid barrier wall. She was now well and truly lost, finding herself at the other end of the slum which abutted the inner fort wall. The inner city of Mithila was as far as it could be. It was eerily quiet, with scarcely anyone around. The sun had almost set, and the faint snatches of twilight only emphasised the darkness. She did not know what to do.

'Who is this now?' A voice was heard from behind her.

Sita whirled around, ready to strike. She saw two adolescent boys moving towards her from the right. She turned left. And ran. But did not get far. A leg stuck out and tripped her, making her fall flat on her face. Into the muck. There were more of them. She got up quickly and grabbed her stick. Five boys had

gathered around her. Casual menace on their faces.

Her mother had warned her about the crimes in the slums. Of people getting beaten up. But Sita had not believed those stories, thinking that the sweet people who came to collect charity from her mother would never hurt anyone.

*I should have listened to Maa.*

Sita looked around nervously. The five boys were now in front of her. The steep fort wall was behind her. There was no escape.

She brandished the stick at them, threateningly. The boys let out a merry laugh, amused by the antics of the little girl.

The one in the centre bit a fingernail in mock fear, and said in a sing-song voice, ‘Ooh … we’re so scared …’

Raucous laughter followed.

‘That’s a precious ring, noble girl,’ said the boy, with theatrical politeness. ‘I’m sure it’s worth more than what the five of us will earn in our entire lives. Do you think that …’

‘Do you want the ring?’ asked Sita, feeling a sense of relief as she reached for it. ‘Take it. Just let me go.’

The boy sniggered. ‘Of course we will let you go. First throw the ring over here.’

Sita gulped anxiously. She balanced her stick against her body, and quickly pulled the ring off her forefinger. Holding it in her closed fist, she pointed the stick at them with her left hand. ‘I know how to use this.’

The boy looked at his friends, his eyebrows raised. He turned to the girl and smiled. ‘We believe you. Just throw the ring here.’

Sita flung the ring forward. It fell a short distance from the boy.

‘Your throwing arm could do with more strength, noble girl,’ laughed the boy, as he bent down to pick it up. He looked at it carefully and whistled softly, before tucking it into his waistband. ‘Now, what more do you have?’

Suddenly, the boy arched forward and fell to the ground. Behind him stood the tall, dark-skinned girl Sita had crashed into earlier. She held a big bamboo stick with both hands. The boys whirled around aggressively and looked at the girl; the bravado evaporated just as quickly. She was taller than they were. Lean and muscular.

More importantly, it appeared the boys knew her. And her reputation.

‘You have nothing to do with this, Samichi …’ said one of the boys, hesitantly. ‘Leave.’

Samichi answered with her stick and struck his hand. Ferociously. The boy staggered back, clutching his arm.

‘I’ll break the other one too, if you don’t get out of here,’ growled Samichi.

And, the boy ran.

The other four delinquents, however, stood their ground. The one that was felled earlier was back on his feet. They faced Samichi, their backs to Sita. The apparently harmless one. They didn't notice Sita gripping her stick, holding it high above her head and creeping up on the one who had her ring. Judging the distance perfectly, she swung her weapon viciously at the boy's head.

Thwack!

The boy collapsed in a heap, blood spurting from the crack on the back of his head. The three others turned around. Shocked. Paralysed.

'Come on! Quick!' screamed Samichi, as she rushed forward and grabbed Sita by the hand.

As the two girls ran around the corner, Samichi stole a glance back at the scene. The boy lay on the ground, unmoving. His friends had gathered around him, trying to rouse him.

'Quickly!' shouted Samichi, dragging Sita along.



## Chapter 4

Sita stood, her hands locked behind her back. Her head bowed. Muck and refuse from the Mithila slums all over her clothes. Her face caked with mud. The very expensive ring on her finger missing. Shivering with fear. She had never seen her mother so angry.

Sunaina was staring at her daughter. No words were spoken. Just a look of utter disapproval. And worse, disappointment. Sita felt like she had failed her mother in the worst possible way.

‘I’m so sorry, *Maa*,’ wailed Sita, fresh tears flowing down her face.

She wished her mother would at least say something. Or, slap her. Or, scold her. This silence was terrifying.

‘*Maa* ...’

Sunaina sat in stony silence. Staring hard at her daughter.

‘My Lady!’

Sunaina looked towards the entrance to her chamber. A Mithila policeman was standing there. His head bowed.

‘What is the news?’ asked Sunaina, brusquely.

‘The five boys are missing, My Lady,’ said the policeman. ‘They have probably escaped.’

‘All five?’

‘I don’t have any new information on the injured boy, My Lady,’ said the policeman, referring to the one hit on the head by Sita. ‘Some witnesses have come forward. They say that he was carried away by the other boys. He was bleeding a lot.’

‘A lot?’

‘Well ... one witness said he would be surprised if that boy ...’

The policeman, wisely, left the words ‘made it alive’ unsaid.

‘Leave us,’ ordered Sunaina.

The policeman immediately saluted, turned, and marched out.

Sunaina turned her attention back to Sita. Her daughter cowered under the

stern gaze. The queen then looked beyond Sita, at the filthy adolescent standing near the wall.

‘What is your name, child?’ asked Sunaina.

‘Samichi, My Lady.’

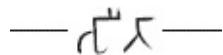
‘You are not going back to the slums, Samichi. You will stay in the palace from now on.’

Samichi smiled and folded her hands together into a *Namaste*. ‘Of course, My Lady. It will be my honour to ...’

Samichi stopped speaking as Sunaina raised her right hand. The queen turned towards Sita. ‘Go to your chambers. Take a bath. Have the physician look at your wounds; and Samichi’s wounds. We will speak tomorrow.’

‘*Maa* ...’

‘Tomorrow.’



Sita was standing next to Sunaina, who was seated on the ground. Both Sunaina and she were outside the private temple room in the queen’s chambers. Sunaina was engrossed in making a fresh *rangoli* on the floor; *made of powdered colours, it was an ethereal mix of fractals, mathematics, philosophy, and spiritual symbolism.*

Sunaina made a new *rangoli* early every morning at the entrance of the temple. Within the temple, idols of the main Gods who Sunaina worshipped had been consecrated: Lord Parshu Ram, the previous Vishnu; Lord Rudra, the great Mahadev; Lord Brahma, the creator-scientist. But the pride of place at the centre was reserved for the Mother Goddess, Shakti *Maa*. The tradition of Mother Goddess worship was especially strong in the land of Sunaina’s father, Assam; a vast, fertile and fabulously rich valley that embraced the upper reaches of the largest river of the Indian subcontinent, Brahmaputra.

Sita waited patiently. Too scared to talk.

‘There is always a reason why I ask you to do or not do something, Sita,’ said Sunaina. Not raising her eyes from the intricate *rangoli* that was emerging on the floor.

Sita sat still. Her eyes pinned on her mother’s hands.

‘There is an age to discover certain things in life. You need to be ready for it.’

Finishing the *rangoli*, Sunaina looked at her daughter. Sita relaxed as she saw her mother’s eyes. They were full of love. As always. She wasn’t angry anymore.

'There are bad people too, Sita. People who do criminal things. You find them among the rich in the inner city and the poor in the slums.'

'Yes *Maa*, I ...'

'Shhh ... don't talk, just listen,' said Sunaina firmly. Sita fell silent. Sunaina continued. 'The criminals among the rich are mostly driven by greed. One can negotiate with greed. But the criminals among the poor are driven by desperation and anger. Desperation can sometimes bring out the best in a human being. That's why the poor can often be noble. But desperation can also bring out the worst. They have nothing to lose. And they get angry when they see others with so much when they have so little. It's understandable. As rulers, our responsibility is to make efforts and change things for the better. But it cannot happen overnight. If we take too much from the rich to help the poor, the rich will rebel. That can cause chaos. And everyone will suffer. So we have to work slowly. We must help the truly poor. That is dharma. But we should not be blind and assume that all poor are noble. Not everyone has the spirit to keep their character strong when their stomachs are empty.'

Sunaina pulled Sita onto her lap. She sat comfortably. For the first time since her foolhardy foray into the slums, she breathed a little easier.

'You will help me govern Mithila someday,' said Sunaina. 'You will need to be mature and pragmatic. You must use your heart to decide the destination, but use your head to plot the journey. People who only listen to their hearts usually fail. On the other hand, people who only use their heads tend to be selfish. Only the heart can make you think of others before yourself. For the sake of dharma, you must aim for equality and balance in society. Perfect equality can never be achieved but we must try to reduce inequality as much as we can. But don't fall into the trap of stereotypes. Don't assume that the powerful are always bad or that the powerless are always good. There is good and bad in everyone.'

Sita nodded silently.

'You need to be liberal, of course. For that is the Indian way. But don't be a blind and stupid liberal.'

'Yes, *Maa*.'

'And do not wilfully put yourself in danger ever again.'

Sita hugged her mother, as tears flowed out of her eyes.

Sunaina pulled back and wiped her daughter's tears. 'You frightened me to death. What would I have done if something bad had happened to you?'

'Sorry, *Maa*.'

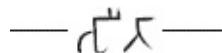
Sunaina smiled as she embraced Sita again. 'My impulsive little girl ...'

Sita took a deep breath. Guilt had been gnawing away at her. She needed to know. '*Maa*, that boy I hit on the head ... What ...'

Sunaina interrupted her daughter. ‘Don’t worry about that.’

‘But ...’

‘I said don’t worry about that.’



‘Thank you, *chacha!*’ Sita squealed, as she jumped into her *uncle* Kushadhwaj’s arms.

Kushadhwaj, Janak’s younger brother and the king of Sankashya, was on a visit to Mithila. He had brought a gift for his niece. A gift that had been a massive hit. It was an Arabian horse. Native Indian breeds were different from the Arab variety. The Indian ones usually had thirty-four ribs while the Arabian horses often had thirty-six. More importantly, an Arabian horse was much sought after as it was smaller, sleeker, and easier to train. And its endurance level was markedly superior. It was a prized possession. And expensive too.

Sita was understandably delighted.

Kushadhwaj handed her a customised saddle, suitable for her size. Made of leather, it had a gold-plated horn on top of the pommel. The saddle, though small, was still heavy for the young Sita. But she refused the help of the Mithila royal staff in carrying it.

Sita dragged the saddle to the private courtyard of the royal chambers, where her young horse waited for her. It was held by one of Kushadhwaj’s aides.

Sunaina smiled. ‘Thank you so much. Sita will be lost in this project for the next few weeks. I don’t think she will eat or sleep till she’s learnt how to ride!’

‘She’s a good girl,’ said Kushadhwaj.

‘But it is an expensive gift, Kushadhwaj.’

‘She’s my only niece, *Bhabhi*,’ said Kushadhwaj to his *sister-in-law*. ‘If I won’t spoil her, then who will?’

Sunaina smiled and gestured for them to join Janak in the veranda adjoining the courtyard. The king of Mithila set the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* manuscript aside as his wife and brother joined him. Discreet aides placed some cups filled with buttermilk on the table. They also lit a silver lamp, placed at the centre of the table. Just as noiselessly, they withdrew.

Kushadhwaj cast a quizzical look at the lamp and frowned. It was daytime. But he remained quiet.

Sunaina waited till the aides were out of earshot. Then she looked at Janak. But her husband had picked up his manuscript again. Deeply engrossed. After her attempts to meet his eyes remained unsuccessful, she cleared her throat.

Janak remained focused on the manuscript in his hands.

‘What is it, *Bhabhi*?’ asked Kushadhwaj.

Sunaina realised that she had no choice. She would have to be the one to speak up. She pulled a document out of the large pouch tied to her waist and placed it on the table. Kushadhwaj resolutely refused to look at it.

‘Kushadhwaj, we have been discussing the road connecting Sankashya to Mithila for many years now,’ said Sunaina. ‘It was washed away in the Great Flood. But it has been more than two decades since. The absence of that road has caused immense hardship to the citizens and traders of Mithila.’

‘What traders, *Bhabhi*?’ said Kushadhwaj, laughing gently. ‘Are there any in Mithila?’

Sunaina ignored the barb. ‘You had agreed in principle to pay for two-thirds of the cost of the road, if Mithila financed the remaining one-third.’

Kushadhwaj remained silent.

‘Mithila has raised its share of the money,’ said Sunaina. She pointed to the document. ‘Let’s seal the agreement and let the construction begin.’

Kushadhwaj smiled. ‘But *Bhabhi*, I don’t see what the problem is. The road is not that bad. People use it every day. I myself took that road to Mithila yesterday.’

‘But you are a king, Kushadhwaj,’ said Sunaina pleasantly, her tone studiously polite. ‘You are capable of many things that ordinary people are not. Ordinary people need a good road.’

Kushadhwaj smiled broadly. ‘Yes, the ordinary people of Mithila are lucky to have a queen as committed to them as you are.’

Sunaina did not say anything.

‘I have an idea, *Bhabhi*,’ said Kushadhwaj. ‘Let Mithila begin the construction of the road. Once your share of the one-third is done, Sankashya will complete the remaining two-third.’

‘All right.’

Sunaina picked up the document and a quill from a side table and scribbled a line at the end. She then pulled out the royal seal from her pouch and marked the agreement. She offered the document to Kushadhwaj. It was then that Kushadhwaj realised the significance of the lamp.

Lord Agni, the God of Fire, as witness.

Every Indian believed that *Agni* was the great purifier. It was not a coincidence that the first hymn of the first chapter of the holiest Indian scripture, the *Rig Veda*, celebrated Lord Agni. All promises that were sealed with the God of Fire as witness could never be broken; promises of marriage, of *yagnas*, of peace treaties ... and even a promise to build roads.

Kushadhwaj did not take the agreement from his sister-in-law. Instead, he reached into his pouch and pulled out his own royal seal. ‘I trust you completely, *Bhabhi*. You can mark my agreement on the document.’

Sunaina took the seal from Kushadhwaj and was about to stamp the agreement, when he softly spoke, ‘It’s a new seal, *Bhabhi*. One that reflects Sankashya properly.’

Sunaina frowned. She turned the seal around and looked at its markings. Even though it was a mirror image of the symbol that would be marked on the agreement, the Queen of Mithila recognised it immediately. It was a single dolphin; the seal symbol of Mithila. Sankashya had historically been a subsidiary kingdom of Mithila, ruled by the younger members of the royal family. And it had a different seal: a single *hilsa* fish.

Sunaina stiffened in anger. But she knew that she had to control her temper. She slowly placed the document back on the table. The Sankashya seal had not been used.

‘Why don’t you give me your actual seal, Kushadhwaj?’ said Sunaina.

‘This is my kingdom’s seal now, *Bhabhi*.’

‘It can never be so unless Mithila accepts it. No kingdom will recognise this as your seal till Mithila publicly does so. Every Sapt Sindhu kingdom knows that the single dolphin is the mark of the Mithila royal family’s direct line.’

‘True, *Bhabhi*. But you can change that. You can legitimise this seal across the land by using it on that document.’

Sunaina cast a look at her husband. The king of Mithila raised his head, looked briefly at his wife, and then went back to the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad*.

‘This is not acceptable, Kushadhwaj,’ said Sunaina, maintaining her calm expression and voice to hide the anger boiling within. ‘This will not happen for as long as I’m alive.’

‘I don’t understand why you are getting so agitated, *Bhabhi*. You have married into the Mithila royal family. I was born into it. The royal blood of Mithila flows in my veins, not yours. Right, Janak *dada*?’

Janak looked up and finally spoke, though the tone was detached and devoid of anger. ‘Kushadhwaj, whatever Sunaina says is my decision as well.’

Kushadhwaj stood up. ‘This is a sad day. Blood has been insulted by blood. For the sake of ...’

Sunaina too rose to her feet. Abruptly interrupting Kushadhwaj, though her tone remained unfailingly polite. ‘Be careful what you say next, Kushadhwaj.’

Kushadhwaj laughed. He stepped forward and took the Sankashya seal from Sunaina’s hand. ‘This is mine.’

Sunaina remained silent.

'Don't pretend to be a custodian of the royal traditions of Mithila,' scoffed Kushadhwaj. 'You are not blood family. You are only an import.'

Sunaina was about to say something when she felt a small hand wrap itself around hers. She looked down. The young Sita stood by her side, shaking with fury. In her other hand was the saddle that Kushadhwaj had just gifted her. She threw the saddle at her uncle. It fell on his feet.

As Kushadhwaj doubled up in pain, the Sankashya seal fell from his hand.

Sita leapt forward, picked up the seal and smashed it to the ground, breaking it in two. The breaking of a royal seal was considered a very bad omen. This was a grievous insult.

'Sita!' shouted Janak.

Kushadhwaj's face contorted with fury. 'This is an outrage, *Dada*!'

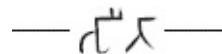
Sita now stood in front of her mother. She faced her uncle, daring him with her eyes. Spreading her arms out to cover her mother protectively.

The king of Sankashya picked up the broken pieces of his royal seal and stormed out. 'You have not heard the last of this, *Dada*!'

As he left, Sunaina went down on her knees and turned Sita around. 'You should not have done that, Sita.'

Sita looked at her mother with smouldering eyes. Then turned to look at her father, defiant and accusing. There was not a trace of apology on her face.

'You should not have done that, Sita.'



Sita held on to her mother, refusing to let go. She wept with wordless anguish. A smiling Janak came up to her and patted her head. The royal family had gathered in the king's private office. A few weeks had passed since the incident with Kushadhwaj. Sita, her parents had decided, was old enough to leave for *gurukul*; literally, the *Guru's family*, but in effect a residential school.

Janak and Sunaina had chosen Rishi Shvetaketu's *gurukul* for their daughter. Shvetaketu was the uncle of Janak's chief guru, Ashtaavakra. His *gurukul* offered lessons in the core subjects of Philosophy, Mathematics, Science, and Sanskrit. Sita would also receive education in other specialised subjects like Geography, History, Economics, and Royal Administration, among others.

One subject that Sunaina had insisted Sita be taught, overriding Janak's objections, was warfare and martial arts. Janak believed in non-violence. Sunaina believed in being practical.

Sita knew that she had to go. But she was a child. And the child was terrified of leaving home.

'You will come home regularly, my dear,' said Janak. 'And we will come and see you too. The *ashram* is on the banks of the Ganga River. It's not too far.'

Sita tightened her grip on her mother.

Sunaina prised Sita's arms and held her chin. She made her daughter look at her. 'You will do well there. It will prepare you for your life. I know that.'

'Are you sending me away because of what I did with *chacha*?' sobbed Sita.

Sunaina and Janak immediately went down on their knees and held her close.

'Of course not, my darling,' said Sunaina. 'This has nothing to do with your uncle. You have to study. You must get educated so that you can help run this kingdom someday.'

'Yes, Sita,' said Janak. 'Your mother is right. What happened with Kushadhwaj uncle has nothing to do with you. It is between him, and your mother and I.'

Sita burst into a fresh bout of tears. She clung to her parents like she'd never let them go.



## Chapter 5

Two years had passed since Sita had arrived in Shvetaketu's *gurukul*. While the ten-year-old student had impressed her guru with her intelligence and sharpness, it was her enthusiasm for the outdoors that was truly extraordinary. Especially noteworthy was her skill in stick-fighting.

But her spirited temperament also created problems on occasion. Like the time when a fellow student had called her father an ineffectual king, more suited to being a teacher than a ruler. Sita's response had been to thrash the living daylights out of him. The boy had been confined to the *gurukul Ayuralay* for almost a month. He had limped for two months after that.

A worried Shvetaketu had arranged for extra classes on the subjects of non-violence and impulse control. The hotheaded girl had also been strictly reminded of the rules against physical violence on the *gurukul* premises. The art of warfare was taught to inculcate self-discipline and a code of conduct for future royal duties. Within the school, they were not allowed to hurt one another.

To ensure that the message went home, Sunaina had also been told of this incident on one of her visits to the *gurukul*. Her strong words had had the desired impact on Sita. She had refrained from beating other students since then, though her resolve was tested at times.

This was one such time.

'Aren't you adopted?' taunted Kaaml Raj, a fellow classmate.

Five students from the *gurukul* had gathered close to the pond on the campus. Three sat around Sita, who had drawn a geometric shape on the ground, using some ropes. Engrossed in explaining a theorem from the *Baudhayana Shulba Sutra*, she had been studiously ignoring Kaaml. As were the others. He was hovering around as usual, trying to distract everyone. Upon hearing his words, all eyes turned to Sita.

Radhika was Sita's best friend. She immediately tried to prevent a reaction.  
'Let it be, Sita. He is a fool.'

Sita sat up straight and closed her eyes for a moment. She had often wondered about her birth mother. Why had she abandoned her? Was she as magnificent as her adoptive mother? But there was no doubt in her mind about one fact: She was Sunaina's daughter.

'I am my mother's daughter,' muttered Sita, looking defiantly at her tormentor as she pointedly ignored her friend's advice.

'Yes, yes, I know that. We are all our mothers' children. But aren't you adopted? What will happen to you when your mother has a real daughter?'

'Real daughter? I am not unreal, Kaaml. I am *very* real.'

'Yes, yes. But you are not ...'

'Just get lost,' said Sita. She picked up the twig with which she had been explaining the *Baudhayana* theorem.

'No, no. You aren't understanding what I'm saying. If you are adopted, you can be thrown out at any time. What will you do then?'

Sita put the twig down and looked at Kaaml with cold eyes. This would have been a good moment for the boy to shut up. Regrettably, he did not have too much sense.

'I can see that the teachers like you. Guruji likes you a lot. You can come back here and teach all day when you get thrown out of your home!' Kaaml broke into maniacal laughter. No one else laughed. In fact, the tension in the air was crackling dangerously.

'Sita ...' pleaded Radhika, again advising calm. 'Let it be ...'

Sita ignored Radhika's advice yet again. She slowly got up and walked towards Kaaml. The boy swallowed hard, but he did not step back. Sita's hands were locked tightly behind her back. She stopped within an inch of her adversary. She looked at him and glared. Straight into his eyes. Kaaml's breath had quickened nervously, and the twitch in his temple showed that his courage was rapidly disappearing. But he stood his ground.

Sita took one more threatening step. Dangerously close to Kaaml. Her toe was now touching the boy's. The tip of her nose was less than a centimetre from his face. Her eyes flashed fire.

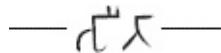
Sweat beads had formed on Kaaml's forehead. 'Listen ... you are not allowed to hit anyone ...'

Sita kept her eyes locked with his. She kept staring. Unblinking. Cold. Breathing heavily.

Kaaml's voice emerged in a squeak. 'Listen ...'

Sita suddenly screamed loudly; an ear-splitting sound right in Kaaml's face. A forceful, strong, high-pitched bellow. A startled Kaaml fell back, flat on the ground and burst into tears.

And, the other children burst into laughter.  
A teacher appeared seemingly from nowhere.  
'I didn't hit him! I didn't hit him!'  
'Sita ...'  
Sita allowed herself to be led away by the teacher. 'But I didn't hit him!'



'Hanu *bhaiya*!' cooed Radhika as she hugged her *elder brother*. Or more specifically, her elder *cousin* brother.

Radhika had asked Sita along to meet her favourite relative. The meeting place was around an hour's walk from the *gurukul*, deep in the jungles to the south, in a well-hidden clearing. This was where the cousins met. In secret. Her brother had good reasons to remain invisible to the *gurukul* authorities.

He was a Naga; a person born with deformities.

He was dressed in a dark-brown *dhoti* with a white *angvastram*. Fair-skinned. Tall and hirsute. An outgrowth jutted out from his lower back, almost like a tail. It flapped with rhythmic precision, as though it had a mind of its own. His massive build and sturdy musculature gave him an awe-inspiring presence. Almost a godly aura. His flat nose was pressed against his face, which in turn was outlined with facial hair, encircling it with neat precision. Strangely though, the skin above and below his mouth was hairless, silken smooth and light pink in colour; it had a puffed appearance. His lips were a thin, barely noticeable line. Thick eyebrows drew a sharp, artistic curve above captivating eyes that radiated intelligence and a meditative calm. It almost seemed like the Almighty had taken the face of a monkey and placed it on a man's head.

He looked at Radhika with almost paternal affection. 'How are you, my little sister?'

Radhika stuck her lower lip out in mock anger. 'How long has it been since I saw you last? Ever since father allowed that new *gurukul* to come up ...'

Radhika's father was the chief of a village along the river Shon. He had recently given permission for a *gurukul* to be set up close to the village. Four young boys had been enrolled. There were no other students. Sita had wondered why Radhika was still in Rishi Shvetaketu's *gurukul*, when another was now so close to home. Maybe a small, four-student *gurukul* was not as good as their Guruji's renowned school.

'Sorry Radhika, I've been very busy,' said the man. 'I've been given a new assignment and ...'

'I don't care about your new assignment!'

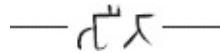
Radhika's brother quickly changed the topic. 'Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend?'

Radhika stared at him for a few more seconds, then smiled in surrender and turned to her friend. 'This is Sita, the princess of Mithila. And this is my elder brother, Hanu *bhaiya*.'

He gave his new acquaintance a broad smile as he folded his hands into a *Namaste*. 'Hanu *bhaiya* is what little Radhika calls me. My name is Hanuman.'

Sita folded her hands too, and looked up at the kindly face. 'I think I prefer Hanu *bhaiya*.'

Hanuman laughed warmly. 'Then Hanu *bhaiya* it is!'



Sita had spent five years in the *gurukul*. She was thirteen years old now.

The *gurukul* was built on the southern banks of the holy Ganga, a short distance downriver from Magadh, where the feisty Sarayu merged into the sedate Ganga. Its location was so convenient that many *rishis* and *rishikas* from various *ashrams* used to drop into this *gurukul*. They, usually, even taught for a few months as visiting teachers.

Indeed, Maharishi Vishwamitra himself was on a visit to the *gurukul* right now. He and his followers entered the frugal *ashram*, home to almost twenty-five students.

'*Namaste*, great Malayaputra,' said Shvetaketu, folding his hands together and bowing to the legendary *rishi*, chief of the tribe left behind by the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram. The Malayaputras were tasked with two missions: to help the next Mahadev, Destroyer of Evil, if and when he or she arose. And, to give rise to the next Vishnu, Propagator of Good, when the time was right.

The *gurukul* was electrified by the presence of the great Maharishi Vishwamitra; considered a *Saptrishi Uttradhikari*, successor to the legendary seven *rishis*. It was a singular honour, greater than receiving any of the men and women of knowledge who had visited before.

'*Namaste*, Shvetaketu,' said Vishwamitra imperiously, a hint of a smile playing on his face.

The staff at the *gurukul* had immediately set to work. Some helped the sage's followers with their luggage and horses, while others rushed to clean the already spick-and-span guest quarters. Arishtanemi, the military chief of the Malayaputras and the right-hand man of Vishwamitra, organised the efforts like the battle commander that he was.

'What brings you to these parts, Great One?' asked Shvetaketu.

'I had some work upriver,' said Vishwamitra, enigmatically, refusing to elaborate.

Shvetaketu knew better than to ask any more questions on this subject to the fearsome Malayaputra chief. But an attempt at conversation was warranted. 'Raavan's trade treaties are causing immense pain to the kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu, noble Guru. People are suffering and being impoverished. Somebody has to fight him.'

Almost seven feet tall, the dark-skinned Vishwamitra was altogether of unreal proportions, both physically and in intellect. His large belly lay under a sturdy chest, muscular shoulders, and powerful arms. A flowing white beard grazed his chest. Brahminical, tuft of knotted hair on an otherwise shaven head. Large, limpid eyes. And the holy *janau*, *sacred thread*, tied over his shoulder. In startling contrast were the numerous battle scars that lined his face and body. He looked down at Shvetaketu from his great height.

'There are no kings today who can take on this task,' said Vishwamitra. 'They are all just survivors. Not leaders.'

'Perhaps this task is beyond that of mere kings, Illustrious One ...'

Vishwamitra's smile broadened mysteriously. But no words followed.

Shvetaketu would not let down his need for interaction with the great man. 'Forgive my impertinence, Maharishi, but how long do you expect to stay with us? It would be wonderful if my students could get the benefit of your guidance.'

'I will be here for only a few days, Shvetaketu. Teaching your children may not be possible.'

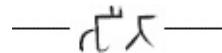
Shvetaketu was about to repeat his request, as politely as possible, when a loud sound was heard.

A speedy whoosh followed by a loud thwack!

Vishwamitra had once been a Kshatriya warrior prince. He recognised the sound immediately. Of a spear hitting a wooden target. Almost perfectly.

He turned in the direction that the sound had emerged from, his brows lifted slightly in admiration. 'Someone in your *gurukul* has a strong throwing arm, Shvetaketu.'

Shvetaketu smiled proudly. 'Let me show you, Guruji.'



'Sita?' asked Vishwamitra, surprised beyond words. 'Janak's daughter, Sita?'

Vishwamitra and Shvetaketu were at one end of the sparse but well-equipped outdoor training arena, where students practised archery, spear-throwing and

other *ananga* weapon techniques. At the other end was a separate area set aside for the practice of *anga* weapons like swords and maces. Sita, immersed in her practice, did not see the two *rishis* as they silently walked in and watched her get ready for the next throw.

'She has the wisdom of King Janak, great Malayaputra,' answered Shvetaketu. 'But she also has the pragmatism and fighting spirit of Queen Sunaina. And, dare I say, my *gurukul* teachers have moulded her spirit well.'

Vishwamitra observed Sita with a keen eye. Tall for a thirteen-year old, she was already beginning to build muscle. Her straight, jet-black hair was braided and rolled into a practical bun. She flicked a spear up with her foot, catching it expertly in her hand. Vishwamitra noticed the stylish flick. But he was more impressed by something else. She had caught the spear exactly at the balance point on the shaft. Which had not been marked, unlike in a normal training spear. She judged it, instinctively perhaps. Even from a distance, he could see that her grip was flawless. The spear shaft lay flat on the palm of her hand, between her index and middle finger. Her thumb pointed backwards while the rest of the fingers faced the other direction.

Sita turned to the target with her left foot facing it. It was a wooden board painted with concentric circles. She raised her left hand, again in the same direction. Her body twisted ever so slightly, to add power to the throw. She pulled her right hand back, parallel to the ground; poised as a work of art.

*Perfect.*

Shvetaketu smiled. Though he did not teach warfare to his students, he was personally proud of Sita's prowess. 'She doesn't take the traditional few steps before she throws. The twist in her body and strength in her shoulders give her all the power she needs.'

Vishwamitra looked dismissively at Shvetaketu. He turned his attention back to the impressive girl. Those few steps may add power, but could also make you miss the target. Especially if the target was small. He did not bother to explain that little detail to Shvetaketu.

Sita flung hard as she twisted her body leftward, putting the power of her shoulder and back into the throw. Whipping the spear forward with her wrist and finger. Giving the final thrust to the missile.

Whoosh and thwack!

The spear hit bang on target. Right at the centre of the board. It jostled for space with the earlier spear which had pierced the same small circle.

Vishwamitra smiled slightly. 'Not bad ... Not bad at all ...'

What her two spectators did not know was that Sita had been taking lessons from Hanuman, on his regular visits to see his two sisters. He had helped

perfect her technique.

Shvetaketu smiled with the pride of a parent. ‘She is exceptional.’

‘What is her status in Mithila now?’

Shvetaketu took a deep breath. ‘I can’t be sure. She is their adopted daughter. And, King Janak and Queen Sunaina have always loved her dearly. But now that ...’

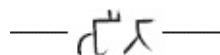
‘I believe Sunaina was blessed with a daughter a few years back,’ interrupted Vishwamitra.

‘Yes. After more than a decade of marriage. They have their own natural-born daughter now.’

‘Urmila, right?’

‘Yes, that is her name. Queen Sunaina has said that she does not differentiate between the two girls. But she has not visited Sita for nine months. She used to come every six months earlier. Admittedly, Sita has been called to Mithila regularly. She last visited Mithila six months ago. But she didn’t return very happy.’

Vishwamitra looked at Sita, his hand on his chin. Thoughtful. He could see her face now. It seemed strangely familiar. But he couldn’t place it.



It was lunchtime at the *gurukul*. Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras sat in the centre of the courtyard, surrounded by the simple mud huts that housed the students. It also served as an open-air classroom. Teaching was always done in the open. The small, austere huts for the teachers were a short distance away.

‘Guruji, shall we begin?’ asked Arishtanemi, the Malayaputra military chief.

The students and the *gurukul* staff had served the honoured guests on banana leaf plates. Shvetaketu sat alongside Vishwamitra, waiting for the Chief Malayaputra to commence the ceremony. Vishwamitra picked up his glass, poured some water into the palm of his right hand, and sprinkled it around his plate, thanking Goddess Annapurna for her blessings in the form of food and nourishment. He scooped the first morsel of food and placed it aside, as a symbolic offering to the Gods. Everyone repeated the action. At a signal from Vishwamitra, they began eating.

Vishwamitra, however, paused just as he was about to put the first morsel into his mouth. His eyes scanned the premises in search of a man. One of his soldiers was a Naga called Jatayu. The unfortunate man had been born with a condition that led to deformities on his face over time, classifying him as a Naga. His deformities were such that his face looked like that of a vulture.

Many ostracised Jatayu. But not Vishwamitra. The Chief Malayaputra recognised the powerful warrior and noble soul that Jatayu was. Others, with prejudiced eyes, were blind to his qualities.

Vishwamitra knew the biases that existed in the times. He also knew that in this *ashram*, it was unlikely that anybody would have bothered to take care of Jatayu's meals. He looked around, trying to find him. He finally saw Jatayu, sitting alone in the distance, under a tree. Even as he was about to signal a student, he saw Sita heading towards the Naga, a banana-leaf plate in one hand, and a tray full of food in the other.

The *Maharishi* watched, as Jatayu stood up with coy amazement.

From the distance, Vishwamitra could not hear what was being said. But he read the body language. With utmost respect, Sita placed the banana-leaf plate in front of Jatayu, then served the food. As Jatayu sat down to eat with an embarrassed smile, she bowed low, folded her hands into a *Namaste* and walked away.

Vishwamitra watched Sita, lost in thought. *Where have I seen that face before?*

Arishtanemi, too, was observing the girl. He turned to Vishwamitra.

'She seems like a remarkable girl, Guruji,' said Arishtanemi.

'Hmm,' said Vishwamitra, as he looked at his lieutenant very briefly. He turned his attention to his food.



## Chapter 6

*'Kaushik, this is not a good idea,' said Divodas. 'Trust me, my brother.'*

*Kaushik and Divodas sat on a large boulder outside their gurukul, on the banks of the Kaveri River. The two friends, both in their late thirties, were teachers at the Gurukul of Maharishi Kashyap, the celebrated Saptrishi Uttradhikari, successor to the seven legendary seers. Kaushik and Divodas had been students of the gurukul in their childhood. Upon graduation, they had gone their separate ways. Divodas had excelled as a teacher of great renown and Kaushik, as a fine Kshatriya royal. Two decades later, they had joined the prestigious institution again, this time as teachers. They had instantly rekindled their childhood friendship. In fact, they were like brothers now. In private, they still referred to each other by the gurukul names of their student days.*

*'Why is it not a good idea, Divodas?' asked Kaushik, his massive, muscular body bent forward aggressively, as usual. 'They are biased against the Vaanars. We need to challenge this prejudice for the good of India!'*

*Divodas shook his head. But realised that further conversation was pointless. He had long given up trying to challenge Kaushik's stubborn streak. It was like banging your head against an anthill. Not a good idea!*

*He picked up a clay cup kept by his side. It contained a bubbly, milky liquid. He held his nose and gulped it down. 'Yuck!'*

*Kaushik burst into laughter as he patted his friend heartily on his back. 'Even after all these years, it still tastes like horse's piss!'*

*Divodas wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled. 'You need to come up with a new line! How do you know it tastes like horse's piss, anyway? Have you ever drunk horse's piss?!'*

*Kaushik laughed louder and held his friend by the shoulder. 'I have had the Somras often. And I'm sure even horse's piss can't taste worse!'*

*Divodas smiled broadly and put his arm around his friend's shoulder. They sat on the boulder in companionable silence, watching the sacred Kaveri as it flowed gently by Mayuram, the small town that housed their gurukul. The town*

*was a short distance from the sea, and the perfect location for this massive gurukul, which taught hundreds of young students. More importantly, it also offered specialised courses in higher studies in different fields of knowledge. Being close to the sea, students from the Sapt Sindhu in the North could conveniently sail down the eastern coast of India to the gurukul. Thus, they did not need to cross the Narmada River from the north to south, and violate the superstitious belief that instructed against it. Furthermore, this gurukul was close to the submerged, prehistoric land of Sangamtil, which along with the submerged ancient land of Dwarka in western India, was one of the two fatherlands of Vedic culture. This made its location uniquely holy to the students.*

*Divodas braced his shoulders, as if gathering resolve.*

*Kaushik, knowing well the non-verbal cues of his friend, remarked, ‘What?’*

*Divodas took a deep breath. He knew this would be a difficult conversation. But he decided to try one more time. ‘Kaushik, listen to me. I know you want to help Trishanku. And, I agree with you. He needs help. He is a good man. Perhaps immature and naive, but a good man nonetheless. But he cannot become a Vayuputra. He failed their examination. He must accept that. It has nothing to do with how he looks or where he was born. It is about his capability.’*

*The Vayuputras were the tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra. They lived far beyond the western borders of India in a place called Pariha. The Vayuputras were tasked with supporting the next Vishnu, whenever he or she arose. And, of course, one of them would become the next Mahadev whenever Evil raised its dangerous head.*

*Kaushik stiffened. ‘The Vayuputras are intolerant towards the Vaanars and you know it.’*

*The Vaanars were a large, powerful, and reclusive tribe living on the banks of the great Tungabhadra River, north of the Kaveri. The Tungabhadra was a tributary of the Krishna River farther to the north. The tribe had a distinctly different appearance: Mostly short, stocky and very muscular, some of them were giant-like too. Their faces were framed with fine, facial hair, which ballooned into a beard at the jaw. Their mouths protruded outwards, and the skin around it was silken smooth and hairless. Their hirsute bodies sported thick, almost furry hair. To some prejudiced people, the Vaanars appeared like monkeys and thus, somehow, less human. It was said that similar tribes lived farther to the west of Pariha. One of their biggest and most ancient settlements was a land called Neanderthal or the valley of Neander.*

*‘What intolerance are you talking about?’ asked Divodas, his hand raised in*

*question. ‘They accepted young Maruti into their fold, didn’t they? Maruti is a Vaanar too. But he has merit. Trishanku doesn’t!’*

*Kaushik would not be dissuaded. ‘Trishanku has been loyal to me. He asked for my help. I will help him!’*

*‘But Kaushik, how can you create your own version of Pariha? This is not wise ...’*

*‘I have given him my word, Divodas. Will you help me or not?’*

*‘Kaushik, of course I will help! But, brother, listen ...’*

*Suddenly a loud, feminine voice was heard from a distance. ‘Hey, Divodas!’*

*Kaushik and Divodas turned around. It was Nandini. Another teacher at the gurukul. And a friend to both. Kaushik cast a dark, injured look at Divodas, gritting his teeth softly.*

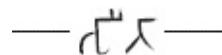
*‘Guruji ...’*

Vishwamitra’s eyes flew open, bringing him back to the present from an ancient, more-than-a-century-old memory.

‘I am sorry to disturb you, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi, his hands joined in a penitent *Namaste*. ‘But you had asked me to wake you when the students assembled.’

Vishwamitra sat up and gathered his *angvastram*. ‘Is Sita present?’

‘Yes, Guruji.’



Shvetaketu sat on a chair placed in a discreet corner. He was clearly elated to see all the twenty-five students of his *gurukul* gathered in the open square. Vishwamitra sat on the round platform built around the trunk of the main *peepal* tree. It was the seat of the teacher. The great Chief Malayaputra would teach his students, if only for one class. This was a rare honour for Shvetaketu and his students.

The teachers of the *gurukul* and the Malayaputras stood in silence behind Shvetaketu.

‘Have you learnt about our great ancient empires?’ asked Vishwamitra. ‘And the reasons for their rise and fall?’

All the students nodded in the affirmative.

‘All right, then someone tell me, why did the empire of the descendants of the great Emperor Bharat decline? An empire that flourished for centuries, was annihilated within just two generations. Why?’

Kaaml Raj raised his hand. Shvetaketu groaned softly.

‘Yes?’ asked Vishwamitra.

‘Guruji,’ answered Kaaml, ‘they were attacked by foreigners and had internal rebellions at the same time. They were like the *kancha* marbles we play with. Everyone from everywhere was hitting them again and again. How could the empire survive?’

Saying this, Kaaml guffawed uncontrollably, laughing as if he had just cracked the funniest joke in human history. Everyone else remained silent. A few students at the back held their heads in shame. Vishwamitra stared at Kaaml with a frozen expression. The same expression was then directed towards Shvetaketu.

Not for the first time, Shvetaketu considered sending young Kaaml back to his parents. He really was a strange, untrainable child.

Vishwamitra did not deign to respond to Kaaml and repeated his question, this time looking directly at Sita. But the princess of Mithila did not answer.

‘Bhoomi, why don’t you answer?’ asked Vishwamitra, using her *gurukul* name.

‘Because I am not sure, Guruji.’

Vishwamitra pointed to the front row. ‘Come here, child.’

Since her last visit to Mithila, Sita had preferred to be alone. She mostly sat at the back of the class. Her friend Radhika patted her back, encouraging her to go. As Sita came forward, Vishwamitra gestured for her to sit. Then he stared at her eyes closely. Very few sages were adept at reading people’s minds through their eyes. Vishwamitra was one such rare sage.

‘Tell me,’ said Vishwamitra, his eyes piercing through her mind. ‘Why did the *Bhaaratas*, the descendants of the great Emperor Bharat, disintegrate so suddenly?’

Sita felt very uncomfortable. She felt an overpowering urge to get up and run. But she knew she could not insult the great *Maharishi*. She chose to answer. ‘The *Bhaaratas* had a massive standing army. They could have easily fought on multiple battle fronts. But their warriors were ...’

‘They were useless,’ said Vishwamitra, completing Sita’s thought. ‘And, why were they useless? They had no shortage of money, of training, of equipment, or of war weapons.’

Sita repeated something she had heard Samichi say. ‘What matters is not the weapon, but the woman who wields that weapon.’

Vishwamitra smiled in approval. ‘And why were their *warriors* incapable of wielding weapons? Do not forget, these were weapons of far superior technology than those of their enemies.’

Sita had not thought about this. She remained silent.

‘Describe the *Bhaarat* society at the time of their downfall,’ Vishwamitra

demanded.

Sita knew this answer. ‘It was peaceful. A liberal and polite society. It was a haven for arts, culture, music, conversations, debates ... They not only practised but proudly celebrated non-violence. Both verbal and physical. It was a perfect society. Like heaven.’

‘True. But there were some for whom it was hell.’

Sita did not say anything. But her mind wondered: *For whom?*

Vishwamitra read her mind as if she had spoken aloud. He answered, ‘The warriors.’

‘The warriors?’

‘What are the chief qualities of warriors? What drives them? What motivates them? Yes, there are many who fight for honour, for the country, for a code. But equally, there are those who simply want a socially sanctioned way to kill. If not given an outlet, such people can easily turn to crime. Many great warriors, celebrated by humanity, narrowly escaped being remembered as social degenerates. What saved them from becoming criminals and instead, turned them into soldiers? The answer is the warrior code: The *right* reason to kill.’

It’s difficult for a child to surrender certainties and understand nuances. Sita, after all just a thirteen-year-old, stiffened.

‘Warriors thrive on admiration and hero worship. Without these, the warrior spirit, and with it, the warrior code, dies. Sadly, many in the latter-day *Bhaarat* society despised their soldiers and preferred to condemn them. Every action of the army was vehemently criticised. Any form of violence, even dharmic violence, was opposed. The warrior spirit itself was berated as a demonic impulse that had to be controlled. It didn’t stop there. Freedom of speech was curtailed so that verbal violence could also be controlled. Disagreement was discouraged. This is how the *Bhaaratas* felt that heaven could be created on earth; by making strength powerless, and weakness powerful.’

Vishwamitra’s voice became softer, almost as if he was speaking only to Sita. The assembly listened in rapt attention.

‘Essentially, the *Bhaaratas* curbed their Kshatriya class drastically. Masculinity was emasculated. Great sages of yore who preached absolute non-violence and love were glorified and their messages amplified. But then, when barbaric invaders attacked from foreign lands, these pacifist, non-violent *Bhaarat* men and women were incapable of fighting back. These civilised people appeared like weak wimps to the brutal warriors from abroad.’ With an ironic laugh, Vishwamitra continued, ‘Unexpectedly, for the people of *Bhaarat* society, the *Hiranyaloman Mlechcha* warriors did not care for their message of

love. Their answer to love was mass murder. They were barbarians, incapable of building their own empire. But they destroyed *Bhaarat* power and prestige. Internal rebels finished the job of destruction.'

'Guruji, are you saying that to fight foreign monsters, you need your own monsters?'

'No. All I'm saying is that society must be wary of extremes. It must constantly strive towards attaining a balance among competing ideologies. Criminals must be removed from society, and meaningless violence must be stopped. But the warrior spirit must not be demonised. Do not create a society that demeans masculinity. Too much of anything creates an imbalance in life. This is true even of virtues such as nonviolence. You never know when the winds of change strike; when violence may be required to protect your society, or to even survive.'

There was pin-drop silence.

It was time.

Vishwamitra asked the question he had steered the conversation towards. 'Is there an extremism that the Sapt Sindhu surrendered to which allowed Raavan to defeat them?'

Sita considered the question carefully. 'Yes, resentment and hatred towards the trading class.'

'Correct. In the past, because of a few monsters among their warriors, the *Bhaaratas* attacked the entire Kshatriya way of life. They became pathologically non-violent. There have been societies that have attacked the Brahmin way of life, becoming proudly anti-intellectual, because a few of their Brahmins became closed-minded, elitist and exclusivist. And the Sapt Sindhu in our age began to demean trading itself when a few of their Vaishyas became selfish, ostentatious, and money-grubbing. We gradually pushed trade out of the hands of the 'evil-moneyed capitalists' of our own society, and into the hands of others. Kubaer, and later Raavan, just gathered the money slowly, and economic power flowed naturally to them. The Battle of Karachapa was only a formality that sealed long historical trends. A society must always aim for balance. It needs intellectuals, it needs warriors, it needs traders, it needs artists, and it needs skilled workers. If it empowers one group too much or another too little, it is headed for chaos.'

Sita recalled something she had heard in one of the *dharma sabhas* of her father. 'The only "ism" I believe in, is pragmatism.'

It was said by a Charvak philosopher.

'Are you committed to Charvak philosophy?' asked Vishwamitra.

The Charvak School of philosophy was named after their ancient founder,

an atheist who believed in materialism. He had lived near Gangotri, the source of the holy Ganga. The Charvaks only believed in what could be sensed by the physical senses. According to them, there was neither a soul, nor any Gods. The only reality was this body, a mix of the elements, which would return to the elements once it died. They lived for the day and enjoyed life. Their admirers saw them as liberal, individualistic and non-judgemental. On the other hand, their critics saw them as immoral, selfish and irresponsible.

‘No, I am not committed to the Charvaks, Guruji. If I am pragmatic, then I should be open to *every* school of philosophy. And accept only those parts that make sense to me, while rejecting other bits that don’t. I should learn from any philosophy that can help me fulfil my karma.’

Vishwamitra smiled. *Smart, very smart for a thirteen-year-old.*



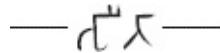
## Chapter 7

Sita sat by the pond, reading *Nyayasutra*, the classic text which introduced a key school of Indian philosophy, *Nyaya Darshan*. A few months had passed since Vishwamitra had visited Rishi Shvetaketu's *gurukul*.

'Bhoomi,' said Radhika, using the *gurukul* name of Sita, 'someone from your home has come to meet you.'

Sita sighed with irritation. 'Can't they wait?'

She was compiling a list of questions she wanted to ask Rishi Shvetaketu. Now the exercise would be delayed.



Samichi stood patiently, close to the jetty. Waiting for Sita.

A posse of ten men stood behind her. They were under her command.

Samichi was not the girl from the slums anymore. Having joined the police, she was a rapidly rising star there. It was common knowledge that the royal family liked her, indebted as they were to her for having saved Princess Sita in the Mithila slums. People were guarded in her presence. Nobody knew her exact age, including Samichi herself. Her appearance suggested that she was in her early twenties now. For a woman of her age, not born into nobility, to be commanding a posse in the police force was a rare honour. But then, she had saved the princess.

'Samichi!'

Samichi groaned as she recognised the voice. It was that ridiculous boy, Kaaml Raj. He was panting by the time he ran up to her. Excited.

'Someone told me you were here. I came as fast as I could.'

Samichi looked at the twelve-year-old. He held a red rose in his hands. She narrowed her eyes and resisted the temptation to shove him. 'I've told you ...'

'I thought you'd like this rose,' said Kaaml shyly. 'I saw you enjoy the fragrance of the flowers the last time you were here.'

Samichi spoke in a cold whisper. ‘I’m not interested in odours of any kind.’

Not to be deterred, Kaaml held out a hand, showing her his bleeding finger. A pathetic attempt to extract sympathy. He had pricked himself repeatedly with thorns before yanking the flower from the rose bush. Seeing that it wasn’t working, he stepped closer. ‘Do you have some medicine for my finger?’

Samichi stepped back to put some distance between them. In doing so, she stumbled on a stone. Just a little. Kaaml rushed forward to grab her. The poor boy genuinely wanted to help. What happened next was blinding in its speed. Samichi screamed in anger, twisted his arm, and viciously kicked him in the leg. As Kaaml fell forward, she brought her elbow up in a brutal jab. It cracked his nose. Instantly.

Kaaml clutched his bleeding nose, as Samichi shouted in anger, ‘DO NOT TOUCH ME, EVER!’

Kaaml was crying desperately now. He lay on the ground in a frightened heap. Bloodied. Trembling. The policemen rushed forward and helped the boy to his feet. They cast a surreptitious, horror-filled glance at their leader. All of them had the same thought.

*He’s only a boy! What is wrong with her?*

Samichi’s stony face showed no trace of regret. She signalled a Mithila policeman with a dismissive wave of a hand. ‘Get this idiot out of here.’

The policeman lifted the boy gingerly and walked away to find the *gurukul* doctor. The other policemen walked back to the jetty in a fearful procession. The air was thick with unspoken words about their captain.

*Something is not right with Samichi.*

‘Samichi.’

All turned to see Princess Sita emerge from the trees. And, Samichi transformed like a chameleon. Smiling broadly, she rushed forward with warmth oozing from her eyes.

‘How are you, Samichi?’ asked Sita, as she embraced her friend.

Before Samichi could answer, Sita turned to the policemen standing at a distance and pulled her hands together into a *Namaste*, along with a warm smile. The policemen bowed low, also folding their hands into a *Namaste*.

‘I wonder why your men always look so scared,’ whispered Sita.

Samichi grinned and shook her head, holding Sita’s hand, pulling her away, out of earshot of the policemen. ‘Forget them, Princess,’ said Samichi, her smile affectionate.

‘I’ve told you before, Samichi,’ said Sita, ‘when we are alone, call me Sita. Not Princess. You are my friend. Anyway, it’s not as if anyone thinks of me as a princess anymore.’

‘Whatever anyone may think, I have no doubt that you are a princess of Mithila.’

Sita rolled her eyes. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘Princess, I have been sent to ...’

Sita interrupted Samichi. ‘Sita. Not Princess.’

‘Apologies, Sita, you must come home.’

Sita sighed. ‘You know I can’t, Samichi. I have caused enough trouble for *maa*.’

‘Sita, don’t do this to yourself.’

‘Everyone knows about the incident with *chacha*. When I broke his royal seal,’ Sita recalled her *uncle* Kushadhwaj’s last visit to Mithila. ‘He is endlessly troubling *maa* and Mithila. Everyone blames me for it. And rightly so. I should just stay away.’

‘Sita, your father and mother miss you. Queen Sunaina is very sick. You really should ...’

‘Nothing can happen to *maa*. She is a superwoman. You are just saying this to make me leave the *gurukul* and come home.’

‘But ... it’s the truth.’

‘The truth is that *maa* should focus on Urmila and the kingdom. You know that *baba* is ... distracted. You yourself have told me what the people say about me. She doesn’t need me to increase her problems.’

‘Sita ...’

‘Enough,’ said Sita, raising her hand. ‘I don’t feel like talking about this anymore.’

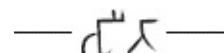
‘Sita ...’

‘I feel like practising stick-fighting. Are you game?’

*Anything to change the subject*, thought Samichi.

‘Come on,’ said Sita, turning around.

Samichi followed.



Vishwamitra sat in the lotus position in his austere hut at the Ganga *ashram* of the Malayaputras.

He was meditating. Trying to keep all thoughts out of his mind. But he was failing today.

He heard a whistling sound. And recognised it immediately. It was a common hill myna. A bird that has often been called the most amazing vocalist. It can whistle, warble, shriek, and even mimic.

*What is it doing so far away from home? In the plains?*

His mind wandered to an incident from the past. When he had heard the myna in a place he should not have.

*Amazing how the mind wanders ... So flighty and unpredictable ...*

The memory of that day, many decades ago, now came flooding back.

It was the day he had received the news of his former friend, Vashishtha, being appointed the *raj guru* of Ayodhya.

Vishwamitra felt his chest constrict. In anger. And pain.

*That backstabber ... I did so much for him ...*

His mind wandered to the exact moment he had heard the news. At the *ashram* of ...

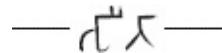
Vishwamitra's eyes suddenly flew open.

*By the great Lord Parshu Ram ...*

He remembered where he had seen that face. Sita's face.

He smiled. This only reinforced his decision.

*Thank you, Lord Parshu Ram. You made my mind wander only to help me find my path.*



‘Guruji ...’ whispered Arishtanemi.

He stood next to Vishwamitra at the balustrade of the lead ship. They were in a five-vessel convoy that was sailing down the sacred Ganga, on their way to supervise a search being conducted by their miners for some special material. It would help them acquire a powerful weapon called the *Asuraashtra*, leaving them less dependent on the Vayuputras.

Centuries ago, Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev, had restricted the use of *daivi astras*. The approval of the Vayuputras, the living representatives of Lord Rudra, was mandatory for using the *divine weapons*. This was not to Vishwamitra's liking or comfort.

The great *Maharishi* had made elaborate plans. Plans which involved, perhaps, the use of the *Asuraashtra*. He knew the Vayuputras did not like him. Not since the episode with Trishanku. They tolerated him because they had no choice. He was, after all, chief of the Malayaputras.

While the search was a slow and tedious process, Vishwamitra was confident that the material would be found, eventually.

It was time to move to the next phase of his plan. He had to select a Vishnu. He had just revealed his choice to Arishtanemi, his trusted lieutenant.

‘You disagree?’ asked Vishwamitra.

‘She is exceptionally capable, Guruji. No doubt about it. One can sense it, even at her tender age. But ...’ Arishtanemi’s voice trailed off.

Vishwamitra put his hand on Arishtanemi’s shoulder. ‘Speak freely. I am talking to you because I want to hear your views.’

‘I spent some time watching her carefully, Guruji. I think she is too rebellious. I am not sure the Malayaputras will be able to manage her. Or, control her.’

‘We will. She has no one else. Her city has abandoned her. But she has the potential to be great. She *wants* to be great. We will be her route to realising it.’

‘But can’t we also keep searching for other candidates?’

‘Your trusted aides gathered information on her in Mithila, right? Most of it was very encouraging.’

‘But there was that case of her probably killing a boy in the Mithila slums when she was eight.’

‘I see in that incident her ability to survive. Your investigators also said the boy was probably a criminal. She fought her way through, even as a small child. That’s a positive. She has the fighting spirit. Would you rather she had died like a coward?’

‘No, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘But I am wondering if there are possibly other candidates that we have not yet stumbled upon.’

‘You personally know almost every royal family in India. Most of them are completely useless. Selfish, cowardly, and weak. And their next generation, the royal children, are even worse. They are nothing but genetic garbage.’

Arishtanemi laughed. ‘Few countries have had the misfortune of being saddled with such a worthless elite.’

‘We have had great leaders in the past. And we will have a great leader in the future too. One who will pull India out of its present morass.’

‘Why not from the common folk?’

‘We have been searching for a long time. Had that been Lord Parshu Ram’s will, we would have found one by now. And don’t forget, Sita is only an adopted royal. Her parentage is unknown.’

Vishwamitra did not feel the need to tell Arishtanemi what he suspected about Sita’s birth.

Arishtanemi overcame his hesitation. ‘I have heard that the Ayodhya princes ...’

The Malayaputra military chief stopped mid-sentence when he saw Vishwamitra bristle. His famed courage vanished into thin air. Arishtanemi had indeed heard positive reports about the young princes of Ayodhya, particularly Ram and Bharat. Ram was a little less than nine years old. But Vashishtha was

the *raj guru* of Ayodhya. And, Vashishtha was a subject Arishtanemi had learned to avoid.

‘That snake has taken the Ayodhya princes to his *gurukul*,’ said Vishwamitra, anger boiling within. ‘I don’t even know where his *ashram* is. He has kept it a secret. If I don’t know then nobody knows. We only hear about the four brothers when they return to Ayodhya on holiday.’

Arishtanemi stood like a statue, barely breathing.

‘I know how Vashishtha’s mind works. I had made the mistake of considering him my friend once. He is up to something. Either with Ram or Bharat.’

‘Sometimes, things don’t work out as planned, Guruji. Our work in Lanka inadvertently ended up helping ...’

‘Raavan has his uses,’ interrupted Vishwamitra. ‘Don’t ever forget that. And, he is moving in the direction we need him to. It will all work out.’

‘But Guruji, can the Vayuputras oppose the Malayaputras? It is our prerogative to choose the next Vishnu. Not that of the *raj guru* of Ayodhya.’

‘For all their sham neutrality, the Vayuputras will do everything they can to help that rat. I know it. We do not have much time. We must start preparing now!’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

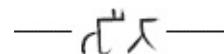
‘And, if she is to be trained for her role, it too must begin now.’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

‘Sita will be the Vishnu. The Vishnu will rise during my reign. The time has come. This country needs a leader. We cannot allow our beloved India to suffer endlessly.’

‘Yes, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Should I tell the Captain to ...’

‘Yes.’



‘Where are you taking me, Radhika?’ asked Sita, smiling, as her friend led her by the hand.

They were walking deep into the forest to the south of the *gurukul*.

‘Hanu bhaiya!’ screamed Sita in delight, as they entered a small clearing.

Hanuman stood next to his horse, rubbing the tired animal’s neck. The horse was tied to a tree.

‘My sisters!’ said Hanuman affectionately.

The gentle giant walked up to them. He enclosed them together in a warm embrace. ‘How are the two of you doing?’

'You have been away for far too long!' Radhika complained.

'I know,' sighed Hanuman. 'I'm sorry. I was abroad ...'

'Where do you keep going?' asked Sita, who found Hanuman's mysterious life very exciting. 'Who sends you on these missions?'

'I will tell you when the time is right, Sita ... But not now.'

Hanuman reached into the saddlebag tied to the horse and pulled out a delicate necklace made of gold, in a style that was obviously foreign.

Radhika squealed with delight.

'You guess correctly,' smiled Hanuman, as he handed it to her. 'This one is for you ...'

Radhika admired the necklace in detail, turning it around several times in her hands.

'And for you, my serious one,' said Hanuman to Sita. 'I've got what you've always wanted ...'

Sita's eyes widened. 'An *ekmukhi Rudraaksh*?!'

The word *Rudraaksh* literally meant the *teardrop of Rudra*. In reality, it was a brown elliptical seed. All who were loyal to the Mahadev, Lord Rudra, wore threaded *Rudraaksh* beads or kept one in their *puja* rooms. A common *Rudraaksh* seed had many grooves running across it. An *ekmukhi Rudraaksh* was rare, and had only one groove on its surface. Very difficult to find. Expensive too. Priceless for Sita, a staunch Lord Rudra devotee.

Hanuman smiled as he reached into the saddlebag.

Suddenly, the horse became fidgety and nervous, its ears flicking back and forth. Within moments its breathing was rapid and shallow. Conveying panic.

Hanuman looked around carefully. And he caught sight of the danger.

Very slowly, without any sign of alarm, he pulled Radhika and Sita behind him.

The girls knew better than to talk. They, too, could sense danger. Something was seriously wrong.

Hanuman suddenly made a loud, screeching sound; like that of an agitated monkey. The tiger hidden behind the tree immediately knew that its element of surprise was gone. It walked out slowly. Hanuman reached for the scabbard tied to his cummerbund and drew out his curved knife. Made in the style of the *khukuris* of the fierce Gorkhas, the blade of the knife was not straight. It thickened at mid-length, and then the thick section curved downwards. Like a sloping shoulder. At the hilt-end, the sharp side of the blade had a double-wave notch. Shaped like a cow's foot. It served a practical purpose. It allowed the blood from the blade to drip to the ground, instead of spreading to the hilt and making the knife-hold slippery. The cow's foot indentation also signified that

the weapon could never be used to kill a holy cow. The handle was made of ivory. At the halfway mark, a protrusion emerged from all sides of the hilt. It served as a peg between the middle finger and the ring finger, making the grip secure. The *khukuri* had no cross-guard for a thrusting action. A less-skilled warrior's hand could slip forward onto the blade, in a thrust. It could cause serious injury to the knife-wielder.

But nobody in their right mind would call Hanuman less than supremely skilled.

'Stay behind me,' whispered Hanuman to the girls, as the tiger edged forward slowly.

Hanuman spread his legs apart and bent, maintaining his balance. Waiting. For what was to follow. Keeping his breathing steady.

With an ear-splitting roar, the tiger suddenly burst forward, going up on its hind legs, spreading its front legs out. Ready to hold the massive Hanuman in its grip. Its jaws opened wide, it headed straight for Hanuman's throat.

The tiger's tactic was sound: topple the human with its massive weight, pin him to the ground with its claws, and rely on its jaws to finish the job.

Against a lesser enemy, it would have prevailed. But, to its misfortune, it had attacked the mighty Hanuman.

The giant Naga was almost as big as the tiger. With one foot back, he arched his spine, flexed his powerful muscles; and, remained on his feet. Using his left hand, he held the tiger by its throat, and kept its fearsome jaws away. Hanuman allowed the tiger to claw his back. It would not cause much damage. He pulled his right hand back, flexed his shoulder muscles and brutally thrust the *khukuri* deep into the tiger's abdomen. Its outrageously sharp-edged blade sliced in smoothly. The beast roared in pain. Its eyes wide in shock.

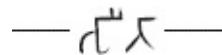
Hanuman sucked in his breath and executed a draw-cut to the right, ripping deep into the beast's abdominal cavity. All the way from one end to the other. Vicious, but effective. Not only did most of the beast's abdominal organs get slashed, the knife even sliced through a bit of the backbone and the nerves protected inside.

The tiger's slippery intestines slid out of its cleaved abdomen, its hind legs locked in paralysis. Hanuman pushed the beast back. It fell to the ground, roaring in agony as its front legs lashed out in all directions.

Hanuman could have avoided further injury from its claws had he waited for the tiger to weaken. And let its front legs go down. But the animal was in agony. He wanted to end its suffering. Hanuman bent closer even as the tiger's claws dug deep into his shoulders. The Naga stabbed straight into the animal's chest. The blade cut right through, sliding deep into the beast's heart. It

struggled for a few moments and then its soul escaped its body.

Hanuman pulled the blade out and whispered softly, ‘May your soul find purpose once again, noble beast.’



‘These things happen, Radhika,’ said Hanuman. ‘We’re in the middle of a jungle. What do you expect?’

Radhika was still shaking with fear.

Sita had quickly pulled out the medical aid kit from the saddlebag and dressed Hanuman’s injuries. They were not life-threatening but a few of them were deep. Sita stitched a couple of gaping wounds. She found some rejuvenating herbs around the clearing and made an infusion, using stones to grind the leaves with some water. She gave it to Hanuman to drink.

As Hanuman gulped the medicine down and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he watched Sita.

*She is not nervous ... She didn’t get scared ... This girl is special ...*

‘I would not have imagined that a tiger could be brought down with such ease,’ whispered Sita.

‘It helps if you’re my size!’ laughed Hanuman.

‘Are you sure that you can ride? Your wounds aren’t serious, but ...’

‘I can’t stay here either. I have to get back ...’

‘Another of your mysterious missions?’

‘I have to go.’

‘You have to do what you have to do, Hanu *bhaiya*.’

Hanuman smiled. ‘Don’t forget your *Rudraaksh*.’

Sita reached into the saddlebag and pulled out a silk pouch. She opened it slowly, carefully picking up the *ekmukhi Rudraaksh*. She stared at it in awe. Then she held it to her forehead with reverence before slipping it into the pouch tied to her waist.



## Chapter 8

Shvetaketu could not believe his luck. The great Vishwamitra had arrived at his *gurukul* for the second time this year! He rushed to the gates of the *ashram* as the Malayaputras marched in.

‘*Namaste, Great One,*’ said Shvetaketu, smiling broadly, his hands joined together in respect.

‘*Namaste, Shvetaketu,*’ said Vishwamitra, smiling just enough to not intimidate his host.

‘What an honour to have you call on our *gurukul* so soon after your last visit.’

‘Yes,’ said Vishwamitra, looking around.

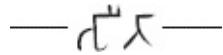
‘It is unfortunate that my students are not here to gain from your presence,’ said Shvetaketu, his expression reflecting heartfelt regret. ‘Most of them are away on vacation.’

‘But I believe a few have stayed back.’

‘Yes, Illustrious One. Sita is here ... And ...’

‘I would like to meet Sita.’

‘Of course.’



Sita stood with Maharishi Vishwamitra near the balustrade at the edge of the main deck of his anchored ship, facing the far bank of the Ganga. Vishwamitra had wanted privacy, away from the curious eyes of the teachers in the *gurukul*. A small brick-laid *yagna kund* was being readied by the Malayaputra *pandits* on the main deck of the ship, a little distance away from Sita and Vishwamitra.

Sita was confused. *Why does the Maharishi want to speak to me?*

‘How old are you now, Sita?’

‘I will turn fourteen soon, Guruji.’

‘That’s not too old. We can begin, I think.’

‘Begin what, Guruji?’

Vishwamitra took a deep breath. ‘Have you heard of the institution of the Vishnu?’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

‘Tell me what you know.’

‘It is a title given to the greatest of leaders, who are Propagators of Good. They lead their people into a new way of life. There have been six Vishnus in this present Vedic age that we live in. The previous Vishnu was the great Lord Parshu Ram.’

‘*Jai Parshu Ram.*’

‘*Jai Parshu Ram.*’

‘What else do you know?’

‘The Vishnus normally work in partnership with the Mahadevs, who are Destroyers of Evil. The Mahadevs assign a tribe as their representatives once their *karma* in a particular life is over. The tribe of the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, is the Vayuputras who live in faraway Pariha. The Vishnu of our age will work in close partnership with ...’

‘This partnership thing is not necessarily important,’ interrupted Vishwamitra.

Sita fell silent. Surprised. This was not what she had learnt.

‘What else do you know?’

‘I know that the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram, left behind a tribe as well — the Malayaputras. And you, *Maharishi*, are the chief of the Malayaputras. And if a Vishnu must rise in our age, to fight the darkness that envelops us, it must be you.’

‘You are wrong.’

Sita frowned. Confused.

‘The assumption you made in your last statement is wrong,’ clarified Vishwamitra. ‘Yes, I am the chief of the Malayaputras. But I cannot be the Vishnu. My task is to decide who the next Vishnu will be.’

Sita nodded silently.

‘What do you think is the main problem corroding India today?’

‘Most people will say Raavan, but I won’t.’

Vishwamitra smiled. ‘Why not?’

‘Raavan is only a symptom. He is not the disease. If it hadn’t been Raavan, it would have been someone else torturing us. The fault lies in us, that we allow ourselves to be dominated. Raavan may be powerful, but if we ...’

‘Raavan is not as powerful as the people of Sapt Sindhu think he is. But he revels in this image of the monster that he has created for himself. That image

intimidates others. But that image is useful for us as well,’ said Vishwamitra.

Sita didn’t understand that last line. And, Vishwamitra chose not to explain.

‘So, you say that Raavan is only a symptom. Then, what is the disease afflicting the Sapt Sindhu today?’

Sita paused to formulate her thoughts. ‘I’ve been thinking about this since you spoke to us at the *gurukul* last year, Guruji. You said society needs balance. It needs intellectuals, warriors, traders, and skilled workers. And that ideally, the scale should not be tipped against any group. That there should be a fair balance between all.’

‘And ...’

‘So, why is it that society always moves towards imbalance? That’s what I was thinking. It gets unbalanced when people are not free to live a life that is in alignment with their innate *guna*, their *attributes*. It can happen when a group is oppressed or belittled, like the *Vaishyas* in Sapt Sindhu today. It makes those with *Vaishya gunas* frustrated and angry. It can also happen when you’re made to follow the occupation of your parents and clan, rather than what you may want to pursue. Raavan was born a Brahmin. But he clearly did not want to be a Brahmin. He is a Kshatriya by nature. It must have been the same with ...’

Sita stopped herself in time. But Vishwamitra was staring directly into her eyes, reading her thoughts. ‘Yes, it happened with me too. I was born a Kshatriya but wanted to be a Brahmin.’

‘People like you are rare, Guruji. Most people surrender to the pressure of society and family. But it builds terrible frustration within. These are unhappy and angry people, living unbalanced, dissatisfied lives. Furthermore, society itself suffers. It may get stuck with Kshatriyas who do not possess valour, and cannot protect their society. It may get stuck with Brahmins who prefer to be skilled Shudras like medical surgeons or sculptors, and therefore will be terrible teachers. And ultimately, society will decline.’

‘You have diagnosed the problem well. So, what is the solution?’

‘I don’t know. How does one change society? How do we break down this birth-based caste system that is destroying our noble land?’

‘I have a solution in mind.’

Sita waited for an explanation.

‘Not now,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘I will explain one day. When you are ready. For now, we have a ceremony to conduct.’

‘Ceremony?’

‘Yes,’ said Vishwamitra, as he turned towards the *yagna kund*, which had been built at the centre of the main deck. Seven Malayaputra *pandits* waited at the other end of the deck. Upon a signal from Vishwamitra, they walked up to

the *yagna kund*.

‘Come,’ said Vishwamitra, as he led her forward.

The *yagna* platform was built in an unorthodox manner, or at least one with which Sita was not familiar. It had a square, outer boundary, made of bricks. Encased within it was a circular inner boundary, made of metal.

‘This *yagna kund* represents a type of *mandal*, a symbolic representation of spiritual reality,’ Vishwamitra explained to Sita. ‘The square boundary symbolises *Prithvi*, the earth that we live on. The four sides of the square represent the four directions. The space inside the square represents *Prakruti* or nature. It is uncultured and wild. The circle within represents the path of consciousness; of the *Parmatma*. The task of the Vishnu is to find the *Parmatma* within this earthly life. The Vishnu lights a path to God. Not through detachment from the world, but through profound and spiritual attachment to this great land of ours.’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

‘You will sit on the southern side of the square.’

Sita sat in the seat indicated by Vishwamitra. The Chief Malayaputra sat with his back to the north, facing Sita. A Malayaputra *pandit* lit the fire within the circular inner boundary of the *yagna* platform. He was chanting a hymn dedicated to Lord Agni, the God of Fire.

A *yagna* signifies a sacrificial exchange: you sacrifice something that you hold dear, and receive benediction in return. Lord Agni, the purifying fire, is witness to this exchange between humans and the divine.

Vishwamitra folded his hands together into a *Namaste*. So did Sita. He began chanting a hymn from the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad*. Sita and the seven Malayaputra *pandits* joined in.

*Asato mā sadgamaya*

*Tamasomā jyotir gamaya*

*Mrityormāamritam gamaya*

*Om shāntishānti shāntih*

Lead me from untruth to truth

Lead me from darkness to light

Lead me from death to immortality

*For Me and the Universe, let there be peace, peace, peace*

Vishwamitra reached into a pouch tied to his waist and withdrew a small scabbard. Holding it reverentially in the palm of his hand, he pulled out a tiny silver knife. He ran his finger over the edge, bringing it to rest on the tip of the blade. Sharp. He checked the markings on the handle. It was the correct one. He reached over the fire and handed the knife to Sita. It had to be passed from the

northern to the southern direction.

‘This *yagna* will be sealed in blood,’ said Vishwamitra.

‘Yes, Guruji,’ said Sita, accepting the knife with both hands as a mark of respect.

Vishwamitra reached into his pouch and retrieved another small scabbard. He pulled out the second knife and checked its blade. Perfectly sharp. He looked at Sita. ‘The blood must only drop within the circular inner boundary of the *yagna kund*. Under no circumstances must it spill in the space between the metal and bricks. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

Two Malayaputra *pandits* approached them silently and handed two pieces of cloth each to Vishwamitra and Sita. Each had been doused in neem-juice disinfectants. Without waiting for further instructions, Sita placed the sharp knife-edge on her left palm and folded her hand over the blade. Then, in a swift, clean motion, she pulled the knife back, cutting open the skin from edge to edge. Blood dribbled freely into the sacred fire. She did not flinch.

‘Arrey, we needed just a drop of blood,’ exclaimed Vishwamitra. ‘A little nick would have been enough.’

Sita looked at Vishwamitra, unperturbed. She pressed the disinfectant cloth into her injured hand, careful not to spill any blood.

Vishwamitra quickly pricked his thumb with the knife edge.

He held his hand over the inner boundary of the *yagna kund*, and pressed his thumb to let a drop of blood fall into the flames. Sita also held out her left hand and removed the cloth, letting her blood drip into the fire.

Vishwamitra spoke in a clear voice. ‘With the pure Lord Agni as my witness, I swear that I will honour my promise to Lord Parshu Ram. Always. To my last breath. And beyond.’

Sita repeated the words. Exactly.

‘*Jai Parshu Ram*,’ said Vishwamitra.

‘*Jai Parshu Ram*,’ repeated Sita.

The Malayaputra *pandits* around them chimed in. ‘*Jai Parshu Ram*.’

Vishwamitra smiled and withdrew his hand. Sita too pulled her hand back and covered it with the disinfectant cloth. A Malayaputra *pandit* walked up to her and tied the cloth tight around her hand, staunching the blood flow.

‘It is done,’ said Vishwamitra, looking at Sita.

‘Am I a Malayaputra now?’ asked Sita expectantly.

Vishwamitra looked amused. He pointed to Sita’s knife. ‘Look at the markings on your knife.’

Sita picked up the silver knife. Its blade-edge was stained with her blood. She

examined the handle. It had three intricate letters engraved on it. Sages of yore, in their wisdom, had suggested that Old Sanskrit should not have a written script. They felt that the written word was inferior to the spoken; that it reduced the ability of the mind to understand concepts. Rishi Shvetaketu had had another explanation: the sages preferred that scriptures were not written down and remained oral so that as times changed, they could change easily as well. Writing things down brought rigidity into the scriptures. Whatever the reason, the fact was that writing was not valued in the Sapt Sindhu. As a result, there were many scripts that existed across the land. Scripts that changed from time to time and place to place. There was no serious attempt to develop a standard script.

The word on the handle was written in a common script from the upper reaches of the Saraswati River. Sita recognised it.

The symbols represented Parshu Ram.



'Not that side, Sita,' said Vishwamitra. 'Turn it around.'

Sita flipped the knife. Her eyes widened with shock.

The fish was the most common symbol across all scripts in India. A giant fish had helped Lord Manu and his band escape when the sea had devastated their land. Lord Manu had decreed that the great fish would be honoured with the title of Lord Matsya, the first Vishnu. The symbol of the fish represented a follower of the Vishnu. This was the symbol on Vishwamitra's knife handle.



But the symbol on Sita's handle was a modified version. It was a fish, no doubt, but it also had a crown on top.



The fish symbol minus the crown on it meant that you were a follower of the Vishnu. But if the fish symbol had a crown on top, it meant that you *were* the Vishnu.

Sita looked at Vishwamitra, bewildered.

'This knife is yours, Sita,' said Vishwamitra softly.



## Chapter 9

The student quarters in Shvetaketu's *gurukul* were frugal. In keeping with the general atmosphere of the place. Each student occupied a small windowless mud hut, barely large enough to accommodate a single bed, some clothes pegs and a place for study materials. The huts had no doors, just doorways.

Sita was lying in bed, recalling the events of the previous day on the Malayaputra ship.

She held the knife in her hand. She was in no danger of getting cut since the blade was safely in the scabbard. Again and again, her eyes were drawn to the knife handle. And the beautiful symbol etched on its surface.

*Vishnu?*

*Me?*

Vishwamitra had said that her training would begin soon. She would be old enough to leave the *gurukul* in a few months. She would then take a trip to Agastyakootam, the capital of the Malayaputras, deep in the south of India. After that, she would travel across India, incognito. Vishwamitra wanted her to understand the land that she would redeem and lead one day. Along with his Malayaputras, he would guide her through this. In the interim, she and Vishwamitra would prepare a blueprint for the task ahead. For a new way of life.

It was all quite overwhelming.

‘My Lady.’

Sita slipped out of bed and came to the doorway. Jatayu was standing at some distance.

‘My Lady,’ he repeated.

Sita folded her hands into a *Namaste*. ‘I am like your younger sister, Jatayuji. Please don't embarrass me. Just call me by my name.’

‘No, I can't do that, My Lady. You are the ...’

Jatayu fell silent. Strict instructions had been given to the Malayaputras. Nobody was to speak of Sita as the next Vishnu. It would be announced at the

right time. Even Sita had been prohibited from speaking about it with anyone. Not that she would have, in any case. She felt anxious, almost afraid, of what the title implied.

‘Well then, you can call me your sister.’

Jatayu smiled. ‘That is fair, my sister.’

‘What did you want to talk about, Jatayuji?’

‘How is your hand now?’

Sita grinned as she touched the neem-leaf bandage with her other hand. ‘I was a little too enthusiastic about drawing blood.’

‘Yes.’

‘I am all right now.’

‘That is good to hear,’ said Jatayu. He was a shy man. Taking a slow, long breath in, he softly continued, ‘You are one of the very few people, besides the Malayaputras, who have shown kindness towards me. Even though Lord Vishwamitra had not ordered you to do so.’

All those months ago, Sita had served Jatayu some food simply because his face reminded her of the noble vulture who had saved her life. But she kept that to herself.

‘You are probably unsure about this new situation,’ said Jatayu. ‘It’s natural to feel overwhelmed.’

What he didn’t tell her was that even some Malayaputras had their doubts about the choice of Sita as a Vishnu, but wouldn’t dare openly challenge their formidable chief.

Sita nodded silently.

‘It must be even more difficult because you cannot talk to anyone other than a Malayaputra about this.’

‘Yes,’ Sita smiled.

‘If you ever need any advice, or even someone to talk to, you always have me. It is my duty to protect you from now onwards. My platoon and I will always be nearby,’ said Jatayu, gesturing behind him.

Around fifteen men stood quietly at a distance.

‘I will not embarrass you by revealing myself in public, in Mithila or anywhere else,’ said Jatayu. ‘I understand that I am a Naga. But I will never be more than a few hours’ ride away. My people and I will always be your shadow from now on.’

‘You could never embarrass me, Jatayuji,’ said Sita.

‘Sita!’

The princess of Mithila looked to her left. It was Arishtanemi.

‘Sita,’ said Arishtanemi, ‘Guruji would like to have a word with you.’

‘Excuse me, Jatayuji,’ said Sita, as she folded her hands into a polite *Namaste*.

Jatayu returned her salutation and Sita walked away, trailing Arishtanemi. As she faded into the distance, Jatayu bent down, picked up some dust from her footprint, and touched it respectfully to his forehead. He then turned in the direction that Sita had walked.

*She is such a good soul ...*

*I hope Lady Sita does not become a pawn in the battle between Guru Vishwamitra and Guru Vashishtha.*



Two months had passed. The Malayaputras had left for their capital, Agastyakootam. As instructed, Sita spent most of her free time reading texts that the chief of the Malayaputras had given her. They chronicled the lives of some of the previous Vishnus: Lord Narsimha, Lord Vaaman, Lord Parshu Ram, among others. He wanted her to learn from their lives, their challenges; and, how to overcome them and establish a new path that led to the Propagation of Good.

She took up this task with utmost seriousness and conducted it in privacy. Today, she sat by a tiny pond not frequented by other students. It was therefore with irritation that she reacted to the disturbance.

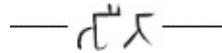
‘Bhoomi, you need to come to the main *gurukul* clearing right away,’ said Radhika, using Sita’s *gurukul* name. ‘Someone from your home is here.’

Sita waved her hand in annoyance. ‘I’ll be there, soon.’

‘Sita!’ said Radhika loudly.

Sita turned around. Her friend looked and sounded agitated.

‘Your mother is here. You need to go. Now.’



Sita walked slowly towards the main *gurukul* clearing. Her heart beating hard. She saw two elephants tied close to the walkway, which led to the *gurukul* jetty. She knew her mother liked bringing her elephants along. On Sunaina’s visits, Sita and she would go on elephant rides deep into the jungle. Sunaina loved to educate her daughter on animals in their natural habitat.

Sunaina knew more about animals than anyone Sita had met. The trips into the jungle were among Sita’s most cherished memories. For they involved the two most important entities in her life: Mother Earth and her own mother.

Pain shot through her heart.

Because of her, Kushadhwaj had imposed severe restrictions on Mithila trade. Her uncle's kingdom, Sankashya, was the main conduit for trade with her father's kingdom; and the prices of most commodities, even essentials, had shot through the roof. Most Mithilans blamed Sita for this. Everyone knew that she had broken Kushadhwaj's royal seal. And, that retaliation was inevitable. According to ancient tradition, the royal seal was the representation of the king; breaking it was comparable to regicide.

The blame had also seamlessly passed on to her mother, Sunaina. For everyone knew that it was Sunaina's decision to adopt Sita.

*I have given her nothing but trouble. I have destroyed so much of what she spent her life building.*

*Maa should forget me.*

Sita was even more convinced of her decision by the time she reached the clearing.

It was unusually crowded, even for a royal visit. Eight men were gathered around a heavy, empty palanquin. It was a palanquin she hadn't seen before: longer and broader. It appeared to be designed so that the person travelling in it could lie down. To the left, she saw eight women crowding around a low platform built around an *Ashok* tree. She looked all over for her mother, but did not see her anywhere.

She moved towards the women, about to ask where her mother was. Just then, a few of them moved aside, revealing Queen Sunaina.

It knocked the wind out of Sita.

Her mother was a shadow of her former self. She had been reduced to bare skin and bones. Her round, moon-shaped face had turned gaunt, with cheeks sunken in. She had always been short and petite, but had never looked unhealthy. Now, her muscles had wasted away, and her body was stripped of the little fat she had once had. Her eyes looked hollow. Her lustrous, rich black hair had turned sparse and a ghostly white. She could barely hold herself up. She needed her aides to support her.

As soon as Sunaina saw her precious daughter, her face lit up. It was the same warm smile where Sita had always found comfort and sanctuary.

'My child,' said Sunaina, in a barely audible voice.

The queen of Mithila held out her hands, her deathly pallor temporarily reduced by the abundance of a mother's love-filled heart.

Sita stood rooted to her spot. Hoping the earth would swallow her.

'Come here, my child,' said Sunaina. Her arms, too weak to be held up, fell on her sides.

Sunaina coughed. An aide rushed forward and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief. Specks of red appeared on the white cloth.

Sita stumbled towards her mother. Dazed. She fell to her knees and rested her head on Sunaina's lap. One that had always been soft, like Mother Earth immediately after the rains. It was bony and hard now, like the same earth after a series of devastating droughts.

Sunaina ran her fingers through Sita's hair.

Sita trembled in fear and sorrow, like a little sparrow about to see the fall of the mighty *Banyan* tree that had sheltered not just her body but also her soul.

Continuing to run her hand through Sita's hair, Sunaina bent down, kissed her head and whispered, 'My child ...'

Sita burst out crying.

## — ರಂಗ —

The Mithila physician-in-attendance had vehemently opposed it. Even though severely weakened, Sunaina was still a formidable creature. She would not be denied the elephant ride into the jungle with her daughter.

The physician had played his final card. He had whispered into the queen's ear, 'This may well be your last elephant ride, Your Highness.'

And Sunaina had replied, 'That is precisely why I must go.'

The queen had rested in the palanquin while the two elephants were prepared for the ride. One would carry the physician and a few attendants, while the other would carry Sunaina and Sita.

When it was time, Sunaina was carried to the howdah of the seated elephant. A maid tried to clamber aboard, next to the queen.

'No!' a firm Sunaina decreed.

'But, My Lady ...' pleaded the maid, holding up a handkerchief and a small bottle. The fumes from the dissolved herbal medicine helped boost her energy for short periods of time.

'My daughter is with me,' said Sunaina. 'I don't need anyone else.'

Sita immediately took the handkerchief and bottle from the maid and climbed aboard the howdah.

Sunaina signalled the mahout, who tenderly stroked the elephant behind its ears with his foot. The elephant rose very slowly, causing the least amount of discomfort to Sunaina.

'Let's go,' she ordered.

The two elephants ambled off into the jungle, accompanied by fifty armed Mithila policemen, on foot.



## Chapter 10

The howdah swayed like a cradle with the animal's gentle walk. Sita held her mother's hand and huddled close. The mahout steered the elephants in the shade, under the trees. Nonetheless, it was dry and warm.

Sita, though, was shivering. With guilt. And fear.

Sunaina lifted her hand slightly. Sita instinctively knew what her mother wanted. She lifted Sunaina's arm higher, and snuggled in close. And wrapped her mother's arm around her shoulder. Sunaina smiled with satisfaction and kissed Sita on her forehead.

'Sorry that your father couldn't come, Sita,' said Sunaina. 'He had to stay back for some work.'

Sita knew her mother was lying. She did not wish to cause her daughter further pain.

Perhaps, it was just as well.

Sita had, in a fit of anger, told Janak the last time she had been in Mithila that he should stop wasting his time on spirituality and help Sunaina govern the kingdom. That it was his duty. Her outburst had angered Sunaina more than her father.

Also, little Urmila, Sita's four-year-old younger sister, was a sickly child. Janak had probably stayed behind with her, while their mother travelled to Shvetaketu's *gurukul*. In debilitating illness. To meet her troubled elder daughter. And, to make her come back home.

Sita closed her eyes, as another guilty tear rolled down her cheek.

Sunaina coughed. Sita immediately wiped her mother's mouth with the cloth. She looked at the red stains — signs that her mother's life was slowly slipping away.

Tears began to flow in a rush.

'Everyone has to die someday, my darling,' said Sunaina.

Sita continued crying.

'But the fortunate ones die with their loved ones around them.'

## —८—

The two elephants were stationary, expertly stilled by their mahouts. The fifty Mithilan guards, too, were immobile, and silent. The slightest sound could prove dangerous.

Ten minutes back, Sunaina had spotted a scene rarely witnessed by human eyes: The death of the matriarch of a large elephant herd.

Sita remembered her mother's lessons on elephant herds. They tended to be matriarchal, led by the eldest female. Most herds comprised adult females with calves, both male and female, nurtured as common children. Male elephants were normally exiled from the herd when they came of age.

The matriarch was more than the leader of the herd. She was a mother to all.

The death of the matriarch, therefore, would be a devastating event for the herd. Or so one would imagine.

'I think it's the same herd that we saw a few years ago,' whispered Sunaina.

Sita nodded.

They watched from a safe distance, hidden by the trees.

The elephants stood in a circle around the corpse of the matriarch. Solemn. Motionless. Quiet. The gentle afternoon breeze struggled to provide relief as the sun shone harshly on the assembly. Two calves stood within the circle, near the body. One was tiny, the other slightly older.

'We saw that little one being born, Sita,' said Sunaina.

Sita nodded in the affirmative.

She remembered the birth of the matriarch's child. Her mother and she had witnessed it on another elephant ride a few years ago.

Today, that baby elephant, a male calf, was down on his knees next to his dead mother. His trunk was entwined with hers, his body shaking. Every few minutes, he would pull on the trunk of his mother's corpse, as though trying to wake her up.

The older calf, his sister, stood next to the baby. Calm. Still. Like the other members of the herd.

'Watch now ...' whispered Sunaina.

An adult female, perhaps the new matriarch, slowly ambled up to the corpse. She stretched her trunk and touched the forehead of the dead body with utmost respect. Then she walked around the corpse solemnly, turned and simply walked away.

The other elephants in the circle followed her lead, one by one. Doing the exact same thing — touching the forehead of the dead former matriarch with their trunks, performing a circumambulation and then walking away.

With dignity. With respect.

None of them looked back. Not once. Not once.

The little male calf, however, refused to leave. He clung to his mother. Desperately. He pulled at her with helpless ferocity. His sister stood quietly by his side.

The rest of the herd came to a halt at a distance, not once turning around. Patiently, they waited.

After some time, the sister touched her little brother with her trunk.

The male calf pushed it away. With renewed energy, he stood on his feet and wrapped his trunk around his mother's. And pulled hard. He slipped. He got up again. Held his mother's trunk and pulled. Harder. He cast a beseeching look at his sister, begging for her help. With a gut-wrenching cry, he turned back to his mother, willing her to get up.

But his mother had succumbed to the long sleep now. She would wake up only in her next life.

The child refused to give up. Shifting from side to side, he pulled his mother's trunk. Repeatedly.

The sister finally walked up to her mother's corpse, and touched the forehead with her trunk, just like the others had. She then walked around the body of her mother. She came up to her brother, held his trunk and tried to pull him away.

The male calf began to screech heartbreakingly. He followed his sister. But he kept looking back. Again. And again. He offered no resistance, however, to his sister.

The sister, like every other elephant in the herd, walked steadily ahead. She did not look back. Not once. Not once.

Sita looked up at her mother, tears flowing down her cheeks.

'Society moves on, my child,' whispered Sunaina. 'Countries move on. Life moves on. As it should.'

Sita couldn't speak. She could not look at her mother. She held Sunaina close, burying her head in her mother's bosom.

'Clinging to painful memories is pointless, Sita,' said Sunaina. 'You must move on. You must live ...'

Sita listened. But the tears did not stop.

'There's no escape from problems and challenges. They're a part of life. Avoiding Mithila does not mean that your troubles will disappear. It only means that other challenges will appear.'

Sita tightened her grip on her mother.

'Running away is never the solution. Confront your problems. Manage them.'

That is the way of the warrior.' Sunaina lifted Sita's chin and looked into her eyes. 'And, you are a warrior. Don't ever forget that.'

Sita nodded.

'You know your sister was born weak. Urmila is no warrior. You must take care of her, Sita. And, you must look after Mithila.'

Sita made a promise to herself within the confines of her mind. *Yes. I will.*

Sunaina caressed Sita's face and smiled. 'Your father has always loved you. So does your younger sister. Remember that.'

*I know.*

'As for me, I don't just love you, Sita. I also have great expectations from you. Your karma will ensure our family's name survives for many millennia. You will go down in history.'

Sita uttered her first words since she had seen her mother at the *gurukul*. 'I am so sorry, *Maa*. I'm so sorry. I ...'

Sunaina smiled and held Sita tight.

'Sorry ...' sobbed Sita.

'I have faith in you. You will live a life that will make me proud.'

'But I can't live without you, *Maa*.'

Sunaina pulled back and held Sita's face up. 'You can and you will.'

'No ... I will not live without you ...'

Sunaina's expression became firm. 'Listen to me, Sita. You will not waste your life mourning me. You will live wisely and make me proud.'

Sita continued crying.

'Don't look back. Look to the future. Build your future, don't grieve for your past.'

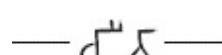
Sita did not have the strength to speak.

'Promise me.'

Sita stared at her mother, her eyes brimming with misery.

'Promise me.'

'I promise, *Maa*. I promise.'



It had been four weeks since Sunaina's visit to Shvetaketu's *gurukul*. Sita had returned home with her mother. Sunaina had manoeuvred for Sita to be appointed prime minister of Mithila, with all the executive powers necessary to administer the kingdom.

Sita now spent most of her time with Sunaina, looking after her mother's failing health. Sunaina guided Sita's meetings with the ministers of the

kingdom in her private chambers, by her bedside.

Sita was aware that Sunaina was greatly concerned about her relationship with her younger sister. Thus, she made a concerted effort to bond with Urmila. The queen of Mithila wanted her daughters to build a strong relationship that would tide them over the difficult years ahead. She had spoken to them about the need for them to stand by each other. And the love and loyalty they must share.

One evening, after a long meeting in Sunaina's chambers, Sita entered Urmila's room, next to their mother's. She had asked an aide to arrange a plate of black grapes. Urmila loved black grapes. Dismissing the aide, she carried the plate into the chamber.

The room was dimly lit. The sun had set but only a few lamps were aglow.

'Urmila!'

She was not in bed. Sita began looking for her sister. She stepped into the large balcony overlooking the palace garden.

*Where is she?*

She came back into the room. Irritated with the minimal light, she was about to order for some more lamps to be lit, when she noticed a shaking figure bundled in a corner.

'Urmila?'

Sita walked over.

Urmila sat in the corner, her knees pulled against her chest. Her head down on her knees.

Sita immediately set the plate aside and sat down on the floor next to Urmila. She put her arm around her baby sister.

'Urmila ...' she said, gently.

Urmila looked up at her *elder sister*. Her tear-streaked face was lined with misery.

'Didi ...'

'Talk to me, my child,' said Sita.

'Is ...'

Sita squeezed Urmila's shoulders gently. 'Yes ...'

'Is *maa* leaving us and going to heaven?'

Sita swallowed hard. She wished *maa* was here to answer Urmila's questions. Almost immediately, she realised that Sunaina would soon not be here at all. Urmila was her responsibility. She had to be the one to answer her.

'No, Urmila. *Maa* will always be here.'

Urmila looked up. Confused. Hopeful. 'But everyone is telling me that *maa* is going away. That I have to learn to ...'

‘Everyone doesn’t know what you and I know, Urmila. *Maa* will just live in a different place. She won’t live in her body anymore.’ Sita pointed to Urmila’s heart and then her own. ‘*Maa* will live in these two places. She will always be there in our hearts. And, whenever we are together, she will be complete.’

Urmila looked down at her chest, feeling her heart pick up pace. Then she looked at Sita. ‘She will never leave us?’

‘Urmila, close your eyes.’

Urmila did as her sister ordered.

‘What do you see?’

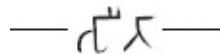
She smiled. ‘I see *maa*. She is holding me. She is caressing my face.’

Sita ran her fingers down Urmila’s face. She opened her eyes, smiling even more broadly.

‘She will always be with us.’

Urmila held Sita tightly. ‘*Didi* ...’

‘The both of us, together, are now our mother.’



‘My journey in this life is drawing to an end,’ said Sunaina.

Sita and Sunaina were alone in the queen’s chambers. Sunaina lay in bed. Sita sat beside her, holding her hand.

‘*Maa* ...’

‘I’m aware of what people in Mithila say about me.’

‘*Maa*, don’t bother about what some idiots ...’

‘Let me speak, my child,’ said Sunaina, pressing Sita’s hand. ‘I know they think my achievements of the past have evaporated in the last few years. Ever since Kushadhwaj began to squeeze our kingdom dry.’

Sita felt the familiar guilt rise in her stomach.

‘It is not your fault,’ said Sunaina, emphatically. ‘Kushadhwaj would have used any excuse to hurt us. He wants to take over Mithila.’

‘What do you want me to do, *Maa*?’

Sunaina knew her daughter’s aggressive nature. ‘Nothing to Kushadhwaj ... He is your father’s brother. But I want you to redeem my name.’

Sita kept quiet.

‘It is said that we come with nothing into this world, and take nothing back. But that’s not true. We carry our karma with us. And we leave behind our reputation, our name. I want my name redeemed, Sita. And I want you to do it. I want you to bring back prosperity to Mithila.’

‘I will, *Maa*.’

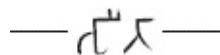
Sunaina smiled. ‘And, once you have done that ... you have my permission to leave Mithila.’

‘Maa?’

‘Mithila is too small a place for one such as you, Sita. You are meant for greater things. You need a bigger stage. Perhaps, a stage as big as India. Or, maybe history itself ...’

Sita considered telling Sunaina about the Malayaputras having recognised her as the next Vishnu.

It took her only a few moments to decide.



The head *pandit* walked up to Sita, holding a torch in his right hand. Other *pandits* were lined up at the back, chanting hymns from the *Garuda Purana*. ‘It’s time, My Lady.’

Sita nodded at him and looked down to her left. Urmila had not stopped crying since Sunaina’s death. She held on to Sita’s arm with both her hands. Sita tried to pry them open, but her sister clung on, even stronger. Sita looked at her father, who walked up, picked Urmila up in his arms and stood beside his elder daughter. Janak looked as devastated and lost as the young Urmila. He had lost the human shield that had guarded him, as he had soared the heights of philosophical wisdom. Reality had intruded rudely into his life.

Sita turned to the *pandit* and took the torch.

It had only been three months since Sunaina’s visit to the *gurukul*.

Sita had thought she’d have more time with Sunaina. To learn. To live. To love.

But that was not to be.

She moved forward as she heard the *pandits* chant from the *Isha Vasya Upanishad*.

*Vayur anilam amritam; Athedam bhasmantam shariram*

*Let this temporary body be burned to ashes. But the breath of life belongs elsewhere. May it find its way back to the Immortal Breath.*

She walked up to the sandalwood logs that entombed her mother’s body. She closed her eyes as she pictured her mother’s face. She must not cry. Not here. Not in public. She knew that many Mithilans secretly blamed her for further weakening her mother in her illness, by making her travel to Shvetaketu’s *gurukul*. She also knew that they blamed her for the troubles caused by Kushadhwaj.

She must be strong. For her mother. She looked to her friend, Samichi, who

stood at a distance. Next to her stood Radhika, her friend from the *gurukul*. She drew strength from their support.

She stuck the burning log into the pyre. Washed with ghee, the wood caught fire immediately. The pyre burned bright and strong, as if honoured to be the purifying agent for one so noble.

*Farewell, Maa.*

Sita stepped back and looked at the sky, to the One God, *Brahman*.

*If anyone ever deserved moksha, it is her, my mother.*

Sita remembered her mother's words as they had witnessed the mourning of the elephant matriarch.

*Don't look back. Look to the future.*

Sita whispered softly to the cremation pyre. 'I will look back, *Maa*. How can I not? You are my life.'

She remembered her last coherent conversation with her mother. Sunaina had warned Sita to not trust either the Malayaputras or the Vayuputras completely if she were to fulfil her destiny as the Vishnu. Both tribes would have their own agenda. She needed partners.

Her mother's voice resonated in her mind. *Find partners you can trust; who are loyal to your cause. Personal loyalty is not important. But they must be loyal to your cause.*

She remembered her mother's last statement.

*I will always be looking at you. Make me proud.*

Sita took a deep breath and clenched her fists, making a vow.

'I will, *Maa*. I will.'



## Chapter 11

Sita and Samichi sat on the edge of the outer fort wall. Sita moved forward and looked down at the moat that surrounded the city. It was a long way down. Not for the first time, she wondered what it would be like to fall, all the way to the ground. Would it hurt? Would she be released from her body instantly? Would she finally be free? What happens after death?

*Why do these stupid thoughts enter my mind?*

‘Sita ...’ whispered Samichi, breaking the silence.

They had been seated together for some time. There were hardly any words exchanged between the two, as a distracted Sita kept looking beyond the wall. Samichi could understand Sita’s pain. After all, it had just been a day since the princess had cremated her mother’s dead body. Despite her recently reduced popularity, almost the entire kingdom was in mourning for their Queen Sunaina. Not just Sita, but all of Mithila had lost its mother.

Sita did not respond.

‘Sita ...’

Instinct kicked in. Samichi reached her arm out and held it in front of Sita. Attempting to prevent some unspoken fear from coming true. Samichi understood, only too well, the power of dark thoughts.

Sita shook her head. Pushing the unnecessary thoughts out of her head.

Samichi whispered again, ‘Sita ...’

Sita spoke distractedly. To herself. ‘*Maa*, as always, was right ... I need partners ... I will complete my karma ... But I can’t do it alone. I need a partner ...’

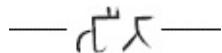
Samichi held her breath, thinking that Sita had plans for her. Thinking that Sita was talking about what Sunaina had wanted for Mithila. And, the karma the dying queen had asked of her. But Sita was, in fact, dwelling on what the chief of the Malayaputras had tasked her with.

Sita touched the scar on her left palm, recalling the blood oath she had made with Vishwamitra. She whispered to herself, ‘I swear by the great Lord Rudra

and by the great Lord Parshu Ram.'

Samichi did not notice that Sita had, for the first time, taken an oath in the name of Lord Parshu Ram as well. Usually, the princess only invoked Lord Rudra's name. But how could she have registered the change? Her thoughts, too, had drifted; to her *True Lord*, the *Iraiva*.

*Does Sita intend to make me her second-in-command in Mithila? Iraiva be praised ... Iraiva will be happy ...*



A year had passed since the death of Sunaina. The sixteen-year-old Sita had been administering the kingdom reasonably well. She had consolidated her rule by retaining the team that had advised Sunaina, careful to continue systems that her mother had instituted. The only major change she had made was to appoint her trusted aide, Samichi, as the Chief of Police. An appointment necessitated by the sudden death of the previous police chief, who had had an unexpected and fatal heart attack.

Jatayu, the Malayaputra captain, had been true to his word, and shadowed Sita along with his team of soldiers. They had been tasked with being her bodyguards. Sita did not feel the need for this extra protection. But who can shake off a shadow? In fact, she had had to give in to Jatayu's request and induct some Malayaputra soldiers into the Mithila police force. Their true identity was kept a secret from all, including Samichi. They followed Sita. Always.

Over the last year, Sita had grown to trust Jatayu. Almost like a brother. He was the senior most Malayaputra officer that she interacted with on a regular basis. And, the only person she could openly discuss her Vishnu responsibilities with.

'I'm sure you understand, don't you, Jatayuji?' asked Sita.

Sita and Jatayu had rendezvoused an hour's ride away from Mithila, near an abandoned bangle-making factory. Her Malayaputra bodyguards had accompanied her, disguised as Mithila policemen. Jatayu had just told her that Vishwamitra expected her to come to Agastyakootam, the capital of the Malayaputras, a hidden city deep in the south of India. She was to be trained there for some months to prepare her for her role as the Vishnu. After that, for the next few years, she would remain in her hometown, Mithila, for half the year and spend the other half travelling around the Sapt Sindhu, understanding the land she had to save.

However, Sita had just told Jatayu that she was not ready to leave Mithila yet.

There was a lot left to be done. Mithila had to be stabilised and made secure; not the least of all, from the threat posed by Kushadhwaj.

‘Yes, my sister,’ said Jatayu. ‘I understand. You need a few more years in Mithila. I will convey this to Guruji. I am sure he, too, will understand. In fact, even your work here is training, in a way, for your mission.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sita. She asked him something she had been meaning to for some time. ‘By the way, I have heard that Agastyakootam is close to Raavan’s Lanka. Is that true?’

‘Yes, it is. But do not worry, you will be safe there. It’s a hidden city. And, Raavan would not dare attack Agastyakootam even if he knew where it was.’

Sita was not worried about Agastyakootam’s security. It was something else that troubled her. But she decided not to seek further clarification. At least for now.

‘Have you decided what to do with the money?’ asked Jatayu.

The Malayaputras had donated a grand sum of one hundred thousand gold coins to Mithila, to help Sita speedily establish her authority in the kingdom. It was a relatively small amount for the tribe; but for Mithila, it had been a windfall. The Malayaputras had officially called it an endowment to a city that had dedicated itself to knowledge and was the beloved of the *rishis*.

No one was surprised by this unprecedented generosity. Why wouldn’t great *rishis* nurture the saintly king Janak’s city of knowledge? In fact, Mithilans had gotten used to seeing many of the Malayaputras, and even the great *maharishi*, Vishwamitra, visit their city often.

There were two potential projects that needed investment. One was the road that connected Mithila to Sankashya. The other was cheap, permanent and liveable housing for the slum dwellers.

‘The road will revive trade to a great extent,’ said Jatayu. ‘Which will bring in more wealth to the city. A big plus.’

‘Yes, but that wealth will largely go to a small number of already rich people. Some of them may even leave, taking their wealth along with them to more trade-friendly cities. The road will not rid us of our dependency on the Sankashya port. Nor will it stymie my uncle’s ability to freeze supplies to Mithila whenever he feels like. We must become independent and self-reliant.’

‘True. The slum redevelopment project, on the other hand, will provide permanent homes to the poor. It will also remove an eyesore at one of the main city gates, making it accessible to traffic.’

‘Hmm.’

‘And, you will earn the loyalty of the poor. They are the vast majority in Mithila. Their loyalty will prove useful, my sister.’

Sita smiled. ‘I am not sure if the poor are always loyal. Those who are capable of loyalty will be loyal. Those who are not will not, no matter what I may do for them. Be that as it may, we must help the poor. And we can generate so many jobs with this project, making many more people productive locally. That is a good thing.’

‘True.’

‘I have other ideas related to this project, which would increase our self-reliance. At least with regard to food and other essentials.’

‘I have a feeling that you’ve made up your mind already!’

‘I have. But it is good to listen to other wise opinions before taking the final decision. This is exactly what my mother would have done.’

‘She was a remarkable woman.’

‘Yes, she was,’ smiled Sita. She hesitated a moment, took one more look at Jatayu, and then broached another sensitive topic. ‘Jatayuji, do you mind if I ask you a question?’

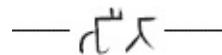
‘Anytime you wish to, great Vishnu,’ said Jatayu. ‘How can I not answer?’

‘What is the problem between Maharishi Vishwamitra and Maharishi Vashishtha?’

Jatayu smiled ruefully. ‘You have a rare ability to discover things that you are not supposed to. Things that are meant to be a secret.’

Sita smiled with disarming candour. ‘That is not an answer to my question, Jatayuji.’

‘No, it’s not, my sister,’ laughed Jatayu. ‘To be honest, I don’t know much about it. But I do know this: they hate each other viscerally. It is unwise to even mention the name of Maharishi Vashishtha in the presence of Maharishi Vishwamitra.’



‘Good progress,’ whispered Sita. She was standing in the garden of the Lord Rudra temple in Mithila, looking at the ongoing work of rebuilding the city slums.

A few months ago, Sita had ordered that the slums at the southern gate of Mithila be demolished and new, permanent houses be built for the poor on the same land. These houses, built with the money given by the Malayaputras, would be given to the poor free of cost.

Samichi preened at the compliment from her prime minister. In an unorthodox move, Sita had assigned her, rather than the city engineer, with the task of implementing the project rapidly and within budget. Sita knew that her

Police Chief was obsessively detail-oriented, with an ability to push her subordinates ruthlessly to get the job done. Also, having spent her early years in the slums, Samichi was uniquely qualified to understand the problems faced by the people living there.

Though the execution had been entrusted to Samichi, Sita had involved herself in the planning and design of the project after consulting the representatives of the slum dwellers. She had eventually worked out an innovative solution for not only their housing needs, but also providing them with sustainable livelihood.

The slum dwellers had been unwilling to vacate their land for even a few months. They had little faith in the administration. For one, they believed the project would be under construction for years, rendering them homeless for a long time. Also, many were superstitious and wanted their rebuilt homes to stand exactly where the old ones had been. This, however, would leave no excess space for neatly lined streets. The original slum had no streets to begin with, just small, haphazard pathways.

Sita had conceived a brilliant solution: building a honeycomb-like structure, with houses that shared walls on all sides. Residents would enter from the top, with steps descending into their homes. The ‘ceilings’ of all the homes would, from the outside, be a single, joint, level platform; a new ‘ground level’ above all the houses; an artificial ground that was four floors above the actual ground. It would be an open-to-sky space for the slum dwellers, with a grid of ‘streets’ marked in paint. The ‘streets’ would contain hatch doors serving as entries to their homes. This would address their superstitions; each one would get a house exactly at the same location as their original hovel. And, since the honeycomb structure would extend four floors below, each inhabitant would, in effect, have four rooms. A substantially bigger home than earlier.

Because of its honeycomb-like structure, Samichi had informally named the complex Bees Quarter. Sita had liked it so much that it had become the official name!

There was still the problem of temporary accommodation for the slum dwellers, while their new homes were being constructed. Sita had had another innovative idea. She converted the moat outside the fort wall into a lake, to store rain water and to aid agriculture. The uninhabited area between the outer fort wall and the inner fort wall was partly handed over to the slum dwellers. They built temporary houses for themselves there with bamboo and cloth. They used the remaining land to grow food crops, cotton and medicinal herbs. This newly allotted land would remain in their possession even after they moved back into the Bees Quarter, which would be ready in a few months.

This had multiple benefits. Firstly, the land between the outer fort wall and the inner fort wall, which had been left unoccupied as a security measure, was put to good use. Agricultural productivity improved. This provided additional income for the slum dwellers. Moving agriculture within the city wall would also provide food security during times of siege; unlikely though it seemed that impoverished Mithila would ever be attacked.

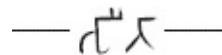
Most importantly, Mithilans became self-reliant in terms of food, medicines and other essentials. This reduced their dependence on the Sankashya river port.

Samichi had warned Sita that this might tempt Kushadhwaj to militarily attack them. But Sita doubted it. It would be politically difficult for her uncle to justify his army attacking the saintly king of Mithila. It would probably stoke rebellion even among the citizens of Sankashya. Notwithstanding this, it was wise to be prepared for even the most unlikely event.

Sita had always been uneasy about the outer moat being the city's main water supply. In the unlikely event of a siege, an enemy could poison the water outside and cause havoc. She decreed that a deep lake be constructed within the city as a precaution. In addition to this, she also strengthened the two protective walls of Mithila.

She organised the chaotic central market of the city. Permanent, uniform stalls were given to the vendors, ensuring cleanliness and orderliness. Sales increased, along with a reduction in pilferage and wastage. This led to a virtuous cycle of decrease in prices, further enhancing business.

All these moves also dramatically increased Sita's popularity. At least, among the poor. Their lives had improved considerably, and the young princess was responsible.



'I must admit, I am surprised,' said Jatayu. 'I didn't expect a police chief to efficiently oversee the construction of your Bees Quarter so smoothly.'

Sita sat with Jatayu outside the city limits. The day had entered the third *prahar*. The sun still shone high in the sky.

She smiled. 'Samichi is talented. No doubt.'

'Yes. But ...'

Sita looked at him and frowned. 'But what, Jatayuji?'

'Please don't misunderstand me, great Vishnu. It is your kingdom. You are the prime minister. And, we Malayaputras concern ourselves with the whole country, not just Mithila ...'

‘What is it, Jatayuji?’ interrupted Sita. ‘You know I trust you completely. Please speak openly.’

‘My people in your police force talk to the other officers. It’s about Samichi. About her ...’

Sita sighed. ‘I know ... It’s obvious that she has a problem with men ...’

‘It’s more like hatred for men, rather than just a problem.’

‘There has to be a reason for it. Some man must have ...’

‘But hating all men because of one man’s actions, whatever they may have been, is a sign of an unstable personality. Reverse-bias is also bias. Reverse-racism is also racism. Reverse-sexism is also sexism.’

‘I agree.’

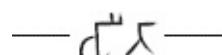
‘If she kept her feelings to herself that would be fine. But her prejudice is impacting her work. Men are being targeted unfairly. You don’t want to trigger a rebellion.’

‘She does not allow me to help her in the personal space. But I will ensure that her hatred does not impact her work. I’ll do something.’

‘I am only concerned about your larger interest, great Vishnu. There is no doubt in my mind that she is personally very loyal to you.’

‘I guess it helps that I am not a man!’

Jatayu burst out laughing.



‘How are you, Naarad?’ asked Hanuman.

Hanuman had just returned from a trip to Pariha. He had sailed into the port of Lothal in Gujarat, on his way eastward, deeper into the heart of India. He had been met at the port by his friend Naarad, a brilliant trader in Lothal who was also a lover of art, poetry and the latest gossip! Naarad had immediately escorted his friend, along with his companions, to the office behind his shop.

‘I’m all right,’ said Naarad heartily. ‘Any better would be a sin.’

Hanuman smiled. ‘I don’t think you try too hard to stay away from sin, Naarad!’

Naarad laughed and changed the topic. ‘The usual supplies, my friend? For you and your band?’

A small platoon of Parihans accompanied Hanuman on his travels.

‘Yes, thank you.’

Naarad nodded and whispered some instructions to his aide.

‘And, I thank you further,’ continued Hanuman, ‘for not asking where I am going.’

The statement was too obvious a bait, especially for Naarad. He swallowed it hook, line, and sinker.

‘Why would I ask you? I already know you are going to meet Guru Vashishtha!’

Vashishtha was the royal guru of the kingdom of Ayodhya. It was well known that he had taken the four princes of Ayodhya — Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan— to his *gurukul* to train and educate them. The location of the *gurukul*, however, was a well-kept secret.

Hanuman stared at Naarad, not saying anything.

‘Don’t worry, my friend,’ said Naarad, smiling. ‘Almost nobody, besides me of course, knows who you are going to meet. And nobody, not even me, knows where the *gurukul* is.’

Hanuman smiled. He was about to retort when a loud feminine voice was heard.

‘Hans!’

Hanuman closed his eyes for a moment, winced and turned around. It was Sursa, an employee of Naarad who was obsessed with him.

Hanuman folded his hands together into a *Namaste* and spoke with extreme politeness, ‘Madam, my name is Hanuman, not Hans.’

‘I know that,’ said Sursa, sashaying towards Hanuman. ‘But I think Hans sounds so much better. Also, don’t you think Sur is better than madam?’

Naarad giggled with mirth as Sursa came uncomfortably close to Hanuman. The Naga glared at his friend before taking a few steps back and distancing himself from his admirer. ‘Madam, I was engaged in an important conversation with Naarad and ...’

Sursa cut him short. ‘And, I’ve decided to interrupt. Deal with it.’

‘Madam ...’

Sursa arched her eyebrows and swayed her hip seductively to the side. ‘Hans, don’t you understand the way I feel about you? The things I can do for you ... And, to you ...’

‘Madam,’ interrupted Hanuman, blushing beet-red, and stepping back farther. ‘I have told you many times. I am sworn to celibacy. This is inappropriate. I am not trying to insult you. Please understand. I cannot ...’

Naarad was leaning against the wall now, covering his mouth, shoulders shaking, laughing silently. Trying hard not to make a sound.

‘Nobody needs to know, Hans. You can keep up the appearance of your vow. You don’t have to marry me. I only want you. Not your name.’ Sursa stepped forward and reached out for Hanuman’s hand.

With surprising agility for a man his size, Hanuman sidestepped quickly,

deftly avoiding Sursa's touch. He raised his voice in alarm, 'Madam! Please! I beg you! Stop!'

Sursa pouted and traced her torso with her fingers. 'Am I not attractive enough?'

Hanuman turned towards Naarad. 'In Lord Indra's name, Naarad. Do something!'

Naarad was barely able to control his laughter. He stepped in front of Hanuman and faced the woman. 'Listen Sursa, enough is enough. You know that ...'

Sursa flared up. Suddenly aggressive. 'I don't need your advice, Naarad! You know I love Hans. You had said you would help me.'

'I am sorry, but I lied,' said Naarad. 'I was just having fun.'

'This is fun for you?! What is wrong with you?'

Naarad signalled a couple of his employees. Two women walked up and pulled an irate Sursa away.

'I will make sure you lose half your money in your next trade, you stupid oaf!' screamed Sursa, as the women dragged her out.

As soon as they were alone again, Hanuman glared at his friend. 'What is wrong with you, Naarad?'

'I was just having fun, my friend. Sorry.'

Hanuman held the diminutive Naarad by his shoulder, towering over him. 'This is not fun! You were insulting Sursa. And, harassing me. I should thrash you to your bones!'

Naarad held Hanuman's hands in mock remorse, his eyes twinkling mischievously. 'You won't feel like thrashing me when I tell you who the Malayaputras have appointed as the Vishnu.'

Hanuman let Naarad go. Shocked. 'Appointed?'

*How can Guru Vishwamitra do that? Without the consent of the Vayuputras!*

Naarad smiled. 'You won't survive a day without the information I give you. That's why you won't thrash me!'

Hanuman shook his head, smiled wryly, hit Naarad playfully on his shoulder and said, 'Start talking, you stupid nut.'



## Chapter 12

‘Radhika!’ Sita broke into a broad smile.

Sita’s friend from her *gurukul* days had made a surprise visit. The sixteen-year-old Radhika, a year younger than Sita, had been led into the princess’ private chambers by Samichi, the new protocol chief of Mithila. The protocol duties, a new addition to Samichi’s responsibilities, kept her busy with non-police work of late. Sita had therefore appointed a Deputy Police Chief to assist Samichi. This deputy was male. A strong but fair-minded officer, he had ensured that Samichi’s biases did not affect real policing.

Radhika had not travelled alone, this time. She was accompanied by her father, Varun Ratnakar, and her uncle, Vayu Kesari.

Sita had met Varun Ratnakar in the past, but this was her first meeting with Radhika’s uncle and Ratnakar’s cousin, Vayu Kesari. The uncle did not share any family resemblance with his kin. Substantially short, stocky and fair-complexioned, his muscular body was extraordinarily hairy.

*Perhaps he is one of the Vaanars,* thought Sita.

She was aware that Radhika’s tribe, the Valmikis, were matrilineal. Their women did not marry outside the community. Men, however, could marry non-Valmiki women; of course, on the condition that if they did, they would leave the tribe. Perhaps Vayu Kesari was the son of one such excommunicated Valmiki man and a Vaanar woman.

Sita bent down and touched the feet of the elderly men.

Both blessed Sita with a long life. Varun Ratnakar was a respected intellectual and thinker, revered by those who valued knowledge. Sita knew he would love to spend time with her father, who was, perhaps, the most intellectual king in the Sapt Sindhu. With the departure of his chief guru, Ashtaavakra, to the Himalayas, Janak missed philosophical conversations. He would be happy to spend some quality time in the company of fellow intellectuals.

The men soon departed for King Janak’s chambers. Samichi, too, excused

herself. Her busy schedule did not leave her with much time for social niceties. Sita and Radhika were soon alone in the Mithila princess' private study.

'How is life treating you, Radhika?' asked Sita, holding her friend's hands.

'I am not the one leading an exciting life, Sita,' smiled Radhika. 'You are!'

'Me?!' laughed Sita, rolling her eyes with exaggerated playfulness. 'Hardly. All I do is police a small kingdom, collect taxes and redevelop slums.'

'Only for now. You have so much more to do ...'

Sita instantly became guarded. There seemed to be more to this conversation than was obvious at the surface level. She spoke carefully. 'Yes, I do have a lot to do as the prime minister of Mithila. But it's not unmanageable, you know. We truly are a small and insignificant kingdom.'

'But India is a big nation.'

Sita spoke even more carefully, 'What can this remote corner do for India, Radhika? Mithila is a powerless kingdom ignored by all.'

'That may be so,' smiled Radhika. 'But no Indian in his right mind will ignore Agastyakootam.'

Sita held her breath momentarily. She maintained her calm demeanour, but her heart was thumping like the town crier's drumbeat.

*How does Radhika know? Who else does? I have not told anyone. Except Maa.*

'I want to help you, Sita,' whispered Radhika. 'Trust me. You are a friend and I love you. And, I love India even more. You are important for India. *Jai Parshu Ram.*'

'*Jai Parshu Ram,*' whispered Sita, hesitating momentarily before asking, 'Are your father and you ...'

Radhika laughed. 'I'm a nobody, Sita. But my father ... Let's just say that he's important. And, he wants to help you. I am just the conduit, because the universe conspired to make me your friend.'

'Is your father a Malayaputra?'

'No, he is not.'

'Vayuputra?'

'The Vayuputras do not live in India. The tribe of the Mahadev, as you know, can visit the sacred land of India anytime but cannot live here. So, how can my father be a Vayuputra?'

'Then, who is he?'

'All in good time ...' smiled Radhika. 'Right now, I have been tasked with checking a few things with you.'

Vashishtha sat quietly on the ground, resting against a tree. He looked at his *ashram* from the distance, seeking solitude in the early morning hour. He looked towards the gently flowing stream. Leaves floated on the surface, strangely even-spaced, as if in a quiet procession. The tree, the water, the leaves ... nature seemed to reflect his deep satisfaction.

His wards, the four princes of Ayodhya — Ram, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughan — were growing up well, moulding ideally into his plans. Twelve years had passed since the demon king of Lanka, Raavan, had catastrophically defeated Emperor Dashrath, changing the fortunes of the Sapt Sindhu in one fell blow.

It had convinced Vashishtha that the time for the rise of the Vishnu had arrived.

Vashishtha looked again at his modest *gurukul*. This was where the great Rishi Shukracharya had moulded a group of marginalised Indian royals into leaders of one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen: the *AsuraSavitr*, the Asura Sun.

*A new great empire shall rise again from this holy ground. A new Vishnu shall rise from here.*

Vashishtha had still not made up his mind. He wasn't sure which of the two — Ram or Bharat — he would push for as the next Vishnu. One thing was certain; the Vayuputras supported him. But there were limits to what the tribe of Lord Rudra could do. The Vayuputras and Malayaputras had their fields of responsibility; after all, the Vishnu was supposed to be officially recognised by the Malayaputras. And the chief of the Malayaputras ... His former friend ...

*Well ...*

*I'll manage it.*

*'Guruji.'*

Vashishtha turned. Ram and Bharat had quietly approached him.

'Yes,' said Vashishtha. 'What did you find out?'

'They are not there, Guruji,' said Ram.

*'They?'*

'Not only Chief Varun, but many of his advisers are also missing from their village.'

Varun was the chief of the tribe that managed and maintained this *ashram*, situated close to the westernmost point of the River Shon's course. His tribe, the Valmikis, rented out these premises to *gurus* from time to time. Vashishtha had hired this *ashram* to serve as his *gurukul* for the duration that the four Ayodhya princes were with him.

Vashishtha had hidden the true identity of his wards from the Valmikis. But

of late he had begun to suspect that perhaps the tribe knew who the students were. It also seemed to him that the Valmikis had their own carefully kept secrets.

He had sent Ram and Bharat to check if Chief Varun was in the village. It was time to have a talk with him. Vashishtha would then decide whether to move his *gurukul* or not.

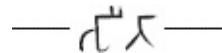
But Varun had left. Without informing Vashishtha. Which was unusual.

'Where have they gone?' asked Vashishtha.

'Apparently, Mithila.'

Vashishtha nodded. He knew that Varun was a lover and seeker of knowledge, especially the spiritual kind. Mithila was a natural place for such a person.

'All right, boys,' said Vashishtha. 'Get back to your studies.'



'We heard that the Vishnu blood oath has been taken,' said Radhika.

'Yes,' answered Sita. 'In Guru Shvetaketu's *gurukul*. A few years ago.'

Radhika sighed.

Sita frowned. 'Is there a problem?'

'Well, Maharishi Vishwamitra is a little ... unorthodox.'

'Unorthodox? What do you mean?'

'Well, for starters, the Vayuputras should have been present.'

Sita raised her eyebrows. 'I didn't know that ...'

'The tribes of the Vishnu and the Mahadev are supposed to work in partnership.'

Sita looked up as she realised something. 'Guru Vashishtha?'

Radhika smiled. 'For someone who hasn't even begun training, you have picked up quite a lot already!'

Sita shrugged and smiled.

Radhika held her friend's hand. 'The Vayuputras do not like or trust Maharishi Vishwamitra. They have their reasons, I suppose. But they cannot oppose the Malayaputra chief openly. And yes, you guessed correctly, the Vayuputras support Maharishi Vashishtha.'

'Are you telling me that Guru Vashishtha has his own ideas about who the Vishnu should be?'

Radhika nodded. 'Yes.'

'Why do they hate each other so much?'

'Very few know for sure. But the enmity between Guru Vishwamitra and

Guru Vashishtha is very old. And, very fierce ...'

Sita laughed ruefully. 'I feel like a blade of grass stuck between two warring elephants.'

'Then you wouldn't mind another species of grass next to you for company while being trampled upon, I suppose!'

Sita playfully hit Radhika on her shoulders. 'So, who is this other blade of grass?'

Radhika took a deep breath. 'There are two, actually.'

'Two?'

'Guru Vashishtha is training them.'

'Does he plan to create two Vishnus?'

'No. Father believes Guru Vashishtha will choose one of them.'

'Who are they?'

'The princes of Ayodhya. Ram and Bharat.'

Sita raised her eyebrows. 'Guru Vashishtha has certainly aimed high. The family of the emperor himself!'

Radhika smiled.

'Who is better among the two?'

'My father prefers Ram.'

'And who do you prefer?'

'My opinion doesn't matter. Frankly, father's opinion doesn't count either. The Vayuputras will back whomsoever Guru Vashishtha chooses.'

'Is there no way Guru Vashishtha and Guru Vishwamitra can be made to work together? After all, they are both working for the greater good of India, right? I am willing to work in partnership with the Vishnu that Guru Vashishtha selects. Why can't they partner each other?'

Radhika shook her head. 'The worst enemy a man can ever have is the one who was once his best friend.'

Sita was shocked. 'Really? Were they friends once?'

'Maharishi Vashishtha and Maharishi Vishwamitra were childhood friends. Almost like brothers. Something happened to turn them into enemies.'

'What?'

'Very few people know. They don't speak about it even with their closest companions.'

'Interesting ...'

Radhika remained silent.

Sita looked out of the window and then at her friend. 'How do you know so much about Guru Vashishtha?'

'You know that we host a *gurukul* close to our village, right? It is Guru

Vashishtha's *gurukul*. He teaches the four princes in the *ashram* we have rented out.'

'Can I come and meet Ram and Bharat? I'm curious to know if they are as great as Guru Vashishtha thinks they are.'

'They are still young, Sita. Ram is five years younger than you. And, don't forget, the Malayaputras keep track of you. They follow you everywhere. We cannot risk revealing the location of Guru Vashishtha's *gurukul* to them ...'

Sita was constrained to agree. 'Hmm.'

'I will keep you informed about what they are doing. I think father intends to have an honest conversation with Guru Vashishtha in any case. Perhaps, even offer his help.'

'Help Guru Vashishtha? Against me?'

Radhika smiled. 'Father hopes for the same partnership that you do.'

Sita bent forward. 'I have told you much of what I know. I think I deserve to know ... Who is your father?'

Radhika seemed hesitant.

'You would not have spoken about the Ayodhya princes had your father not allowed you to do so,' said Sita. 'And, I am sure that he would have expected me to ask this question. So, he wouldn't have sent you to meet me unless he was prepared to reveal his true identity. Tell me, who is he?'

Radhika paused for a few moments. 'Have you heard of Lady Mohini?'

'Are you serious?' asked Sita. 'Who hasn't heard of her, the great Vishnu?'

Radhika smiled. 'Not everyone considers her a Vishnu. But the majority of Indians do. I know that the Malayaputras revere her as a Vishnu.'

'So do I.'

'And so do we. My father's tribe is the one Lady Mohini left behind. We are the Valmikis.'

Sita sat up straight. Shocked. 'Wow!' Just then another thought struck her. 'Is your uncle, Vayu Kesari, the father of Hanu *bhaiya*?'

Radhika nodded. 'Yes.'

Sita smiled. 'That's why ...'

Radhika interrupted her. 'You are right. That is one of the reasons. But it's not the only one.'



## Chapter 13

‘Chief Varun,’ said Vashishtha, as he came to his feet and folded his hands into a respectful *Namaste*.

Varun had just returned from Mithila. And, Guru Vashishtha had been expecting a visit from him.

Vashishtha was much taller than Varun. But far thinner and leaner compared to the muscular and sturdy tribal chief.

‘Guru Vashishtha,’ said Varun, returning Vashishtha’s greeting politely. ‘We need to talk in private.’

Vashishtha was immediately wary. He led the chief out to a quieter spot.

Minutes later, they sat by the stream that flowed near the *ashram*, away from the four students, as well as others who might overhear them.

‘What is it, Chief Varun?’ asked Vashishtha, politely.

Varun smiled genially. ‘You and your students have been here for many years, Guruji. I think it’s time we properly introduce ourselves to each other.’

Vashishtha stroked his flowing, snowy beard carefully, feigning a lack of understanding. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean ... for example, the princes of Ayodhya do not have to pretend to be the children of some nobles or rich traders anymore.’

Vashishtha’s thoughts immediately flew to the four boys. Where were they? Were they being rounded up by Varun’s warriors? Chief Varun’s tribe was not allowed, according to their traditional law, to help any Ayodhyean royals.

*Perhaps, I wasn’t so clever after all. I thought we would be safe if we just stayed away from the areas under Lankan or Malayaputra influence.*

Vashishtha leaned forward. ‘If you are concerned about your laws, you must also remember the one that states that you cannot harm the people you accept as your guests.’

Varun smiled. ‘I intend no harm either to you or your students, Guruji.’

Vashishtha breathed easy. ‘My apologies, if I have offended you. But I needed a place that was ... safe. We will leave immediately.’

'There is no need to do that either,' said Varun, calm. 'I do not intend to kick you out. I intend to help you, Guruji.'

Vashishtha was taken aback. 'Isn't it illegal for you to help the Ayodhya royalty?'

'Yes, it is. But there is a supreme law in our tribe that overrides every other. It is the primary purpose of our existence.'

Vashishtha nodded, pretending to understand, though he was confused.

'You must know our war cry: Victory at all costs ... When war is upon us, we ignore all the laws. And a war is coming, my friend ...'

Vashishtha stared at him, completely flummoxed.

Varun smiled. 'Please don't think I am unaware that my Vayuputra nephew steals into your *ashram* regularly, late at night, thinking we wouldn't notice. He thinks he can fool his uncle.'

Vashishtha leaned back, as a veil seemed to lift from his eyes. 'Hanuman?'

'Yes. His father is my cousin.'

Vashishtha was startled, but he asked in an even tone. 'Is Vayu Kesari your brother?'

'Yes.'

Varun was aware of the bond that Hanuman and Vashishtha shared. Many years ago, the guru had helped his nephew. He chose not to mention it. He knew the situation was complicated.

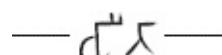
'Who are you?' Vashishtha finally asked.

'My full name is Varun Ratnakar.'

Suddenly, everything fell into place. Vashishtha knew the significance of that second name. He had found allies. Powerful allies. By pure chance.

There was only one thing left to do. Vashishtha clasped his right elbow with his left hand and touched his forehead with the clenched right fist, in the traditional salute of Varun's tribe. Respectfully, he uttered the ancient greeting. '*Jai Devi Mohini!*'

Varun held Vashishtha's forearm, like a brother, and replied, '*Jai Devi Mohini!*'



Indians in the Sapt Sindhu have a strange relationship with the Sun God. Sometimes they want him, at other times, they don't. In summer, they put up with his rage. They plead with him, through prayers, to calm down and, if possible, hide behind the clouds. In winter, they urge him to appear with all his force and drive away the cold fury of the season.

It was on one such early winter day, made glorious by the energising sun, when Sita and Samichi rode out into the main palace garden. It had been refurbished recently on Sita's orders. The two had decided on a private competition — a chariot race. It was a sport Sita truly enjoyed. The narrow lanes of the garden would serve as the racing track. They had not raced together in a long time. And, they had never done so in the royal garden before.

The garden paths were narrow, hemmed in with trees and foliage. It would require considerable skill to negotiate them in a chariot. The slightest mistake would mean crashing into trees at breakneck speed. Dangerous ... And, exhilarating.

The risk of it, the thrill, made the race worthwhile. It was a test of instinct and supreme hand-eye coordination.

The race began without any ceremony.

'Hyaah!' screamed Sita, whipping her horses, instantly urging them forward. Faster. Faster.

Samichi kept pace, close behind. Sita looked back for an instant. She saw Samichi swerving her chariot to the right. Sita looked ahead and pulled her horses slightly to the right, blocking Samichi's attempt to sneak past her at the first bend.

'Dammit!' screamed Samichi.

Sita grinned and whipped her horses. 'Move!'

She swung into the next curve without reining her horses in. Speeding as her chariot swerved left. The carriage tilted to the right. Sita expertly balanced her feet, bending leftwards to counter the centrifugal forces working hard on the chariot at such fast speeds. The carriage balanced itself and sped ahead as the horses galloped on without slowing.

'Hyaah!' shouted Sita again, swinging her whip in the air.

It was a straight and narrow path now for some distance. Overtaking was almost impossible. It was the best time to generate some speed. Sita whipped her horses harder. Racing forward. With Samichi following close behind.

Another bend lay farther ahead. The path broadened before the curve, giving a possible opportunity for Samichi to forge ahead. Sita smoothly pulled the reins to the right, guiding the horses to the centre, leaving as little space as possible on either side. Samichi simply could not overtake.

'Hyaah!'

Sita heard Samichi's loud voice. Behind her. To the left. Her voice was much louder than normal. Like she was trying to announce her presence.

Sita read her friend correctly.

A few seconds later, Sita quickly swerved. But, unexpectedly, to the right, covering that side of the road. Samichi had feigned the leftward movement. She had actually intended to overtake from the right. As Sita cut in, that chance was lost.

Sita heard a loud curse from Samichi.

Grinning, Sita whipped her horses again. Taking the turn at top speed. Ahead of the curve, the path would straighten out. And become narrower. Again.

*'Hyaah!'*

'Sita!' screamed Samichi loudly.

There was something in her voice.

Panic.

As if on cue, Sita's chariot flipped.

Sita flew up with the momentum. High in the air. The horses did not stop. They kept galloping.

Instinctively, Sita tucked in her head and pulled her legs up, her knees close to her chest. She held her head with her hands. In brace position.

The entire world appeared to flow in slow motion for Sita.

Her senses alert. Everything going by in a blur.

*Why is it taking so long to land?*

Slam!

Sharp pain shot through her as she landed hard on her shoulder. Her body bounced forward, in the air again, hurled sickeningly with the impact.

*'Princess!'*

Sita kept her head tucked in. She had to protect her head.

She landed on her back. And was hurled forward, repeatedly rolling on the tough ground, brutally scraping her body.

A green blur zipped past her face.

Wham!

She slammed hard against a tree. Her back felt a sharp pain. Suddenly stationary.

But to her eyes, the world was still spinning.

Dazed, Sita struggled to focus on her surroundings.

Samichi brought her chariot to a halt, dismounted rapidly, and ran towards the princess. Sita's own chariot was being dragged ahead. Sparks flew in the air due to the intense friction generated by the chariot metal rubbing against the rough road. The disoriented horses kept galloping forward wildly.

Sita looked at Samichi. 'Get ... my ... chariot ...'

And then, she lost consciousness.

## —८—

It was dark when Sita awoke. Her eyelids felt heavy. A soft groan escaped her lips.

She heard a panic-stricken squeal. ‘*Didi* ... Are you alright ...? Talk to me ...’

It was Urmila.

‘I’m alright, Urmila ...’

Her father gently scolded the little girl. ‘Urmila, let your sister rest.’

Sita opened her eyes and blinked rapidly. The light from the various torches in the room flooded in. Blinding her. She let her eyelids droop. ‘How long ... have I been ...’

‘The whole day, *Didi*.’

*Just a day? It feels longer.*

Her entire body was a mass of pain. Except her left shoulder. And her back. They were numb.

*Painkillers. May the Ashwini Kumars bless the doctors.*

Sita opened her eyes again. Slowly. Allowing the light to gently seep in. Allowing her pupils to adjust.

Urmila stood by the bedside, clutching the bedsheet with both hands. Her round eyes were tiny pools of water. Tears streamed down her face. Her father, Janak, stood behind his younger daughter. His normally serene face was haggard, lined with worry. He had just recovered from a serious illness. The last thing he needed was this additional stress.

‘*Baba* ...’ said Sita to her father. ‘You should be resting ... You are still weak ...’

Janak shook his head. ‘You are my strength. Get well soon.’

‘Go back to your room, *Baba* ...’

‘I will. You rest. Don’t talk.’

Sita looked beyond her family. Samichi was there. As was Arishtanemi. He was the only one who looked calm. Unruffled.

Sita took a deep breath. She could feel her anger rising. ‘Samichi ...’

‘Yes, princess,’ said Samichi, as she quickly walked up to the bed.

‘My chariot ...’

‘Yes, princess.’

‘I want to ... see it ...’

‘Yes, princess.’

Sita noticed Arishtanemi hanging back. There was a slight smile on his face now. A smile of admiration.

## —८—

‘Who do you think tried to kill you?’ asked Arishtanemi.

It had been five days since the chariot accident. Sita had recovered enough to be able to sit up in bed. Even walk around a bit. She ate like a soldier, quickly increasing her energy levels and boosting her alertness. A full recovery would take a few weeks.

Her left arm was in a sling. Her back was plastered with thick *neem* paste, mixed with tissue-repairing Ayurvedic medicines. Miniature bandages covered most parts of her body, protecting nicks and cuts to make them heal quickly.

‘One doesn’t need to be Vyomkesh to figure this out,’ said Sita, referring to a popular fictional detective from folk stories.

Arishtanemi laughed softly.

The chariot had been brought to Sita’s large chamber in the *Ayuralay*. Sita had examined it thoroughly. It had been very cleverly done.

Wood from another type of tree had been used to replace the two suspension beams. It was similar in appearance to the wood used in the rest of the carriage. It looked hardy. But was, in fact, weak. The nail marks that fixed the beams on the main shaft were fresh, despite care being taken to use old nails. One beam had cracked like a twig when strained by the speed of movement on uneven ground and the sharp turns. The beam had collapsed and jammed into the ground, seizing up the axle. This had brought the wheels to an abrupt halt when at a great speed. The chariot had levered up on the broken suspension beam as its front-end had rammed into the ground.

Very cleverly done.

Whoever had done this had the patience of a stargazer. It could have been done many months ago. It had been made to look like an old construction flaw, a genuine error. To make the death appear like an accident. And not an assassination. Sita had uncovered the conspiracy only through a close inspection of the nail marks.

The chariot was Sita’s. The target obvious. She was the only one who stood between Mithila and its expansionary enemies. Urmila could simply be married off. And Janak … Well. After Sita, it would only be a matter of time.

She had been extremely lucky. The accident had occurred when the last bend had almost been negotiated, making the chariot drag in a direction different from where Sita was flung due to the inertia of her bodily movement. Otherwise, she would have been crushed under the wheels and metal of her chariot. It would have been an almost certain death.

‘What do you want to do?’ asked Arishtanemi.

Sita had no doubt in her mind about who the perpetrator was behind her supposed accident. ‘I was willing to consider an alliance. Frankly, he could have become the head of the royal family, too. After all, I have bigger plans. All I had asked for was that my father and sister be safe and treated well. And, my citizens be taken care of. That’s it. Why did he do this?’

‘People are greedy. They are stupid. They misread situations. Also, remember, outside of the Malayaputras, no one knows about your special destiny. Perhaps, he sees you as a future ruler and a threat.’

‘When is Guru Vishwamitra coming back?’

Arishtanemi shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

*So we have to do this ourselves.*

‘What do you want to do?’ repeated Arishtanemi.

‘Guru Vishwamitra was right. He had told me once ... Never wait. Get your retaliation in first.’

Arishtanemi smiled. ‘A surgical strike?’

‘I can’t do it openly. Mithila cannot afford an open war.’

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘It must look like an accident, just like mine was meant to be.’

‘Yes, it must.’

‘And, it cannot be the main man.’

Arishtanemi frowned.

‘The main man is just the strategist. In any case, I can’t attack him directly ... My mother had prohibited it ... We must cut off his right hand. So that he loses the ability to execute such plans.’

‘Sulochan.’

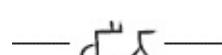
Sulochan was the prime minister of Sankashya. The right-hand man of Sita’s uncle Kushadhwaj. The man who ran practically everything for his king. Kushadhwaj would be paralysed without Sulochan.

Sita nodded.

Arishtanemi’s face was hard as stone. ‘It will be done.’

Sita did not react.

*Now, you are truly worthy of being a Vishnu, thought Arishtanemi. A Vishnu who can’t fight for herself would be incapable of fighting for her people.*



Mara had chosen his day and time well.

The boisterous *nine-day* festivities of the Winter *Navratra* always included the day that marked the *Uttarayan*, the beginning of the *northward movement* of

the sun. This was the day the nurturer of the world, the sun, was farthest away from the northern hemisphere. It would now begin its six-month journey back to the north. *Uttarayan* was, in a sense, a harbinger of renewal. The death of the old. The birth of the new.

It was the first hour of the first *prahar*. Just after midnight. Except for the river port area, the city of Sankashya was asleep. The peaceful sleep of the tired and happy. Festivals manage to do that. The city guards, though, were among the few who were awake. Throughout the city, one could hear their loud calls on the hour, every hour: All is well.

Alas, not all the guards were as duty-conscious.

Twenty such men sat huddled in the guard room at Prime Minister Sulochan's palace; it was the hour of their midnight snack. They should not have left their posts. But this had been a severe winter. And, the snack was only an excuse. They had, in fact, gravitated to the warm fireplace in the room like fireflies. It was just a break, they knew. They would soon be back on guard.

Sulochan's palace was perched on a hill, skirting the royal garden of Sankashya at one end. At the other end was the generous River Gandaki. It was a truly picturesque spot, apt for the residence of the second-most powerful man in the city. But not very kind to the guards. The palace's elevation increased the severity of the frosty winds. It made standing at the posts a battle against the elements. So, the men truly cherished the warmth of the guard room.

Two guards lay on the palace rooftop, towards the royal garden end. Their breathing even and steady. Sleeping soundly. They would not remember anything. Actually, there was nothing to remember. An odourless gas had gently breezed in and nudged them into a sound sleep. They would wake up the next morning, guiltily aware that they had dozed off on duty. They wouldn't admit this to any investigator. The punishment for sleeping while on guard duty was death.

Mara was not a crass assassin. Any brute with a bludgeon could kill. He was an artist. One hired Mara only if one wanted to employ a shadow. A shadow that would emerge from the darkness, for only a little while, and then quickly retreat. Leaving not a trace. Leaving just a body behind. The right body; always, the right body. No witnesses. No loose ends. No other 'wrong' body. No unnecessary clues for the mind of a savvy investigator.

Mara, the artist, was in the process of crafting one of his finest creations.

Sulochan's wife and children were at her maternal home. The Winter *Navratra* was the period of her annual vacation with her family. Sulochan usually joined them after a few days, but had been held back this time by some urgent state business. The prime minister was home alone. Indeed, Mara had

chosen the day and time well. For he had been told strictly: avoid collateral damage.

He looked at the obese form of Prime Minister Sulochan. Lying on the bed. His hands on his sides. Feet flopped outwards. As he would ordinarily sleep. He was wearing a beige *dhoti*. Bare-chested. He had placed his *angvastram* on the bedside cabinet. Folded neatly. As he ordinarily would have done before going to sleep. His rings and jewellery had been removed and placed inside the jewellery box, next to the *angvastram*. Again, as he ordinarily would.

But, he was not breathing as he ordinarily would. He was already dead. A herbal poison had been cleverly administered through his nose. No traces would be left behind. The poison had almost instantly paralysed the muscles in his body.

The heart is a muscle. So is the diaphragm, located below the lungs. The victim asphyxiated within minutes.

Perhaps, Sulochan had been conscious through it. Perhaps not. Nobody would know.

And Mara didn't care to know.

The assassination had been carried out.

Mara was now setting the scene.

He picked up a manuscript from a shelf. It chronicled the doomed love story of a courtesan and a peripatetic trader. The story was already a popular play throughout the Sapt Sindhu. It was well known that Sulochan liked reading. And that he especially loved a good romance. Mara walked over to Sulochan's corpse and placed the dog-eared manuscript on the bed, by the side of his chest.

*Sulochan had fallen asleep while reading.*

He picked up a glass-encased lamp, lit the wick, and placed it on the bedside cabinet.

*His reading lamp ...*

He picked up the decanter of wine lying on a table-top at the far end of the room and placed it on the cabinet, along with a glass. He poured some wine into the empty glass.

*Prime Minister Sulochan had been drinking wine and reading a romantic novel at the end of a tiring day.*

He placed a bowlful of an Ayurvedic paste on the bedside cabinet. He dipped a wooden tong in the paste, opened Sulochan's mouth and spread it evenly inside, taking care to include the back of his throat. A doctor would recognise this paste as a home remedy for stomach ache and gas.

*The prime minister was quite fat. Stomach trouble would surely have been common. And he was also known to have enough Ayurvedic knowledge for home*

*remedies for minor diseases and afflictions.*

He walked towards the window.

*Open window. Windy night.*

He retraced his steps and pulled the covering sheet up to Sulochan's neck.

*Sulochan had covered himself up. He was feeling cold.*

Mara touched the sheet and the *angvastram*. And cast a careful glance around the room. Everything was as it should be.

*Perfect.*

Sulochan had, it would be deduced, confused the beginnings of a heart attack for a stomach and gas problem. A regrettably common mistake. He had had some medicine for it. The medicine had relieved his discomfort. Somewhat. He had then picked up a book to read and poured himself some wine. He had begun to feel the chill, typical of a heart attack. He had pulled up his sheet to cover himself. And then the heart attack had struck with its full ferocity.

*Unfortunate.*

Perfectly unfortunate.

Mara smiled. He looked around the scene and took a final mental picture. As he always did.

He frowned.

*Something's not right.*

He looked around again. With animal alertness.

*Damn! Bloody stupid!*

Mara walked up to Sulochan and picked up his left arm. *Rigor mortis* was setting in and the body had already begun to stiffen. With some effort, Mara placed Sulochan's left hand on his chest. With strain, he spread the fingers apart. As if the man had died clutching his chest in pain.

*I should have done this earlier. Stupid! Stupid!*

Satisfied with his work now, Mara once again scanned the room. Perfect.

It looked like a simple heart attack.

He stood in silence, filled with admiration for his creation. He kissed the fingertips of his right hand.

No, he was not just a killer. He was an artist.

*My work here is done.*

He turned and briskly walked up to the window, leapt up and grabbed the parapet of the roof. Using the momentum, he somersaulted and landed on his feet above the parapet. Soon he was on the rooftop.

Mara was the invisible man. The dark, non-transferable polish that he had rubbed all over his skin, along with his black *dhoti*, ensured that he went unseen in the night.

The maestro sighed with satisfaction. He could hear the sounds of the night. The chirping crickets. The crackling fire from the guard room. The rustling wind. The soft snores of the guards asleep on the roof ... Everything was as it should be. Nothing was amiss.

He ran in the direction of the royal garden. Without any hesitation. Building up speed. As he neared the edge of the roof, he leapt like a cat and glided above the ground. His outstretched arms caught an overhanging branch of a tree. He swung onto the branch, balanced his way to the tree trunk and smoothly slid to the ground.

He began running. Soft feet. Silent breaths. No unnecessary sound.

Mara, the shadow, disappeared into the darkness. Lost to the light. Again.



## Chapter 14

Mithila was more stable than it had been in years. The rebuilt slums, along with the ancillary opportunities it provided, had dramatically improved the lives of the poor. Cultivation in the land between the two fort walls had led to a spike in agricultural production. Inflation was down. And, the unfortunate death of the dynamic prime minister of Sankashya had neutralised Kushadhwaj substantially. No one grudged the now popular Sita her decision to carry out a spate of diplomatic visits across the country.

Of course, few knew that the first visit would be to the fabled capital of the Malayaputras: Agastyakootam.

The journey was a long and convoluted one. Jatayu, Sita, and a large Malayaputra company first travelled to Sankashya by the dirt road. Thereafter, they sailed on river boats down the Gandaki till its confluence with the mighty Ganga. Then, they sailed up the Ganga to its closest point to the Yamuna. They then marched over land to the banks of the Yamuna and sailed down the river till it met the Sutlej to form the Saraswati. From there, they sailed farther down the Saraswati till it merged into the Western Sea. Next, they boarded a seaworthy ship and were presently sailing down the western coast of India, towards the southwestern tip of the Indian subcontinent. Destination: Kerala. Some called it God's own country. And why not, for this was the land the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram, had called his own.

On an early summer morning, with a light wind in its sails, the ship moved smoothly over calm waters. Sita's first experience of the sea was pleasant and free of discomfort.

'Was Lord Parshu Ram born in Agastyakootam?' asked Sita.

Sita and Jatayu stood on the main deck, their hands resting lightly on the balustrade. Jatayu turned to her as he leaned against the bar. 'We believe so. Though I can't give you proof. But we can certainly say that Lord Parshu Ram belongs to Kerala and Kerala belongs to him.'

Sita smiled.

Jatayu pre-empted what he thought Sita would say. ‘Of course, I am not denying that many others in India are as devoted to Lord Parshu Ram as we are.’

She was about to say something but was distracted as her eyes fell upon two ships in the distance. Lankan ships. They were moving smoothly, but at a startling speed.

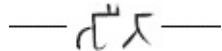
Sita frowned. ‘Those ships look the same as ours. They have as many sails as ours. How are they sailing so much faster?’

Jatayu sighed. ‘I don’t know. It’s a mystery. But it’s a huge maritime advantage for them. Their armies and traders travel to faraway regions faster than anyone else can.’

*Raavan must have some technology that the others do not possess.*

She looked at the mastheads of the two ships. Black-coloured Lankan flags, with the image of the head of a roaring lion emerging from a profusion of fiery flames, fluttered proudly in the wind.

Not for the first time, Sita wondered about the relationship between the Malayaputras and the Lankans.



As they neared the Kerala coast, the travellers were transferred to a ship with a lesser draught, suitable for the shallower backwaters they would now sail into.

Sita had been informed in advance by Jatayu and knew what to expect as they approached the landmass. They sailed into the maze-like water bodies that began at the coast. A mix of streams, rivers, lakes and flooded marshes, they formed a navigable channel into the heart of God’s own country. Charming at first glance, these waters could be treacherous; they constantly changed course in a land blessed with abundant water. As a result, new lakes came into being as old ones drained every few decades. Fortunately, most of these backwaters were inter-connected. If one knew how, one could navigate this watery labyrinth into the hinterland. But if one was not guided well, it was easy to get lost or grounded. And, in this relatively uninhabited area, populated with all kinds of dangerous animals, that could be a death sentence.

Sita’s ship sailed in this confusing mesh of waterways for over a week till it reached a nondescript channel. At first, she did not notice the three tall coconut trees at the entrance to the channel. The creepers that spread over the three trunks seemed fashioned into a jigsaw of axe-parts.

The channel led to a dead end, covered by a thick grove of trees. No sight of a dock where the ship could anchor. Sita frowned. She assumed that they would

anchor mid-stream and meet some boats soon. Amazingly, the ship showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, the drumbeats of the pace-setters picked up a notch. As the rowers rowed to a faster beat, the vessel gathered speed, heading straight for the grove!

Sita was alone on the upper deck. She held the railings nervously and spoke aloud, ‘Slow down. We are too close.’

But her voice did not carry to Jatayu, who was on the secondary deck with his staff, supervising some intricate operations.

*How can he not see this! The grove is right in front of us!*

‘Jatayuji!’ screamed Sita in panic, sure now that the ship would soon run aground. She tightened her grip on the railing, bent low and braced herself. Ready for impact.

No impact. A mild jolt, a slight slowing, but the ship sailed on.

Sita raised her head. Confused.

The trees moved, effortlessly pushed aside by the ship! The vessel sailed deep into what should have been the grove. Sita bent over and looked into the water.

Her mouth fell open in awe.

*By the great Lord Varun.*

Floating trees were pushed aside as the ship moved into a hidden lagoon ahead. She looked back. The floating trees had moved back into position, hiding the secret lagoon as the ship sailed forward. Later, Jatayu would reveal to her that they were a special sub-species of the Sundari tree.

Sita smiled with wonder and shook her head. ‘What mysteries abound in the land of Lord Parshu Ram!’

She faced the front again, her eyes aglow.

And then, she froze in horror.

*Rivers of blood!*

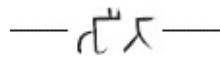
Bang in front of her, in the distance, where the lagoon ended and the hills began, three streams of blood flowed in from different directions and merged into the cove.

It was believed that a long time ago, Lord Parshu Ram had massacred all the evil kings in India who were oppressing their people. Legend had it that when he finally stopped, his blood-drenched axe had spewed the tainted blood of those wicked kings in an act of self-purification. It had turned the river Malaprabha red.

*But it's just a legend!*

Yet here she was, on a ship, seeing not one, but three rapid streams of blood disgorging into the lagoon.

Sita clutched her *Rudraaksh* pendant in fear as her heart rate raced. *Lord Rudra, have mercy.*



‘Sita is on her way, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi, as he entered the Hall of Hundred Pillars. ‘She should be in Agastyakootam in two or three weeks at most.’

Vishwamitra sat in the main *ParshuRamEshwar* temple in Agastyakootam. The temple was dedicated to the one that Lord Parshu Ram worshipped: Lord Rudra. He looked up from the manuscript he was reading.

‘That’s good news. Are all the preparations done?’

‘Yes, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi. He extended his hand and held out a scroll. The seal had been broken. But it could still be recognised. It was the royal seal of the descendants of Anu. ‘And King Ashwapati has sent a message.’

Vishwamitra smiled with satisfaction. Ashwapati, the king of Kekaya, was the father of Kaikeyi and Emperor Dashrath’s father-in-law. That also made him the grandfather of Dashrath’s second son, Bharat. ‘So, he has seen the light and seeks to build new relationships.’

‘Ambition has its uses, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Whether the ambition is for oneself or one’s progeny. I believe, an Ayodhya nobleman called General Mrigasya has shown ...’

‘Guruji!’ A novice ran into the hall, panting with exertion.

Vishwamitra looked up, irritated.

‘Guruji, she is practising.’

Vishwamitra immediately rose to his feet. He quickly folded his hands together and paid his respects to the idols of Lord Rudra and Lord Parshu Ram. Then, he rushed out of the temple, followed closely by Arishtanemi and the novice.

They quickly mounted their horses and broke into a gallop. There was precious little time to lose.

Within a short while, they were exactly where they wanted to be. A small crowd had already gathered. On hallowed ground. Under a tower almost thirty metres in height, built of stone. Some heads were tilted upwards, towards a tiny wooden house built on top of the tower. Others sat on the ground, their eyes closed in bliss. Some were gently crying, rocking with emotions coursing through their being.

A glorious musical rendition wafted through the air. Divine fingers plucked the strings of an instrument seemingly fashioned by God himself. A woman,

who had not stepped out of that house for years, was playing the *Rudra Veena*. An instrument named after the previous Mahadev. What was being performed was a *raga* that most Indian music aficionados would recognise. Some called it *Raga Hindolam*, others called it *Raga Malkauns*. A composition dedicated to the great Mahadev himself, Lord Rudra.

Vishwamitra rushed in as the others made way. He stopped at the base of the staircase at the entrance to the tower. The sound was soft, filtered by the wooden walls of the house. It was heavenly. Vishwamitra felt his heart instantly settle into the harmonic rhythm. Tears welled up in his eyes.

‘Wah, Annapoorna devi, wah,’ mouthed Vishwamitra, as though not wanting to break the spell with any superfluous sound, even that of his own voice.

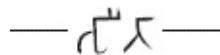
According to Vishwamitra, Annapoorna was undoubtedly the greatest stringed-instrument player alive. But if she heard any such words of praise, she might stop her practice.

Hundreds had gathered, as if risen from the ground. Arishtanemi looked at them uncomfortably. He had never been happy about this.

*Offering refuge to the estranged wife of the chief court musician of Lanka? A former favourite of Raavan himself?*

Arishtanemi possessed a military mind. Given to strategic thought. Not for him the emotional swings of those passionately in love with music.

But he knew that his Guru did not agree with him. So he waited, patiently. The *raga* continued to weave its ethereal magic.



‘It’s not blood, my sister,’ said Jatayu, looking at Sita.

Though Sita had not asked any question regarding the ‘rivers of blood’, the terror on her face made Jatayu want to ease her mind. She did not let go of her *Rudraaksh* pendant, but her face relaxed.

The Malayaputras, meanwhile, were anchoring the vessel to the floating jetty.

‘It’s not?’ asked Sita.

‘No. It’s the effect of a unique riverweed which grows here. It lines the bottom of the stream and is reddish-violet in colour. These streams are shallow, so they appear red from a distance. As if it’s a stream full of blood. But the ‘blood’ doesn’t discolour the lagoon, don’t you see? Because the riverweeds are too deep in the lagoon to be seen.’

Sita grinned in embarrassment.

‘It can be alarming, the first time one sees it. For us, it marks Lord Parshu

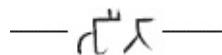
Ram's territory. The legendary river of blood.'

Sita nodded.

'But blood can flow by other means, in this region. There are dangerous wild animals in the dense jungles between here and Agastyakootam. And we have a two-week march ahead of us. We must stick together and move cautiously.'

'All right.'

Their conversation was cut short by the loud bang of the gangway plank crashing on the floating jetty.



A little less than two weeks later, the company of five platoons neared their destination. They had cut through unmarked, dense forests along the way, where no clear pathway had been made. Sita realised that unless one was led by the Malayaputras, one would be hopelessly lost in these jungles.

Excitement coursed through her veins as they crested the final hill and beheld the valley that cradled Lord Parshu Ram's city.

'Wow ...' whispered Sita.

Standing on the shoulders of the valley, she admired the grandiose beauty spread out below her. It was beyond imagination.

The Thamiravaruni river began to the west and crashed into this huge, egg-shaped valley in a series of massive waterfalls. The valley itself was carpeted with dense vegetation and an impenetrable tree cover. The river snaked its way through the vale and exited at the eastern, narrower end; flowing towards the land where the Tamil lived.

The valley was deep, descending almost eight hundred metres from the peaks in the west, from where the Thamiravaruni crashed into it. The sides of the valley fell sharply from its shoulders to its floor, giving it steep edges. The shoulders of the valley were coloured red; perhaps the effect of some metallic ore. The river picked up some of this ore as it began its descent down the waterfall. It lent a faint, red hue to the waters. The waterfalls looked eerily bloody. The river snaked through the valley like a lightly coloured red snake, slithering across an open, lush green egg.

Most of the valley had been eroded over the ages by the river waters, heavy rainfall, and fierce winds. All except for one giant monolith, a humongous tower-like mountain of a single rock. It stood at a proud height of eight hundred and fifty metres from the valley floor, towering well above the valley's shoulders. Massive in breadth as well, it covered almost six square

kilometres. The monolith was coloured grey, signifying that it was made of granite, one of the hardest stones there is. Which explained why it stood tall, like a sentinel against the ravages of time, refusing to break even as Mother Nature constantly reshaped everything around it.

Early evening clouds obstructed her view, yet Sita was overwhelmed by its grandeur.

The sides of the monolith were almost a ninety-degree drop from the top to the valley floor. Though practically vertical, the sides were jagged and craggy. The crags sprouted shrubs and ferns. Some creepers clung on bravely to the sides of the monolith. Trees grew on the top, which was a massive space of six square kilometres in area. Besides the small amount of vegetation clinging desperately to the monolith's sides, it was a largely naked rock, standing in austere glory against the profusion of green vegetation that populated every other nook and cranny of the valley below.

The *ParshuRamEshwar* temple was at the top of the monolith. But Sita could not get a very clear view because it was hidden behind cloud cover.

The monolith was *Agastyakootam*; literally, the *hill of Agastya*.

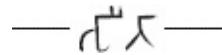
The Malayaputras had eased the otherwise impossible access to Agastyakootam with a rope-and-metal bridge from the valley shoulders to the monolith.

‘Shall we cross over to the other side?’ asked Jatayu.

‘Yes,’ answered Sita, tearing her gaze away from the giant rock.

‘*Jai Parshu Ram.*’

‘*Jai Parshu Ram.*’



Jatayu led his horse carefully over the long rope-and-metal bridge. Sita followed with her horse in tow. The rest of the company fell in line, one behind the other.

Sita was amazed by the stability of the rope bridge. Jatayu explained that this was due to the innovatively designed hollow metal planks that buttressed the bottom of the bridge. The foundations of these interconnected planks lay buried deep on both sides; one at the valley-shoulder end, the other at the granite monolith.

Intriguing as the bridge design was, it did not hold Sita’s attention for long. She peered over the rope-railing at the Thamiravaruni, flowing some eight hundred metres below her. She steadied herself; it was a long and steep drop. The Thamiravaruni crashed head-on into the monolith that Sita was walking

towards. The river then broke into two streams, which, like loving arms, embraced the sheer rock. They re-joined on the other side of the monolith; and then, the Thamiravaruni continued flowing east, out of the valley. The monolith of granite rock was thus, technically, a riverine island.

‘What does the name Thamiravaruni mean, Jatayuji?’ asked Sita.

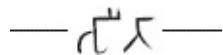
Jatayu answered without turning around. ‘*Varuni* is *that which comes from Lord Varun*, the God of Water and the Seas. In these parts, it is simply another word for *river*. And *Thamira*, in the local dialect, has two meanings. One is red.’

Sita smiled. ‘Well, that’s a no-brainer! The red river!’

Jatayu laughed. ‘But *Thamira* has another meaning, too.’

‘What?’

‘Copper.’



As Sita neared the other side, the clouds parted. She came to a sudden halt, making her horse falter. Her jaw dropped. In sheer amazement and awe.

‘How in Lord Rudra’s name did they build this?’

Jatayu smiled as he looked back at Sita and gestured that she keep moving. He turned quickly and resumed his walk. He had been trained to be careful on the bridge.

A massive curvilinear cave had been carved into the monolith. Almost fifteen metres in height and probably around fifty metres deep, the cave ran all along the outer edge of the monolith, in a continuous line, its floor and ceiling rising gently as it spiralled its way to the top of the stone structure. It therefore served as a road, built into the monolith itself. The ‘road’ spiralled its way down to a lower height as well, till it reached the point of the monolith where it was two hundred metres above the valley floor. But this long continuous cave, which ran within the surface of the structure, with the internal monolith rock serving as its road and roof, did not just serve as a passage. On the inner side of this cave were constructions, again carved out of the monolith rock itself. These constructions served as houses, offices, shops and other buildings required for civilised living. This innovative construction, built deeper into the inner parts of the monolith itself, housed a large proportion of the ten thousand Malayaputras who lived in Agastyakootam. The rest lived on top of the monolith. There were another ninety thousand Malayaputras, stationed in camps across the great land of India.

‘How can anyone carve something this gigantic into stone as hard as

granite?' asked Sita. 'That too in a rock face that is almost completely vertical? This is the work of the Gods!'

'The Malayaputras represent the God, Lord Parshu Ram, himself,' said Jatayu. 'Nothing is beyond us.'

As he stepped off the bridge onto the landing area carved into the monolith, Jatayu mounted his horse again. The ceiling of the cave was high enough to comfortably allow a mounted soldier to ride along. He turned to see Sita climbing onto her horse as well. But she did not move. She was admiring the intricately engraved railings carved out at the edge of the cave, along the right side of the 'road'. The artistry imposed on it distracted one from the sheer fall into the valley that the railing prevented. The railing itself was around two metres high. Pillars had been carved into it, which also allowed open spaces in between for light. The 'fish' symbol was delicately carved into each pillar's centre.

'My sister,' whispered Jatayu.

Sita had steered her horse towards the four-floor houses on the left inner side of the cave road. She turned her attention back to Jatayu.

'Promise me, my sister,' said Jatayu, 'you will not shrink or turn back, no matter what lies ahead.'

'What?' frowned Sita.

'I think I understand you now. What you're about to walk into may overwhelm you. But you cannot imagine how important this day is for us Malayaputras. Don't pull back from anyone. Please.'

Before Sita could ask any further questions, Jatayu had moved ahead. Jatayu steered his horse to the right, where the road rose gently, spiralling its way to the top.

Sita too kicked her horse into action.

And then, the drumbeats began.

As the road opened ahead, she saw large numbers of people lined on both sides. None of them wore any *angvastrams*. The people of Kerala dressed this way, when they entered temples to worship their Gods and Goddesses. The absence of the *angvastram* symbolised that they were the servants of their Gods and Goddesses. And, they were dressed this way today, as their living Goddess had come home.

At regular intervals stood drummers with large drums hanging from cloth ropes around their shoulders. As Sita emerged, they began a rhythmic, evocative beat. Next to each drummer was a *veena* player, stringing melody to the rhythm of the drummers. The rest of the crowd was on their knees, heads bowed. And, they were chanting.

The words floated in the air. Clear and precise.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Saakshine namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to the Witness

Sita looked on, unblinking. Unsure of what to do. Her horse, too, had stopped.

Jatayu pulled up his horse and fell behind Sita. He made a clicking sound and Sita's horse began to move. Forward, on a gentle gradient to the top.

And thus, led by Sita, the procession moved ahead.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Matsyaaya namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lord Matsya

Sita's horse moved slowly, but unhesitatingly. Most of the faces in the crowd were filled with devotion. And many had tears flowing down their eyes.

Some people came forward, bearing rose petals in baskets. They flung them in the air. Showering roses on their Goddess, Sita.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Kurmaaya namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lord Kurma

One woman rushed in, holding her infant son in her arms. She brought the baby close to the horse's stirrups and touched the child's forehead to Sita's foot.

A confused and troubled Sita tried her best to not shrink back.

The company, led by Sita, kept riding up the road, towards the summit of the monolith.

The drumbeats, the veenas, the chanting continued ... ceaselessly.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasyai Vaaraahyai namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lady Varahi

Ahead of them, some people were down on their knees with their heads placed on the ground, their hands spread forward. Their bodies shook with the force of their emotions.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Narasimhaaya namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

## Salutations, Salutations to Lord Narsimha

The gently upward-sloping cave opened onto the top of the monolith. The railing continued to skirt the massive summit. People from the spiral cave road followed Sita in a procession.

The large area at the top of the monolith was well organised with grid-like roads and many low-rise buildings. The streets were bordered with dugouts on both sides that served as flower beds, the soil for which had been painstakingly transported from the fertile valley below. At regular intervals, the dugouts were deep, for they held the roots of larger trees. It was a carefully cultivated naturalness in this austere, rocky environment.

At the centre of the summit lay two massive temples, facing each other. Together, they formed the *ParshuRamEshwar* temple complex. One temple, red in colour, was dedicated to the great Mahadev, Lord Rudra. The other, in pristine white, was the temple of the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram.

The other buildings in the area were uniformly low-rise, none built taller than the temples of *ParshuRamEshwar*. Some served as offices and others as houses. Maharishi Vishwamitra's house was at the edge of the summit, overlooking the verdant valley below.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Vaamanaaya namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lord Vaaman

The chanting continued.

Jatayu held his breath as his eyes fell on a gaunt old lady. Her flowing white hair let loose in the wind, she sat on a platform in the distance. Her proud, ghostly eyes were fixed on Sita. With her felicitous fingers, she plucked at the strings of the *Rudra Veena*. Annapoorna devi. The last time she had been seen was the day that she had arrived at Agastyakootam, many years ago. She had stepped out of her home, today. She was playing the *Veena* in public, consciously breaking her oath. A terrible oath, compelled by a husband she had loved. But there was good reason to break the oath today. It was not every day that the great Vishnu came home.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasyai Mohinyai namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lady Mohini

Some purists believed that a Mahadev and a Vishnu could not exist simultaneously. That at any given time, either the Mahadev exists with the tribe of the previous Vishnu, or the Vishnu exists with the tribe of the previous

Mahadev. For how could the need for the destruction of Evil coincide with the propagation of Good? Therefore, some refused to believe that Lady Mohini was a Vishnu. Clearly, the Malayaputras sided with the majority that believed that the great Lady Mohini was a Vishnu.

The chanting continued.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasmai Parshuramaaya namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lord Parshu Ram

Sita pulled her horse's reins and stopped as she approached Maharishi Vishwamitra. Unlike the others, he was wearing his *angvastram*. All the Malayaputras in Agastyakootam were on top of the monolith now.

Sita dismounted, bent and touched Vishwamitra's feet with respect. She stood up straight and folded her hands together into a *Namaste*. Vishwamitra raised his right hand.

The music, the chanting, all movement stopped instantly.

A gentle breeze wafted across the summit. The soft sound it made was all that could be heard. But if one listened with the soul, perhaps the sound of ten thousand hearts beating as one would also have been heard. And, if one possessed the power of the divine, one would have also heard the cry of an overwhelmed woman's heart, as she silently called out to the beloved mother she had lost.

A Malayaputra *pandit* walked up to Vishwamitra, holding two bowls in his hands. One contained a thick red viscous liquid; and, the other, an equal amount of thick white liquid. Vishwamitra dipped his index and ring finger into the white liquid and then the middle finger in the red liquid.

Then he placed his wrist on his chest and whispered, 'By the grace of the Mahadev, Lord Rudra, and the Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram.'

He placed his three colour-stained fingers together in between Sita's eyebrows, then slid them up to her hairline, spreading the outer fingers gradually apart as they moved. A trident-shaped *tilak* emerged on Sita's forehead. The outer arms of the *tilak* were white, while the central line was red.

With a flick of his hand, Vishwamitra signalled for the chanting to resume. Ten thousand voices joined together in harmony. This time, though, the chant was different.

*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya*

*Tasyai Sitadevyai namo namah*

Salutations to the great God Vishnu

Salutations, Salutations to Lady Sita



## Chapter 15

Late in the evening, Sita sat quietly in the Lord Parshu Ram temple. She had been left alone. As she had requested.

The grand *ParshuRamEshwar* temple grounds spread over nearly one hundred and fifty acres on the summit of the granite monolith. At the centre was a man-made square-shaped lake, its bottom lined with the familiar reddish-violet riverweeds. It reminded her of the three apparently ‘blood-filled’ streams she had seen at the hidden lagoon. The riverweeds had been grafted here, so that they could survive in these still waters. The lake served as a store for water for the entire city built into this rock formation. The water was transported into the houses through pipes built parallel to the spiral pathway down the curvilinear cave structure.

The two temples of the *ParshuRamEshwar* complex were constructed on opposite sides of this lake. One was dedicated to Lord Rudra and the other to Lord Parshu Ram.

The Lord Rudra temple’s granite inner structure had been covered with a single layer of red sandstone, transported in ships from a great distance. It had a solid base, almost ten metres in height, forming the pedestal on which the main temple structure had been built. The exterior face of the base was intricately carved with figures of *rishis* and *rishikas*. A broad staircase in the centre led to a massive veranda. The main temple was surrounded by delicate lattice, made from thin strips of a copper alloy; it was brown in colour, rather than the natural reddish-orange of the metal. The lattice comprised tiny square-shaped openings, each of them shaped into a metallic lamp at its base. With thousands of these lamps festively lit, it was as if a star-lit sky screened the main temple.

Ethereal.

Beyond the metallic screen holding thousands of lamps, was the Hall of Hundred Pillars. Each pillar was shaped to a near-perfect circular cross-section using elephant-powered lathes. These imposing pillars held the main temple

spire, which itself shot up a massive fifty metres. The towering temple spire was carved on all sides with figures of great men and women of the ancient past. People from many groups such as the Sangamtamils, Dwarkans, Manaskul, Adityas, Daityas, Vasus, Asuras, Devas, Rakshasas, Gandharvas, Yakshas, Suryavanshis, Chandravanshis, Nagas and many more. The forefathers and foremothers of this noble Vedic nation of India.

At the centre of the Hall was the *sanctum sanctorum*. In it were life-size idols of Lord Rudra and the woman he had loved, Lady Mohini. Unlike their normal representations, these idols did not carry weapons. Their expressions were calm, gentle, and loving. Most fascinatingly, Lord Rudra and Lady Mohini held hands.

On the other side of the square lake, facing the Lord Rudra temple, was the temple dedicated to Lord Parshu Ram. Almost exactly similar to the Lord Rudra temple, there was one conspicuous difference: Lord Parshu Ram temple's granite inner structure was layered on top with white marble. The *sanctum sanctorum* in the middle of the Hall of Hundred Pillars had life-sized idols of the great sixth Vishnu and his wife, Dharani. And, these idols were armed. Lord Parshu Ram held his fearsome battle axe and Lady Dharani sat with the long bow in her left hand and a single arrow in the other.

Had Sita paid close attention, she might have recognised the markings on the bow that Lady Dharani held. But she was lost in her own thoughts. Leaning against a pillar. Staring at the idols of Lord Parshu Ram and Lady Dharani.

She recalled the words of Maharishi Vishwamitra as he had welcomed her to Agastyakootam, earlier today. That they would wait for nine years. Till the stars aligned with the calculations of the Malayaputra astrologers. And then, her Vishnuhood would be announced to the world. She had been told that she had time till then to prepare. To train. To understand what she must do. And that the Malayaputras would guide her through it all.

Of course, until that auspicious moment, it was the sworn duty of every single Malayaputra to keep her identity secret. The risks were too high.

She looked back. Towards the entrance. Nobody had entered the temple. She had been left alone.

She looked at the idol of Lord Parshu Ram.

She knew that not every Malayaputra was convinced of her potential as the Vishnu. But none would dare oppose the formidable Vishwamitra.

*Why is Guru Vishwamitra so sure about me? What does he know that I don't?*

A month had passed since Sita had arrived in Agastyakootam. Vishwamitra and she had had many extended conversations.

Some of these were purely educational; on science, astronomy and medicine. Others were subtle lessons designed to help her clearly define, question, confront or affirm her views on various topics like masculinity and femininity, equality and hierarchy, justice and freedom, liberalism and order, besides others. The debates were largely enlightening for Sita. But the ones on the caste system were the most animated.

Both teacher and student agreed that the form in which the caste system currently existed, deserved to be completely destroyed. That it corroded the vitals of India. In the past, one's caste was determined by one's attributes, qualities and deeds. It had been flexible. But over time, familial love distorted the foundations of this concept. Parents began to ensure that their children remained in the same caste as them. Also, an arbitrary hierarchy was accorded to the castes, based on a group's financial and political influence. Some castes became 'higher', others 'lower'. Gradually, the caste system became rigid and birth-based. Even Vishwamitra had faced many obstacles when, born a Kshatriya, he had decided to become a Brahmin; and, in fact, a *rishi*. This rigidity created divisions within society. Raavan had exploited these divisions to eventually dominate the Sapt Sindhu.

But what could be the solution for this? The *Maharishi* believed that it was not possible to create a society where all were completely and exactly equal. It may be desirable, but would remain a utopian idea, always. People differed in skills, both in degree and kind. So, their fields of activity and achievements also had to differ. Periodic efforts at imposing exact equality had invariably led to violence and chaos.

Vishwamitra laid emphasis on freedom. A person must be enabled to understand himself and pursue his dreams. In his scheme of things, if a child was born to Shudra parents, but with the skills of a Brahmin, he should be allowed to become a Brahmin. If the son of a Kshatriya father had trading skills, then he should train to become a Vaishya.

He believed that rather than trying to force-fit an artificial equality, one must remove the curse of birth determining one's life prospects. Societies would always have hierarchies. They existed even in nature. But they could be fluid. There would be times when Kshatriya soldiers comprised the elite, and then, there would be times when skilful Shudra creators would be the elite. The differences in society should be determined by merit. That's all. Not birth.

To achieve this, Vishwamitra proposed that families needed to be restructured. For it was inheritance that worked most strongly against merit

and free movement in society.

He suggested that children must compulsorily be adopted by the state at the time of birth. The birth-parents would have to surrender their children to the kingdom. The state would feed, educate and nurture the in-born talents of these children. Then, at the age of fifteen, they would appear for an examination to test them on their physical, psychological and mental abilities. Based on the result, appropriate castes would be allocated to them. Subsequent training would further polish their natural skills. Eventually, they would be adopted by citizens of the same caste as the one assigned to the adolescents through the examination process. The children would not know their birth-parents, only their adoptive caste-parents. The birth-parents, too, would not know the fate of their birth-children.

Sita agreed that this would be a fair system. But she also felt that it was harsh and unrealistic. It was unimaginable to her that parents would willingly hand over their birth-children to the kingdom. Permanently. Or that they would ever stop trying to learn what happened to them. It was unnatural. In fact, times were such that it was impossible to make Indians follow even basic laws for the greater good. It was completely far-fetched to think that they would ever make such a big sacrifice in the larger interest of society.

Vishwamitra retorted that it was the Vishnu's task to radically transform society. To convince society. Sita responded that perhaps the Vishnu would need to be convinced, first. The guru assured her that he would. He laid a wager that over time, Sita would be so convinced that she would herself champion this 'breathtakingly fair and just organisation of society'.

As they ended another of their discussions on the caste system, Sita got up and walked towards the end of the garden, thinking further about it. The garden was at the edge of the monolith summit. She took a deep breath, trying to think of some more arguments that would challenge her guru's proposed system. She looked down at the valley, eight hundred and fifty metres below. Something about the Thamiravaruni startled her. She stopped thinking. And stared.

*Why have I not noticed this before?*

The river did not appear to flow out of the valley at all. At the eastern end of the egg-shaped valley, the Thamiravaruni disappeared underground.

*What in Lord Rudra's name ...*

'The river flows into a cave, Sita.' Vishwamitra had quietly walked up to his student.

Vishwamitra and Sita stood at the mouth of the natural cave, carved vertically into the rock face.

Intrigued by the flow of the Thamiravaruni, Sita had wished to see the place where it magically disappeared, at the eastern end of the valley. From a distance, it had seemed as if the river dropped into a hole in the ground. But, as she drew near, she had seen the narrow opening of the cave. A vertical cave. It was incredible that an entire river entered the small aperture. The thunderous roar of the river within the cave suggested that the shaft expanded underground.

‘But where does all this water go?’ asked Sita.

A company of Malayaputra soldiers stood behind Sita and Vishwamitra. Out of earshot. But close enough to move in quickly if needed.

‘The river continues to flow east,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘It drains into the Gulf of Mannar which separates India from Lanka.’

‘But how does it emerge from the hole it has dug itself into?’

‘It bursts out of this underground cavern some ten kilometres downstream.’

Sita’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘Is this cave that long?’

Vishwamitra smiled. ‘Come. I’ll show you.’

Vishwamitra led Sita to the edge of the mouth of the cave. She hesitated. It was only around twenty-five metres across at the entry point. This forced constriction dramatically increased the speed of the river. It tore into the underground causeway with unreal ferocity.

Vishwamitra pointed to a flight of stairs to the left side of the cave mouth. It was obviously man-made. Steps had been carved into the sloping side wall. A railing thoughtfully provided on the right side, preventing a steep fall into the rapids.

Torrents of foam and spray from the rapidly descending river diminished vision. It also made the stairs dangerously slippery.

Vishwamitra pulled his *angvastram* over his head to shield himself from water droplets that fell from the ceiling. Sita followed suit.

‘Be careful,’ said Vishwamitra, as he approached the staircase. ‘The steps are slippery.’

Sita nodded and followed her guru. The Malayaputra soldiers stayed close behind.

They wended their way in silence. Descending carefully. Deeper and deeper, into the cave. Sita huddled into her *angvastram*. Daylight filtered through. But she expected pitch darkness as they descended farther. The insistent spray of water made it impossible to light a torch.

Sita had always been afraid of the dark. Added to which was this confined,

slippery space. The looming rock structure and the loud roar of the descending river combined altogether into a terrifying experience.

Her mother's voice called out to her. A memory buried deep in her psyche.

*Don't be afraid of the dark, my child. Light has a source. It can be snuffed out. But darkness has no source. It just exists. This darkness is a path to That, which has no source: God.*

Wise words. But words that didn't really provide much comfort to Sita at this point. Cold fear slowly tightened its grip on her heart. A childhood memory forced itself into her consciousness. Of being confined in a dark basement, the sounds of rats scurrying about, the frantic beat of her heart. Barely able to breathe. She pulled her awareness into the present. An occasional glimpse of Vishwamitra's white robe disturbed the void they had settled into. Suddenly, she saw him turn left. She followed. Her hand not letting go of the railing.

Disoriented by sudden blinding light, her eyes gradually registered the looming figure of Vishwamitra standing before her. He held aloft a torch. He handed it to her. She saw a Malayaputra soldier hand another torch to Vishwamitra.

Vishwamitra started walking ahead again, continuing to descend. The steps were much broader now. Though the sound of the river reverberated against the wall and echoed all around.

*Too loud for such a small cave.*

But Sita could not see much since there were only two torches. Soon, all the Malayaputras held a torch each and light flooded into the space.

Sita held her breath.

*By the great Lord Rudra!*

The small cave had opened into a cavern. And it was huge. Bigger than any cave Sita had ever seen. Perhaps six hundred metres in width. The steps descended farther and farther while the ceiling remained at roughly the same height. When they reached the bottom of the cavern, the ceiling was a good two hundred metres above. A large palace, fit for a king, could have been built in this subterranean space. And still have room left over. The Thamiravaruni flowed on the right-hand side of this cavern, descending rapidly with great force.

'As you can see, the river has eroded this cave over the ages,' explained Vishwamitra. 'It is huge, isn't it?'

'The biggest I have ever seen!' said Sita in wonder.

There was a massive white hill on the left. The secret behind the well-lit interior. It reflected light from the numerous torches and spread it to all the

corners of the cave.

'I wonder what material that hill is made up of, Guruji,' said Sita.

Vishwamitra smiled. 'A lot of bats live here.'

Sita looked up instinctively.

'They are all asleep now,' said Vishwamitra. 'It's daytime. They will awaken at night. And that hill is made from the droppings of billions of bats over many millennia.'

Sita grimaced. 'Yuck!'

Vishwamitra's laughter echoed in the vastness.

It was then that Sita's eyes fell on something behind Vishwamitra. Many rope ladders hanging from the walls; so many that she gave up the attempt to count them. Hammered into place on top, they fell from the roof, all the way to the floor.

Sita pointed. 'What's that, Guruji?'

Vishwamitra turned around. 'There are some white semicircular bird nests in the nooks and crannies of these walls. Those nests are precious. The material they are made from is precious. These ladders allow us to access them.'

Sita was surprised. 'What could be so valuable about the material that a nest is made from? These ladders go really high. Falling from that height must mean instant death.'

'Indeed, some have died. But it is a worthy sacrifice.'

Sita frowned.

'We need some hold over Raavan. The material in those nests gives us that control.'

Sita froze. The thought that had been troubling her for some time made its reappearance: *What is the relationship between the Malayaputras and the Lankans?*

'I will explain it to you, someday,' said Vishwamitra, reading her thoughts as usual. 'For now, have faith in me.'

Sita remained silent. But her face showed that she was troubled.

'This land of ours,' continued Vishwamitra, 'is sacred. Bound by the Himalayas in the north, washed by the Indian Ocean at its feet and the Western and Eastern Seas at its arms, the soil in this great nation is hallowed. All those born in this land carry the sacred earth of Mother India in their body. This nation cannot be allowed to remain in this wretched state. It is an insult to our noble ancestors. We must make India great again. I will do anything, anything, to make this land worthy of our great ancestors. And, so shall the Vishnu.'

—८—

Sita, Jatayu, and a company of Malayaputra soldiers were sailing back up the western coast towards the Sapt Sindhu. Sita was returning to Mithila. She had spent more than five months in Agastyakootam, educating herself on the principles of governance, philosophies, warfare and personal history of the earlier Vishnus. She had also acquired advanced training in other subjects. This was in preparation for her Vishnuhood. Vishwamitra had been personally involved in her training.

Jatayu and she sat on the main deck, sipping a hot cup of ginger *kadha*.

Sita set her cup down and looked at the Malayaputra. ‘Jatayuji, I hope you will answer my question.’

Jatayu turned towards Sita and bowed his head. ‘How can I refuse, great Vishnu?’

‘What is the relationship between the Malayaputras and the Lankans?’

‘We trade with them. As does every kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu. We export a very valuable material mined in the cavern of Thamiravaruni to Lanka. And they give us what we need.’

‘I’m aware of that. But Raavan usually appoints sub-traders who are given the licence to trade with Lanka. No one else can conduct any business with him. But there is no such sub-trader in Agastyakootam. You trade directly with him. This is strange. I also know that he strictly controls the Western and Eastern Seas. And that no ship can set sail in these waters without paying him a cess. This is how he maintains a stranglehold over trade. But Malayaputra ships pay nothing and yet, pass unharmed. Why?’

‘Like I said, we sell him something very valuable, great Vishnu.’

‘Do you mean the bird’s nest material?’ asked Sita, incredulously. ‘I am sure he gets many equally valuable things from other parts of the Sapt Sindhu ...’

‘This material is very, very valuable. Far more than anything he gets from the Sapt Sindhu.’

‘Then why doesn’t he just attack Agastyakootam and seize it? It’s not far from his kingdom.’

Jatayu remained silent, unsure of how much to reveal.

‘I have also heard,’ continued Sita, choosing her words carefully, ‘that, apparently, there is a shared heritage.’

‘That there may be. But every Malayaputra’s primary loyalty is to you, Lady Vishnu.’

‘I don’t doubt that. But tell me, what is this common heritage?’

Jatayu took a deep breath. He had managed to sidestep the first question, but

it seemed he would be unable to avoid this one. ‘Maharishi Vishwamitra was a prince before he became a *Brahmin Rishi*.’

‘I know that.’

‘His father, King Gaadhi, ruled the kingdom of Kannauj. Guru Vishwamitra himself was the king there for a short span of time.’

‘Yes, so I have heard.’

‘Then he decided to renounce his throne and become a Brahmin. It wasn’t an easy decision, but nothing is beyond our great Guruji. Not only did he become a Brahmin, he also acquired the title of *Maharishi*. And, he scaled great heights to reach the peak by ultimately becoming the chief of the Malayaputras.’

Sita nodded. ‘Nothing is beyond Guru Vishwamitra. He is one of the all-time greats.’

‘True,’ said Jatayu. Hesitantly, he continued. ‘So, Guru Vishwamitra’s roots are in Kannauj.’

‘But what does that have to do with Raavan?’

Jatayu sighed. ‘Most people don’t know this. It is a well-kept secret, my sister. But Raavan is also from Kannauj. His family comes from there.’



## Chapter 16

At twenty years of age, Sita may have had the energy and drive of a youngster, but her travels through much of India and the training she had received at Agastyakootam, had given her wisdom far beyond her years.

Samichi was initially intrigued by Sita's repeated trips around the country. She was told that they were for trade and diplomatic purposes. And, she believed it. Or, pretended to. As she practically governed Mithila with a free hand in the absence of the princess. But Sita was now back in Mithila and the reins of administration were back in the hands of the prime minister.

Radhika was on one of her frequent visits to Mithila.

'How are you doing, Samichi?' asked Radhika.

Sita, Radhika and Samichi were in the private chambers of the prime minister of Mithila.

'Doing very well!' smiled Samichi. 'Thank you for asking.'

'I love what you have done with the slums at the southern gate. A cesspool has transformed into a well-organised, permanent construction.'

'It would not have been possible without the guidance of the prime minister,' said Samichi with genuine humility. 'The idea and vision were hers. I just implemented it.'

'Not prime minister. Sita.'

'Sorry?'

'I have told you many times,' said Sita, 'when we are alone, you can call me by my name.'

Samichi looked at Radhika and then at Sita.

Sita rolled her eyes. 'Radhika is a friend, Samichi!'

Samichi smiled. 'Sorry. No offence meant.'

'None taken, Samichi!' said Radhika. 'You are my friend's right hand. How can I take offence at something you say?'

Samichi rose to her feet. 'If you will excuse me, Sita, I must go to the inner city. There is a gathering of the nobles that I need to attend.'

'I have heard,' said Sita, gesturing for Samichi to wait, 'that the rich are not too happy.'

'Yes,' said Samichi. 'They are richer than they used to be, since Mithila is doing well now. But the poor have improved their lot in life at a faster pace. It is no longer easy for the rich to find cheap labour or domestic help. But it's not just the rich who are unhappy. Ironically, even the poor aren't as happy as they used to be, before their lives improved. They complain even more now. They want to get richer, more quickly. With greater expectations, they have discovered higher dissatisfaction.'

'Change causes disruption ...' Sita said, thoughtfully.

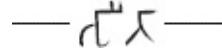
'Yes.'

'Keep me informed of the early signs of any trouble.'

'Yes, Sita,' said Samichi, before saluting and walking out of the room.

As soon as they were alone, Sita asked Radhika, 'And what else has been happening with the other Vishnu candidates?'

'Ram is progressing very well. Bharat is a little headstrong. It's still a toss-up!'



*It was late in the evening at the gurukul of Maharishi Kashyap. Five friends, all of them eight years old, were playing a game with each other. A game suitable for the brilliant students who populated this great centre of learning. An intellectual game.*

*One of the students was asking questions and the others had to answer. The questioner had a stone in his hand. He tapped it on the ground once. Then he paused. Then he tapped once again. Pause. Then two times, quickly. Pause. Three times. Pause. Five times. Pause. Eight times. Pause. He looked at his friends and asked, 'Who am I?'*

*His friends looked at each other, confused.*

*A seven-year-old boy stepped up gingerly from the back. He was dressed in rags and clearly looked out of place. 'I think the stone taps represented 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, right? That's the Pingala Series. Therefore, I am Rishi Pingala.'*

*The friends looked at the boy. He was an orphan who lived in the minuscule guard cabin of the local Mother Goddess temple. The boy was weak, suffering from malnutrition and poor health. But he was brilliant. A gurukul student named Vishwamitra had managed to convince the principal to enrol this poor orphan in the school. Vishwamitra had leveraged the power of the massive endowment that his father, the King of Kannauj, had given to the gurukul, to get*

this done.

The boys turned away from the orphan, even though his answer was correct. ‘We’re not interested in what you say, Vashishtha,’ sneered the boy who had asked the question. ‘Why don’t you go and clean the guard’s cabin?’

As the boys burst out laughing, Vashishtha’s body shrank in shame. But he stood his ground. Refusing to leave.

The questioner turned to his friends again and tapped the earth once. Then drew a circle around the spot he had tapped. Then he drew the circle’s diameter. Then, outside the circle, he tapped sharply once. Then, he placed the stone flat on the ground. Pause. Then he tapped the stone sharply again. Quickly. Eight times. ‘Who am I?’

Vashishtha immediately blurted out, ‘I know! You tapped the ground and drew a circle. That’s Mother Earth. Then you drew the diameter. Then you tapped 1-0-8 outside. What is 108 times the diameter of the Earth? The diameter of the Sun. I am the Sun God!’

The friends did not even turn to look at Vashishtha. Nobody acknowledged his answer.

But Vashishtha refused to be denied. ‘It’s from the Surya Siddhanta ... It’s the correct answer ...’

The questioner turned to face him in anger. ‘Get lost, Vashishtha!’  
A loud voice was heard. ‘Hey!’

It was Vishwamitra. He may have been only eight years old, but he was already huge. Powerful enough to scare the five boys.

‘Kaushik ...’ said the boy questioner nervously, using the gurukul name for Vishwamitra, ‘this has nothing to do with you ...’

Vishwamitra walked up to Vashishtha and held his hand. Then, he turned to the five boys. Glaring. ‘He is a student of the gurukul now. You will call him by his gurukul name. With respect.’

The questioner swallowed. Shaking in fear.

‘His gurukul name is Divodas,’ said Vishwamitra, holding Vashishtha’s hand tighter. Divodas was the name of a great ancient king. It was Vishwamitra who had selected this gurukul name for Vashishtha and then convinced the principal to make it official. ‘Say it.’

The five friends remained paralysed.

Vishwamitra stepped closer, menace oozing from every pore of his body. He had already built a reputation with his fierce temper. ‘Say my friend’s gurukul name. Say it. Divodas.’

The questioner sputtered, as he whispered, ‘Divo ... das.’

‘Louder. With respect. Divodas.’

*All five boys spoke together, ‘Divodas.’*

*Vishwamitra pulled Vashishtha towards himself. ‘Divodas is my friend. You mess with him, you mess with me.’*

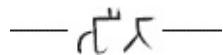
‘Guruji!’

Vashishtha was pulled back from the ancient, more than a hundred-and-forty-year-old memory. He quickly wiped his eyes. Tears are meant to be hidden.

He turned to look at Shatrughan, who was holding up a manuscript of the *Surya Siddhanta*.

*Of all the books in the entire world ... What are the odds?*

Vashishtha would have smiled at the irony. But he knew it was going to be a long discussion. The youngest prince of Ayodhya was by far the most intelligent of the four brothers. So, he looked with a serious expression at Shatrughan and said, ‘Yes, my child. What is your question?’



Sita and Radhika were meeting after a two-year gap.

Over this time, Sita had travelled through the western parts of India, all the way to Gandhar, at the base of the Hindukush mountains. While India’s cultural footprints could be found beyond these mountains, it was believed that the Hindukush, peopled by the Hindushahi Pashtuns and the brave Baloch, defined the western borders of India. Beyond that was the land of the *Mlechchas*, the *foreigners*.

‘What did you think of the lands of Anu?’ asked Radhika.

Kekaya, ruled by Ashwapati, headed the kingdoms of the Anunnaki, descendants of the ancient warrior-king, Anu. Many of the kingdoms around Kekaya, bound by Anunnaki clan ties, pledged fealty to Ashwapati. And Ashwapati, in turn, was loyal to Dashrath. Or, at least so it was publicly believed. After all, Ashwapati’s daughter, Kaikeyi, was Dashrath’s favourite wife.

‘Aggressive people,’ said Sita. ‘The Anunnaki don’t do anything by half measures. Their fire, put to good use, can help the great land of India achieve new heights. But, when uncontrolled, it can also lead to chaos.’

‘Agreed,’ said Radhika. ‘Isn’t Rajagriha beautiful?’

Rajagriha, the capital of Kekaya, was on the banks of the river Jhelum, not far from where the Chenab River merged into it. Rajagriha extended on both sides of the river. The massive and ethereally beautiful palace of its king was on the eastern bank of the Jhelum.

'It is, indeed,' said Sita. 'They are talented builders.'

'And, fierce warriors. Quite mad, too!' Radhika giggled.

Sita laughed loudly. 'True ... There is a thin dividing line between fierceness and insanity!'

Sita noted that Radhika seemed happier than usual. 'Tell me about the princes of Ayodhya.'

'Ram is doing well. My father is quite certain that Guru Vashishtha will choose him.'

'And Bharat?'

Radhika blushed slightly. And, Sita's suspicions were confirmed.

'He's growing up well too,' whispered Radhika, a dreamy look on her face.

'That well?' joked Sita.

Her crimson face a giveaway, Radhika slapped her friend on her wrists.  
'Shut up!'

Sita laughed in delight. 'By the great Lady Mohini, Radhika is in love!'

Radhika glared at Sita, but did not refute her friend.

'But what about the law ...'

Radhika's tribe was matrilineal. Women were strictly forbidden from marrying outside the tribe. Men could marry outside their tribe on condition that they would be excommunicated.

Radhika waved her hand in dismissal. 'All that is in the future. Right now, let me enjoy the company of Bharat, one of the most romantic and passionate young men that nature has ever produced.'

Sita smiled, then changed the subject. 'What about Ram?'

'Very stoic. Very, very serious.'

'Serious, is it?'

'Yes. Serious and purposeful. Relentlessly purposeful. Almost all the time. He has a strong sense of commitment and honour. Hard on others and on himself. Fiercely patriotic. In love with every corner of India. Law-abiding. Always! And not one romantic bone in his body. I am not sure he will make a good husband.'

Sita leaned back in her couch and rested her arms on the cushions. She narrowed her eyes and whispered to herself. *But he will probably make a good Vishnu.*

— rā —

A year had lapsed since the friends had last met. Her work having kept her busy, Sita had not travelled out of Mithila. She was delighted, therefore, when

Radhika returned, unannounced.

Sita embraced her warmly. But pulled back as she noticed her friend's eyes.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' said Radhika, shaking her head. Withdrawn.

Sita immediately guessed what must have happened. She held her friend's hands. 'Did he leave you?'

Radhika frowned and shook her head. 'Of course not. You don't know Bharat. He is an honourable man. In fact, he begged me not to leave him.'

*She left him?!*

'In the name of Lady Mohini, why? Forget about your tribe's silly law. If you want him then you have to fight for him ...'

'No. It's not about the laws ... I would have left the tribe if ... if I had wanted to marry him.'

'Then, what is the problem?' asked Sita.

'It wouldn't have worked out ... I know. I don't want to be a part of this "greatness project", Sita. I know Ram, Bharat, and you will do a lot for India. I also know that greatness usually comes at the cost of enormous personal suffering. That is the way it has always been. That is the way it will always be. I don't want that. I just want a simple life. I just want to be happy. I don't want to be great.'

'You are being too pessimistic, Radhika.'

'No, I am not. You can call me selfish but ...'

Sita cut in, 'I would never call you selfish. Realistic, maybe. But not selfish.'

'Then speaking realistically, I know what I am up against. I have observed my father all my life. There is a fire within him. I see it in his eyes, all the time. I see the same fire in you. And in Ram. A desire to serve Mother India. I didn't expect it initially, but now I see the same fire in Bharat's eyes. You are all the same. Even Bharat. And just like all of you, he is willing to sacrifice everything for India. I don't want to sacrifice anything. I just want to be happy. I just want to be normal ...'

'But can you be happy without him?'

Radhika's sad smile did not hide her pain. 'It would be even worse if I married him and all my hopes for happiness were tied to nagging him to give up his dreams for India and for himself. I'd eventually make him unhappy. I'd make myself unhappy as well.'

'But ...'

'It hurts right now. But time always heals, Sita. Years from now, what will remain are the bittersweet memories. More sweet, less bitter. No one can take away the memories of passion and romance. Ever. That'll be enough.'

‘You’ve really thought this through?’

‘Happiness is not an accident. It is a choice. It is in our hands to be happy. Always in our hands. Who says that we can have only one soulmate? Sometimes, soulmates want such radically different things that they end up being the cause of unhappiness for each other. Someday I will find another soulmate, one who also wants what I want. He may not be as fascinating as Bharat. Or, even as great as Bharat will be. But he will bring me what I want. Simple happiness. I will find such a man. In my tribe. Or, outside of it.’

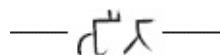
Sita gently placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

Radhika took a deep breath and shook her head. Snapping out of her blues. She had been sent to Mithila with a purpose. ‘By the way, Guru Vashishta has made his decision. So have the Vayuputras.’

‘And?’

‘It’s Ram.’

Sita took a long, satisfied breath. Then, she smiled.



Another year passed by. Sita was twenty-four years old now. She had visited the entire length of the western coast of India, the previous year. From the beaches of Balochistan all the way down to Kerala, which cradled Agastyakootam. She was finally back in Mithila, engaged in mounds of pending royal duties. Whatever little time she could spare, she spent with her younger sister, Urmila, and her father, Janak.

Kushadhwaj had not visited Mithila for a while. He wasn’t in Sankashya either. Which was strange. Sita had tried to make inquiries about his whereabouts, but had not been successful so far. What she did know was that the Sankashya administration had lost much of its efficiency after Sulochan’s death, universally believed to be the result of an unfortunate heart attack.

Sita was used to Radhika’s unexpected visits, by now. Hence, she was delighted to receive her friend, whom she was meeting after a few months.

‘How are things in your village, now that the excitement of hosting the princes of Ayodhya is gone?’

Radhika laughed. ‘It’s all right ...’

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m getting there ...’

‘And how is Ram doing in Ayodhya?’

‘He has been made the chief of police. And Bharat the chief of diplomatic relations.’

‘Hmm ... So Queen Kaikeyi still has her grip on Ayodhya. Bharat is better placed to catapult into the role of Crown Prince. The chief of police is a tough and thankless job.’

‘So it would seem. But Ram is doing exceedingly well. He has managed to bring crime under visible control. This has made him popular among the people.’

‘How did he manage that miracle?’

‘He just followed the laws. Ha!’

Sita laughed, befuddled. ‘How does Ram abiding by the law make any difference? The people also have to follow it. And, Indians will never do that. In fact, I think we enjoy breaking rules. Pointlessly. For the heck of it. One must be pragmatic when dealing with Indians. Laws must be enforced, yes. But this cannot be an end in itself. You may sometimes need to even misuse the law to achieve what you want.’

‘I disagree. Ram has shown a new way. By simply ensuring that he, too, is accountable and subject to the law. No shortcuts are available to the Ayodhyans anymore. This has electrified the common folk. If the law is above even a prince, then why not them?’

Sita leaned into her chair. ‘Interesting ...’

‘By the way,’ asked Radhika, ‘where is Guru Vishwamitra?’

Sita hesitated.

‘I am only checking because we believe Guru Vashishtha has gone to Pariha to propose Ram’s candidature as the Vishnu.’

Sita was shocked. ‘Guru Vishwamitra is in Pariha as well.’

Radhika sighed. ‘Things will soon come to a head. You better have a plan in mind to convince Guru Vishwamitra about Ram and you partnering as the Vishnus.’

Sita took a deep breath. ‘Any idea what the Vayuputras will do?’

‘I have told you already. They lean towards Guru Vashishtha. The only question is whether they will give in to Guru Vishwamitra. After all, he is the chief of the Malayaputras and the representative of the previous Vishnu.’

‘I will speak with Hanu *bhaiya*.’



## Chapter 17

‘But, *Didi*,’ pouted Urmila, keeping her voice low as she spoke to her *elder sister*, Sita, ‘why have you agreed to a *swayamvar*? I don’t want you to leave. What will I do without you?’

Urmila and Sita sat on a large, well-camouflaged wooden *machan* in a tree. Their feet dangled by the side. Sita’s bow lay within hand’s reach, next to a quiver full of arrows. The jungle was quiet and somnolent this hot afternoon. Most of the animals, it seemed, were taking a nap.

Sita smiled and pulled Urmila close. ‘I have to get married sometime, Urmila. If this is what *baba* wants, then I have no choice but to honour it.’

Urmila did not know that it was Sita who had convinced her father to arrange the *swayamvar*. The *swayamvar* was an ancient tradition where the father of the bride organised a gathering of prospective bridegrooms; and the daughter selected her husband from among the gathered men. Or mandated a competition. Sita was actively managing the arrangements. She had convinced Vishwamitra to somehow get Ram to Mithila for the *swayamvar*. An official invitation from Mithila to Ayodhya would not have gotten a response. After all, why would Ayodhya ally with a small and relatively inconsequential kingdom like Mithila? But there was no way that Ayodhya would say no to the powerful Malayaputra chief’s request just to attend the *swayamvar*. And, at the *swayamvar* itself, managed by her Guru, the great Malayaputra Vishwamitra, she could arrange to have Ram as her husband. Vishwamitra had also liked the idea. This way, he would displace Vashishtha and gain direct influence over Ram. Of course, he was unaware that Sita had other plans. Plans to work with Ram in partnership as the Vishnu.

*God bless Hanu bhaiya! What a fantastic idea.*

Urmila rested her head on Sita’s shoulder. Although a young woman now, her sheltered upbringing had kept her dependent on her elder sister. She could not imagine life without her nurturer and protector. ‘But ...’

Sita held Urmila tight. ‘You too will be married. Soon.’

Urmila blushed and turned away.

Sita heard a faint sound. She looked deep into the forest.

Sita, Samichi, and a troop of twenty policemen had come to this jungle, a day's ride from Mithila, to kill a man-eating tiger that was tormenting villagers in the area. Urmila had insisted on accompanying Sita. Five *machans* had been built in a forest clearing. Each *machan* was manned by Mithila policemen. The bait, a goat, had been tied in the open. Keeping the weather in mind, a small waterhole had also been dug, lined with waterproofing bitumen. If not the meat, perhaps the water would entice the tiger.

'Listen, *Didi*,' whispered Urmila, 'I was thinking ...'

Urmila fell silent as Sita raised a finger to her lips. Then, Sita turned around. Two policemen sat at the other end of the *machan*. Using hand signals, she gave quick orders. Silently, they crawled up to her side. Urmila moved to the back.

Sita picked up her bow and noiselessly drew an arrow from the quiver.

'Did you see something, My Lady?' whispered a policeman.

Sita shook her head to signal no. And then, cupped her ear with her left hand.

The policemen strained their ears but could not hear anything. One of them spoke in a faint voice, 'I don't hear any sound.'

Sita nocked the arrow on the bowstring and whispered, 'It's the absence of sound. The goat has stopped bleating. It is scared stiff. I bet it's not an ordinary predator that the goat has sniffed.'

The policemen drew their bows forward and nocked arrows. Quickly and quietly.

Sita thought she caught a fleeting glimpse of stripes from behind the foliage. She took a long, hard look. Slowly, she began to discern alternating brownish-orange and black stripes in the dark, shaded area behind the tree line. She focused her eyes. The stripes moved.

Sita pointed towards the movement.

The policeman noticed it as well. 'It's well-camouflaged ...'

Sita raised her hands, signalling for quiet. She held the bowstring and pulled faintly, ready to shoot at the first opportunity.

After a few excruciatingly long moments, the tiger stepped into view, inching slowly towards the waterhole. It saw the goat, growled softly and turned its attention back to the water. The goat collapsed on the ground in absolute terror, urine escaping its bladder in a rush. It closed its eyes and surrendered itself to fate. The tiger, though, did not seem interested in the petrified bait. It kept lapping up the water.

Sita pulled the bowstring back, completely.

Suddenly, there was a very soft sound from one of the *machans* to the right. The tiger looked up, instantly alert. Sita cursed under her breath. The angle wasn't right. But she knew the tiger would turn and flee in moments. She released the arrow.

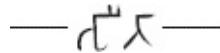
It whizzed through the clearing and slammed into the beast's shoulder. Enough to enrage, but not disable.

The tiger roared in fury. But its roar was cut short just as suddenly. An arrow shot into its mouth, lodging deep in the animal's throat. Within split seconds, eighteen arrows slammed into the big cat. Some hit an eye, others the abdomen. Three missiles thumped into its rear *bicep femoris* muscles, severing them. Its rear legs debilitated, the tiger collapsed to the ground. The Mithilans quickly reloaded their bows and shot again. Twenty more arrows pierced the severely injured beast. The tiger raised its head one last time. Sita felt the animal was staring directly at her with one uninjured eye.

*My apologies, noble beast. But it was either you or the villagers under my protection.*

The tiger's head dropped. Never to rise again.

*May your soul find purpose, once again.*



Sita, Urmila, and Samichi rode at the head of the group. The policemen rode a short distance behind. The party was headed back to the capital city.

The tiger had been cremated with due respect. Sita had made it clear to all that she did not intend to keep the skin of the animal. She was aware that the opportunity to acquire the tiger skin, a mark of a brave hunter, would have made her policemen careful with their arrows. They would not have liked the pelt damaged. That may have led to the tiger merely being injured rather than killed.

Sita's objective was clear. She wanted to save the villagers from the tiger attacks. An injured animal would have only become more dangerous for humans. Sita had to ensure that all her policemen shot to kill. So, she had made it clear to all that the tiger would be cremated.

'I understand why you gave that order, Prime Minister,' said Samichi, 'but it's sad that we cannot take the tiger skin home. It would have been a great trophy, displaying your skill and bravery.'

Sita looked at Samichi, then turned to her sister. 'Urmila, fall back please.'

Urmila immediately pulled the reins of her horse and fell behind the other two, out of earshot.

Samichi pulled her horse close to Sita's. 'I had to say that, Sita. It will encourage Urmila to brag about your bravery and ...'

Sita shook her head and interrupted Samichi. 'Propaganda and myth-making are part and parcel of ruling. I understand that. But do not spread stories that will get debunked easily. I did not exhibit any skill or bravery in that hunt.'

'But ...'

'My shot was not good. Everyone present knows that.'

'But, Sita ...'

'Every single one knows that,' repeated Sita. 'Earlier too, you gave me all the credit for the hunt. Near the policemen.'

'But you deserved the ...'

'No, I did not.'

'But ...'

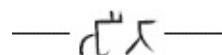
'You believe you did me a service. No, Samichi, you did not. I lost respect among those men by receiving an undeserved compliment.'

'But ...'

'Don't let your loyalty to me blind you. That is the worst thing you can do to me.'

Samichi stopped arguing. 'I'm sorry.'

Sita smiled. 'It's all right.' Then she turned to her younger sister and beckoned her. The three of them rode on, in silence.



Sita had returned from the hunt just a few days earlier. Preparations for her *swayamvar* had begun in full swing. She personally supervised most of the work, ably assisted by Samichi and her younger sister, Urmila.

Sita sat in her chamber perusing some documents, when a messenger was announced.

'Bring him in.'

Two guards marched in with the messenger in tow. She recognised the man. He was from Radhika's tribe.

Saluting smartly, the messenger handed her a rolled parchment. Sita examined the seal. It was unbroken.

She dismissed the messenger, broke the seal and read Radhika's message.

Her anger rose even before she reached the last word. But even in her rage, she did not forget what she must do. She held the parchment to a flame till every inch of it was reduced to ashes.

Task done, she walked up to the balcony to cool her mind.

*Ram ... Don't fall into Guruji's trap.*

—८—

Mithila was a few weeks away from Sita's *swayamvar*.

Sita's spirits had been uplifted by the news that Vishwamitra was on his way to Mithila. Along with the Malayaputras and the princes of Ayodhya. Her mind had been feverishly contemplating plausible excuses to cancel the *swayamvar*. In the absence of Ram, it would have been a pointless exercise.

'Sita,' said Samichi, saluting as she entered the princess' chamber.

Sita turned. 'Yes, Samichi?'

'I have some troubling news.'

'What's happened?'

'I have heard that your uncle Kushadhwaj has been invited to the *swayamvar*. In fact, he is inviting some of his friends as well. He's behaving like a joint host.'

Sita sighed. She should have guessed that her father would invite Kushadhwaj.

*Such misplaced generosity.*

On the other hand, Kushadhwaj had not visited Mithila in years. Perhaps, he had made his peace with his reduced circumstances.

'I am his niece, after all,' said Sita, shrugging her shoulders. '*Chacha* may want to demonstrate to the Sapt Sindhu royalty that he retains some influence in his elder brother's household and kingdom. Let him come.'

Samichi smiled. 'As long as the one you want also comes, right?'

'Ram is coming ... He is coming ...'

Samichi broke into a rare smile. Though she did not understand why Sita had suddenly developed an interest in Ram, and in allying with Ayodhya, she supported her princess wholeheartedly. Allying with Ayodhya, even in its weakened state, would only benefit Mithila in the long run. And, once Sita left for Ayodhya, Samichi expected to become even more powerful. Perhaps, even rule Mithila for all practical purposes.

After all, who else was there?



## Chapter 18

A nervous Samichi stood in the small clearing. The ominous sounds of the jungle added to the dread of a dark, moonless night.

Memories from the past crashed into the present. It had been so long. So many years. She had thought that she had been forgotten. Left to her own devices. After all, Mithila was a minor, insignificant kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu. She hadn't expected this. A sense of gratification meshed with the unease of the moment to altogether overwhelm her mind.

Her left hand rested on the hilt of her sheathed sword.

'Samichi, did you understand what I said?' asked the man. His gravelly voice was distinctive. The result of years of tobacco and alcohol abuse. Accompanied by uncontrolled shouting.

The man was clearly a noble. Expensive clothes. All neatly pressed. Soft, well-coiffed and completely grey hair. An array of rings on all his fingers. Jewelled pommels decorated his knife and sword. Even his scabbard was gold-plated. A thick black line, a *tilak*, plastered the middle of his wrinkled forehead.

A platoon of twenty soldiers in black uniforms stood quietly in the shadows. Out of earshot. Their swords were securely sheathed. They knew they had nothing to fear from Samichi.

She was to receive Guru Vishwamitra at Sankashya the following day. She really couldn't afford this unexpected rendezvous. Not now. She mentioned the *True Lord*, hoping it would push Akampana back.

'But, Lord Akampana ...' said Samichi uneasily, '... *Iraiva's* message ...'

'Forget everything you were told earlier,' said Akampana. 'Remember your oath.'

Samichi stiffened. 'I will never forget my oath, Lord Akampana.'

'See that you don't.' Akampana raised his hand and nonchalantly looked at his manicured nails. Perfectly cut, filed and polished. A light cream dye had been carefully painted on them. The nail on the slim pinkie finger though, had been painted black. 'So, Princess Sita's *swayamvar* will be ...'

'You don't have to repeat yourself,' interrupted Samichi. 'It will be done. It is in Princess Sita's interest as well.'

Akampana smiled. Perhaps something had gotten through Samichi's thick head after all. 'Yes, it is.'

## — ರಂಗ —

Sita sighed and lightly tapped her head. 'Silly me.'

She walked into her private *puja* room and picked up the knife. It was the day of the *astra puja*, an ancient ritual worship of weapons. And she had forgotten the knife in the *garbha griha*, at the feet of the deities, after the *puja*.

Fortunately, she had managed without the weapon today. She had always suspected that the wealthy merchant, Vijay, was more loyal to Sankashya than Mithila. Earlier that day, in the market place, he had tried to incite the crowd to attack her, when she had intervened to save a boy-thief from mob justice.

Fortunately, it had all ended well. No one had been injured. Except that stupid Vijay who would be nursing a broken rib for many weeks. She would visit the *Ayuralay* and check on him, probably in the evening or the next day. She didn't really care what happened to Vijay. But it was important to demonstrate that she cared equally for the well-being of the rich as well, and not just the poor. Even the irredeemably stupid ones among the rich.

*Where is Samichi?*

The Police and Protocol Chief was expected anytime now, escorting Guru Vishwamitra and his accompanying Malayaputras to Mithila. And, of course, Ram and Lakshman.

Suddenly, the doorman announced that Arishtanemi, the military chief of the Malayaputras, had arrived.

Sita answered loudly. 'Bring him in. With respect.'

Arishtanemi walked into the room. Sita folded her hands together in a respectful *Namaste* and bowed her head as she greeted the right-hand man of Maharishi Vishwamitra. 'Greetings, Arishtanemiji. I hope that you are comfortable in Mithila.'

'One is always comfortable in the place one looks upon as home,' smiled Arishtanemi.

Sita was surprised to not find Samichi with him. This was unorthodox. Samichi should have escorted the senior officer, with respect, to her chambers.

'My apologies, Arishtanemiji. Samichi should have led you to my chambers. I am sure that she meant no disrespect, but I will speak with her.'

'No, no,' said Arishtanemi, raising his hand reassuringly. 'I told her that I

wanted to meet you alone.'

'Of course. I hope you are satisfied with the accommodation, especially for Guru Vishwamitra and the princes of Ayodhya.'

Arishtanemi smiled. Sita had come to the point quickly. 'Guru Vishwamitra is comfortable in his usual set of rooms at the palace. But Prince Ram and Prince Lakshman have been accommodated in the Bees Quarter.'

'Bees Quarter?!' Sita was aghast.

*Has Samichi gone mad?*

Almost as if he had heard her thought, Arishtanemi said, 'Actually, Guruji himself wanted the princes to stay in there.'

Sita raised her hands in exasperation. 'Why? They are the princes of Ayodhya. Ram is the Crown Prince of the empire. Ayodhya will see this as a terrible insult. I do not want Mithila getting into any trouble because of ...'

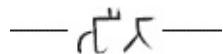
'Prince Ram does not see it as an insult,' interrupted Arishtanemi. 'He is a mature man of great understanding. We need to keep his presence in Mithila a secret, for now. And, even you must avoid meeting him for a few days.'

Sita was losing her patience. 'Secret? He has to participate in the *swayamvar*, Arishtanemiji. That's why he is here, isn't he? How can we keep this a secret?'

'There is a problem, princess.'

'What problem?'

Arishtanemi sighed. He paused for a few seconds and whispered, 'Raavan.'



'It is wise of you to have not met him till now,' said Samichi.

Sita and Samichi were in the royal section of the state armoury. A special room was reserved in this wing for the favourite personal weapons of the royalty. Sita sat on a chair, carefully oiling the *Pinaka*, the great bow of Lord Rudra.

Her conversation with Arishtanemi had upset her. Frankly, she had had her suspicions about what the Malayaputras were planning. She knew that they wouldn't go against her. She was crucial to their plans. But Ram was not.

*If only I had someone to talk to. I wish Hanu bhaiya or Radhika were here ...*

Sita looked up at Samichi and continued oiling the already gleaming *Pinaka*.

Samichi looked nervous. She seemed to be in a state of inner struggle. 'I have to tell you something. I don't care what the others say. But it is the truth, Sita. Prince Ram's life is in danger. You have to send him home, somehow.'

Sita stopped oiling the bow and looked up. 'His life has been in danger since the day he was born.'

Samichi shook her head. ‘No. I mean real danger.’

‘What exactly is unreal danger, Samichi? There is nothing that ...’

‘Please, listen to me ...’

‘What are you hiding, Samichi?’

Samichi straightened up. ‘Nothing, princess.’

‘You have been acting strange these past few days.’

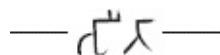
‘Forget about me. I am not important. Have I ever told you anything that is not in your interest? Please trust me. Send Prince Ram home, if you can.’

Sita stared at Samichi. ‘That’s not happening.’

‘There are bigger forces at play, Sita. And, you are not in control. Trust me. Please. Send him home before he gets hurt.’

Sita didn’t respond. She looked at the *Pinaka* and resumed oiling the bow.

*Lord Rudra, tell me what to do ...*



‘My fellow Mithilans actually clapped?’ asked Sita, eyes wide in incredulity.

Arishtanemi had just walked into Sita’s private office. With disturbing, yet expected, news. Raavan had arrived in Mithila to participate in Sita’s *swayamvar*. His *Pushpak Vimaan*, the *legendary flying vehicle*, had just landed outside the city. He was accompanied by his brother Kumbhakarna and a few key officers. His bodyguard corps of ten thousand Lankan soldiers had marched in separately and set up camp outside the city.

Sita was bemused by the news that the Mithilans had applauded the spectacle of the *Pushpak Vimaan* landing in the fields beyond the city moat.

‘Most normal human beings applaud the first time they see the *Pushpak Vimaan*, Sita,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘But that is not important. What is important is that we stop Ram from leaving.’

‘Is Ram leaving? Why? I thought he would want to prove a point to Raavan ...’

‘He hasn’t made up his mind as yet. But I’m afraid Lakshman may talk his elder brother into leaving.’

‘So, you would like me to speak with him in Lakshman’s absence.’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you ...’

‘I’ve spoken to him already. But I don’t think I had much of an impact ...’

‘Can you think of someone else who can speak to him?’

Arishtanemi shook his head. ‘I don’t think even Guru Vishwamitra will be able to convince Ram.’

‘But ...’

‘It’s up to you, Sita,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘If Ram leaves, we will have to cancel this *swayamvar*.’

‘What in Lord Rudra’s name can I tell him? He has never even met me. What do I tell him to convince him to stay?’

‘I have no idea.’

Sita laughed and shook her head. ‘Thank you.’

‘Sita ... I know it’s ...’

‘It’s okay. I’ll do it.’

*I must find a way. Some path will emerge.*

Arishtanemi seemed unusually tense. ‘There’s more, Sita ...’

‘More?’

‘The situation may be a little more complicated.’

‘How so?’

‘Ram was ... in a way ... tricked into coming here.’

‘What?’

‘He was made to understand that he was merely accompanying Guru Vishwamitra on an important mission in Mithila. Since Emperor Dashrath had commanded Ram to strictly follow Guru Vishwamitra’s orders, he could not say no ... He wasn’t informed about the fact that he was expected to participate in this *swayamvar*. Till he arrived in Mithila, that is.’

Sita was shocked. ‘You have got to be joking!’

‘But he did agree to the *swayamvar* finally, a few days ago. On the same day that you had that fight in the marketplace to save that boy-thief ...’

Sita held her head and closed her eyes. ‘I can’t believe that the Malayaputras have done this.’

‘The ends justify the means, Sita.’

‘Not when I’m expected to live with the consequences!’

‘But he did agree to participate in the *swayamvar*, eventually.’

‘That was before the arrival of Raavan, right?’

‘Yes.’

Sita rolled her eyes. *Lord Rudra help me.*



## Chapter 19

Sita and Samichi were headed for the Bees Quarter, accompanied by a bodyguard posse of ten policemen. The city was agog with the news of the appearance of Raavan, the king of Lanka and the tormentor of India; or at least, the tormentor of Indian kings. The most animated discussions were about his legendary flying vehicle, the *Pushpak Vimaan*. Even Sita's sister, Urmila, was not immune to reports about the Lankan technological marvel. She had insisted on accompanying her elder sister to see the *vimaan*.

They had marched to the end of the Bees Quarter, up to the fort walls. The *Pushpak Vimaan* was stationed beyond the city moat, just before the jungle. Even Sita was impressed by what she saw.

The *vimaan* was a giant conical craft, made of some strange unknown metal. Massive rotors were attached to the top of the vehicle, at its pointed end. Smaller rotors were attached near the base, on all sides.

'I believe,' said Samichi, 'the main rotor at the top gives the *vimaan* the ability to fly and the smaller rotors at the base are used to control the direction of flight.'

The main body of the craft had many portholes, each covered with circular metal screens.

Samichi continued. 'Apparently, the metal screens on the portholes are raised when the *vimaan* is airborne. The portholes also have a thick glass shield. The main door is concealed behind a section of the *vimaan*. Once that section swings open, the door slides sideward into the inner cabin. So the *vimaan* entrance is doubly sealed.'

Sita turned to Samichi. 'You know a lot about this *Lankan* craft.'

Samichi shook her head and smiled sheepishly. 'No, no. I just watched the *vimaan* land. That's all ...'

Thousands of Lankan soldiers were camped around the *vimaan*. Some were sleeping, others eating. But nearly a third had their weapons drawn, standing guard at strategic points in the camp. Keeping watch. Alive to any potential

threats.

Sita knew this camp security strategy: The staggered one-third plan. One third of the soldiers, working in rotating four-hour shifts, always on guard. While the others rest and recuperate.

*The Lankans don't take their security lightly.*

'How many are there?' asked Sita.

'Probably ten thousand soldiers,' said Samichi.

'Lord Rudra have mercy ...'

Sita looked at Samichi. It was a rare sight. For her friend looked genuinely nervous.

Sita placed a hand on Samichi's shoulders. 'Don't worry. We can handle this.'

## — ରତ୍ନ —

Samichi bent down and banged the hatch door on the Bees Quarter roof. Ten policemen stood at the back. Sita cast Urmila a quiet, reassuring look.

Nobody opened the door.

Samichi looked at Sita.

'Knock again,' ordered Sita. 'And harder this time.'

Samichi did as ordered.

Urmila still wasn't sure what her sister was up to. 'Didi, why are we ...'

She stopped talking the moment the hatch door swung open. Upwards.

Samichi looked down.

Lakshman stood at the head of the staircase that descended into the room. Muscular with a towering height, his gigantic form seemed to fill up the space. He was fair-complexioned and handsome in a rakish, flamboyant way. A bull of a man. He wore the coarse white clothes of common soldiers when off-duty: a military style *dhoti* and an *angvastram* tied from his shoulder to the side of his waist. Threaded *Rudraaksh* beads around his neck proudly proclaimed his loyalty to Lord Rudra.

Lakshman held his sword, ready to strike should the need arise. He looked at the short-haired, dark-skinned and muscular woman peering down at him. 'Namaste, Chief Samichi. To what do we owe this visit?' he asked gruffly.

Samichi grinned disarmingly. 'Put your sword back in the scabbard, young man.'

'Let me decide what I should or should not do. What is your business here?'

'The prime minister wants to meet your elder brother.'

Lakshman seemed taken aback. Like this was unexpected. He turned to the

back of the room, where his elder brother Ram stood. Upon receiving a signal from him, he immediately slipped his sword in its scabbard and backed up against the wall, making room for the Mithilans to enter.

Samichi descended the stairs, followed by Sita. As Sita stepped in through the door hole, she gestured behind her. ‘Stay there, Urmila.’

Lakshman instinctively looked up. To see Urmila. Ram stood up to receive the prime minister of Mithila. The two women climbed down swiftly but Lakshman remained rooted. Entranced by the vision above. Urmila had truly grown into a beautiful young lady. She was shorter than her elder sister, Sita. Also fairer. So fair that her skin was almost the colour of milk. Her round baby face was dominated by large eyes, which betrayed a sweet, childlike innocence. Her hair was arranged in a bun. Every strand neatly in place. The *kaajal* in her eyes accentuated their exquisiteness. Her lips were enhanced with some beet extract. Her clothes were fashionable, yet demure: a bright pink blouse complemented by a deep-red *dhoti* which was longer than usual — it reached below her knees. A neatly pressed *angvastram* hung from her shoulders. Anklets and toe-rings drew attention to her lovely feet, while rings and bracelets decorated her delicate hands. Lakshman was mesmerised. Urmila sensed it and smiled genially. Then looked away with shy confusion.

Sita turned and saw Lakshman looking at Urmila. Her eyes widened, just a bit.

*Urmila and Lakshman? Hmm ...*

‘Shut the door, Lakshman,’ said Ram.

Lakshman reluctantly did as ordered.

‘How may I help you, princess?’ asked Ram to Sita.

Sita turned and looked at the man she had chosen to be her husband. She had heard so much about him, for so long, that she felt like she practically knew him. So far all her thoughts about him had been based on reason and logic. She saw him as a worthy partner in the destiny of the Vishnu; someone she could work with for the good of her motherland, the country that she loved, this beautiful, matchless India.

But this was the first time she saw him as a flesh-and-blood reality. Emotion arose unasked, and occupied its seat next to reason. She had to admit the first impression was quite pleasing.

The Crown Prince of Ayodhya stood at the back of the room. Ram’s coarse white *dhoti* and *angvastram*, provided a startling contrast to his dark, flawless complexion. His nobility lent grace to the crude garments he wore. He was tall, a little taller than Sita. His broad shoulders, strong arms and lean, muscular physique were testimony to his archery training. His long hair was tied neatly

in an unassuming bun. He wore a string of *Rudraaksh* beads around his neck; a marker that he too was a fellow devotee of the great Mahadev, Lord Rudra. There was no jewellery on his person. No marker to signify that he was the scion of the powerful Suryavanshi clan, a noble descendant of the great emperor Ikshvaku. His persona exuded genuine humility and strength.

Sita smiled. *Not bad. Not bad at all.*

'Excuse me for a minute, prince,' said Sita. She looked at Samichi. 'I'd like to speak to the prince alone.'

'Of course,' said Samichi, immediately climbing out of the room.

Ram nodded at Lakshman, who also turned to leave the room. With alacrity.

Ram and Sita were alone in no time.

Sita smiled and indicated a chair in the room. 'Please sit, Prince Ram.'

'I'm all right.'

'I insist,' said Sita, as she sat down herself.

Ram sat on a chair facing Sita. A few seconds of awkward silence passed. Then Sita spoke up, 'I believe you were tricked into coming here.'

Ram did not say anything, but his eyes gave the answer away.

'Then why haven't you left?'

'Because it would be against the law.'

*So, he has decided to stay for the swayamvar. Lord Rudra and Lord Parshu Ram be praised.*

'And is it the law that will make you participate in the *swayamvar* day after tomorrow?' asked Sita.

Ram chose silence again. But Sita could tell that there was something on his mind.

'You are Ayodhya, the overlord of Sapt Sindhu. I am only Mithila, a small kingdom with little power. What purpose can possibly be served by this alliance?'

'Marriage has a higher purpose; it can be more than just a political alliance.'

Sita smiled. 'But the world seems to believe that royal marriages are meant only for political gain. What other purpose do you think they can serve?'

Ram didn't answer. He seemed to be lost in another world. His eyes had taken on a dreamy look.

*I don't think he's listening to me.*

Sita saw Ram's eyes scanning her face. Her hair. Her neck. She saw him smile. Ruefully. His face seemed to ...

*Is he blushing? What is going on? I was told that Ram was only interested in the affairs of the state.*

'Prince Ram?' asked Sita loudly.

'Excuse me?' asked Ram. His attention returned to what she was saying.

'I asked, if marriage is not a political alliance, then what is it?'

'Well, to begin with, it is not a necessity; there should be no compulsion to get married. There's nothing worse than being married to the wrong person. You should only get married if you find someone you admire, who will help you understand and fulfil your life's purpose. And you, in turn, can help her fulfil her life's purpose. If you're able to find that one person, then marry her.'

Sita raised her eyebrows. 'Are you advocating just one wife? Not many? Most people think differently.'

'Even if all people think polygamy is right, it doesn't make it so.'

'But most men take many wives; especially the nobility.'

'I won't. You insult your wife by taking another.'

Sita raised her chin in contemplation. Her eyes softened. Admiringly. Wow ... *This man is special.*

A charged silence filled the room. As Sita gazed at him, her expression changed with sudden recognition.

'Wasn't it you at the marketplace the other day?' she asked.

'Yes.'

Sita tried to remember the details. Yes. *Lakshman had been there too. Next to him. The giant who stood out. They were amongst the crowd on the other side. The onlookers. Not a part of the well-heeled mob that had wanted to lynch the poor boy-thief. I saw them as I dragged the boy away, after thrashing Vijay.* And then, she held her breath as she remembered another detail. *Hang on ... Ram was ... bowing his head to me ... But why? Or am I remembering incorrectly?*

'Why didn't you step in to help me?' asked Sita.

'You had the situation under control.'

Sita smiled slightly. *He is getting better with every moment ...*

It was Ram's turn to ask questions. 'What is Raavan doing here?'

'I don't know. But it makes the *swayamvar* more personal for me.'

Ram's muscles tightened. He was shocked. But his expression remained impassive. 'Has he come to participate in your *swayamvar*?'

'So I have been told.'

'And?'

'And, I have come here.' Sita kept the next sentence confined to her mind. *I have come for you.*

Ram waited for her to continue.

'How good are you with a bow and arrow?' asked Sita.

Ram allowed himself a faint smile.

Sita raised her eyebrows. ‘That good?’

She arose from her chair. As did Ram. The prime minister of Mithila folded her hands into a *Namaste*. ‘May Lord Rudra continue to bless you, prince.’

Ram returned Sita’s *Namaste*. ‘And may He bless you, princess.’

An idea struck Sita. ‘Can I meet with your brother and you in the private royal garden tomorrow?’

Ram’s eyes had glazed over once again. He was staring at Sita’s hands in almost loving detail. Only the Almighty or Ram himself knew the thoughts that were running through his head. For probably the first time in her life, Sita felt self-conscious. She looked at her battle-scarred hands. The scar on her left hand was particularly prominent. Her hands weren’t, in her own opinion, particularly pretty.

‘Prince Ram,’ said Sita, ‘I asked—’

‘I’m sorry, can you repeat that?’ asked Ram, bringing his attention back to the present.

‘Can I meet with you and your brother in the private royal garden tomorrow?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Good,’ said Sita, as she turned to leave. She stopped as she remembered something. She reached into the pouch tied to her waistband and pulled out a red thread. ‘It would be nice if you could wear this. It’s for good luck. It is a representation of the blessings of the *Kanyakumari*. And I would like you to ...’

Sita stopped speaking as she realised that Ram’s attention had wandered again. He was staring at the red thread and mouthing a couplet. One that was normally a part of a wedding hymn.

Sita could lip-read the words that Ram was mouthing silently, for she knew the hymn well.

*Maangalyatantunaanena bhava jeevanahetuh may.* A line from old Sanskrit, it translated into: *With this holy thread that I offer you, please become the purpose of my life ...*

She tried hard to suppress a giggle.

‘Prince Ram ...’ said Sita, loudly.

Ram suddenly straightened as the wedding hymn playing in his mind went silent. ‘I’m sorry. What?’

Sita smiled politely, ‘I was saying ...’ She stopped suddenly. ‘Never mind. I’ll leave the thread here. Please wear it if it pleases you.’

Placing the thread on the table, Sita began to climb the stairs. As she reached the door, she turned around for a last look. Ram was holding the thread in the

palm of his right hand. Gazing at it reverentially. As if it was the most sacred thing in the world.

Sita smiled once again. *This is completely unexpected ...*



## Chapter 20

Sita sat alone in her private chamber. Astonished. Pleasantly surprised.

Samichi had briefed her on the conversation between Lakshman and Urmila. Lakshman was clearly besotted with her sister. He was also, clearly, very proud of his elder brother. He simply wouldn't stop talking about Ram. Lakshman had told the duo about Ram's attitude towards marriage. It seemed that Ram did not want to marry an ordinary woman. He wanted a woman, in front of whom he would be compelled to bow his head in admiration.

Samichi had laughed, while relating this to Sita. 'Ram is like an earnest, conscientious school boy,' she had said. 'He has not grown up yet. There is not a trace of cynicism in him. Or, realism. Trust me, Sita. Send him back to Ayodhya before he gets hurt.'

Sita had listened to Samichi without reacting. But only one thing had reverberated in her mind — Ram wanted to marry a woman in front of whom he would be compelled to bow his head in admiration.

*He bowed to me ...*

She giggled. Not something she did normally. It felt strange. Even girlish ...

Sita rarely bothered about her appearance. But for some reason, she now walked to the polished copper mirror and looked at herself.

She was almost as tall as Ram. Lean. Muscular. Wheat-complexioned. Her round face a shade lighter than the rest of her body. She had high cheekbones and a sharp, small nose. Her lips were neither thin nor full. Her wide-set eyes were neither small nor large; strong brows were arched in a perfect curve above creaseless eyelids. Her straight, jet-black hair was braided and tied in a neat bun. As always.

She looked like the mountain people from the Himalayas.

Not for the first time, she wondered if the Himalayas were her original home.

She touched a battle scar on her forearm and winced. Her scars had been a source of pride. Once.

*Do they make me look ugly?*

She shook her head.

*A man like Ram will respect my scars. It's a warrior's body.*

She giggled again. She had always thought of herself as a warrior. As a princess. As a ruler. Of late, she had even gotten used to being treated by the Malayaputras as the Vishnu. But this feeling was new. She now felt like an *apsara*, a *celestial nymph* of unimaginable beauty. One who could halt *her* man in his tracks by just fluttering her eyelashes. It was a heady feeling.

She had always held these 'pretty women' in disdain and thought of them as non-serious. Not anymore.

Sita put a hand on her hip and looked at herself from the corner of her eyes.

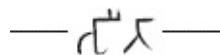
She replayed the moments spent with Ram at the Bees Quarter.

*Ram . . .*

This was new. Special. She giggled once again.

She undid her hair and smiled at her reflection.

*This is the beginning of a beautiful relationship.*



The royal garden in Mithila was modest in comparison to the one in Ayodhya. It only contained local trees, plants, and flower beds. Its beauty could safely be attributed more to the ministrations of talented gardeners than to an impressive infusion of funds. The layout was symmetrical, well-manicured. The thick, green carpet of grass thrown into visual relief by the profusion of flowers and trees of all shapes, sizes and colours. It was a celebration of Nature, expressed in ordered harmony.

Sita and Urmila waited in a clearing at the back of the garden. Sita had asked her younger sister to accompany her so that Urmila could spend more time with Lakshman. This would also give her some alone time with Ram, without the looming presence of Lakshman.

Samichi was at the gate, tasked with fetching the young princes of Ayodhya. She walked in shortly, followed by Ram and Lakshman.

*The evening sky has increased his radiance . . .* Sita quickly controlled her wandering mind and beating heart.

'*Namaste*, princess,' said Ram to Sita.

'*Namaste*, prince,' replied Sita, before turning to her sister. 'May I introduce my younger sister, Urmila?' Gesturing towards Ram and Lakshman, Sita continued, 'Urmila, meet Prince Ram and Prince Lakshman of Ayodhya.'

'I had occasion to meet her yesterday,' said Lakshman, grinning from ear to

ear.

Urmila smiled politely at Lakshman, with her hands folded in a *Namaste*, then turned towards Ram and greeted him.

‘I would like to speak with the prince privately, once again,’ said Sita.

‘Of course,’ said Samichi immediately. ‘May I have a private word before that?’

Samichi took Sita aside and whispered in her ear, ‘Sita, please remember what I said. Ram is too simple. And, his life is in real danger. Please ask him to leave. This is our last chance.’

Sita smiled politely, fully intending to ignore Samichi’s words.

Samichi cast a quick look at Ram before walking away, leading Urmila by the hand. Lakshman followed Urmila.

Ram moved towards Sita. ‘Why did you want to meet me, princess?’

Sita checked that Samichi and the rest were beyond earshot. She was about to begin speaking when her eyes fell on the red thread tied around Ram’s right wrist. She smiled.

*He has worn it.*

‘Please give me a minute, prince,’ said Sita.

She walked behind a tree, bent and picked up a long package covered in cloth. She walked back to Ram. He frowned, intrigued. Sita pulled the cloth back to reveal an intricately carved, and unusually long, bow. An exquisite piece of weaponry, it was a composite bow with recurved ends, which would give it a very long range. Ram carefully examined the carvings on the inside face of the limbs, both above and below the grip of the bow. It was the image of a flame, representative of Agni, the God of Fire. The first hymn of the first chapter of the *Rig Veda* was dedicated to the deeply revered deity. However, the shape of this flame was slightly different.

Sita pulled a flat wooden base platform from the cloth bag and placed it on the ground ceremonially. She looked at Ram. ‘This bow cannot be allowed to touch the ground.’

Ram was clearly fascinated. He wondered why this bow was so important. Sita placed the lower limb of the bow on the platform, steadyng it with her foot. She used her right hand to pull down the other end with force. Judging by the strain on her shoulder and biceps, Ram guessed that it was a very strong bow with tremendous resistance. With her left hand, Sita pulled the bowstring up and quickly strung it. She let the upper limb of the bow extend, and relaxed. She let out a long breath. The mighty bow adjusted to the constraints of the potent bowstring. She held the bow with her left hand and pulled the bowstring with her fingers, letting it go with a loud twang.

Ram knew from the sound that this bow was special. ‘Wow. That’s a good bow.’

‘It’s the best.’

‘Is it yours?’

‘I cannot own a bow like this. I am only its caretaker, for now. When I die, someone else will be deputed to take care of it.’

Ram narrowed his eyes as he closely examined the image of the flames around the grip of the bow. ‘These flames look a little like —’

Sita interrupted him, impressed that he had figured it out so quickly. ‘This bow once belonged to the one whom we both worship. It still belongs to him.’

Ram stared at the bow with a mixture of shock and awe, his suspicion confirmed.

Sita smiled. ‘Yes, it is the *Pinaka*.’

The *Pinaka* was the legendary bow of the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra. It was considered the strongest bow ever made. Believed to be a composite, it was a mix of many materials, which had been given a succession of specific treatments to arrest its degeneration. It was also believed that maintaining this bow was not an easy task. The grip, the limbs and the recurved ends needed regular lubrication with a special oil.

‘How did Mithila come into the possession of the *Pinaka*?’ asked Ram, unable to take his eyes off the beautiful weapon.

‘It’s a long story,’ said Sita. She knew she couldn’t give him the real reason. Not yet, at least. ‘But I want you to practise with it. This is the bow which will be used for the *swayamvar* competition tomorrow.’

Ram took an involuntary step back. There were many ways in which a *swayamvar* was conducted. Sometimes the bride directly selected her groom. Or, she mandated a competition. The winner married the bride. However, it was unorthodox for a groom to be given advance information and help. In fact, it was against the rules.

Ram shook his head. ‘It would be an honour to even touch the *Pinaka*, much less hold the bow that Lord Rudra himself graced with his touch. But I will only do so tomorrow. Not today.’

Sita frowned. *What? Doesn’t he want to marry me?*

‘I thought you intended to win my hand,’ said Sita.

‘I do. But I will win it the right way. I will win according to the rules.’

Sita smiled, shaking her head. *This man is truly special. Either he will go down in history as someone who was exploited by all. Or, he will be remembered as one of the greatest ever.*

Sita was happy that she had chosen to marry Ram. In a tiny corner of her

heart, though, she was worried. For she knew that this man would suffer. The world would make him suffer. And from what she knew about his life, he had suffered a lot already.

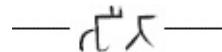
‘Do you disagree?’ asked Ram, seeming disappointed.

‘No, I don’t. I’m just impressed. You are a special man, Prince Ram.’

Ram blushed.

*He’s blushing again ...!*

‘I look forward to seeing you fire an arrow tomorrow morning,’ said Sita, smiling.



‘He refused help? Really?’ asked Jatayu, surprised.

Jatayu and Sita had met in the patch of the jungle that was now their regular meeting place. It lay towards the north of the city, as far away as possible from Raavan’s temporary camp.

‘Yes,’ answered Sita.

Jatayu smiled and shook his head. ‘He is no ordinary man.’

‘No, he isn’t. But I’m not sure whether the Malayaputras agree.’

Jatayu instinctively cast a glance around the woods, as if expecting to be heard by the formidable chief of the Malayaputras. He knew Vishwamitra did not like Ram. The Prince of Ayodhya was just a tool for the *Maharishi*; a means to an end.

‘It’s all right. The words will not carry to ...’ Sita left the name unsaid. ‘So, what do you think of Ram?’

‘He is special in many ways, my sister,’ whispered Jatayu, carefully. ‘Perhaps, just what our country needs ... His obsession with rules and honesty, his almighty love for this great land, his high expectations from everyone, including himself ...’

Sita finally asked him the question that had been weighing on her mind. ‘Is there anything I should know about the Malayaputras’ plans regarding Ram tomorrow? At the *swayamvar*?’

Jatayu remained silent. He looked distinctly nervous.

‘You have called me your sister, Jatayuji. And this is regarding my future husband. I deserve to know.’

Jatayu looked down. Struggling between his loyalty to the Malayaputras and his devotion to Sita.

‘Please, Jatayuji. I need to know.’

Jatayu straightened his back and let out a sigh. ‘You do know about the attack

on a motley bunch of *Asuras* close to our Ganga *ashram*, right?’

Vishwamitra had gone to Ayodhya and asked for Ram and Lakshman’s help in resolving a ‘serious’ military problem that he was facing. He had taken them to his *ashram* close to the Ganga River. He had then asked them to lead a contingent of his Malayaputra soldiers in an assault on a small tribe of Asuras, who were apparently, attacking his *ashram* repeatedly. It was only after the ‘Asura problem’ had been handled that they had left for Mithila, for Sita’s *swayamvar*.

‘Yes,’ said Sita. ‘Was Ram’s life in danger?’

Jatayu shook his head dismissively. ‘It was a pathetic tribe of a handful of people. They were imbeciles. Incapable warriors. Ram’s life was never in danger.’

Sita frowned, confused. ‘I don’t understand ...’

‘The idea wasn’t to get rid of Ram. It was to destroy his reputation with his most powerful supporters.’

Sita’s eyes widened as she finally unravelled the conspiracy.

‘The Malayaputras do not want him dead. They want him out of the reckoning as a potential Vishnu; and, under *their* control.’

‘Are the Malayaputras intending to ally with Raavan?’

Jatayu was shocked. ‘How can you even ask that, great Vishnu? They will never ally with Raavan. In fact, they will destroy him. But only when the time is right. Remember, the Malayaputras are loyal to one cause alone: the restoration of India’s greatness. Nothing else matters. Raavan is just a tool for them.’

‘As is Ram. As am I.’

‘No. No ... How can you even think that the Malayaputras would use you as a ...’

Sita looked at Jatayu, silently. *Perhaps Samichi is right. There are forces far beyond my control. And Ram is ...*

Jatayu interrupted Sita’s thoughts and unwittingly gave her a clue as to what she should do. ‘Remember, great Vishnu. You are too crucial to the Malayaputras’ plans. They cannot allow anything to happen to you. No harm can come to you.’

Sita smiled. Jatayu had given her the answer. She knew what she must do.



## Chapter 21

‘Do I know all there is to know about the Malayaputras’ plans for the *swayamvar*, Arishtanemiji?’ asked Sita.

Arishtanemi was surprised by the question.

‘I don’t understand, Sita,’ he said, carefully.

‘How did Raavan get an invitation?’

‘We are as clueless as you, Sita. You know that. We suspect it to be the handiwork of your uncle. But there is no proof.’

Sita looked sceptical. ‘Right ... No proof.’

Arishtanemi took a deep breath. ‘Why don’t you say what is on your mind, Sita ...’

Sita leaned forward, looked directly into Arishtanemi’s eyes, and said, ‘I know that Raavan’s family has its roots in Kannauj.’

Arishtanemi winced. But recovered quickly. He shook his head, an injured expression on his face. ‘In the name of the great Lord Parshu Ram, Sita. How can you think such thoughts?’

Sita was impassive.

‘You think Guru Vishwamitra has any other identity now, besides being the chief of the Malayaputras? Seriously?’

Arishtanemi looked a little agitated. It was uncharacteristic of him. Sita knew she had hit a nerve. She could not have had a conversation like this with Vishwamitra. She needed to press home the advantage. Arishtanemi was one of the rare few who could convince Vishwamitra. She unnerved him further by choosing silence. For now.

‘We can destroy Raavan at any time,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘We keep him alive because we plan to use his death to help you. To help you be recognised, by all Indians, as the Vishnu.’

‘I believe you.’

Now, Arishtanemi fell silent. Confused.

‘And I also know that you have plans for Ram.’

‘Sita, listen to ...’

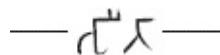
Sita interrupted Arishtanemi. It was time to deliver the threat. ‘I may not have Ram’s life in my hands. But I do have my own life in my hands.’

A shocked Arishtanemi did not know what to say. All the plans would be reduced to dust without Sita. They had invested too much in her.

‘I have chosen,’ said Sita firmly. ‘Now you need to decide what to do.’

‘Sita ...’

‘I have nothing more to say, Arishtanemiji.’



The *swayamvar* was held in the Hall of Dharma instead of the royal court. This was simply because the royal court was not the biggest hall in Mithila. The main building in the palace complex, which housed the Hall of Dharma, had been donated by King Janak to the Mithila University. The hall hosted regular debates and discussions on various esoteric topics — the nature of dharma, karma’s interaction with dharma, the nature of the divine, the purpose of the human journey ...

The Hall of Dharma was in a circular building, built of stone and mortar, with a massive dome. The delicate elegance of the dome was believed to represent the feminine, while the typical temple spire represented the masculine. The hall was also circular. All *rishis* sat as equals, without a moderating ‘head’, debating issues openly and without fear; freedom of expression at its zenith.

However, today was different. The Hall of Dharma was set to host a *swayamvar*. Temporary three-tiered spectator stands stood near the entrance. At the other end, on a wooden platform, was placed the king’s throne. A statue of the great King Mithi, the founder of Mithila, stood on a raised pedestal behind the throne. Two thrones, only marginally less grand, were placed to the left and right of the king’s throne. A circle of comfortable seats lined the middle section of the great hall, where kings and princes, the potential suitors, would sit. The spectator stands were already packed when Ram and Lakshman were led in by Arishtanemi. Most contestants too had taken their seats. Few recognised the two princes of Ayodhya, dressed as hermits. A guard gestured for them to move towards the base platform of a three-tiered stand, occupied by the nobility and rich merchants of Mithila.

Arishtanemi informed the guard that he was accompanying a competitor. The guard was surprised. He had recognised Arishtanemi, the lieutenant of the great Vishwamitra, but not Ram and Lakshman. But he stepped aside to let them

proceed. After all, it would not be unusual for the devout King Janak to invite even Brahmin *rishis*, not just Kshatriya kings, for his daughter's *swayamvar*.

Ram followed Arishtanemi to the allotted seat. He seated himself, as Lakshman and Arishtanemi stood behind him. All eyes turned to them. Many contestants wondered who these simple mendicants were, who hoped to compete with them for Princess Sita's hand. A few, though, recognised the princes of Ayodhya. A conspiratorial buzz was heard from a section of the contestants.

'Ayodhya ...'

'Why does Ayodhya want an alliance with Mithila?'

Ram, however, was oblivious to the stares and whispers of the assembly.

He looked towards the centre of the hall; to the *Pinaka* bow placed on a table. The legendary bow was unstrung. An array of arrows placed by its side. Next to the table, at ground level, was a large copper-plated basin.

A competitor was first required to pick up the bow and string it. Itself no mean task. Then he would move to the copper-plated basin. It was filled with water, with additional drops trickling in steadily into the basin through a thin tube. Excess water was drained out by another thin tube, attached to the other side. This created subtle ripples within the bowl, spreading out from the centre towards the edge. Troublingly, the drops of water were released at irregular intervals, making the ripples unpredictable.

A *hilsa* fish was nailed to a wheel, fixed to an axle that was suspended from the top of the dome. A hundred metres above the ground. The wheel, thankfully, revolved at a constant speed.

The contestant was required to look at the reflection of the fish in the unstill water below, disturbed by ripples generated at irregular intervals, and use the *Pinaka* bow to fire an arrow into the eye of the fish, fixed on the revolving wheel high above. The first to succeed would win the hand of the bride.

Sita sat in a room on the second floor adjoining the Hall of Dharma, directly above the royal Mithilan thrones, hidden behind a latticed window. She looked at Ram, seated in the circle of contestants.

The eldest prince of Ayodhya looked around. Sita felt as though he was seeking her out. She smiled. 'I'm here, Ram. I'm waiting for you. Waiting for you to win ...'

She noticed Samichi standing with a posse of policemen a short distance from the entrance. Samichi was staring at Ram. She looked up at the latticed window where Sita sat hidden from view. She had a look of utter disapproval.

Sita sighed with irritation. *Samichi needs to relax. I can handle the situation. Ram's life is not in danger.*

She turned her attention back to the princes of Ayodhya. She saw Lakshman bend close to his elder brother and whisper something. The expression on his face mischievous. Ram looked at his brother and glared. Lakshman grinned, said something more, and stepped back.

Sita smiled. *The brothers really love each other. Surprising, given the politics of their family.*

Her attention was drawn away by the court announcer.

‘The Lord of the Mithi clan, the wisest of the wise, beloved of the *rishis*, King Janak!’

The court arose to welcome their host, Janak, the king of Mithila. He walked in from the far end of the hall. In a deviation from courtly tradition, he followed the great Malayaputra chief, Vishwamitra, who was in the lead. Janak had always honoured men and women of knowledge. He followed his own personal tradition on this special day as well. Behind Janak was his younger brother, Kushadhwaj, the king of Sankashya. Those aware of the strained relations between Janak and his younger brother, were impressed by the graciousness of the king of Mithila. He had let bygones be bygones and included the entire extended family in this celebration. Unfortunately, Kushadhwaj felt otherwise. He felt his brother had been naive as usual. Besides, Kushadhwaj had just played his own cards ...

Janak requested Vishwamitra to occupy the main throne of Mithila, as he moved towards the smaller throne to the right. Kushadhwaj walked towards the seat on the left of the great *Maharishi*. This was exactly two floors below the room Sita was in, hidden behind a latticed window. A flurry of officials scuttled all over the place, for this was an unexpected breach of protocol. The king had offered his own throne to another.

A loud buzz ran through the hall at this unorthodox seating arrangement, but Sita was distracted by something else.

*Where is Raavan?*

She smiled.

*So the Malayaputras have handled the king of Lanka. He won’t be coming. Good.*

The court crier banged his staff against the large bell at the entrance of the hall, signalling a call for silence.

Vishwamitra cleared his throat and spoke loudly. The superb acoustics of the Hall of Dharma carried his voice clearly to all those present. ‘Welcome to this august gathering called by the wisest and most spiritual of rulers in India, King Janak.’

Janak smiled genially.

Vishwamitra continued. ‘The princess of Mithila, Sita, has decided to make this a *gupt swayamvar*. She will not join us in the hall. The great kings and princes will, on her bidding, compete —’

The *Maharishi* was interrupted by the ear-splitting sounds of numerous conch shells; surprising, for conch shells were usually melodious and pleasant. Everyone turned to the source of the sound: the entrance of the great hall. Fifteen tall, muscular warriors strode into the room holding black flags, with the image of the head of a roaring lion emerging from a profusion of fiery flames. The warriors marched with splendid discipline.

Behind them were two formidable men. One was a giant, even taller than Lakshman. He was corpulent but muscular, with a massive potbelly that jiggled with every step. His whole body was unusually hirsute — he looked more like a giant bear than human. Most troubling for all those present, were the strange outgrowths on his ears and shoulders. He was a Naga. He was also Raavan’s younger brother, Kumbhakarna.

Walking proudly beside him was Raavan, his head held high. He moved with a minor stoop; perhaps a sign of advancing age. Despite the stoop, Raavan’s great height and rippling musculature were obvious. The muscles may have sagged a bit and the skin may have wrinkled, but the strength that remained in them was palpable. His battle-worn, swarthy skin was pockmarked, probably by a childhood disease. A thick beard, with an equal sprinkling of black and white hair, valiantly attempted to cover his ugly marks while a handlebar moustache set off his menacing features. He was wearing a violet-coloured *dhoti* and *angvastram*; only the most expensive colour-dye in the world. His headgear was intimidating, with two threatening six-inch-long horns reaching out from the top on either side.

Fifteen more warriors followed the two men.

Raavan’s entourage moved to the centre and halted next to the bow of Lord Rudra. The lead bodyguard made a loud announcement. ‘The king of kings, the emperor of emperors, the ruler of the three worlds, the beloved of the Gods, Lord Raavan!’

Raavan turned to a minor king who sat closest to the *Pinaka*. He made a soft grunting sound and flicked his head to the right, a casual gesture which clearly communicated what he expected. The king immediately rose and scurried away, coming to a standstill behind another competitor. Raavan walked to the chair, but did not sit. He placed his right foot on the seat and rested his hand on his knee. His bodyguards, including the giant bear-like Kumbhakarna, fell in line behind him.

Raavan finally cast a casual glance at Vishwamitra. ‘Continue, great

Malayaputra.'

Vishwamitra, the chief of the Malayaputras, was furious. He had never been treated so disrespectfully. 'Raavan ...' he growled.

Raavan stared at Vishwamitra with lazy arrogance.

The *Maharishi* managed to rein in his temper; he had an important task at hand. He would deal with Raavan later. 'Princess Sita has decreed the sequence in which the great kings and princes will compete.'

Raavan began to walk towards the *Pinaka* while Vishwamitra was still speaking. The chief of the Malayaputras completed his announcement just as Raavan was about to reach for the bow. 'The first man to compete is not you, Raavan. It is Ram, the prince of Ayodhya.'

Raavan's hand stopped a few inches from the bow. He looked at Vishwamitra, and then turned around to see who had responded to the sage. He saw a young man, dressed in the simple white clothes of a hermit. Behind him stood another young, though gigantic, man, next to whom was Arishtanemi.

Raavan glared first at Arishtanemi, and then at Ram. If looks could kill, Raavan would have certainly felled a few today. He turned towards Vishwamitra, Janak, and Kushadhwaj, his fingers wrapped around the macabre finger-bones pendant that hung around his neck. His body was shaking in utter fury. He growled in a loud and booming voice, 'I have been insulted! Why was I invited at all if you planned to make unskilled boys compete ahead of me?!"

Janak looked at Kushadhwaj before turning to Raavan and interjecting weakly, 'These are the rules of the *swayamvar*, Great King of Lanka ...'

A voice that sounded more like the rumble of thunder was finally heard. The voice of Kumbhakarna. 'Enough of this nonsense!' He turned towards Raavan, his *elder brother*. 'Dada, let's go.'

Raavan suddenly bent and picked up the *Pinaka*. Before anyone could react, he had strung it and nocked an arrow on the string. Everyone sat paralysed as he pointed the arrow directly at Vishwamitra.

Vishwamitra stood up, threw his *angvastram* aside, and banged his chest with his closed fist. 'Shoot, Raavan!' The sage's voice resounded in the great hall. 'Come on! Shoot, if you have the guts!'

The crowd gasped collectively. In horror.

Sita was shocked beyond words. *Guruji!*

Raavan released the arrow. It slammed into the statue of Mithi behind Vishwamitra, breaking off the nose of the ancient king, the founder of Mithila. An unimaginable insult.

Sita was livid. *How dare he?*

'Raavan!' growled Sita, as she got up and whirled around, simultaneously

reaching for her sword. She was stopped by her Mithilan maids, who held her back from rushing towards the stairs.

‘No, Lady Sita!’

‘Raavan is a monster ...’

‘You will die ...’

‘Look, he’s leaving ...’ said another maid.

Sita rushed back to the latticed window. She saw Raavan throw the bow, the holy *Pinaka*, on the table and begin to walk towards the door. He was followed by his guards. In all this commotion, Kumbhakarna quickly stepped up to the table, unstrung the *Pinaka*, and reverentially brought it to his head. Holding it with both hands. Almost like he was apologising to the bow. Placing the *Pinaka* back on the table, he turned around and briskly walked out of the hall. Behind Raavan.

As the last of the Lankans exited, the people within the hall turned in unison from the doorway to those seated at the other end of the room: Vishwamitra, Janak and Kushadhwaj.

Vishwamitra spoke as if nothing had happened. ‘Let the competition begin.’

The people in the room sat still, as if they had turned to stone. *En masse*. Vishwamitra spoke once again, louder this time. ‘Let the competition begin. Prince Ram, please step up.’

Ram rose from his chair and walked up to the *Pinaka*. He bowed with reverence and folded his hands together into a *Namaste*. Sita thought she saw his lips move in a chant. But she couldn’t be sure from the distance.

He raised his right wrist and touched both his eyes with the red thread tied around it.

Sita smiled. *May the Kanyakumari bless you, Ram. And, may she bless me with your hand in marriage.*

Ram touched the bow and tarried a while. He then brought his head down and placed it on the bow; as if asking to be blessed by the great weapon. He breathed steadily as he lifted the bow with ease. Sita looked at Ram intently. With bated breath.

Ram placed one arm of the bow on a wooden stand placed on the ground. His shoulders, back and arms strained visibly as he pulled down the upper limb of the *Pinaka*, simultaneously pulling up the bowstring. His body laboured at the task. But his face was serene. He bent the upper limb farther with a slight increase in effort, and tied the bowstring. His muscles relaxed as he let go of the upper limb and held the bow at the grip. He brought the bowstring close to his ear and plucked; his expression showed that the twang was right.

He picked up an arrow and walked to the copper-plated basin. Deliberate

footsteps. Unhurried. He went down on one knee and held the bow horizontally above his head. He looked down at the water. At the reflection of the fish that moved in a circle above him. The rippling water in the basin danced as if to tantalise his mind. Ram focused on the image of the fish to the exclusion of all else. He nocked the arrow on the string of the bow and pulled slowly with his right hand. His back erect. The core muscles activated with ideal tension. His breathing steady and rhythmic.

Calmly, without any hint of nervousness or anxiety, he pulled the string all the way back and released the arrow. It shot up. As did the vision of each person in the room. The unmistakable sound of a furiously speeding arrow crashing into wood reverberated in the great hall. It had pierced the right eye of the fish, and lodged itself into the wooden wheel. The wheel swirled rhythmically as the shaft of the arrow drew circles in the air.

Sita smiled in relief. All the tension of the last few days was forgotten. The anger of the last few minutes, forgotten. Her eyes were pinned on Ram, who knelt near the basin with his head bowed, studying the rippling water; a calm smile on his face.

A part of Sita that had died years ago, when she had lost her mother, slowly sputtered to life once again.

*I am not alone anymore.*

She felt a bittersweet ache as she thought of her mother. That she wasn't around to see Sita find her man.

For the first time since her mother's death, she could think of her without crying.

Grief overwhelms you when you are alone. But when you find your soulmate, you can handle anything.

What was a painful, unbearable memory had now been transformed into bittersweet nostalgia. A source of sadness, yes. But also, a source of strength and happiness.

She pictured her mother standing before her. Smiling. Nurturing. Warm. Maternal. Like Mother Nature herself.

Sita was whole once again.

After a long, long time, she felt like whispering words that lay buried deep in her consciousness. Words that she thought she would have no use for once her mother had died.

She looked at Ram in the distance and whispered, 'I love you.'



## Chapter 22

‘Thank you, Arishtanemiji,’ said Sita. ‘The Malayaputras stood by me. Guruji put his own life at risk. I am grateful.’

It had been announced that the wedding of Ram and Sita would be carried out in a simple set of rituals that very afternoon. To Ram’s surprise, Sita had suggested that Lakshman and Urmila get married in the same auspicious hour of the day. To Ram’s further disbelief, Lakshman had enthusiastically agreed. It was decided that while both the couples would be wed in Mithila — to allow Sita and Urmila to travel with Ram and Lakshman to Ayodhya — a set of grand ceremonies would be held in Ayodhya as well. Befitting the descendants of the noble Ikshvaku.

In the midst of the preparations for the wedding ceremonies, Arishtanemi had sought a meeting with Sita.

‘I hope this puts to rest any suspicions about where the Malayaputra loyalties lie,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘We have always been, and always will be, with the Vishnu.’

*You will be with the Vishnu only as long as I do what you want me to do. Not when I do something that does not fit in with your plans.*

Sita smiled. ‘My apologies for having doubted you, Arishtanemiji.’

Arishtanemi smiled. ‘Misunderstandings can occur within the closest of families. All’s well that ends well.’

‘Where is Guru Vishwamitra?’

‘Where do you think?’

*Raavan.*

‘How is the demon king taking it?’ asked Sita.

Vishwamitra had gone out on a limb to aggressively stop Raavan during the *swayamvar*. The King of Lanka had felt insulted. There could be consequences. Raavan’s almighty ego was as legendary as his warrior spirit and cruelty. But would he take on the formidable Malayaputras?

Arishtanemi looked down thoughtfully before returning his gaze to Sita.

‘Raavan is a cold and ruthless man, who makes decisions based on hard calculations. But his ego ... His ego gets in the way sometimes.’

‘Cold and ruthless calculations would tell him not to take on the Malayaputras,’ said Sita. ‘He needs whatever it is we give him from the cavern of the Thamiravaruni.’

‘That he does. But like I said, his ego may get in the way. I hope Guru Vishwamitra can handle it.’

Arishtanemi was astonished that Sita had not uncovered the entire secret of the aid that the Malayaputras provided Raavan. Perhaps, there were some things beyond even the redoubtable Sita’s abilities. But he kept his surprise from showing on his face.

## —rūk—

The two weddings were simple sets of rituals, concluded quickly in the afternoon of the day of the *swayamvar*.

Sita and Ram were alone at last. They sat on floor cushions in the dining hall, their dinner placed on a low stool. It was late in the evening, the sixth hour of the third *prahar*. Notwithstanding their relationship being sanctified by dharma a few hours earlier, an awkwardness underlined their ignorance of each other’s personalities.

‘Umm,’ said Ram, staring at his plate.

‘Yes, Ram?’ asked Sita. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘I’m sorry, but ... the food ...’

‘Is it not to your liking?’

‘No, no, it’s good. It’s very good. But ...’

Sita looked into Ram’s eyes. *I am your wife. You can be honest with me. I haven’t made the food in any case.*

But she kept these thoughts in her head and asked, ‘Yes?’

‘It needs a bit of salt.’

Sita was irritated with the Mithila royal cook. *Daya! I’d told him that the central Sapt Sindhuans eat more salt than us Easterners!*

She pushed her plate aside, rose and clapped her hands. An attendant rushed in. ‘Get some salt for the prince, please.’ As the attendant turned, Sita ordered, ‘Quickly!’

The attendant broke into a run.

Ram cleaned his hand with a napkin as he waited for the salt. ‘I’m sorry to trouble you.’

Sita frowned as she took her seat. ‘I’m your wife, Ram. It’s my duty to take

care of you.'

*He's so awkward ... and cute ...*

Ram smiled. 'Umm, may I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'Tell me something about your childhood.'

'You mean, before I was adopted? You do know that I was adopted, right?'

'Yes ... I mean, you don't have to talk about it if it troubles you.'

Sita smiled. 'No, it doesn't trouble me, but I don't remember anything. I was too young when I was found by my adoptive parents.'

Ram nodded.

*Will you also judge me by my birth?*

Sita answered the question that she thought was on Ram's mind. 'So, if you ask me who my birth-parents are, the short answer is that I don't know. But the one I prefer is that I am a daughter of the earth.'

'Birth is completely unimportant. It is just a means of entry into this world of action, into this *karmabhoomi*. Karma is all that matters. And your karma is divine.'

Sita smiled. She was charmed by her husband's ability to constantly surprise her. Positively surprise her. *I can see what Maharishi Vashishtha sees in him. He is special ...*

Ram was about to say something when the attendant came rushing in with the salt. He added some to his food and resumed eating. The attendant retreated from the room.

'You were saying something,' said Sita.

'Yes,' said Ram, 'I think that ...'

Ram was interrupted again, this time by the doorkeeper announcing loudly, 'The chief of the Malayaputras, the *Saptrishi Uttradhikari*, the protector of the way of the Vishnus, Maharishi Vishwamitra.'

Sita was surprised. *Why is Guruji here?*

She looked at Ram. He shrugged. He did not know what this visit was about. Ram and Sita rose as Vishwamitra entered the room, followed by Arishtanemi. Sita gestured to her attendant to get some washing bowls for Ram and herself.

'We have a problem,' said Vishwamitra, not feeling the need to exchange pleasantries.

Sita cursed under her breath. *Raavan ...*

'What happened, Guruji?' asked Ram.

'Raavan is mobilising for an attack.'

'But he doesn't have an army,' said Ram. 'What's he going to do with ten thousand bodyguards? He can't hold a city of even Mithila's size with that

number. All he'll achieve is getting his men killed in battle.'

'Raavan is not a logical man,' said Vishwamitra. 'His ego is hurt. He may lose his bodyguard corps, but he will wreak havoc on Mithila.'

Ram looked at his wife.

Sita shook her head with irritation and addressed Vishwamitra. 'Who in Lord Rudra's name invited that demon for the *swayamvar*? I know it was not my father.'

Vishwamitra took a deep breath as his eyes softened. 'That's water under the bridge, Sita. The question is, what are we going to do now?'

'What is your plan, Guruji?' asked Ram.

'I have with me some important material that was mined at my *ashram* by the Ganga. I needed it to conduct a few science experiments at Agastyakootam. This was why I had visited my *ashram*.'

'Science experiments?' asked Ram.

'Yes, experiments with the *daivi astras*.'

Sita drew a sharp breath. She knew the power and ferocity of the *divine weapons*. 'Guruji, are you suggesting that we use *daivi astras*?'

Vishwamitra nodded in confirmation. Ram spoke up. 'But that will destroy Mithila as well.'

'No, it won't,' said Vishwamitra. 'This is not a traditional *daivi astra*. What I have is the *Asuraastra*.'

'Isn't that a biological weapon?' asked Ram. Deeply troubled now.

'Yes. Poisonous gas and a blast wave from the *Asuraastra* will incapacitate the Lankans, paralysing them for days on end. We can easily imprison them in that state and end this problem.'

'Just paralyse, Guruji?' asked Ram. 'I have learnt that in large quantities, the *Asuraastra* can kill as well.'

Vishwamitra knew that only one man could have possibly taught this to Ram. His best friend-turned-foe, Vashishtha. The Chief of the Malayaputras was immediately irritated. 'Do you have any better ideas?'

Ram fell silent.

Sita looked at Ram and then at Vishwamitra. *I know exactly what Guruji is trying to do.*

'But what about Lord Rudra's law?' asked Sita, a little aggressively.

It was well known that Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev, had banned the unauthorised use of *daivi astras* many centuries ago. Those who broke the law would be punished with banishment for fourteen years, he had decreed. Breaking the law for the second time would be punishable by death.

The Vayuputras would be compelled to enforce the Mahadev's law.

‘I don’t think that law applies to the use of the *Asurastra*,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘It is not a weapon of mass destruction, just mass incapacitation.’

Sita narrowed her eyes. Clearly, she wasn’t convinced. ‘I disagree. A *daivi astra* is a *daivi astra*. We cannot use it without the authorisation of the Vayuputras, Lord Rudra’s tribe. I am a Lord Rudra devotee. I will not break his law.’

‘Do you want to surrender, then?’

‘Of course not! We will fight!’

Vishwamitra laughed derisively. ‘Fight, is it? And who, please explain, will fight Raavan’s hordes? The namby-pamby intellectuals of Mithila? What is the plan? Debate the Lankans to death?’

‘We have our police force,’ said Sita, annoyed at this disrespect shown to her force.

‘They’re not trained or equipped to fight the troops of Raavan.’

‘We are not fighting his troops. We are fighting his bodyguard platoons. My police force is enough for them.’

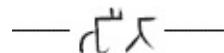
‘They are not. And you know that.’

‘We will not use the *daivi astras*, Guruji,’ said Sita firmly, her face hardening.

Ram spoke up. ‘Samichi’s police force is not alone. Lakshman and I are here, and so are the Malayaputras. We’re inside the fort, we have the double walls; we have the lake surrounding the city. We can hold Mithila. We can fight.’

Vishwamitra turned to Ram with a sneer. ‘Nonsense! We are vastly outnumbered. The double walls ...’ He snorted with disgust. ‘It seems clever. But how long do you think it will take a warrior of Raavan’s calibre to figure out a strategy that works around that obstacle?’

‘We will not use the *daivi astras*, Guruji,’ said Sita, raising her voice. ‘Now, if you will excuse me, I have a battle to prepare for.’



‘Where is Samichi?’ asked Sita, surprised that the Mithila Chief of Police and Protocol was not in her office.

The sun had already set. Sita was marshalling her forces for an expected attack from Raavan. She did not think the demon king of Lanka would honour the rules of war. It was quite likely that he would attack at night. Time was of the essence.

‘My Lady,’ said an officer. ‘We don’t know where she has gone. She left

immediately after your wedding ceremony.'

'Find her. Tell her to come to the fort walls. The Bees Quarter.'

'Yes, My Lady.'

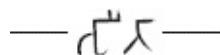
'Right now!' ordered Sita, clapping her hands. As the officer hurried out, Sita turned to the others. 'Round up all the officers in the city. Get them to the Bees Quarter. To the inner wall.'

As the policemen rushed out, Sita walked out of her office to meet her personal bodyguards — the Malayaputras embedded in the Mithila police force. She checked to see if they were out of earshot. Then, she whispered to Makrant, a guard she had come to trust. 'Find Captain Jatayu. Tell him that I want all of you to protect the eastern secret tunnel on our inner wall. He knows where it is. Preferably, find a way to collapse that tunnel.'

'My Lady, do you expect Raavan to ...'

'Yes, I do,' interrupted Sita. 'Block that tunnel. Block it within the hour.'

'Yes, My Lady.'



'I cannot do that!' hissed Samichi, looking around to ascertain that nobody was near.

Akampana, unlike his usual well-groomed self, was dishevelled. The clothes, though expensive, were rumpled. Some of the rings on his fingers were missing. The knife lay precariously in the scabbard, the blood-stained blade partly exposed. Samichi was shocked. This was an Akampana she did not know. Crazed and violent.

'You must do as ordered,' growled Akampana softly.

Samichi glared angrily at the ground. She knew she had no choice. Because of what had happened all those years ago ...

'Princess Sita cannot be hurt.'

'You are in no position to make demands.'

'Princess Sita cannot be hurt!' snarled Samichi. 'Promise me!'

Akampana held his fists tight. His fury at breaking point.

'Promise me!'

Despite his anger, Akampana knew they needed Samichi if they were to succeed. He nodded.

Samichi turned and hurried off.



## Chapter 23

It was late at night; the fourth hour of the fourth *prahar*. Ram and Sita had been joined by Lakshman and Samichi on top of the Bees Quarter, close to the inner wall edge. The entire Bees Quarter complex had been evacuated as a precautionary step. The pontoon bridge that spanned the moat-lake had been destroyed.

Mithila had a force of four thousand policemen and policewomen. Enough to maintain law and order for the hundred thousand citizens of the small kingdom. But against the Lankans, they were outnumbered five to two. Would they be able to thwart an attack from the Lankan bodyguards of Raavan?

Sita believed they could. A cornered animal fights back ferociously. The Mithilans were not fighting for conquest. Or wealth. Or ego. They were fighting for their lives. Fighting to save their city from annihilation. And this was not a traditional war being fought on open ground. The Mithilans were behind defensive walls; double walls in fact; a war-battlement innovation that had rarely been tried in other forts in the recent past. The Lankan generals were unlikely to have war-gamed this scenario. A lower ratio of soldiers was not such a huge disadvantage with this factor thrown in.

Ram and Sita had abandoned efforts to secure the outer wall. They wanted Raavan and his soldiers to scale it and launch an assault on the inner wall; the Lankans would, then, be trapped between the two walls, which the Mithilan arrows would convert into a killing field. They expected a volley of arrows from the other side too. In preparation for which the police had been asked to carry their wooden shields, normally used for crowd control within Mithila. Lakshman had quickly taught them some basic manoeuvres to protect themselves from the arrows.

‘Where are the Malayaputras?’ asked Lakshman.

Sita looked around, but did not answer. She knew the Malayaputras would not abandon her. She hoped they were carrying out last-minute parleys, laced with adequate threats and bribes, to convince the Lankans to back off.

Ram whispered to Lakshman, ‘I think it’s just us.’

Lakshman shook his head and spat, saying loudly, ‘Cowards.’

Sita did not respond. She had learnt in the last few days that Lakshman was quite hot-headed. And she needed his short temper in the battle that was to follow.

‘Look!’ said Samichi.

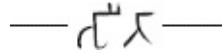
Sita and Lakshman turned in the direction that Samichi had pointed.

Torches lined the other side of the moat-lake that surrounded the outer wall of Mithila. Raavan’s bodyguards had worked feverishly through the evening, chopping down trees from the forest and building rowboats to carry them across the lake.

Even as they watched, the Lankans began to push their boats into the moat-lake. The assault on Mithila was being launched.

‘It’s time,’ said Sita.

‘Yes,’ said Ram. ‘We have maybe another half hour before they hit our outer wall.’



Conch shells resounded through the night, by now recognised as the signature sound of Raavan and his men. As they watched in the light of the flickering flames of torches, the Lankans propped giant ladders against the outer walls of Mithila.

‘They are here,’ said Ram.

Sita turned to her messenger and nodded.

Messages were relayed quickly down the line to the Mithila police-soldiers. Sita expected a shower of arrows from Raavan’s archers. The Lankans would fire their arrows only as long as their soldiers were outside the outer wall. The shooting would stop the moment the Lankans climbed over. The archers would not risk hitting their own men.

A loud whoosh heralded the release of the arrows.

‘Shields!’ shouted Sita.

The Mithilans immediately raised their shields. Ready for the Lankan arrows that were about to rain down on them.

Sita’s instincts kicked in. *Something’s wrong with the sound. It’s too strong even for thousands of arrows. Something much larger has been fired.*

Hiding behind her shield, she looked at Ram. She sensed that he too was troubled.

Their instincts were right.

Huge missiles rammed through the Mithilan defences with massive force. Desperate cries of agony along with sickening thuds were heard as shields were ripped through. Many in the Mithilan ranks were brought down in a flash.

‘What is that?’ screamed Lakshman, hiding behind his shield.

Sita saw Ram’s wooden shield snap into two pieces as a missile tore through it like a hot knife through butter. It missed him by a hair’s breadth.

*Spears!*

Their wooden shields were a protection against arrows, not large spears.

*How can spears be flung to this distance?!*

The first volley was over. Sita knew they had but a few moments before the next one. She lowered her shield and looked around, just as Ram did.

She heard Ram exclaim, ‘Lord Rudra, be merciful ...’

The destruction was severe. At least a quarter of the Mithilans were either dead or heavily injured, impaled on massive spears that had brutally ripped through their shields and bodies.

Ram looked at Sita. ‘Another volley will be fired any moment! Into the houses!’

‘Into the houses!’ shouted Sita.

‘Into the houses!’ repeated the lieutenants, as everybody ran towards the doors, lifted them, and jumped in. It was a most disorganised retreat, but it was effective. In a few minutes, practically every surviving Mithilan police soldier had jumped to safety within the houses. As the doors closed, the volley of spears resumed on the roofs of the Bees Quarter. A few stragglers were killed as the rest made it to safety; for now.

As soon as they were secure within a house, Ram pulled Sita aside. Lakshman and Samichi followed. Samichi looked ashen-faced and nervous as she stood behind her princess, helplessly rubbing her forehead.

Sita was breathing hard, her eyes flitting like that of a cornered tigress, anger bursting through every pore.

‘What now?’ Ram asked Sita. ‘Raavan’s soldiers must be scaling the outer walls. They will be upon us soon. There’s no one to stop them.’

Sita had run out of ideas. She felt helpless. And livid. *Dammit!*

‘Sita?’ prompted Ram.

Sita’s eyes suddenly opened wide. ‘The windows!’

‘What?’ asked Samichi, surprised by her prime minister.

Sita immediately gathered her lieutenants around her. She ordered that the wood-panel seals on the windows of the houses be broken open; the ones that shared the inner fort wall.

The Bees Quarter windows overlooked the ground between the two fort

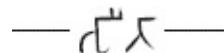
walls. Sita had found her vantage point. Arrows would be fired at the charging Lankans, after all.

‘Brilliant!’ shouted Lakshman, as he rushed to a barricaded window. He pulled back his arm, flexed his muscles, and punched hard at the wood. Smashing the barricade with one mighty blow.

All the houses in this section of the Bees Quarter were internally connected through corridors. The message travelled rapidly. Within moments, the Mithilans smashed open the sealed windows and began firing arrows. The Lankans were caught between the outer and inner wall. They had expected no resistance. Caught off guard, the arrows shredded through their lines. The losses were heavy.

The Mithilans fired arrows without respite, killing as many of the Lankans as they could. Slowing the charge dramatically. Suddenly, the conch shells sounded; this time it was a different tune. The Lankans immediately turned and ran, retreating as rapidly as they had arrived.

A loud cheer went up from the Mithilan quarters. They had beaten back the first attack.



Ram, Sita, and Lakshman stood on the roof of the Bees Quarter as dawn broke through. The gentle rays of the sun fell on the harsh devastation of Lankan spears. The damage was heart-rending.

Sita stared at the mutilated Mithilan corpses strewn all around her; heads hanging by sinew to bodies, some with their guts spilled out. Many simply impaled on spears, having bled to death.

‘At least a thousand of my soldiers ...’

‘We too have hit them hard, *Bhabhi*,’ said Lakshman to his *sister-in-law*. ‘There are at least a thousand dead Lankans lying between the inner and outer wall.’

Sita looked at Lakshman, her eyes brimming with tears. ‘Yes, but they have nine thousand left. We have only three thousand.’

Ram surveyed the Lankan camp on the other side of the moat-lake. Sita’s gaze followed his eyes. Hospital-tents had been set up to tend to the injured. Many Lankans, though, were furiously at work; hacking trees and pushing the forest line farther with mathematical precision.

Clearly, they did not intend to retreat to Lanka.

‘They will be better prepared next time,’ said Ram. ‘If they manage to scale the inner wall ... it’s over.’

Sita placed her hand on Ram's shoulder and sighed as she stared at the ground. She seemed to gather strength from the simple touch. It was like she had a dependable ally now.

Sita turned around and looked towards her city. Her eyes rested on the steeple of the massive temple dedicated to Lord Rudra, which loomed beyond the garden of the Bees Quarter. Fierce determination blazed from her eyes, resolve pouring steel into her veins.

'It's not over yet. I'll call upon the citizens to join me. Even if my people stand here with kitchen knives, we will outnumber the Lankan scum ten to one. We can fight them.'

Sita could feel Ram's shoulder muscles tensing under her touch. She looked at his eyes. She saw only confidence and trust.

*He believes in me. He trusts me to handle this. I will handle this. I will not fail.*

Sita nodded, like she had made up her mind. And rushed away, signalling some of her lieutenants to follow her.

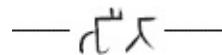
Ram and Lakshman followed her too, trying to keep pace. She turned around. 'No. Please stay here. I need someone I can trust, someone who understands war, to stay here and rally the forces in case the Lankans launch a surprise attack.'

Lakshman tried to argue, but fell silent at a signal from Ram.

'We will stay here, Sita,' said Ram. 'No Lankan will enter the city as long as we are standing here. Rally the others quickly.'

Sita smiled and touched Ram's hand.

Then she turned and ran.



The third hour of the second *prahar* was almost ending. It was three hours before noon, in clear daylight. But this light had not blessed the city's residents with more wisdom. The news of the death of over one thousand courageous Mithilan policemen, and the devastation of the battle at the Bees Quarter, had not stirred the citizens to anger. Tales of the outnumbered and under-equipped Mithilan police, led by Prime Minister Sita, heroically fighting back the Lankans, had not inspired them. In fact, talks of surrender, compromise and negotiations were in the air.

Sita had gathered the local leaders in the market square in an effort to rally a citizen army to fight back the Lankans. This had been a few hours ago. That the rich would not think of risking their lives or property for their motherland

wasn't surprising. It was shocking, though, that even the poor, who had benefited greatly from Sunaina's and then Sita's reforms, did not feel the need to fight for their kingdom.

Sita thought she would burst a capillary in utter fury, listening to the arguments being put forth by her fellow Mithilans; excuses to give a moral veneer to their cowardice.

*'We must be pragmatic ...'*

*'We haven't emerged from poverty, earned all this money, ensured good education for our children, built property, to just lose it all in one war ...'*

*'Seriously, has violence ever solved any problem? We should practise love, not war ...'*

*'War is just a patriarchal, upper-class conspiracy ...'*

*'The Lankans are also human beings like us. I am sure they will listen, if we talk to them ...'*

*'Really, is our conscience clean? We can say all we want about the Lankans, but didn't we insult Emperor Raavan at the swayamvar ...'*

*'What's the big deal if so many police officers died? It's their job to protect us. And die for us. It isn't as if they are doing this for free. What do we pay taxes for? Speaking of taxes, Lanka apparently has much lower tax rates ...'*

*'I think we should negotiate with the Lankans. Let's vote on that ...'*

At the end of her tether, Sita had even asked Janak and Urmila to help her rouse the citizenry. Janak, respected as a saintly figure by the Mithilans, tried his best to urge them to fight. To no avail. Urmila, popular among the women, had no impact either.

Sita's fists were clenched tight. She was about to launch into an angry tirade against the cowardly citizenry when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned around to find Samichi standing there.

Sita quickly pulled her aside. 'Well, where are they?'

Samichi had been dispatched to find Vishwamitra or Arishtanemi. Sita refused to believe that the Malayaputras would abandon her at a time like this, especially when her city was threatened with annihilation. She was sure they knew she would die with her city. And she also knew that her survival mattered to them.

'I have searched everywhere, Sita,' said Samichi. 'I can't find them anywhere.'

Sita looked down and cursed under her breath.

Samichi swallowed hard. 'Sita ...'

Sita looked at her friend.

'I know you don't want to hear this, but we're left with no choice. We must

negotiate with the Lankans. If we can get Lord Raavan to ...'

Sita's eyes flared up in anger. 'You will not say such things in my ...'

Sita stopped mid-sentence as a loud sound was heard from the Bees Quarter.

There were some explosions from a section of the roof of the Bees Quarter, hidden from where the battle with the Lankans had taken place just a few hours ago. A few seconds later, a small missile flew up from the same section. It sped off in a mighty arc, moving farther and farther away in a few short seconds. Towards the city moat, where Sita knew the Lankans were camped.

Everyone in the market square was transfixed, their eyes glued in the same direction. But none had any idea of what had just happened. None, except Sita.

She immediately understood what the Malayaputras had been up to all night. What they had been preparing. What they had done.

### *The Asurastra.*

As the missile flew high above the moat-lake, there was a flash of a minor detonation. The *Asurastra* hovered for an instant above the Lankan camp. And then exploded dramatically.

The spectators in Mithila saw a bright green flash of light emerge from the splintered missile. It burst with furious intensity, like a flash of lightning. Fragments of the exploded missile were seen falling down.

As they witnessed this terrifying scene play out in the sky, the ear-shattering sound of the main explosion shook the very walls of Mithila. Right up to the market square where the citizens had been debating themselves to paralysis a few moments back.

The Mithilans covered their ears in shock. Some began to pray for mercy.

An eerie silence fell on the gathering. Many cowering Mithilans looked around in dazed confusion.

But Sita knew Mithila had been saved. She also knew what would follow. Devastation had fallen on Raavan and his fellow Lankans. They would be paralysed. In a deep state of coma. For days, if not weeks. Some of them would even die.

But her city was safe. It had been saved.

After the reversal at the battle of the Bees Quarter, perhaps this had been the only way to stop Raavan's hordes.

As relief coursed through her veins, she whispered softly, 'Lord Rudra, bless the Malayaputras and Guru Vishwamitra.'

Then, like a bolt from the blue, her elation suddenly evaporated. Raw panic entered her heart.

### *Who had fired the Asurastra?*

She knew that an *Asurastra* had to be fired from a substantial distance. And

only an extremely capable archer could do so successfully. There were just three people in Mithila right now who could shoot an arrow from the distance required to ignite and launch an *Asurastra*. Vishwamitra, Arishtanemi and ...

*Ram ... Please ... No ... Lord Rudra, have mercy.*

Sita began sprinting towards the Bees Quarter. Followed by Samichi and her bodyguards.



## Chapter 24

Sita bounded up the stairway of the Bees Quarter, three steps at a time. A grim-faced Samichi followed close behind. She was up on the roof in no time. Even from the distance, she could see the devastation in the Lankan camp. Thousands lay prone on the ground. Deathly silent. Demonic clouds of green viscous gas had spread like a shroud over the paralysed Lankans.

There was not a whisper in the air. The humans had fallen silent. So had the animals. The birds had stopped chirping. The trees did not stir. Even the wind had died down. All in sheer terror of the fiendish weapon that had just been unleashed.

The only sound was a steady, dreadful hiss, like the battle-cry of a gigantic snake. It was the sound of the thick viscous green gas that continued to be emitted from the fragments of the exploded *Asurastra* missile that had fallen to the ground.

Sita held her *Rudraaksh* pendant in fear. *Lord Rudra, have mercy.*

She saw Arishtanemi and the Malayaputras standing in a huddle. She ran up to them.

‘Who shot it?’ demanded Sita.

Arishtanemi merely bowed his head and stepped aside; and, Ram came into Sita’s view. Her husband was the only one holding a bow.

Vishwamitra had managed to pressure Ram into firing the *Asurastra*. And thus, breaking Lord Rudra’s law.

Sita cursed loudly as she ran towards Ram.

Vishwamitra smiled as he saw her approach. ‘Sita, it is all taken care of! Raavan’s forces are destroyed. Mithila is safe!’

Sita glared at Vishwamitra, too furious for words.

She ran to her husband and embraced him. A shocked Ram dropped his bow. They had never embraced. Until now.

She held him tight. She could feel his heartbeat pick up speed. But his hands remained by his side. He did not embrace her back.

She pulled her head back and saw a solitary tear trickle down her husband's face.

Guilt gnawed at her. She knew Ram had been forced to commit a sin. Forced due to his love for her. Forced due to his sense of duty, which compelled him to protect the innocent: The citizens of Mithila, even if they were selfish and cowardly.

She held Ram and looked deep into his empty eyes. Her face was creased with concern. 'I am with you, Ram.'

Ram remained silent. But his expression had changed. His eyes didn't have an empty look anymore. Instead they had a dreamy sparkle, as if he were lost in another world.

*Oh Lord Rudra, give me the strength to help him. To help this magnificent man. Suffering because of me.*

Sita continued to hold Ram in a tight embrace. 'I am with you, Ram. We will handle this together.'

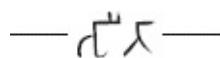
Ram closed his eyes. He wrapped his arms around his wife. He rested his head on her shoulder. She could hear him release a deep, long breath. Like he had found his refuge. His sanctuary.

Sita looked over her husband's shoulder and glared at Vishwamitra. It was a fearsome look, like the wrathful fury of the Mother Goddess.

Vishwamitra glared right back, unrepentant.

A loud sound disturbed them all. They looked beyond the walls of Mithila. Raavan's *Pushpak Vimaan* was sputtering to life. Its giant rotor blades had begun to spin. The sound it made was like that of a giant monster cutting the air with his enormous sword. Within moments the rotors picked up speed and the conical flying vehicle rose from the earth. It hovered just a few feet above the ground; pushing against inertia, against the earth's immense pull of gravity. Then, with a great burst of sound and energy, it soared into the sky. Away from Mithila. And the devastation of the *Asurastra*.

Raavan had survived. Raavan had escaped.



The following day, a makeshift *Ayuralay* was set up outside the city. The Lankan soldiers were housed in large tents. The Malayaputras trained the Mithilan doctors to tend to those who had been rendered comatose by the lethal weapon. To keep them alive till they naturally emerged from the coma; a few days or maybe even a few weeks later. Some would never surface and pass away in their sleep.

Sita sat in her office, contemplating Mithila's governance after her impending departure to Ayodhya. There was too much to take care of and the conversation with Samichi was not helping.

The police and protocol chief stood before her, shaking like a leaf. Sita had never seen her friend so nervous. She was clearly petrified.

'Don't worry, Samichi. I'll save Ram. Nothing will happen to him. He won't be punished.'

Samichi shook her head. Something else was on her mind. She spoke in a quivering voice. 'Lord Raavan survived ... the Lankans ... will come back ... Mithila, you, I ... we're finished ...'

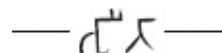
'Don't be silly. Nothing will happen. The Lankans have been taught a lesson they will not forget in a hurry ...'

'They will remember ... They always remember ... Ayodhya ... Karachapa ... Chilika ...'

Sita held Samichi by her shoulders and said loudly, 'Pull yourself together. What's the matter with you? Nothing will happen!'

Samichi fell silent. She held her hands together in supplication. Praying. She knew what she had to do. She would appeal for mercy. To the True Lord.

Sita stared at Samichi and shook her head. Disappointed. She had decided to leave Samichi in charge of Mithila, under the titular rule of her father, Janak. Ensuring that there would be continuity in leadership. But now, she began to wonder whether Samichi was ready for additional responsibilities. She had never seen her friend so rattled before.



'Arishtanemiji, please don't make me do this,' pleaded Kushadhwaj.

Arishtanemi was in the section of the Mithila Palace allotted to Kushadhwaj, the king of Sankashya.

'You will have to,' said Arishtanemi, dangerously soft. The steel in his voice unmistakable. 'We know exactly what happened. How Raavan came here ...'

Kushadhwaj swallowed nervously.

'Mithila is precious to all who love wisdom,' said Arishtanemi. 'We will not allow it to be destroyed. You will have to pay for what you did.'

'But if I sign this proclamation, Raavan's assassins will target me ...'

'And if you don't, we will target you,' said Arishtanemi, stepping uncomfortably close, menace dripping from his eyes. 'Trust me, we will make it far more painful.'

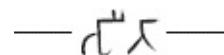
'Arishtanemiji ...'

‘Enough.’ Arishtanemi grabbed the royal Sankashya seal and pressed it on the proclamation sheet, leaving its imprint. ‘It’s done ...’

Kushadhwaj sagged on his seat, sweating profusely.

‘It will be issued in the name of King Janak *and* you, Your Majesty,’ said Arishtanemi, as he bowed his head in mock servility.

Then he turned and walked out.



King Janak and his brother, King Kushadhwaj, had authorised the imprisonment of the Lankan prisoners of war left behind by Raavan. Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras had promised that they would take the Lankan prisoners with them when they left for Agastyakootam. The sage intended to negotiate with Raavan on Mithila’s behalf, guaranteeing the kingdom’s safety in return for the release of the prisoners of war.

This news had been greeted with relief by the Mithilans, and not the least, Samichi. They were petrified of the demon king of Lanka, Raavan. But now, the people felt more at ease knowing that the Malayaputras would ensure that the Lankans backed off.

‘We’re leaving tomorrow, Sita,’ said Arishtanemi.

The military chief of the Malayaputras had come to Sita’s chamber to speak with her in private. Sita had refused to meet Vishwamitra since the day Ram had fired the *daivi astra*.

Sita folded her hands together into a respectful *Namaste* and bowed her head. ‘May Lord Parshu Ram and Lord Rudra bless you with a safe journey.’

‘Sita, I am sure you are aware that the time to make the announcement draws close ...’

Arishtanemi was referring to the declaration that would publicly announce Sita’s status as the Vishnu. Once it was made, not just the Malayaputras, but the whole of India would recognise her as the saviour who would lead the people of this land to a new way of life.

‘It cannot happen now.’

Arishtanemi tried to control his frustration. ‘Sita, you can’t be so stubborn. We had to do what we did.’

‘You could have fired the *Asuraastra*, Arishtanemiji. In fact, Guruji could have fired it as well. The Vayuputras would have understood. They would have even seen it as a Malayaputra effort to protect themselves. But you set Ram up ...’

‘He volunteered, Sita.’

‘R-i-g-h-t ...’ said Sita, sarcastically. She had already heard from Lakshman how Vishwamitra had emotionally blackmailed Ram into firing the divine weapon, exhorting him to protect his wife’s city.

‘Sita, have you forgotten what state Mithila was in? You are not appreciating the fact that we saved your city. You are not even appreciating the fact that Guru Vishwamitra will handle the crisis with Raavan, ensuring that you do not face any retaliation after what happened here. Seriously, what more do you expect?’

‘I would have expected you to behave with ...’

Arishtanemi interrupted Sita, guessing what she would have said. ‘*Honour?* Behave with honour? Don’t be childish, Sita. What I have always liked about you is the fact that you are practical. You are not taken by silly theoretical ideas. You know you can do a lot for India. You must agree to make the announcement of your Vishnuhood ...’

Sita raised an eyebrow. ‘I wasn’t talking about honour. I was talking about wisdom.’

‘Sita ...’ growled Arishtanemi, clenching his fists. He took a deep breath to control himself. ‘Wisdom dictated that we not fire the *Asurastra*. There are ... We have enough problems with the Vayuputras already. This would have further complicated our relationship. It had to be Ram.’

‘Right,’ said Sita. ‘It *had* to be Ram ...’

*Is she worried about Ram being punished for firing the Asurastra?*

‘Ram will not be banished, Sita. The *Asurastra* is not a weapon of mass destruction. Guruji has already told you. We can manage the Vayuputras ...’

Arishtanemi knew the Vayuputras liked Ram and would probably agree to waive the punishment for the eldest prince of Ayodhya. And if they didn’t ... Well, the Malayaputras wouldn’t be too troubled by that. Their main concern was Sita. Only Sita.

‘Ram believes that he should be punished,’ said Sita. ‘It is the law.’

‘Then, tell him to grow up and not be silly.’

‘Try and understand Ram, Arishtanemiji. I am not sure you realise how important a man like that is for India. He can transform us into law-abiding citizens. He can lead by example. He can do a lot of good. I have travelled the length and breadth of this country. I don’t think the ruling nobility, including yourselves, understand the simmering anger among the common folk against the elite. Ram, by subjecting himself to the same laws that apply to them, increases the credibility of the establishment. People will eventually listen to a message delivered by Ram.’

Arishtanemi shifted on his feet, impatiently. ‘This is a pointless conversation, Sita. The Malayaputras, the only ones authorised to recognise a

Vishnu, have chosen you. That's it.'

Sita smiled. 'Indians don't take kindly to choices imposed from above. This is a country of rebels. The people have to accept me as the Vishnu.'

Arishtanemi remained silent.

'Perhaps you didn't understand the point I was trying to make earlier about wisdom,' said Sita.

Arishtanemi frowned.

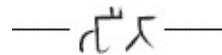
'I suppose the Malayaputras want to keep Raavan alive till, at some stage, I kill him and hence am accepted by all Sapt Sindhuans. Who would deny a leader who delivers them from their most hated enemy ... Raavan.'

Arishtanemi's eyes widened, as he understood what Sita was saying. The Malayaputras had just committed a major blunder. That too on a strategy that they had been planning for decades.

'Yes, Arishtanemiji. You thought you were setting Ram up for punishment. But instead, you have made him into a hero for the common man. The entire Sapt Sindhu has suffered Raavan's economic squeeze. And they now see Ram as their saviour.'

Arishtanemi fell silent.

'Arishtanemiji, sometimes, a too-clever-by-half plan can backfire,' said Sita.



Sita looked at her husband as he rode beside her. Lakshman and Urmila rode behind them. Lakshman was talking nonstop with his wife as she gazed at him earnestly. Urmila's thumb kept playing with the massive diamond ring on her left forefinger; an expensive gift from her husband. Behind them were a hundred Mithilan soldiers. Another hundred soldiers rode ahead of Ram and Sita. The convoy was on its way to Sankashya, from where it would sail to Ayodhya.

Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Urmila had set off from Mithila two weeks after the *Asurastra* laid waste the Lankan camp. True to their word, Vishwamitra and his Malayaputras had left for their capital, Agastyakootam, taking the Lankan prisoners with them. They would negotiate with Raavan on Mithila's behalf, guaranteeing the kingdom's safety in return for the release of the prisoners of war. The Malayaputras had also taken the bow of Lord Rudra, the *Pinaka*, which had been their treasure for centuries. It would be returned to Sita when she took on the role of the Vishnu.

Noting Samichi's improved state of mind, once the Lankan problem had been taken care of, Sita had made her friend Mithila's *de facto* prime minister.

She would work in consultation with a council of five city elders established by Sita. Of course, all under the guidance of King Janak.

‘Ram ...’

Ram turned to his wife with a smile as he pulled his horse close to hers.  
‘Yes?’

‘Are you sure about this?’

Ram nodded. There was no doubt in his mind.

Sita was impressed and worried at the same time. He truly did live by the law.

‘But you are the first in a generation to defeat Raavan. And, it wasn’t really a *daivi astra*. If you —’

Ram frowned. ‘That’s a technicality. And you know it.’

Sita paused for a few seconds and continued. ‘Sometimes, to create a perfect world, a leader has to do what is necessary at the time; even if it may not appear to be the ‘right’ thing to do in the short term. In the long run, a leader who has the capacity to uplift the masses must not deny himself that opportunity. He has a duty to not make himself unavailable. A true leader will even take a sin upon his soul for the good of his people.’

Ram looked at Sita. He seemed disappointed. ‘I have done that already, haven’t I? The question is, should I be punished for it or not? Should I do penance for it? If I expect my people to follow the law, so must I. A leader is not just one who leads. He must also be a role model. He must practise what he preaches, Sita.’

Sita smiled. ‘Well, Lord Rudra had said: “A leader is not just one who gives his people what they want. He must also be the one who teaches his people to be better than they imagined themselves to be.”’

Ram smiled too. ‘And I’m sure you will tell me Lady Mohini’s response to this as well.’

Sita laughed. ‘Yes. Lady Mohini said that people have their limitations. A leader should not expect more from them than what they are capable of. If you stretch them beyond their capacity, they will break.’

Ram shook his head. He did not agree with the great Lady Mohini. Ram expected people to rise above their limitations and better themselves; for only then was an ideal society possible. But he didn’t voice his disagreement aloud. He knew that Sita passionately respected Lady Mohini.

‘Are you sure? Fourteen years outside the boundaries of the Sapt Sindhu?’ Sita looked at Ram seriously, returning to the original discussion.

Ram nodded. ‘I broke Lord Rudra’s law. And this is his stated punishment. It doesn’t matter whether the Vayuputras pass the order to punish me or not. It

doesn't matter whether my people support me or not. I must serve my sentence.'

She smiled. *He will not stray. He is truly incredible. How did he survive in Ayodhya all these years?*

Sita leaned towards him and whispered, 'We ... not I.'

Ram frowned.

Sita reached out and placed her palm on Ram's hand. 'You share my fate and I share yours. That is what a true marriage is.' She entwined her fingers through his. 'Ram, I am your wife. We will always be together; in good times and bad; through thick and thin.'

*We will come back in fourteen years. Stronger. More powerful. The Vishnuhood can wait till then.*

She had already decided that she would ask Jatayu for large quantities of the legendary *Somras*, the anti-ageing medicine created by the great Indian scientist, Brahma, many millennia ago. She would administer the medicine to Ram and herself to retain their vitality and youth in their fourteen years of exile. So that when they returned, they would be ready for the task ahead. Ready to change India.

She remembered a line she had read. A line supposedly spoken by Lady Varahi, the third Vishnu. *India will rise, but not for selfish reasons. It will rise for Dharma ... For the Good of all.*

She looked at Ram and smiled.

Ram squeezed her hand. His horse snorted and quickened its pace. Ram pulled back the reins gently, keeping it in step with his wife's steed.



## Chapter 25

The two young couples sailed into the Ayodhya port to an overwhelming sight. It was as if all of Ayodhya had stepped out of their homes to greet them.

Sita had enjoyed her conversations with Ram during their journey. They had brainstormed on how best an empire can be organised for the good of the people. She had spoken about the concept that the state compulsorily adopt young children to break the evils of the birth-based caste system. Sita had not mentioned that she had grown to believe in the idea relatively recently; or that it was originally Vishwamitra's idea. Ram did not like or trust the Maharishi. Why taint a good idea with that dislike? They had also spoken about the *Somras* mass-manufacturing technology developed by Guru Vashishtha. Ram believed that the *Somras* should either be made available to all or none. Since taking away the *Somras* might be difficult, he suggested that Vashishtha's technology be used to make it available to all.

Enjoyable as those conversations had been, Sita knew they would probably not find the time to have more of them for a while. Ram had his work cut out in Ayodhya. To begin with, he had to ensure that he was not stopped from going on exile. And, of course, he also had to explain his marriage to the adopted princess of the powerless kingdom of Mithila. Jatayu had quipped to Sita, that had the Ayodhyans known that she was the Vishnu, they would have realised that Ram had married up! Sita had simply smiled and dismissed his observation.

Standing at the ship's balustrade, Sita looked at the grand, yet crumbling, port of Ayodhya. It was several times larger than the Sankashya port. She observed the barricaded man-made channel that allowed the waters of the Sarayu River to flow into the massive Grand Canal that surrounded Ayodhya, the *unconquerable city*.

The canal had been built a few centuries ago, during the reign of Emperor Ayutayus, by drawing in the waters of the feisty Sarayu River. Its dimensions were almost celestial. Stretching over fifty kilometres, it circumnavigated the

third and outermost wall of the city of Ayodhya. It was enormous in breadth as well, extending to about two-and-a-half kilometres across the banks. Its storage capacity was so massive that for the first few years of its construction, many kingdoms downriver had complained of water shortages. Their objections had been crushed with brute force by the powerful Ayodhyian warriors.

One of the main purposes of this canal was militaristic. It was, in a sense, a moat. To be fair, it could be called the Moat of Moats, protecting the city from all sides. Prospective attackers would have to row across a moat with river-like dimensions. The fools would be out in the open, vulnerable to a barrage of missiles from the high walls of the unconquerable city. Four bridges spanned the canal in the four cardinal directions. The roads that emerged from these bridges led into the city through four massive gates in the outermost wall: North Gate, East Gate, South Gate and West Gate. Each bridge was divided into two sections. Each section had its own tower and drawbridge, thus offering two levels of defence at the canal itself.

Even so, to consider this Grand Canal a mere defensive structure was to do it a disservice. It also worked as an effective flood-control mechanism, as water from the tempestuous Sarayu could be led in through control-gates. Floods were a recurrent problem in India. Furthermore, its placid surface made drawing water relatively easy, as compared to taking it directly from the feisty Sarayu. Smaller canals radiated out of the Grand Canal into the hinterland of Ayodhya, increasing the productivity of farming dramatically. The increase in agricultural yield allowed many farmers to free themselves from the toil of tilling the land. Only a few were enough to feed the massive population of the entire kingdom of Kosala. This surplus labour transformed into a large army, trained by talented generals into a brilliant fighting unit. The army conquered more and more of the surrounding lands, till the great Lord Raghu, the grandfather of the present Emperor Dashrath, finally subjugated the entire Sapt Sindhu; thus, becoming the *Chakravarti Samrat* or *Universal Emperor*.

Dashrath too had built on this proud legacy, conquering far and wide to become a Chakravarti Samrat as well. That was until the demon of Lanka, Raavan, destroyed the combined might of the Sapt Sindhuan armies at Karachapa around twenty years ago.

The subsequent punitive trade levies that Raavan had imposed on all the kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu, and mostly on Ayodhya, had sucked the treasury dry. It showed in the crumbling grandeur of the Grand Canal and its surrounding structures.

Despite its obviously fading glory, Ayodhya overwhelmed Sita. The city was bigger than any other in the Sapt Sindhu. Even in its decline, Ayodhya was

many times grander than her Mithila. She had visited Ayodhya in the past, but incognito. This was the first time she was visible to all. Being gawked at. Being judged. She could see it in the eyes of the nobles and citizenry standing at a distance, held back by the Ayodhya royal bodyguards.

The gangplank hit the port deck with a loud bang, clearing her mind of the profusion of thoughts. A rakishly handsome man was bounding up the plank. He was shorter than Ram but far more muscular.

*This must be Bharat.*

He was closely followed by a diminutive, immaculately attired man with calm, intelligent eyes. He walked with slow, measured steps.

*Shatrughan ...*

‘*Dada!*’ hollered Bharat, as he ran up to Ram and embraced him.

Sita could see why Radhika had fallen for Bharat. He had obvious charisma.

‘My brother,’ smiled Ram, as he embraced Bharat.

As Bharat stepped back and embraced Lakshman, Shatrughan quietly embraced his eldest brother.

Within a flash, the four brothers were facing Sita and Urmila.

Ram held his hand out and said with simple pride, ‘This is my wife, Sita, and next to her is Lakshman’s wife, Urmila.’

Shatrughan smiled warmly and folded his hands together. ‘*Namaste.* It is an honour to meet both of you.’

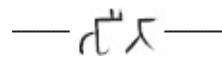
Bharat smacked Shatrughan on his stomach. ‘You are too formal, Shatrughan.’ He stepped forward and embraced Urmila. ‘Welcome to the family.’

Urmila smiled, her nervousness dissipating a bit.

Then Bharat stepped towards his *elder sister-in-law*, Sita, and held her hands. ‘I have heard a lot about you, *Bhabhi* ... I always thought it would be impossible for my brother to find a woman better than him.’ He looked at Ram, grinned and turned his attention back to her. ‘But my *dada* has always had the ability to manage the impossible.’

Sita laughed softly.

Bharat embraced his sister-in-law. ‘Welcome to the family, *Bhabhi*.’



The roads of Ayodhya were clogged with people waiting to receive their crown prince. A few had even extended their enthusiasm to welcome his bride. The procession inched forward at a snail’s pace. The lead chariot had Ram and Sita. The prince was awkwardly acknowledging the wild cheering in the streets.

Two chariots followed behind them. One had Bharat and Shatrughan, while Lakshman and his wife Urmila rode the second. Bharat flamboyantly acknowledged the multitude, waving his hands and blowing kisses with trademark flourish. Lakshman waved his trunk-like arms carefully, lest he hurt the petite Urmila, who stood demurely by his side. Shatrughan, as always, stood stoic, unmoved. Staring into the throngs. Almost like he was academically studying crowd behaviour.

The chanting of the crowd was loud and clear.

*Ram!*

*Bharat!*

*Lakshman!*

*Shatrughan!*

Their four beloved princes, the protectors of the kingdom, were finally together again. And most importantly, their crown prince had returned. *Victorious!* The defeater of the hated Raavan had returned!

Flowers were strewn, holy rice was showered, all were gay and happy. Though it was daytime, the massive stone lamp towers were lit up festively. Many had placed lamps on the parapets of their homes. Resplendent sunshine blazed with glory, as if in obeisance to the prince from the great clan of the Sun God himself. Ram of the Suryavanshis!

It took four hours for the chariots to traverse a distance that normally took less than thirty minutes. They finally reached the wing of the palace allocated to Ram.

A visibly weak Dashrath sat on his travelling throne, with Kaushalya standing next to him, waiting for his sons. A proper welcome ceremony had been laid out to receive the new brides. The eldest queen was a scrupulous upholder of tradition and rituals.

Kaikeyi had not deigned to reply to the invitation sent by Kaushalya, regarding the welcoming ceremony. Sumitra, of peace-loving Kashi, stood on the other side of Dashrath. Kaushalya leaned on her for support, always. Of course, Sumitra too was welcoming home a daughter-in-law!

Loud conch shells were heard as the *swagatam* ceremony began at the palace gate.

The four princes of Ayodhya and the two princesses of Mithila finally emerged from the melee. The Ayodhya royal guards, nervous as cats on a hot metal roof, heaved a visible sigh of relief as the royal youngsters entered the palace compound. Away from the multitude.

The royal procession moved along the elegant, marble-encrusted walkway in the compound. Verdant gardens were laid out on both sides. They slowed on

reaching the entrance of Prince Ram's wing of the palace.

Sita hesitated as her eyes fell on Kaushalya. But she dismissed the thought that had struck her.

Kaushalya walked to the threshold holding the *puja thali* in her hands. It contained a lit lamp, a few grains of rice and some vermillion. She looped the *prayer plate* in small circles, seven times, around Sita's face. She picked up some rice and threw it in the air, above Sita's head. She took a pinch of vermillion and smeared it on Sita's parting on the hairline. Sita bent down to touch Kaushalya's feet in respect. Kaushalya handed the *thali* to an attendant, and placed her hands on Sita's head and blessed her. 'Ayushman bhav, my child.'

As Sita straightened, Kaushalya indicated Dashrath. 'Accept your father-in-law's blessings.' Pointing towards Sumitra, she continued, 'And then, from your *chhoti maa*. We will then do the other ceremonies.'

Sita moved ahead to follow Kaushalya's instructions. Ram stepped forward and touched his mother's feet. She blessed him quickly and indicated that he seek his father's blessings.

Then she beckoned Urmila and Lakshman. Urmila, unlike Sita, did not dismiss the thought; the same one that had struck Sita earlier.

Kaushalya reminded her of her mother Sunaina. She had the same diminutive appearance and calm, gentle eyes. Kaushalya's skin was darker and her facial features were different, no doubt. Nobody could say that they were related. But there was something similar about them. The spiritually inclined would call it a soul connection.

Urmila waited for Kaushalya to finish the *aarti* ceremony, then bent down to touch her feet. Kaushalya blessed the younger princess of Mithila. As Urmila rose, she impulsively stepped forward and embraced Kaushalya. The Queen of Ayodhya was surprised at this unorthodox behaviour and failed to react.

Urmila pulled back, her eyes moist with emotion. She faintly voiced a word she had been unable to utter without crying, since Sunaina had died. 'Maa.'

Kaushalya was moved by the innocence of sweet Urmila. Perhaps for the first time, the queen faced a woman shorter than herself. She looked at the round baby face, dominated by large child-like eyes. An image rose in her mind of a tiny sparrow that needed protection from the big, threatening birds around it. She smiled fondly, and pulled Urmila back into her arms. 'My child ... Welcome home.'

A palace maid in the service of Queen Kaushalya stood, head bowed. Waiting for her instructions.

She was in the residential office of Manthara, the richest businesswoman in Ayodhya; arguably, the richest in the Sapt Sindhu. Rumours suggested that Manthara was even richer than Emperor Dashrath. Druhyu, her closest aide, could swear that there was substance to these rumours. Indeed. Very substantial substance.

‘My Lady,’ whispered the maid, ‘what are my instructions?’

The maid fell silent, as Druhyu signalled her discreetly. She waited.

Druhyu stood submissively next to Manthara. Silent.

The disfigured Manthara sat on a specially designed chair that offered a measure of comfort to her hunched back. The scars on her face, remnants of a childhood affliction of small pox, gave her a forbidding appearance. At the age of eleven she had fallen ill with polio, leaving her right foot partially paralysed. Born to poverty, her physical disfigurement had added prejudice, not sympathy, to her formative years. She had, in fact, been teased mercilessly. Now that she was rich and powerful, no one dared say anything to her face. But she knew exactly what was said about her behind her back. For now, she was not only reviled for her deformed body, but also hated fiercely for being a Vaishya; for being a very rich businessperson.

Manthara looked out of the window to the large garden of her palatial estate.

The maid fidgeted impatiently on her feet. Her absence would be noticed in the palace before long. She had to return quickly. She cast a pleading look at Druhyu. He glared back.

Druhyu had begun to doubt the usefulness of remaining loyal to Manthara. The woman had lost her beloved daughter, Roshni, to a horrific gangrape and murder. The gang had been tried by the courts and executed. However, Dhenuka, the most vicious of them all, and the leader of the gang, had been let off on a legal technicality. He was a juvenile; and, according to Ayodhyan law, juveniles could not be awarded the death penalty. Ram, the prince of Ayodhya and chief of police, had insisted that the law be followed. *No matter what.* Manthara had sworn vengeance. Spending huge amounts of money, she had ferreted Dhenuka from jail and had had him killed in a slow, brutal manner. But her thirst for vengeance had not been quenched. Her target now was Ram. She had been patiently waiting for an opportunity. And one had just presented itself.

Druhyu stared at his mistress, his face devoid of expression. *The old bat has been wasting too much money on her revenge mission. It is affecting business. She has lost it completely. But what can I do? Nobody knows the condition of*

*the True Lord. I am stuck with her for now ...*

Manthara made up her mind. She looked at Druhyu and nodded.

Druhyu rocked back with shock, but controlled himself.

*One thousand gold coins! That's more than this miserable palace maid will earn in ten years!*

But he knew there was no point arguing. He quickly made a *hundi* in lieu of cash. The maid could encash it anywhere. After all, who would refuse a *credit document* with Manthara's seal?

'My Lady ...' whispered Druhyu.

Manthara leaned forward, pulled out her seal from the pouch tied to her *dhoti*, and pressed its impression on the document.

Druhyu handed the *hundi* to the maid, whose face could barely contain her ecstasy.

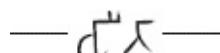
Druhyu quickly brought her down to earth. His cold eyes pinned on her, he whispered, 'Remember, if the information does not come on time or isn't true, we know where you live ...'

'I will not fail, sir,' said the maid.

As the maid turned to leave, Manthara said, 'I've been told that Prince Ram will soon be visiting Queen Kaushalya's wing of the palace to speak with Emperor Dashrath.'

'I will inform you about everything that is discussed, My Lady,' said the maid, bowing low.

Druhyu looked at Manthara and then the palace maid. He sighed inwardly. He knew that more money would be paid out soon.



'Didi, just my section of the palace here is bigger than the entire Mithila palace,' said Urmila excitedly.

Urmila had carefully guided her maids in settling her belongings in her husband's chambers. Having put them to work, she had quickly rushed to meet Sita. Lakshman had been tempted to ask his wife to stay, but gave in to her desire to seek comfort in her sister's company. Her life had changed dramatically in a short span of time.

Sita smiled, as she patted her sister's hand. She still hadn't told Urmila that Ram and she would be leaving the palace shortly, to return only after fourteen years. Urmila would be left behind, without her beloved sister, here in this magnificent palace.

*Why trouble her right now? Let her settle in first.*

'How are things with Lakshman?' asked Sita.

Urmila smiled dreamily. 'He is such a gentleman. He does not say no to anything that I ask for!'

Sita laughed, teasing her sister gently. 'That's exactly what you need. An indulgent husband, who treats you like a little princess!'

Urmila indicated her diminutive structure, straightened her back and retorted with mock seriousness, 'But I am a little princess!'

The sisters burst into peals of laughter. Sita embraced Urmila. 'I love you, my little princess.'

'I love you too, *Didi*,' said Urmila.

Just then, the doorman knocked and announced loudly, 'The Queen of Sapt Sindhu and Ayodhya, the Mother of the Crown Prince, Her Majesty Kaushalya. All rise in respect and love.'

Sita looked at Urmila, surprised. The sisters immediately came to their feet.

Kaushalya walked in briskly, followed by two maids bearing large golden bowls, the contents of which were covered with silk cloths.

Kaushalya looked at Sita and smiled politely, 'How are you, my child?'

'I am well, *Badi Maa*,' said Sita.

The sisters bent to touch Kaushalya's feet in respect. The Queen of Ayodhya blessed them both with a long life.

Kaushalya turned to Urmila with a warm smile. Sita noticed that it was warmer than the one she had received. This was a smile suffused with maternal love.

Sita smiled. Happy. *My little sister is safe here.*

'Urmila, my child,' said Kaushalya, 'I had gone to your chambers. I was told I would find you here.'

'Yes, *Maa*.'

'I believe you like black grapes.'

Urmila blinked in surprise. 'How did you know, *Maa*?'

Kaushalya laughed, with a conspiratorial look. 'I know everything!'

As Urmila laughed delicately, the queen pulled away the silk cloths with a flourish, to reveal two golden bowls filled to the brim with black grapes.

Urmila squealed in delight and clapped her hands. She opened her mouth. Sita was surprised. Urmila had always asked to be fed by their mother, Sunaina; but not once had she asked her sister.

Sita's eyes moistened in happiness. Her sister had found a mother once again.

Kaushalya picked a grape and dropped it into Urmila's open mouth.

'Mmm,' said Urmila, 'It is awesome, *Maa*!'

‘And, grapes are good for your health too!’ said Kaushalya. She looked at her elder daughter-in-law. ‘Why don’t you have some, Sita?’

‘Of course, *Badi Maa*,’ said Sita. ‘Thank you.’



## Chapter 26

A few days later, Sita sat in solitude in the royal garden.

It lay adjunct to the palace, within the compound walls. Laid out in the style of a botanical reserve, it was filled with flowering trees from not only the Sapt Sindhu but other great empires of the world. Its splendid diversity was also the source of its beauty, reflecting the composite character of the people of the Sapt Sindhu. Winding paths bordered what had once been a carefully laid out lush carpet of dense grass in geometric symmetry. Alas, like the main palace and the courts, the royal garden also had the appearance of diminishing grandeur and patchy upkeep. It was, literally, going to seed; a sorry reminder of Ayodhya's depleting resources.

But Sita was neither admiring the aching beauty nor mourning the slow deterioration that surrounded her.

Ram had gone to speak with Dashrath and his mother. He would insist that he be punished for the crime of using the *daivi astra* in Mithila without Vayuputra authorisation.

While that was Ram's conversation to handle, Sita was busy making plans to ensure that their lives would not be endangered in the jungle. She had asked Jatayu to meet her outside the city. She would ask him to shadow them during the exile, along with his team. She had no idea how the Malayaputras would react to her request. She knew that they were upset with her for refusing to be recognised publicly as the Vishnu. But she also knew that Jatayu was loyal to her and would not refuse.

‘The revenue of a hundred villages for your thoughts, *Bhabhi* ...’

Sita turned to see Bharat standing behind her. She laughed. ‘The revenue of a hundred villages from your wealthy Kosala or my poor Mithila?’

Bharat laughed and sat next to her.

‘So, have you managed to talk some sense into *dada*?’ asked Bharat. ‘To make him drop his insistence on being exiled?’

‘What makes you think that I don’t agree with him?’

Bharat was surprised. ‘Well, I thought ... Actually, I have done some background check on you, *Bhabhi* ... I was told that you are very ...’

‘Pragmatic?’ asked Sita, completing Bharat’s statement.

He smiled. ‘Yes ...’

‘And, what makes you think that your brother’s path is not pragmatic?’

Bharat was at a loss for words.

‘I am not suggesting that your brother is being pragmatic consciously. Just that the path he has chosen — one of unbridled commitment to the law — may not *appear* pragmatic. But counter-intuitively, it may actually be the most pragmatic course for some sections of our society.’

‘Really?’ Bharat frowned. ‘How so?’

‘This is a time of vast change, Bharat. It can be exciting. Energising. But many are unsettled by change. The Sapt Sindhu society has foolishly decided to hate its Vaishyas. They see their businessmen as criminals and thieves. It is over-simplistic to assume that the only way a Vaishya makes money is through cheating and profiteering. It is also biased. Such radicalisation increases in times of change and uncertainty. The fact is that while a few businessmen may be crooks, most Vaishyas are hardworking, risk-taking, opportunity-seeking organisers. If they do not prosper, then society does not produce wealth. And if a society does not generate money, most people remain poor. Which leads to frustration and unrest.’

‘I agree with ...’

‘I am not finished.’

Bharat immediately folded his hands together into a *Namaste*. ‘Sorry, *Bhabhi*.’

‘People can adjust to poverty, if they have wisdom and knowledge. But even Brahmins command very little respect in India these days. They may not be resented like the Vaishyas, but it is true that the Brahmins, or even the path of knowledge, are not respected today. I know what people say about my knowledge-obsessed father, for instance.’

‘No, I don’t think ...’

‘I’m still not finished,’ said Sita, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

‘Sorry!’ Bharat surrendered, as he covered his mouth with his hand.

‘As a result, people do not listen to the learned. They hate the Vaishyas and in the process, have ensured poverty for themselves. The people who are idealised the most today are the Kshatriyas, the warriors. “Battle-honour” is an end in itself! There’s hatred for money, disdain for wisdom and love of violence. What can you expect in this atmosphere?’

Bharat remained silent.

‘You can speak now,’ said Sita.

Bharat removed the hand that covered his mouth and said, ‘When you speak about the need to respect the Vaishya, Brahmin, or Kshatriya way of life, you obviously mean the characteristics and not the people born into that caste, right?’

Sita wrinkled her nose. ‘Obviously. Do you really think I would support the evil birth-based caste system? Our present caste system must be destroyed ...’

‘On that, I agree with you.’

‘So, coming back to my question. In an atmosphere of hatred for money-makers, disdain for wisdom-givers, and love only for war and warriors, what would you expect?’

‘Radicalisation. Especially among young men. Usually, they are the biggest fools.’

Sita laughed. ‘They are not *all* foolish ...’

Bharat nodded. ‘You’re right, I suppose. I am a young man too!’

‘So, you have a situation where young men, and frankly some women too, are radicalised. There is intelligence, but little wisdom. There is poverty. There is love of violence. They don’t understand that the absence of balance in their society is at the root of their problems. They look for simplistic, quick solutions. And they hate anyone who doesn’t think like them.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it any surprise then that crime is so high in the Sapt Sindhu? Is it any surprise that there is so much crime against women? Women can be talented and competitive in the fields of knowledge, trading and labour. But when it comes to violence, the almighty has not blessed them with a natural advantage.’

‘Yes.’

‘These radicalised, disempowered, violence-loving youth, looking for simplistic solutions, attack the weak. It makes them feel strong and powerful. They are especially vulnerable to the authoritarian message of the Masculine way of life, which can lead them astray. Thus, creating chaos in society.’

‘And, you don’t think *dada*’s ideas are rooted in the Masculine way? Don’t you think they’re a little too simplistic? And, too top-down? Shouldn’t the solution be the way of the Feminine? To allow freedom? To let people find balance on their own?’

‘But Bharat, many are wary of the uncertainties of the Feminine way. They prefer the simple predictability of the Masculine way. Of following a uniform code without too much thought. Even if that code is made by others. Yes, Ram’s obsession with the law is simplistic. Some may even call it authoritarian. But there is merit in it. He will give direction to those youth who need the

certainties of the Masculine way of life. Radicalised young people can be misused by a demonic force in pursuit of endless violence and hatred. On the other hand, Ram's teachings can guide such people to a life of order, justice, and fairness. He can harness them for a greater good. I am not suggesting that your elder brother's path is for everyone. But he can provide leadership to those who seek order, certainty, compliance, and definite morals. To those who have a strong dislike of decadence and debauchery. He can save them from going down a path of hatred and violence and instead, build them into a force for the good of India.'

Bharat remained silent.

'Ram's true message can provide an answer, a solution, to the radicalisation that plagues so many young people today.'

Bharat leaned back. 'Wow ...'

'What's the matter?'

'I have argued with my brother all my life about his faith in the Masculine way. I always thought that the Masculine way will inevitably lead to fanaticism and violence. But you have opened my mind in just one conversation.'

'Seriously, can you say that the Feminine way never degenerates? The only difference, Bharat, is that it deteriorates differently. The Masculine way is ordered, efficient and fair at its best, but fanatical and violent at its worst. The Feminine way is creative, passionate and caring at its best, but decadent and chaotic at its worst. No one way of life is better or worse. They both have their strengths and weaknesses.'

'Hmmm.'

'Freedom is good, but in moderation. Too much of it is a recipe for disaster. That's why the path I prefer is that of Balance. Balance between the Masculine and the Feminine.'

'I think differently.'

'Tell me.'

'I believe there is no such thing as too much freedom. For freedom has, within itself, the tools for self-correction.'

'Really?'

'Yes. In the Feminine way, when things get too debauched and decadent, many who are disgusted by it, use the same freedom available to them, to revolt and speak out loud. When society is made aware, and more importantly, is in agreement, reforms will begin. No problem remains hidden in a Feminine society for too long. But Masculine societies can remain in denial for ages because they simply do not have the freedom to question and confront their issues. The Masculine way is based on compliance and submission to the code,

the law. The questioning spirit is killed; and with that, the ability to identify and solve their problems before they lead to chaos. Have you ever wondered why the Mahadevs, who had come to solve problems that nobody else could, usually had to fight whoever represented the Masculine force?’

Sita rocked back. She was startled into silence, as she considered what Bharat had said about the Mahadevs. *Oh yes ... He's right ...*

‘Freedom is the ultimate answer. Despite all the uncertainties it creates, freedom allows regular readjustment. Which is why, very rarely does a problem with the Feminine way become so big that it needs a Mahadev to solve it. This magical solution is simply not available to the Masculine way. The first thing it suppresses is freedom. Everyone must comply ... Or, be kicked out.’

‘You may have a point. But freedom without laws is chaos. I'm not sure ...’

Bharat interrupted his sister-in-law, ‘I am telling you, *Bhabhi*. Freedom is the ultimate silver arrow; the answer to everything. It may appear chaotic and difficult to manage on the surface. I agree that laws can be flexibly used to ensure that there isn't *too much* chaos. But there is no problem that cannot ultimately be solved if you grant freedom to a sufficiently large number of argumentative and rebellious people. Which is why I think freedom is the most important attribute of life, *Bhabhi*.’

‘More important than the law?’

‘Yes. I believe there should be as few laws as possible; enough just to provide a framework within which human creativity can express itself in all its glory. Freedom is the natural way of life.’

Sita laughed softly. ‘And what does your elder brother have to say about your views?’

Ram walked up to them from behind and placed his hands on his wife's shoulders. ‘His elder brother thinks that Bharat is a dangerous influence!’

Ram had gone to his wing of the palace and had been told that his wife was in the royal gardens. He had found her deep in conversation with Bharat. They had not noticed him walk up to them.

Bharat burst out laughing as he rose to embrace his brother. ‘*Dada ...*’

‘Should I be thanking you for entertaining your *bhabhi* with your libertarian views?!’

Bharat smiled as he shrugged. ‘At least I won't convert the citizens of Ayodhya into a bunch of bores!’

Ram laughed and said, tongue in cheek, ‘That's good then!’

Bharat's expression instantly transformed and became sombre. ‘Father is not going to let you go, *Dada*. Even you know that. You're not going anywhere.’

‘Father doesn't have a choice. And neither do you. You will rule Ayodhya.

And you will rule it well.'

'I will not ascend the throne this way,' said Bharat, shaking his head. 'No, I will not.'

Ram knew that there was nothing he could say that would ease Bharat's pain.

'*Dada*, why are you insisting on this?' asked Bharat.

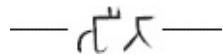
'It's the law, Bharat,' said Ram. 'I fired a *daivi astra*.'

'The hell with the law, *Dada*! Do you actually think your leaving will be in the best interests of Ayodhya? Imagine what the two of us can achieve together; your emphasis on rules and mine on freedom and creativity. Do you think either you or I can be as effective alone?'

Ram shook his head. 'I'll be back in fourteen years, Bharat. Even you just conceded that rules have a significant place in a society. How can I convince others to follow the law if I don't do so myself? The law must apply equally and fairly to every single person. It is as simple as that.' Then Ram stared directly into Bharat's eyes. 'Even if it helps a heinous criminal escape death, the law should not be broken.'

Bharat stared right back, his expression inscrutable.

Sita sensed that the brothers were talking about a sensitive issue. Things were getting decidedly uncomfortable. She rose from the bench and said to Ram, 'You have a meeting with General Mrigasya.'



Sita and her entourage were in the market. She didn't intend to buy anything. She had come out of the palace to give one of her guards the opportunity to slip away unnoticed. Had he left from the palace compound, his movements would have been tracked. But here, in the crowded marketplace, no one would miss one bodyguard from the large posse that guarded Sita.

From the corner of her eye, Sita saw him slip into a tiny lane that led out of the market. He had been ordered to arrange a meeting with Jatayu the following day.

Satisfied that her message would be delivered, Sita walked towards her palanquin to return to the palace. Her path was suddenly blocked by a grand palanquin that appeared out of nowhere. Covered with gold filigree, it was an ornate bronze litter with silk curtains covering the sides. It was obviously a very expensive and comfortable palanquin.

'Stop! Stop!' A feminine voice was heard from inside the curtained litter.

The bearers stopped immediately and placed the palanquin down. The strongest of the attendants walked to the entrance, drew aside the curtain and

helped an old woman step out.

‘*Namaste*, princess,’ said Manthara, as she laboriously came to her feet. She folded her hands together and bowed her head with respect.

‘*Namaste*, Lady Manthara,’ said Sita, returning her greeting.

Sita had met the wealthy businesswoman the previous day. She had immediately felt sympathy for her. People did not speak kindly of Manthara behind her back. It did not seem right to Sita, especially keeping in mind that she had lost her beloved daughter, Roshni, in tragic circumstances.

One of Manthara’s aides quickly placed a folded chair behind her, allowing her to sit. ‘I am sorry, princess. I find it difficult to stand for too long.’

‘No problem, *Mantharaji*,’ said Sita. ‘What brings you to the market?’

‘I’m a businesswoman,’ smiled Manthara. ‘It’s always wise to know what’s happening in the market.’

Sita smiled and nodded.

‘In fact, it’s also wise to know what is happening everywhere else since the market is impacted by so many things.’

Sita groaned softly. She expected the usual question: Why was Ram insisting on being punished for the crime of firing a *daivi astra*?

‘*Mantharaji*, I think it’s best if we wait for ...’

Manthara pulled Sita close and whispered, ‘I’ve been told that the Emperor may choose to abdicate, making Ram the king. And that he may choose to undertake the banishment of fourteen years himself. Along with his wives.’

Sita had heard this too. She also knew that Ram would not allow it. But what troubled her was something else. *Where did Mantharaji hear this?*

Sita maintained a straight face. Something didn’t feel right. She noticed that Manthara’s bodyguards were keeping other people in the market at bay. A chill ran down her spine.

*This meeting wasn’t an accident. It was planned.*

Sita replied carefully, ‘I have not heard this, *Mantharaji*.’

Manthara looked hard at Sita. After a few moments, she smiled, slightly. ‘Really?’

Sita adopted nonchalance. ‘Why would I lie?’

Manthara’s smile broadened. ‘I have heard interesting things about you, princess. That you are intelligent. That your husband confides in you. That he trusts you.’

‘Oh, I am a nobody from a small city. I just happened to marry above myself and arrive in this big, bad metropolis where I don’t understand much of what you people say. Why should my husband trust my advice?’

Manthara laughed. ‘Big cities are complex. Here, often, the diffused light of

the moon lends greater insight. Much is lost in the glare of the sun. Therefore, the wise have held that for real wisdom to rise, the sun must set.'

*Is that a threat?*

Sita feigned confusion.

Manthara continued, 'The city enjoys the moon and the night. The jungle always welcomes the sun.'

*This is not about business. This is about something else.*

'Yes, Mantharaji,' said Sita, pretending to be puzzled. 'Thank you for these words of wisdom.'

Manthara pulled Sita closer, staring directly into her eyes. 'Is Ram going to the jungle or not?'

'I don't know, Mantharaji,' said Sita, innocently. 'The Emperor will decide.'

Manthara narrowed her eyes till they were thin, malevolent slits. Then she released Sita and shook her head dismissively. As if there was nothing more to be learnt here. 'Take care, princess.'

'You take care, Mantharaji.'

'Druhyu ...' said Manthara loudly.

Sita saw the right-hand man of Manthara shuffle up obsequiously. Though the look on his face was at odds with his manner.

Sita smiled innocently. *Something's not right. I need to find out more about Manthara.*



## Chapter 27

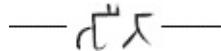
Sita read the coded message quickly. It had come via Radhika. But the sender was someone else.

The message was terse, but clear: I will speak to Guruji; it will be done.

There was no name inscribed on the message. But Sita knew the sender.

She held the letter to a flame, letting it burn. She held on to it till it had reduced completely to ashes.

She smiled and whispered, ‘Thank you, Hanu *bhaiya*.’



Sita and Jatayu stood in the small clearing. It was their predetermined meeting place in the jungle, an hour’s ride from the city. Sita had made it in half that time. She had covered her face and body in a long *angvastram*, so that she wouldn’t be identified. She had a lot to discuss with Jatayu. Not the least being her encounter with Manthara.

‘Are you sure about this, great Vishnu?’ asked Jatayu.

‘Yes. I had initially thought that the city would be more dangerous for Ram. He has so many enemies here. But now I think the jungle may be where the true danger lies.’

‘Then why not stay in the city?’

‘Can’t be done. My husband won’t agree to it.’

‘But ... Why not? Who cares about what others ...’

Sita interrupted Jatayu, ‘Let me give you an insight into my husband’s character. General Mrigasya, one of the most powerful men in Ayodhya, was willing to back Ram replacing Dashrath *babuji* as king. In fact, my father-in-law himself wants to abdicate in Ram’s favour. But my husband refused. He said it’s against the law.’

Jatayu shook his head and smiled. ‘Your husband is a rare jewel among men.’

Sita smiled. ‘That he is.’

‘So, you think Manthara will ...’

‘Yes. She is not interested in the game of thrones. She wants vengeance, especially against Ram for having followed the law; for not executing her daughter’s juvenile rapist-murderer. It’s personal.’

‘Any idea what she is planning?’

‘She will not do anything in Ayodhya. Assassinating a popular prince within the city is risky. I suspect she will try something in the jungle.’

‘I have visited Ayodhya before. I know her and her cohort. I also know whom she depends on.’

‘Druhyu?’

‘Yes. I suspect he will be the one who will organise the assassination. I know whom he will try to hire. I can handle it.’

‘I have a suspicion about Manthara and Druhyu. I suspect they are loyal to ...’

‘Yes, great Vishnu,’ interrupted Jatayu. ‘Raavan is their true lord.’

Sita took a deep breath. Things were beginning to make sense.

‘Do you want us to take care of Manthara as well?’ asked Jatayu.

‘No,’ answered Sita. ‘It’s been difficult enough to stop Raavan from retaliating after what happened in Mithila. Manthara is his key person in Ayodhya, his main cash cow in the north. If we kill her, he may break his pact with the Malayaputras to not attack Mithila.’

‘So ... just Druhyu, then.’

Sita nodded.

‘Let us meet tomorrow. I should know more by then.’

‘Of course, Jatayuji,’ said Sita. ‘Thank you. You are like a protective elder brother.’

‘I am nothing but your devotee, great Vishnu.’

Sita smiled and folded her hands into a *Namaste*. ‘Goodbye. Go with Lord Parshu Ram, my brother.’

‘Go with Lord Rudra, my sister.’

Sita mounted her horse and rode away quickly. Jatayu picked up some dust from the ground where she had stood and brought it reverentially to his forehead. He whispered softly, ‘*Om Namo Bhagavate Vishnudevaya. Tasyai Sitadevyai namo namah.*’

He mounted his horse and rode away.

Sita waited outside Vashishtha's private office. The guards had been surprised at the unannounced arrival of the wife of Prince Ram. They had asked her to wait since the *Raj Guru* of Ayodhya was in a meeting with a foreign visitor.

'I'll wait,' Sita had said.

The last few days had been action-packed. It had almost been decided by Dashrath that he would abdicate and install Ram as king. Ram and Sita had decided that if that happened, Ram would abdicate in turn and banish himself, leaving Bharat to take over. Ideally, though, he didn't want to do that, as it would be a public repudiation of his father's orders. But it had not come to that.

On the day before the court ceremony to announce Emperor Dashrath's abdication, some dramatic developments had taken place. Queen Kaikeyi had lodged herself in the *kopa bhavan*, the *house of anger*. This was an institutionalised chamber created in royal palaces many centuries ago, once polygamy had become a common practice among the royalty. Having multiple wives, a king was naturally unable to spend enough time with all of them. A *kopa bhavan* was the assigned chamber a wife would go to if angry or upset with her husband. This would be a signal for the king that the queen needed redressal for a complaint. It was believed to be inauspicious for a husband to allow his wife to stay overnight in the *kopa bhavan*.

Dashrath had had no choice but to visit his aggrieved spouse. No one knew what had happened in the chamber, but the next day, Dashrath's announcement had been very different from what the rumours had suggested. Ram had been banished from the Sapt Sindhu for a period of fourteen years. Bharat had been named the crown prince in Ram's stead. Ram had publicly accepted the banishment with grace and humility, praising the wisdom of his father's decision. Sita and Ram were to leave for the jungle within a day.

Sita had little time left. She needed to tie up all the loops to ensure their security in the forest.

Vashishtha had not met Sita at all, since their arrival. Was the *Raj Guru* of Ayodhya avoiding her? Or had an opportunity not presented itself thus far? Anyway, she wanted to speak to him before she left.

She looked up as she saw a man emerge from Vashishtha's office. He was a tall, unusually fair-skinned man. He wore a white *dhoti* and an *angavastram*. But one could tell by the deliberate way he walked that he was distinctly uncomfortable in the *dhoti*. Perhaps, it wasn't his normal attire. His most distinguishing features were his hooked nose, beaded full beard and drooping moustache. His wizened face and large limpid eyes were an image of wisdom and calm.

*He's a Parihan. Probably a Vayuputra.*

The Parihan walked towards the main door, not noticing Sita and her maids in the sitting area.

‘My Lady,’ a guard came up to Sita, his head bowed in respect. ‘My sincere apologies for the delay.’

Sita smiled. ‘No, no. You were only doing your job. As you should.’

She stood up. Guided by the guard, she walked into Vashishtha’s office.



‘It must be done outside the boundaries of the Sapt Sindhu,’ said Druhyu.

He was in a small clearing in the forest, having ridden east from the boundaries of the Grand Canal for around three hours. He waited for a response. There was none.

The assassin was seated in the distance, hidden by dark shadows. His *angvastram* was pulled close around his face and torso. He was sharpening his knife on a smooth stone.

Druhyu hated this part of his job. He had done it a few times, but there was something about Mara that spooked him.

‘The Emperor has announced the banishment of Prince Ram. His wife and he will be leaving tomorrow. You will have to track them till they are out of the empire.’

Mara did not respond. He kept sharpening his knife.

Druhyu held his breath in irritation. *How sharp does he need that damned knife to be!*

He placed one large bag of gold coins on the tree stump near him. Then he reached into his pouch and took out a *hundi*. It was stamped with a secret seal recognised only by one specific moneylender in Takshasheela, a city far in the northwestern corners of India.

‘One thousand gold coins in cash,’ said Druhyu, ‘and a *hundi* for fifty thousand gold coins to be picked up at the usual place.’

Mara looked up. Then, he felt the tip and edges of his blade. He seemed satisfied. He got up and started walking towards Druhyu.

‘Hey!’ Druhyu gasped in panic as he turned quickly and ran back some distance. ‘Don’t show me your face. I’m not going to see your face.’

Druhyu knew no living person had seen Mara’s face. He didn’t want to risk his life.

Mara stopped at the tree stump, picked up the bag of gold coins and judged its weight. He set it down and picked up the *hundi*. He didn’t open the document, but slipped it carefully into the pouch tied to his waistband.

Then, Mara looked at Druhyu. ‘It doesn’t matter now.’

It took a few moments for Druhyu to realise the import of what had been said. He shrieked in panic and ran towards his horse. But Mara, lean and fit, could move faster than Druhyu. Silent as a panther, fast as a cheetah. He was upon Druhyu in almost no time. He caught hold of Druhyu from the back, holding his neck in his left arm, pinioning him against his own body. As Druhyu struggled in terror, Mara hit him hard on a pressure point at the back of his neck with the knife hilt.

Druhyu was immediately paralysed from the neck down. Mara let the limp body slip slowly to the ground. Then he bent over Druhyu and asked, ‘Who else has been contracted?’

‘I can’t feel anything!’ screamed Druhyu in shock. ‘I can’t feel anything!’

Mara slapped Druhyu hard. ‘You are only paralysed from the neck down. I can release the pressure point. But first, answer ...’

‘I can’t feel anything. Oh Lord Indra! I can’t ...’

Mara slapped Druhyu hard, again.

‘Answer me quickly and I will help you. Don’t waste my time.’

Druhyu looked at Mara. His *angvastram* was tied across his face. Only the assassin’s eyes were visible.

Druhyu hadn’t seen his face. Maybe he could still come out of this alive.

‘Please don’t kill me ...’ sobbed Druhyu, a flood of tears streaming down his face.

‘Answer my question. Has anyone else been contracted? Is there any other assassin?’

‘Nobody but you ... Nobody but you ... Please ... by the great Lord Indra ... Let me go ... please.’

‘Is there anybody besides you who can find an assassin like me for Lady Manthara?’

‘No. Only me. And you can keep the money. I will tell that old witch that you have taken the contract. You don’t have to kill anyone. How will she know? She will probably be dead before Prince Ram returns ... Please ... Let me ...’

Druhyu stopped talking as Mara removed the *angvastram* that veiled his face. Sheer terror gripped Druhyu’s heart. He had seen Mara’s face. He knew what would follow.

Mara smiled. ‘Don’t worry. You won’t feel a thing.’

The assassin got down to work. Druhyu’s body had to be left there. It had to be discovered by Manthara and the others in her employ. It was supposed to send a message.

## —८—

Sita was sitting with her younger sister, Urmila, who had been crying almost incessantly.

Despite all that had been happening for the last few days, Sita had found time to come and meet Urmila repeatedly. Lakshman had insisted on coming along with Ram and Sita for the fourteen-year banishment. Initially, Lakshman had thought Urmila could also come along. He had later realised that the delicate Urmila would not be able to survive the rigours of the jungle. It was going to be a tough fourteen years. The forests could be survived only if you were sturdy and hard. Not if you were delicate and urbane. It had been tough for Lakshman, but he had spoken to Urmila and she had, reluctantly, agreed to not come along with the three of them. Though she was unhappy about it.

Sita too was constrained to admit that Lakshman was right. And she had come repeatedly to meet Urmila to help her younger sister make peace with the decision.

'First *maa* left me,' sobbed Urmila, 'Now you and Lakshman are also leaving me. What am I supposed to do?'

Sita held her sister warmly, 'Urmila, if you want to come, I will push for it. But before I do so, I need you to realise what jungle life means. We won't even have a proper shelter over our heads. We'll live off the land, including eating meat; and I know how you despise that. These are minor things and I know you will adapt to what needs to be done. But there is also constant danger in the jungle. Most of the coastline south of the Narmada River is in Raavan's control. So, we can't go there unless we intend to get tortured to death.'

Urmila cut in, 'Don't say such things, *Didi*.'

'We cannot go to the coast. So, we will have to remain deep inland. Usually, within the forests of *Dandakaranya*. The Almighty alone knows what dangers await us there. We will have to sleep lightly every night, with our weapons next to us, in case any wild animals attack. Night is their time for hunting. There are so many poisonous fruits and trees; we could die just by eating the wrong thing. I'm sure there will be other dangers we are not even aware of. All of us will need our wits about us at all times to survive. And in the midst of all this, if something were to happen to you, how would I face *maa* when I leave this mortal body? She had charged me with protecting you ... And, you are safe here ...'

Urmila kept sniffing, holding on to Sita.

'Did Kaushalya *maa* come today?'

Urmila looked up, smiling wanly through her tears. 'She is so wonderful. I

feel like our *maa* has returned. I feel safe with her.'

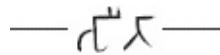
Sita held Urmila tight again. 'Bharat is a good man. So is Shatrughan. They will help Kaushalya *maa*. But they have many powerful enemies, some even more powerful than the king. You need to be here and support Kaushalya *maa*.'

Urmila nodded. 'Yes, Lakshman told me the same thing.'

'Life is not only about what we want, but also about what we must do. We don't just have rights. We also have duties.'

'Yes, *Didi*,' said Urmila. 'I understand. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.'

'I know, my little princess,' said Sita, holding Urmila tight, patting her back. 'I know ...'



Only a few hours were left for Ram, Sita, and Lakshman to leave for the jungle. They had changed into the garb of hermits, made from rough cotton and bark.

Sita had come to meet Guru Vashishtha.

'I've been thinking since our meeting yesterday, Sita,' said Vashishtha. 'I regret that we didn't meet earlier. Many of the issues that arose could have been avoided.'

'Everything has its own time and place, Guruji.'

Vashishtha gave Sita a large pouch. 'As you had requested. I am sure the Malayaputras will also get you some of this. But you are right; it's good to have back-up.'

Sita opened the pouch and examined the white powder. 'This is much finer than the usual *Somras* powder I have seen.'

'Yes, it's made from the process I have developed.'

Sita smelt the powder and grinned. 'Hmmm ... it becomes finer and smells even worse.'

Vashishtha laughed softly. 'But it's just as effective.'

Sita smiled and put the pouch in the canvas bag that she had slung around her shoulder. 'I am sure you have heard what Bharat has done.'

A tearful Bharat had come to Ram's chambers and taken his brother's royal slippers. If and when the time came for Bharat to ascend to kingship, he would place Ram's slippers on the throne. With this one gesture, Bharat had effectively declared that Ram would be the king of Ayodhya and he, Bharat, would function as a mere caretaker in his elder brother's absence. This afforded a powerful shield of protection to Ram from assassination attempts. Any attempts to murder the future king of Ayodhya would invite the wrath of

the Empire, as mandated by the treaties between the various kingdoms under the alliance. Added to the cold reality of treaty obligations was the superstition that it was bad karma to kill kings and crown princes, except in battle or open combat. While this afforded powerful protection to Ram, it would severely undercut Bharat's own authority and power.

Vashishtha nodded. 'Bharat is a noble soul.'

'All four of the brothers are good people. More importantly, they love each other. And this, despite being born in a very dysfunctional family and difficult times. I guess credit must be given where credit is due.'

Vashishtha knew this was a compliment to him, the *guru* of the four Ayodhya princes. He smiled politely and accepted the praise with grace.

Sita folded her hands together in respect and said, 'I've thought about it. I agree with your instructions, Guruji. I will wait for the right time. I'll tell Ram only when I think we are both ready.'

'Ram is special in so many ways. But his strength, his obsession with the law, can also be his weakness. Help him find balance. Then, both of you will be the partners that India needs.'

'I have my weaknesses too, Guruji. And he can balance me. There are so many situations in which he is much better than I am. That's why I admire him.'

'And, he admires you. It is a true partnership.'

Sita hesitated slightly before saying, 'I must ask you something.'

'Of course.'

'I guess you must also have been a Malayaputra once ... Why did you leave?'

Vashishtha began to laugh. 'Hanuman was right. You are very smart. Scarily smart.'

Sita laughed along. 'But you haven't answered my question, Guruji.'

'Leave the subject of Vishwamitra and me aside. Please. It's too painful.'

Sita immediately became serious. 'I don't wish to cause you any pain, Guruji.'

Vashishtha smiled. 'Thank you.'

'I must go, Guruji.'

'Yes. It's time.'

'Before I go, I must say this. I mean it from the bottom of my heart, Guruji. You are as great a guru as the one who taught me.'

'And I mean it from the bottom of my heart, Sita. You are as great a Vishnu as the one I taught.'

Sita bent and touched Vashishtha's feet.

Vashishtha placed his hands on Sita's head and said, 'May you have the

greatest blessing of all: May you be of service to our great motherland, India.'

'Salutations, great *Rishi*.'

'Salutations, great Vishnu.'



## Chapter 28

Eleven months had passed since Ram, Sita, and Lakshman had left Ayodhya on their fourteen-year exile in the forest. And a lot had happened.

Dashrath had passed away in Ayodhya. The three of them had received this heartbreaking news while still in the Sapt Sindhu. Sita knew it had hurt Ram that he had not been able to perform the duties of an eldest son and conduct the funeral rites of his father. For most of his life, Ram had had almost no relationship with his father. Most Ayodhyans, including Dashrath, had blamed the ‘bad fate’ of Ram’s birth for the disastrous loss to Raavan at the Battle of Karachapa. It was only over the last few years that Ram and Dashrath had finally begun building a bond. But exile and death had forced them apart again. Returning to Ayodhya was not possible as that would break Lord Rudra’s law, but Ram had performed a *yagna* in the forest for the journey his father’s soul had undertaken.

Bharat had remained true to his word and placed Ram’s slippers on the throne of Ayodhya. He had begun to govern the empire as his brother’s regent. It could be said that Ram had been appointed emperor *in absentia*. An unorthodox move. But Bharat’s liberal and decentralising style of governance had made the decision palatable to the kingdoms within the Sapt Sindhu.

Ram, Lakshman, and Sita had travelled south. Primarily walking by the banks of rivers, they moved inland only when necessary. They had finally crossed the borders of the Sapt Sindhu near the kingdom of South Kosala, ruled by Ram’s maternal grandfather. Lakshman and Sita had suggested visiting South Kosala and resting there for a few months. But Ram believed that it was against the spirit of the punishment they were serving to exploit the comforts of the palace of royal relatives.

They had skirted South Kosala and travelled deeper southwest, approaching the forest lands of *Dandakaranya*. Lakshman and Ram had expressed some concern about travelling south of the Narmada. Lord Manu had banned the Sapt Sindhuans from crossing the Narmada to the South. If they did cross, they were

not to return. Or, so it had been decreed. But Sita had pointed out that Indians had, for millennia, found creative ways to travel to the south of the Narmada without actually ‘crossing’ the river. She suggested that they follow the letter of Lord Manu’s law, but not the spirit.

While Ram was uncomfortable with this, Sita had managed to prevail. Living close to the coast was dangerous; Raavan controlled the western and eastern coastlines of the subcontinent. The safest place was deep inland, within the *Dandakaranya*; even if that meant being south of the Narmada. They had travelled in a southwesterly direction, so that the source of the west-flowing Narmada remained to their north. They had, thus, reached land that was geographically to the south of the Narmada without technically ‘crossing’ the river. They were now at the outskirts of a very large village, almost a small town.

‘What is this town called, Captain Jatayu?’ asked Ram, turning to the Malayaputra. ‘Do you know these people?’

Jatayu and fifteen of his soldiers had been trailing Ram, Sita, and Lakshman, ensuring their safety. As instructed by Sita, they had remained hidden. Ram and Lakshman did not know of their presence for a long time. However, despite their best efforts to stay hidden, Ram had begun to suspect that someone was shadowing them. Sita had not been sure how Ram would react to her seeking protection from some Malayaputras. So she had not told Ram about her decision to ask Jatayu to act as a bodyguard for them. However, as they crossed the borders of the Sapt Sindhu, the risks of assassination attempts had increased. Sita had finally been forced to introduce Jatayu to Ram. Trusting Sita, Ram had accepted the Malayaputra and his fifteen soldiers as members of his team. Together they were one short of twenty now; more defendable than a group of just three. Ram understood this.

‘It’s called Indrapur, Prince Ram,’ said Jatayu. ‘It is the biggest town in the area. I know Chief Shaktivel, its leader. I’m sure he will not mind our presence. It’s a festive season for them.’

‘Festivities are always good!’ said Lakshman, laughing jovially.

Ram said to Jatayu, ‘Do they celebrate *Uttarayan* as well?’

The *Uttarayan* marked the beginning of the *northward movement* of the sun across the horizon. This day marked the farthest that the nurturer of the world, the sun, moved away from those in the northern hemisphere. It would now begin its six-month journey back to the north. It was believed to be that part of the year which marked nature’s renewal. The death of the old. The birth of the new. It was, therefore, celebrated across practically all of the Indian subcontinent.

Jatayu frowned. ‘Of course they do, Prince Ram. Which Indian does not celebrate the *Uttarayan*? We are all aligned to the Sun God!’

‘That we are,’ said Sita. ‘*Om Suryaya Namah.*’

Everyone repeated the ancient chant, bowing to the Sun God. ‘*Om Suryaya Namah.*’

‘Perhaps, we can participate in their festivities,’ said Sita.

Jatayu smiled. ‘The Indrapurans are a martial, aggressive people and their celebrations can be a little rough.’

‘Rough?’ asked Ram.

‘Let’s just say you need bulls among men to be able to participate.’

‘Really? What’s this celebration called?’

‘It’s called *Jallikattu*.’

## — ருக்மி —

‘By the great Lord Rudra,’ whispered Ram. ‘This sounds similar to our *Vrishbandhan* festival ... But very few play this game in the Sapt Sindhu anymore.’

Ram, Sita, Lakshman, Jatayu, and the bodyguards had just entered Indrapur. They had gone straight to the ground next to the town lake. It had been fenced in and prepared for the *Jallikattu* competition the next day. Crowds were milling around the fence, taking in the sights and sounds. Nobody was allowed to cross the fence into the ground. The bulls would be led there soon to acclimatise them for the competition the next day.

Jatayu had just explained the game of *Jallikattu* to them. It was, in its essence, a very simple game. The name literally meant a tied bag of coins. In this case, gold coins. The contestant had to yank this bag to be declared a winner. Simple? Not quite! The challenge lay in the place this bag of coins was tied. It was tied to the horns of a bull. Not any ordinary bull, mind you. It was a bull especially bred to be aggressive, strong and belligerent.

‘Yes, it is similar to *Vrishbandhan, embracing the bull*,’ explained Jatayu. ‘The game itself has been around for a long time, as you know. In fact, some say that it comes down from our Dwarka and Sangam Tamil ancestors.’

‘Interesting,’ said Sita. ‘I didn’t know it was so ancient.’

Many bulls, which would participate in the *Jallikattu*, were specially bred in the surrounding villages and within Indrapur itself. The owners took pride in finding the best bulls to breed with the local cows. And, they took even more pride in feeding, training and nurturing the beasts to become fierce fighters.

‘There are lands far to the east, outside India’s borders,’ said Jatayu, ‘where

you find bull-fighting competitions as well. But in their case, the dice is loaded against the bulls. Those people keep the bulls hungry for a few days before the contest, to weaken them. Before the main bull-fighter gets into the ring, his team further weakens the beast considerably. They do this by making the poor bull run a long distance and stabbing it multiple times with long spears and blades. And despite weakening the bull so much, the bull-fighter still carries a weapon to fight the beast, and ultimately kill it.'

'Cowards,' said Lakshman. 'There is no *kshatriyahood* in fighting that way.'

'Exactly,' said Jatayu. 'In fact, even in the rare case that a bull survives that competition, it is never brought back into the arena again because it would have learnt how to fight. And that would tilt the scales in its favour instead of the bull-fighter. So, they always bring in a new, inexperienced bull.'

'And, of course, this is not done in *Jallikattu* ...' said Ram.

'Not at all. Here, the bull is well fed and kept strong and healthy, all the way. Nobody is allowed to spear or weaken it. Experienced bulls, which have performed well in previous competitions, are allowed to participate as well.'

'That's the way to do it,' said Lakshman. 'That will make it a fair fight.'

'It gets even fairer,' continued Jatayu. 'None of the men competing against the bull are allowed to carry any weapons. Not even small knives. They only use their bare hands.'

Lakshman whistled softly. 'That takes real courage.'

'Yes, it does. In that other bull-fighting competition I told you about, the one outside India, the bulls almost always die and the men rarely suffer serious injury, let alone die. But in *Jallikattu*, the bulls never die. It's the men who risk serious injury, even death.'

A soft, childish voice was heard. 'That's the way real men fight.'

Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Jatayu turned almost in unison. A small child, perhaps six or seven years of age, stood before them. He had fair skin and small animated eyes. For his young age, he was extraordinarily hairy. His chest was puffed with pride. His arms akimbo as he surveyed the ground beyond the wooden fence.

*He's probably a Vaanar.*

Sita went down on her knees and said, 'Are you participating in the competition tomorrow, young man?'

The child's body visibly deflated. His eyes downcast, he said, 'I wanted to. But they say I cannot. Children are not allowed. By the great Lord Rudra, if I could compete I am sure I would defeat everyone.'

Sita smiled broadly. 'I'm sure you would. What's your name, son?'

'My name is Angad.'

‘A-N-G-A-D!’

A loud booming voice was heard from a distance.

Angad turned around rapidly. Fear in his eyes. ‘My father’s coming ... I gotta go ...’

‘Wait ...’ said Sita, stretching her hand out.

But Angad wriggled out and ran away quickly.

Sita rose up and turned towards Jatayu. ‘The name rang a bell, right?’

Jatayu nodded. ‘I didn’t recognise the face. But I know the name. That is Prince Angad. The son of King Vali of Kishkindha.’

Ram frowned. ‘That kingdom is deep in the south of *Dandakaranya*, right? Isn’t it aligned to ...’

Ram was interrupted by another booming voice. ‘I’ll be damned!’

The crowd made way as the chief of Indrapur, Shaktivel, walked up to them. His voice aggressive. ‘You come to my town and nobody informs me?’

Shaktivel was a massive man. Swarthy. Tall. Muscled like an *auroch* bull, with a large belly, his arms and legs were like the trunks of a small tree. His most striking feature, however, was his extra-large moustache, which extended grandly down his cheeks. Despite his obvious strength, he was also getting on in age, as evidenced clearly by the many white hairs in his moustache and on his head. And, the wrinkles on his forehead.

Jatayu spoke calmly, ‘We’ve just arrived, Shaktivel. No need to lose your temper.’

To everyone present, Shaktivel’s eyes conveyed immense anger. Suddenly, he burst into loud laughter. ‘Jata, you stupid bugger! Come into my arms!’

Jatayu laughed as he embraced Shaktivel. ‘You will always be a ridiculous oaf, Shakti!’

Sita turned to Ram and arched an eyebrow. Amused at seeing two males express love for each other through expletives and curses. Ram smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

The crowds around began cheering loudly as the two friends held each other in a long and warm embrace. Clearly, the relationship meant a lot to them. Equally clearly, they were more brothers than friends. Finally, Shaktivel and Jatayu stepped back, still holding each other’s hands.

‘Who are your guests?’ asked Shaktivel. ‘Because they are my guests now!’

Jatayu smiled and held his friend’s shoulder, as he said, ‘Prince Ram, Princess Sita, and Prince Lakshman.’

Shaktivel’s eyes suddenly widened. He folded his hands together into a *Namaste*. ‘Wow ... the royal family of Ayodhya itself. It is my honour. You must spend the night in my palace. And, of course, come and see the *Jallikattu*

tomorrow.'

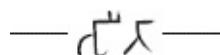
Ram politely returned Shaktivel's *Namaste*. 'Thank you for your hospitality. But it's not correct for us to stay in your palace. We will stay in the forest close by. But we will certainly come for the competition tomorrow.'

Shaktivel had heard of Ram's punishment, so he didn't press the matter. 'You could at least give me the pleasure of having dinner with you.'

Ram hesitated.

'Nothing fashionable at my palace. Just a simple meal together in the forest.'

Ram smiled. 'That would be welcome.'



'Look at that one,' whispered Lakshman to Sita and Ram.

It was just after noon the next day. Massive crowds had gathered at the lake-side ground, where the contest between man and beast was about to take place. The ground had a small entry on the eastern side, from where bulls would be led in, one by one. They had been trained to make a run for the exit at the western end, a good five hundred metres away. The men, essentially, had that distance to try and grab hold of the bull and pull out the bag of coins. If the contestant won, he would keep the bag of gold coins. More importantly, he would be called a *Vrishank*; a *bull warrior!* Of course, if any bull reached the western gate and escaped, without losing its bag, the owner of the bull would be declared winner. Needless to say, he would keep the bag of coins.

There were various breeds of bulls that were used in the *Jallikattu* competitions. Among the most popular was a type of zebu bulls that were specifically cross-bred for aggression, strength, and speed. They were extremely agile and could turn around completely at the same spot in a split second. More importantly, they also had a very pronounced hump; this was a requirement for any bull competing in the *Jallikattu*. Some believed that the humps were essentially fat deposits. They couldn't be more wrong. These humps were an enlargement of the *rhomboideus* muscle in the shoulder and back. The size of the hump, thus, was a marker of the quality of the bull. And, judging by the size of the humps on these bulls, they were, clearly, fierce competitors.

In keeping with tradition, proud owners were parading the bulls in the ground. This was so that human contestants could inspect the beasts. As tradition also dictated, the owners, one by one, began to brag about the strength and speed of their bulls; their genealogy, the diet they were fed, the training they had received, even the number of people they had gored! The greater the

monstrosity of the bull, the louder and lustier the cheers of the crowd. And as the owner stood with his bull, many from the crowd would throw their *angvastrams* into the ring to signify their intention to compete with that beast.

But they all fell silent as a new bull was led in.

‘By the great Lord Rudra ...’ whispered Lakshman, in awe.

Sita held Ram’s hand. ‘Which poor sod is going to grab the coins from that bull’s horns?’

The owner of the bull was aware of the impact of the mere presence of his beast. Sometimes, silence speaks louder than words. He didn’t say anything; nothing about its heredity, its awesome food habits, or fearsome training. He simply looked at the crowd, arrogance dripping from every pore of his body. In fact, he didn’t expect any contestant to even try to compete against his bull.

The bull was massive, larger than all the others that had been paraded so far. The owner didn’t clarify, but it seemed like a cross-breed between a wild gaur and the faster sub-breed of the domesticated zebu. Clearly though, the gaur genes had dominated in the making of this beast. It was gigantic, standing over seven feet tall at the shoulders with a length of nearly ten feet. It must have weighed in at one thousand five hundred kilograms. And practically all that one could see rippling under its skin was pure hard muscle. Its two horns were curved upwards, making a hollow cup on the upper part of the head, like a typical gaur bull. Zebu genes had prevailed in the make of the beast’s skin. It was whitish grey and not dark brown like gaur skins usually are. Perhaps the only other place where the zebu genes had won was the hump. Normally, a gaur has an elongated ridge on its back; it’s flat and long. But this bull had a prominent and very large hump on its upper shoulders and back. This was very, very important. For without that hump, this beastly bull would have been disqualified from the *Jallikattu*.

If a competitor managed to grab hold of the hump of a bull, his main task was to hold on tight, even as the bull bucked aggressively, trying to shake the human off. Through the tussle, the man had to somehow hold on; and if he held on long enough and pulled tight, the bull would finally slow down and the man could grab the bag.

The owner suddenly spoke. Loudly. Disconcertingly, considering the demonic animal he led, the voice of the man was soft and feminine. ‘Some of you may think this bull is all about size. But speed matters as well!’

The owner let go of the rope and whistled softly. The bull charged out in a flash. Its speed blinding. It was faster than any other bull on this day.

Lakshman stared, awestruck. *Gaurs are not meant to be this fast!*

The bull turned rapidly in its spot, displaying its fearsome agility. As if that

wasn't enough, it suddenly started bucking aggressively, and charging towards the fence. The crowd fell back in terror. Its dominance established, the bull sauntered back to its owner, lowered its head and snorted aggressively at the crowd.

*Magnificent!*

Loud and spontaneous applause filled the air.

'Looks like the hump and skin colour are not the only things it inherited from its zebu ancestor,' whispered Sita.

'Yes, it has inherited its speed as well,' said Lakshman. 'With that massive size and speed ... It's almost like me!'

Sita looked at Lakshman with a smile. It disappeared as she saw the look on her brother-in-law's face.

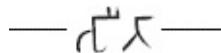
'Don't ...' whispered Sita.

'What a beast,' said Lakshman, admiringly. 'It will be a worthy competitor.'

Ram placed his hand on his brother's shoulder, holding him back. But before Lakshman could do anything, a loud voice was heard. 'I will compete with that bull!'

Everyone's eyes turned towards a violet-coloured, obviously expensive *angvastram* flying into the ring. Beyond the wooden fence stood a fair, ridiculously muscular and very hairy man of medium height. He wore a simple cream-coloured *dhoti* with one end of it sticking out like a tail. The clothes may have been simple, but the bearing was regal.

'That's Vali,' said Jatayu. 'The King of Kishkindha.'



Vali stood close to the barricaded entrance. The gaur-zebu bull was about to be let loose. It was a covered gate and the bull couldn't see who or what was waiting on the other side. Three bulls had already run. Two had been baited and their gold coins grabbed. But one bull had escaped with its package. It was a rapid game. Individual races rarely lasted more than a minute. There were at least a hundred more bulls to run. But everyone knew that this was the match to watch.

The priest of the local temple bellowed out loud. 'May the *Vrishank* above all *Vrishanks*, Lord Rudra, bless the man and the beast!'

This was the standard announcement before any *Jallikattu* match in Indrapur. And as usual, it was followed by the loud and reverberating sound of a conch shell.

After a moment's silence, the loud clanking of metal gates was heard.

*'Jai Shri Rudra!'* roared the crowd.

From the dark interiors of the covered gate, the beast emerged. Usually, bulls charged out, thundering past the press of humans who tried to lunge from the sides and grab the hump of the animal.

Getting in front of the bull was dangerous for it could gore you with its horns. Being at the back was equally dangerous for it could kick outwards with its formidable hind legs. Its side was the best place to be. Which is why, bulls were trained to dash across, giving men less time to try and grab from the two sides.

But this gaur-zebu bull simply sauntered out. Supremely sure of its abilities. Vali, who was waiting beside the gate, hidden from view, leapt up as soon as the bull emerged. Considering Vali was nearly one-and-a-half feet shorter than the bull, it was a tribute to his supreme physical fitness that he managed to get his arms around the bull's massive hump as he landed. The bull was startled. Someone had dared to hold its hump. It started bucking wildly. Bellowing loudly. Banging its hooves hard on the ground. Suddenly, showing awe-inspiring dexterity, it whirled almost a complete circle with monstrous speed. Vali lost his grip. He was flung away.

The bull suddenly calmed down. It stared at the prone Vali, snorted imperiously and began walking away. Slowly. Towards the exit. Staring into the crowds, nonchalantly.

Someone from the crowd shouted an encouragement to Vali. 'Come on! Get up!'

The bull looked at the crowd and stopped. It then turned towards the lake, presenting its backside to the crowd. It slowly raised its tail and urinated. Then, maintaining its blasé demeanour, it started walking again. Towards the exit. Just as leisurely.

Lakshman laughed softly, as he shook his head. 'Forget about baiting this bull. The bull is, in fact, baiting us!'

Ram tapped Lakshman on his shoulder. 'Look at Vali. He's getting up.'

Vali banged his fists hard on his chest and sprinted ahead. Light on his feet. His long hair flying in the wind. He came up from behind the bull.

'This man is a maniac!' said Lakshman, worried but animated. 'That bull can crush his chest with a single blow from its hind legs!'

As Vali came close to the bull, he jumped up, soaring high. He landed on top of the bull. The surprised beast, which hadn't seen Vali come up from behind, bellowed loudly and went up on its hind legs. Trying to shake the king off. But Vali held on firmly. Screaming at the top of his lungs!

The outraged bull roared. Louder than the man who clung to it. Letting its

front legs fall to the ground, it lowered its head and bucked wildly. But Vali held on, screaming all the time.

The bull suddenly leapt into the air and shook its body. It still could not get rid of the man holding on desperately to its hump.

The entire crowd had fallen silent. In absolute awe. They had never seen a *Jallikattu* match last so long. The only sounds were the loud bellows of the bull and the roars of Vali.

The bull leapt up again and readied to fall to its side. Its weight would have crushed Vali to death. He quickly let go of the bull. But not fast enough.

The bull landed on its side. Vali escaped the bulk, but its front legs lashed Vali's left arm. Lakshman heard the bone crack from where he stood. To his admiration, Vali did not scream in pain. The bull was up on its feet in no time and trotted away. From a distance, it looked at Vali. Anger blazing in its eyes. But it kept its distance.

'The bull is angry,' whispered Ram. 'I guess it has never had a human go so far.'

'Stay down,' said Sita, almost willing Vali to remain on the ground.

Lakshman stared at Vali silently.

If a man remained curled up on the ground, unmoving like a stone, a bull normally would not charge. But if he stood up ...

'Fool!' hissed Sita, as she saw Vali rising once again, his bloodied and shattered left arm dangling uselessly by his side. 'Stay down!'

Lakshman's mouth fell open in awe. *What a man!*

The bull too seemed shocked and enraged that the man had risen once again. It snorted and shook its head.

Vali banged his chest repeatedly with his right fist and roared loudly, 'Vali! Vali!'

The crowd too began shouting.

'Vali!'

'Vali!'

The bull bellowed loudly, and banged its front hooves hard on the ground. A warning had been given.

Vali banged his chest again, his shattered left arm swinging uselessly by his side. 'Vali!'

The bull came up on its hind legs and bellowed once again. Much louder this time. Almost deafeningly loud.

And then, the beast charged.

Lakshman jumped over the fence, racing towards the bull at the same time.

'Lakshman!' screamed Ram, as he and Sita also leapt over and sprinted after

Lakshman.

Lakshman ran diagonally, bisecting the path between Vali and the animal. Luckily for the prince of Ayodhya, the bull did not see this new threat.

Lakshman was much taller than Vali. He was also far more bulky and muscular. But even Lakshman knew that brute strength was useless against this gargantuan beast. He knew he would have only one chance. The bull's horns were unlike the pure zebu breed; pure zebu bulls had straight, sharp horns which worked like blunt knives while goring. The gaur-zebu bull's horns, on the other hand, were curved upwards, making a hollow in the upper part of the head.

The bull was focused on Vali. It had lowered its head and was thundering towards him. It didn't notice Lakshman come up suddenly from the side. Lakshman leapt forward, timing his jump to perfection, pulling his legs up. As he soared above the bull's head, he quickly reached out with his hand and yanked the bag off the horns. For that split second, the bull kept charging forward and Lakshman's feet came in line with the bull's head. He pushed out with his legs. Hard. Effectively using the bull's head as leverage, he bounced away. Lakshman's weight and size were enough to push the head of the bull down. As he bounded away, rolling on the field, the bull's head banged into the hard ground and it tripped, falling flat on its face.

Ram and Sita used the distraction to quickly pick up Vali and sprint towards the fence.

'Leave me!' screamed Vali, struggling against the two. 'Leave me!'

Vali's struggle led to more blood spilling out of his shattered arm. It increased the pain dramatically. But Ram and Sita did not stop.

Meanwhile, the bull quickly rose to its feet and bellowed loudly. Lakshman raised his hand, showing the bag he held.

The bull should have charged. But it had been trained well. As soon as it saw the bag of coins, it lowered its head and snorted. It looked behind at its owner, who was standing close to the exit. The owner smiled and shrugged, mouthing the words, 'You win some. You lose some.'

The bull looked back at Lakshman, snorted, and lowered its head again. Almost as if it was accepting defeat gracefully. Lakshman pulled his hands together into a *Namaste* and bowed low to the magnificent beast.

The bull then turned around and started walking away. Towards its owner.

Vali, meanwhile, had lost consciousness, as Sita and Ram carried him over the fence.



## Chapter 29

Late in the evening, Shaktivel came to the forest edge where Ram and his band were resting. A few men followed the Chief of Indrapur, bearing large bundles of weapons in their hands.

Ram stood up, folding his hands together in a *Namaste*. ‘Greetings, brave Shaktivel.’

Shaktivel returned Ram’s greeting. ‘*Namaste*, great Prince.’ He pointed to the bundles being carefully laid on the ground by his men. ‘As requested by you, all your weapons have been repaired, shone, polished, and sharpened.’

Ram picked up a sword, examined its edge and smiled. ‘They are as good as new.’

Shaktivel’s chest swelled with pride. ‘Our metalsmiths are among the best in India.’

‘They clearly are,’ said Sita, examining a spear closely.

‘Prince Ram,’ said Shaktivel, coming close, ‘a private word.’

Ram signalled Sita to follow him, as he was pulled aside by Shaktivel.

‘You may need to leave in haste,’ said Shaktivel.

‘Why?’ asked a surprised Sita.

‘Vali.’

‘Someone wanted him dead?’ asked Ram. ‘So, they’re angry with us now?’

‘No, no. Vali is the one who is angry with Princess Sita and you.’

‘What?! We just saved his life.’

Shaktivel sighed. ‘He doesn’t see it that way. According to him, the two of you and Prince Lakshman made him lose his honour. He’d rather have died in the *Jallikattu* arena than be rescued by someone else.’

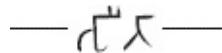
Ram looked at Sita, his eyes wide in surprise.

‘It is not in my town’s interest to have royal families fight each other here,’ said Shaktivel, folding his hands together in apology. ‘When two elephants fight, the grass is the first to get trampled.’

Sita smiled. ‘I know that line.’

'It's a popular line,' said Shaktivel. 'Especially among those who are not from the elite.'

Ram placed his hand on Shaktivel's shoulder. 'You have been our host. You have been a friend. We do not want to cause you any trouble. We'll leave before daybreak. Thank you for your hospitality.'



Ram, Sita, and Lakshman had been in exile for twenty-four months now. The fifteen Malayaputra soldiers accompanied them everywhere.

Each member of the small party had settled into an established routine, as they moved deeper into the forests of Dandak. They were headed in the westward direction, but had not been able to find a suitable enough permanent camp. They usually stayed in one place for a short while before moving on. Standard perimeter and security formations had been agreed upon. Cooking, cleaning, and hunting duties were shared by rotation. Since not everyone in the camp ate meat, hunting wasn't required often.

On one of these hunting trips, a Malayaputra called Makrant had been gored by a boar while trying to save Sita's life. The wild boar's tusk had cut upwards through the upper quadriceps muscles on his thigh, piercing the femoral artery. Fortunately, the other tusk of the boar had hit the hard pelvic bone; thus, it had not pushed through and penetrated deeper where it would have ruptured the intestines. That would have been fatal as the resultant infection would have been impossible to treat in their temporary camp. Makrant had survived, but his recovery had not been ideal. His quadriceps muscles were still weak and the artery had not healed completely, remaining partially collapsed. He still limped a great deal; a condition which could be dangerous for a soldier in the hazardous jungle.

Because of the injury it was impossible for Makrant to move easily through the forest. So, they had not moved camp for some time.

Makrant had been suffering for a few months. Jatayu knew something had to be done. And, he knew the cure as well. He simply had to steel himself for the journey ...

'The waters of Walkeshwar?' asked Sita.

'Yes,' said Jatayu. 'The holy lake emerges from a natural spring bursting out from deep underground, which means it picks up specific minerals on its way to the surface. Those minerals infuse the waters with their divine goodness. That water will help Makrant's arteries recover quickly. We can also get some medicinal herbs from the island which will help his partly atrophied muscles to

recover fully. He can have the full use of his legs again.'

'Where is Walkeshwar, Jatayuji?'

'It's in a small island called Mumbadevi on the west coast. Specifically, the northern part of the Konkan coast.'

'Weren't we supposed to stop at an island close to it for supplies on our way to Agastyakootam? An island called Colaba?'

'Yes. Our captain had thought it would be a good idea to stop there. I had advised against it.'

'Yes. I remember.'

'Mumbadevi is the big island to the northwest of Colaba.'

'So, Mumbadevi is one of that group of seven islands?'

'Yes, great Vishnu.'

'You had advised against stopping there since it is a major sea base for Raavan's forces.'

'Yes, great Vishnu.'

Sita smiled. 'Then, it's probably not a good idea for Ram and me to accompany you.'

Jatayu didn't smile at Sita's wry humour. 'Yes, great Vishnu.'

'But the Lankans will not dare hurt a Malayaputra, right?'

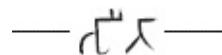
Fear flashed momentarily in Jatayu's eyes, but his voice was even and calm.  
'No, they won't ...'

Sita frowned. 'Jatayuji, is there something you need to tell me?'

Jatayu shook his head. 'Everything will be fine. I will take three men with me. The rest of you should stay here. I will be back in two months.'

Instinct kicked in. Sita knew something was wrong. 'Jatayuji, is there a problem in Mumbadevi?'

Jatayu shook his head. 'I need to prepare to leave, great Vishnu. You and Prince Ram should remain encamped here.'



It was dark when Jatayu and the three soldiers reached the shoreline of the mainland. Across a narrow strait, they saw the seven islands that abutted the south of the far larger Salsette Island. Torchlights on houses and tall lamp towers on streets and public structures had lit up the central and eastern side of Salsette Island. Clearly, the town had expanded on this, the largest island, in the area. It was ten times bigger than the seven islands to the south put together! It was logical that a fast-growing town had come up here. There were large freshwater lakes in the centre of the island. And enough open area to build a

large town. Crossing into the mainland was easy since the creek that separated it was narrow and shallow.

There had been a time when the seven islands to the south of Salsette had been the centre of all civilisation in the area. The island of Mumbadevi had a wonderful harbour on its eastern shores, which worked well for larger ships. The port built at that harbour still existed. And clearly, it was still busy. Jatayu could also see lights on the other four smaller islands on the eastern side: Parel, Mazgaon, Little Colaba, and Colaba. But the western islands of Mahim and Worli were not clearly visible.

The hills at the western end of Mumbadevi, where Walkeshwar was, were tall enough to be seen from across the straits, during the day. In fact, the hills had once been visible at night as well. For that's where the main palaces, temples, and structures of the old city were. And they had always been well lit.

But Jatayu couldn't see a thing there. No torchlights. No lamp towers. No sign of habitation.

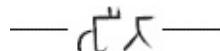
Walkeshwar remained abandoned. It remained in ruin.

Jatayu shivered as he remembered those terrible days. The time when he had been a young soldier. When Raavan's hordes had come ... He remembered only too well. For he had been one of the horde.

*Lord Parshu Ram, forgive me ... Forgive me for my sins ...*

'Captain,' said one of the Malayaputra soldiers. 'Should we cross now or ...'

Jatayu turned around. 'No. We'll cross in the morning. We'll rest here for the night.'



Jatayu tossed and turned as he tried to sleep. Memories that he had buried deep within himself were bursting through to his consciousness. Nightmares from his long-hidden past.

Memories of when he was younger. Many, many years ago.

*Raavan used our own people to conquer us.*

Jatayu sat up. He could see the islands across the creek.

When he had been a teenager, Jatayu had carried the pain, the anger, of being ill-treated as a Naga. As someone who was deformed. But Nagas weren't the only ones ill-treated. Many communities had complaints against the rigid, supercilious, and chauvinistic elite of the Sapt Sindhu. And Raavan had seemed like a rebel-hero, a saviour of sorts to many of them. He took on the powers-that-be. And, the disenchanted flocked to him. Fought for him. Killed for him.

And, were used by him.

Jatayu had, at that time, enjoyed the feeling of vengeance. Of hitting out at the hated, self-absorbed elite. Until the time that his unit had been ordered to join an *AhiRaavan*.

Raavan's forces were divided into two groups. One group commanded the land territories, with commanders called *MahiRaavans* in charge. And the other group commanded the seas and the ports, with commanders called *AhiRaavans* in control.

It was with one such *AhiRaavan* called Prahast that Jatayu had been ordered to come to Mumbadevi and its seven islands.

*These seven islands were peopled by the Devendar community at the time, led by a kindly man called Indran. Mumbadevi and the other six islands were an entrepot, with goods stored for import and export with minimal custom duties. The liberal Devendrars provided supplies and refuge to any seafarer, without favour or discrimination. They treated everyone with kindness. They believed it was their sacred duty to do so. One such seafarer, who had been provided refuge for some time, was Jatayu, when he was very young. He remembered that kindness well. It was a rare place in India, where Jatayu had not been treated like the plague. He had been welcomed like a normal person. The shock of the compassion had been so overwhelming that he had cried himself to sleep that first night in Mumbadevi, unable to handle the flood of emotions.*

And many years later, he had returned, as part of an army sent to conquer that very same Mumbadevi Island.

*Raavan's strategic reasons were obvious. He wanted absolute control over all the sea trade in the Indian Ocean; the hub of global trade. Whoever dominated this Ocean, dominated the entire world. And only with absolute control could Raavan enforce his usurious customs duties. He had conquered or managed to gain control over most of the major ports across the Indian subcontinent and the coasts of Arabia, Africa, and South-east Asia. Those ports followed his rules.*

*But Mumbadevi stubbornly refused to charge high custom or turn away any sailor who sought refuge there. Its inhabitants believed this service was their duty. Their dharma. Raavan had to gain control over this important harbour on the sea route between the Indus-Saraswati coasts and Lanka.*

*AhiRaavan Prahast had been sent to negotiate a solution. And, if needed, force a solution. The Lankan Army had been waiting, camped in their ships, anchored at the Mumbadevi harbour, off its eastern coast. For a week. Nothing had happened. Finally, they had been ordered to march to Walkeshwar, the western part of Mumbadevi, where the palace and a temple dedicated to Lord Rudra had been built, right next to a natural-spring-filled lake.*

*Jatayu, being a junior soldier, was at the back of the line.*

*He knew the Devendrars couldn't fight. They were a peaceful community of seafarers, engineers, doctors, philosophers, and storytellers. There were very few warriors among them. Jatayu hoped desperately that a compromise had been reached.*

*The scene he saw at the main town square, outside of the palace, baffled him.*

*It was completely deserted. Not a soul in sight. All the shops were open. Goods displayed. But nobody to tend to, or even secure them.*

*At the centre of the square was a massive pile of corkwood, with some mixture of holy sandalwood. It was held in place by a metallic mesh. All drenched in fresh ghee. It had clearly been built recently. Perhaps, the previous night itself.*

*It was like a very large unlit cremation pyre. Humongous. Massive enough to potentially accommodate hundreds of bodies.*

*It had a walkway leading up to its top.*

*Prahast had come in expecting a ceremonial surrender, as he had demanded, and then the peaceful expulsion of the Devendrars. This was unexpected. He immediately made his troops fall into battle formations.*

*Sanskrit chants were emanating from behind the palace walls. Accompanied by the clanging of sacred bells and the beating of drums. It took some time for the Lankans to discern the words of the chants.*

*They were from the Garuda Purana. Hymns usually sung during a death ceremony.*

*What were the Devendrars thinking? Their palace walls were not tough enough to withstand an assault. They did not have enough soldiers to take on the five-thousand-strong Lankan Army.*

*Suddenly, smoke began to plume out of the palace compound. Thick, acrid smoke. The wooden palace had been set on fire.*

*And then, the gates were flung open.*

*Prahast's order was loud and clear. 'Draw! And hold!'*

*All the Lankans immediately drew their weapons. Holding their line. In military discipline. Expecting an attack ...*

*Indran, the king of the Devendrars, led his people out of the palace. All of them. His entire family. The priests, traders, workmen, intellectuals, doctors, artists. Men, women, children. All his citizens.*

*All the Devendrars.*

*They all wore saffron robes. The colour of fire, of Lord Agni. The colour of the final journey.*

*Every single face was a picture of calm.*

*They were still chanting.*

*Every Devendarar carried gold coins and jewellery. Each one carried a fortune. And each one carried a small bottle.*

*Indran walked up the pathway to the stand that overhung the massive pile of wood. He nodded at his people.*

*They flung their gold coins and jewellery at the Lankan soldiers.*

*Indran's voice carried loud and clear. 'You can take all our money! You can take our lives! But you cannot force us to act against our dharma!'*

*The Lankan soldiers stood stunned. Not knowing how to react. They looked at their commander for instructions.*

*Prahast bellowed loudly. 'King Indran, think well before you act. Lord Raavan is the King of all three Worlds. Even the Gods fear him. Your soul will be cursed. Take your gold and leave. Surrender and you shall be shown mercy!'*

*Indran smiled kindly. 'We will never surrender our dharma.'*

*Then the king of the Devendrars looked at the Lankan soldiers. 'Save your souls. You alone carry the fruit of your karma. No one else. You cannot escape your karma by claiming that you were only following orders. Save your souls. Choose well.'*

*Some Lankan soldiers seemed to be wavering. The weapons in their hands shaking.*

*'Hold your weapons!' shouted Prahast. 'This is a trick!'*

*Indran nodded to his head priest. The priest stepped up to the pile of wood and stuck a burning torch deep into it. It caught fire immediately. The pyre was ready.*

*Indran pulled out his small bottle and took a deep swig. Possibly a pain reliever.*

*'All I ask is that you not insult our Gods. That you not defile our temples.' Indran then stared at Prahast with pity. 'The rest is for you to do as you will.'*

*Prahast ordered his soldiers again. 'Steady. Nobody move!'*

*Indran pulled his hands together into a Namaste and looked up at the sky. 'Jai Rudra! Jai Parshu Ram!'*

*Saying this, Indran jumped into the pyre.*

*Jatayu screamed in agony. 'Nooooo!'*

*The Lankan soldiers were too shocked to react.*

*'Don't move!' screamed Prahast at his soldiers again.*

*All the other Devendrars took their potions and started running up the walkway. Jumping into the mass pyre. Rapidly. In groups. Every single one. Men, women, children. Following their leader. Following their king.*

*There were one thousand Devendrars. It took some time for all of them to*

*jump in.*

*No Lankan stepped up to stop them. A few officers close to Prahast, to the disgust of many, started picking through the gold jewellery thrown by the Devendrars. Selecting the best for themselves. Discussing the value of their loot with each other. Even as the Devendrars were committing mass suicide. But the majority of the Lankan soldiers just stood there. Too stunned to do anything.*

*As the last of the Devendrars fell to his fiery end, Prahast looked around. He could see the shocked expressions of many of his soldiers. He burst out laughing. ‘Don’t be sad, my soldiers. All the gold will be divided up equally among you. You will all make more money today than you have made in your entire lives! Smile! You are rich now!’*

*The words did not have the desired impact. Many had been jolted to their souls. Sickened by what they had witnessed. Within less than a week, more than half of Prahast’s army had deserted. Jatayu was one of them.*

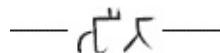
*They couldn’t fight for Raavan anymore.*

The loud sound of the waves crashing against hard rocks brought Jatayu back from that painful memory.

His body was shaking. Tears pouring from his eyes. He held his hands together in supplication, his head bowed. He gathered the courage to look across the straits at Mumbadevi. At the hills of Walkeshwar.

‘Forgive me, King Indran … Forgive me …’

But there was no respite from the guilt.



It had been a few months since Jatayu’s return from Mumbadevi.

The medicine from Walkeshwar had done wonders for Makrant. The limp had reduced dramatically. He could walk almost normally again. The atrophied muscles were slowly regaining strength. It was obvious that within a matter of months Makrant would regain the full use of his legs. Some Malayaputras were even planning hunts with him.

Sita had tried a few times to ask Jatayu why the mention of Mumbadevi caused him such distress. But had given up over time.

Early today, she had stolen away from the group to meet Hanuman at a secret location.

‘Prince Ram and you need to settle down at one place, princess,’ said Hanuman. ‘Your constant movement makes it difficult for me to keep track of you.’

‘I know,’ said Sita. ‘But we haven’t found a secure place yet.’

'I have a place in mind for you. It's close to water. It's defendable. You will be able to forage food easily. There is enough hunt available. And, it's close enough for me to track you.'

'Where is it?'

'It's near the source of the holy Godavari.'

'All right. I'll take the details from you. And, how's ...'

'Radhika?'

Sita nodded.

Hanuman smiled apologetically. 'She's ... She's moved on.'

'Moved on?'

'She's married now.'

Sita was shocked. 'Married?'

'Yes.'

Sita held her breath. 'Poor Bharat ...'

'I have heard that Bharat still loves her.'

'I don't think he'll ever get over her ...'

'I'd heard something once: Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'

Sita looked at Hanuman. 'Forgive me, Hanu *bhaiya*, I don't mean to be rude. But only someone who has never loved at all can say something like that.'

Hanuman shrugged his shoulders. 'Point taken. In any case, the location for the camp ...'



## Chapter 30

Six years had lapsed since Ram, Sita, and Lakshman had gone into exile.

The band of nineteen had finally settled along the western banks of the early course of the mighty Godavari, at *Panchavati*. Or the *place of the five banyan trees*. The site suggested by Hanuman. The river provided natural protection to the small, rustic, yet comfortable camp. The main mud hut at the centre of the camp had two rooms — one for Ram and Sita, and the other for Lakshman — and an open clearing for exercise and assembly.

Another cluster of huts to the east housed Jatayu and his band.

The perimeter of this camp had two circular fences. The one on the outside was covered with poisonous creepers to keep animals out. The fence on the inside comprised *nagavalli* creepers, rigged with an alarm system. It consisted of a continuous rope that ran all the way to a very large wooden cage, filled with birds. The birds were well looked after and replaced every month with new ones. If anyone made it past the outer fence and attempted to enter the *nagavalli* hedge, the alarm system would trigger the opening of the birdcage roof. The noisy flutter of escaping birds would offer precious minutes of warning to the inmates at the camp.

Ram, Sita, and Lakshman had faced dangers in these six years, but not due to any human intervention. The occasional scars served as reminders of their adventures in the jungle, but the *Somras* had ensured that they looked and felt as young as the day they had left Ayodhya. Exposure to the harsh sun had darkened their skin. Ram had always been dark-skinned, but even the fair-skinned Sita and Lakshman had acquired a bronze tone. Ram and Lakshman had grown beards and moustaches, making them look like warrior-sages.

Life had fallen into a predictable pattern. Ram and Sita liked to go to the Godavari banks in the early morning hours to bathe and share some private time together. Their favourite time of the day.

This was one such day. They had washed their hair the previous day. There was no need to wash it again. They had tied it up in a bun while bathing. After

their bath in the clear waters of the river, they sat on the banks eating a repast of fresh berries and fruit.

Ram lay with his head on Sita's lap. She was playing with his hair. Her fingers got stuck in a knot. She gently tried to ease it out and untangle the hair. Ram protested mildly, but the hair came loose easily, without any need to yank it.

Sita smiled. 'See, I can do it gently as well.'

Ram laughed. 'Sometimes ...'

Ram ran his hand through Sita's hair. It hung loose over her shoulder, down to where his head lay on her lap. 'I am bored with your ponytail.'

Sita shrugged. 'It's up to you to tie some other knot. It's open now ...'

'I'll do that,' said Ram, holding Sita's hand and looking lazily towards the river. 'But later. When we get up.'

Sita smiled and continued to ruffle Ram's hair. 'Ram ...'

'Hmm?'

'I need to tell you something.'

'What?'

'About our conversation yesterday.'

Ram turned towards Sita. 'I was wondering when you would bring that up.'

Sita and Ram had spoken about many things the previous day. Most importantly, of Vashishtha's belief that Ram would be the next Vishnu. Ram had then asked who Sita's guru was. But Sita had sidestepped the answer.

'There should be no secrets in a marriage. I should tell you who my guru is. Or was.'

Ram looked directly into Sita's eyes. 'Guru Vishwamitra.'

Sita was shocked. Her eyes gave it away. Ram had guessed correctly.

Ram smiled. 'I'm not blind, you know. Only a favourite student could get away with saying the kind of things that you had said to Guru Vishwamitra in my presence that day in Mithila.'

'Then why didn't you say anything?'

'I was waiting for you to trust me enough to tell me.'

'I have always trusted you, Ram.'

'Yes, but only as a wife. Some secrets are too big even for a marriage. I know who the Malayaputras are. I know what your being Guru Vishwamitra's favourite disciple means.'

Sita sighed, 'It was silly of me to wait for so long. Passage of time makes a simple conversation more complicated than necessary. I probably should not have listened to ...'

'That's water under the bridge.' Ram sat up and moved close to Sita. He held

her hands and said, ‘Now, tell me.’

Sita took a deep breath. Nervous for some reason. ‘The Malayaputras believe I am their Vishnu.’

Ram smiled and looked directly into Sita’s eyes, with respect. ‘I have known you for years. Heard so many of your ideas. You will make a great Vishnu. I will be proud to follow you.’

‘Don’t follow. Partner.’

Ram frowned.

‘Why can’t there be two Vishnus? If we work together, we can end this stupid fight between the Malayaputras and Vayuputras. We can all work together and set India on a new path.’

‘I’m not sure it is allowed, Sita. A Vishnu cannot begin her journey by breaking the law. I will follow you.’

‘There is no rule that dictates that there can be just one Vishnu.’

‘Umm ...’

‘I know, Ram. There is no such rule. Trust me.’

‘All right, assuming there isn’t, you and I can certainly work together. I’m sure that even the Malayaputras and Vayuputras can learn to work together. But what about Guru Vashishtha and Guru Vishwamitra? Their enmity runs deep. And the Malayaputras will still have to acknowledge me. With things between our gurus being the way they are ...’

‘We’ll handle that,’ said Sita, as she inched close to Ram and embraced him. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you for so long.’

‘I thought you would tell me yesterday, when you were tying my hair. That’s why I touched your cheeks and waited. But I guess you weren’t ready ...’

‘You know, Guru Vashishtha believes ...’

‘Sita, Guru Vashishtha is just like Guru Vishwamitra. He is brilliant. But he is human. He can sometimes read situations incorrectly. I may be a devotee of the law, but I am not an idiot.’

Sita laughed. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t trust you earlier.’

Ram smiled. ‘Yes. You should be. And remember, we are married. So, I can use this against you anytime in the future.’

Sita burst into peals of laughter and hit her husband’s shoulder playfully. Ram held her hands, pulled her close and kissed her. They held each other in companionable silence. Looking at the Godavari.

‘What do we do for now?’ asked Sita.

‘There’s nothing to do till our exile is over. We can just prepare ...’

‘Guru Vashishtha has accepted me. So, I don’t think he will have a problem with our partnership.’

‘But Guru Vishwamitra ... He’ll not accept me.’

‘You don’t hold anything against him? For what he did in Mithila?’

‘He was trying to save his Vishnu. His life’s work. He was working for the good of our motherland. I’m not saying I condone his cavalier attitude towards the *daivi astras*. But I understand where he was coming from.’

‘So, we don’t tell the Malayaputras anything about what we have decided for now?’

‘No. In fact, I’m not even sure we can tell the Vayuputras for now ... Let’s wait.’

‘There is one Vayuputra we can tell.’

‘How do you know any Vayuputra? Guru Vashishtha had consistently refused to introduce me to any of them till I was accepted by all as a Vishnu. It could have caused problems.’

‘I wasn’t introduced to him by Guru Vashishtha either! I got to know him through sheer good fortune. I met him through a friend at my *gurukul*. I believe he can advise and help us.’

‘Who is he?’

‘He is Radhika’s cousin.’

‘Radhika! Bharat’s Radhika?’

Sita smiled sadly. ‘Yes ...’

‘You know Bharat still loves her, right?’

‘I have heard ... But ...’

‘Yes, the law in her tribe ... I had told Bharat to not pursue her ...’

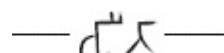
Sita knew Radhika’s reasoning was different. But there was no point in revealing that to Ram. It was water under the bridge.

‘What is her brother’s name? The Vayuputra?’

‘Hanu *bhaiya*.’

‘Hanu *bhaiya*?’

‘That’s what I call him. The world knows him as Lord Hanuman.’



Hanuman smiled, folded his hands together and bowed his head. ‘I bow to the Vishnu, Lady Sita. I bow to the Vishnu, Lord Ram.’

Ram and Sita looked at each other, embarrassed.

Sita and Ram had told Lakshman and the Malayaputras that they were going on a hunt. They had, instead, stolen away to a clearing at least a half-day away. They had taken a boat ride downstream on the Godavari, where Hanuman was waiting for them. Sita had introduced Ram to Hanuman. And told him of their

decision. Hanuman seemed to accept the decision very easily. Even welcoming it.

‘But do you think Guru Vishwamitra and Guru Vashishtha will agree?’ asked Sita.

‘I don’t know,’ said Hanuman. Then looking at Ram, he continued, ‘Guru Vishwamitra was very angry that Guru Vashishtha has told you that he expects you to be the Vishnu.’

Ram remained silent.

Hanuman continued. ‘Your brother Lakshman is a brave and loyal man. He will die for you. But he can, sometimes, let out secrets that he shouldn’t.’

Ram smiled apologetically. ‘Yes, he said it in front of Arishtanemiji. Lakshman doesn’t mean any harm. He is ...’

‘Of course,’ agreed Hanuman. ‘He is very proud of you. He loves you a great deal. But because of that love, he sometimes makes mistakes. Please don’t misunderstand. But I would suggest that you don’t tell him about your little arrangement. Or, about me for that matter. At least for now.’

Ram nodded. Agreeing.

‘What is the reason for the enmity between Guru Vashishtha and Guru Vishwamitra?’ asked Sita. ‘I have never been able to find out.’

‘Yes,’ said Ram. ‘Even Guru Vashishtha refuses to speak about it.’

‘I am not sure either,’ said Hanuman. ‘But I have heard that a woman called Nandini may have played a role.’

‘Really?’ asked Sita. ‘A woman caused the rift between them? What a cliché.’

Hanuman smiled. ‘Apparently, there were other problems as well. But nobody is sure. These are just speculations.’

‘Anyway, what’s more important is, do you think the Malayaputras and Vayuputras can come together on this?’ asked Ram. ‘Will they agree to the two of us being Vishnus? I’ve been told by Sita that there is no law against it. But it is certainly against the standard protocol for Vishnus and Mahadevs, right?’

Hanuman laughed softly. ‘Prince Ram, do you know how long the institutions of the Vishnu and Mahadev have been running?’

Ram shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Thousands of years? Since Lord Manu’s times, I guess. If not earlier.’

‘Right. And do you know exactly how many Vishnus and Mahadevs, in the many millennia, have actually emerged according to the plans and protocols laid down by the tribes left behind by the previous Vishnu or Mahadev?’

Ram looked at Sita. And then, back at Hanuman. ‘I don’t know.’

Hanuman’s eyes were twinkling. ‘Precisely zero.’

‘Really?’

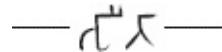
‘Not once, not once has any Vishnu or Mahadev emerged exactly according to plan. The best laid plans always have a tendency to get spoilt. There have always been surprises.’

Ram laughed softly. ‘We are a country that does not like order and plans.’

‘That we are!’ said Hanuman. ‘The Mahadevs or the Vishnus didn’t succeed in their missions because “plans were implemented exactly”. They succeeded because they were willing to give their all for our great land. And they were followed by many who also felt exactly the same way. That is the secret. Passion. Not plans.’

‘So, you think we will succeed in getting the Malayaputras and Vayuputras to agree?’ asked Sita.

‘Of course we will,’ answered Hanuman. ‘Don’t they love India? But if you ask me how exactly we will succeed, my answer is: I don’t know. No plans as of yet! But we have time. Nothing can be done till the both of you return to the Sapt Sindhu.’



It had been more than thirteen years of exile now. In less than a year, Ram, Sita, and Lakshman would head back to the Sapt Sindhu and begin their life’s greatest karma. Hanuman had, over time, managed to get the Vayuputras to accept Sita. And Arishtanemi, along with a few other Malayaputras, had begun to favour Ram. Vashishtha, of course, had no problem with Ram and Sita being the Vishnus together. But Vishwamitra ... well, he was another matter altogether. If he held out, the Malayaputras could not be counted on to be completely on board. After all, they were a relatively disciplined organisation that followed their leader.

But this was not occupying the minds of Ram and Sita right now. They lounged around in their section of the camp, watching the setting sun as it coloured the sky with glorious hues. Unexpectedly, the avian alarm system was triggered; the flock of birds in the cage had suddenly fluttered away noisily. Someone had breached their camp perimeter.

‘What was that?’ asked Lakshman.

Ram’s instincts told him that the intruders were not animals.

‘Weapons,’ ordered Ram calmly.

Sita and Lakshman tied their sword scabbards around their waist. Lakshman handed Ram his bow, before picking up his own. The brothers quickly strung their bows. Jatayu and his men rushed in, armed and ready, just as Ram and Lakshman tied quivers full of arrows to their backs. Sita picked up a long

spear, as Ram tied his sword scabbard to his waist. They already wore a smaller knife scabbard, tied horizontally across the small of their backs; a weapon they kept on their person at all times.

‘Who could they be?’ asked Jatayu.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ram.

‘Lakshman’s Wall?’ asked Sita.

Lakshman’s Wall was an ingenious defensive feature designed by him to the east of the main hut. It was five feet in height; it covered three sides of a small square completely, leaving the inner side facing the main hut partially open; like a cubicle. The entire structure gave the impression that it was an enclosed kitchen. In fact, the cubicle was bare, providing adequate mobility to warriors. But unseen by enemies on the other side of the wall. They would have to be on their knees, though. A small *tandoor*, a *cooking platform*, emerged on the outside from the south-facing wall. Half the enclosure was roof-covered, completing the camouflage of a cooking area. It afforded protection from enemy arrows.

The south, east, and north-facing walls were drilled with well-spaced holes. These holes were narrow on the inner side and broad on the outer side, giving the impression of ventilation required for cooking. Their actual purpose was to give those on the inside a good view of the approaching enemy, while preventing those on the outside from looking in. The holes could also be used to shoot arrows. Made from mud, it was not strong enough to withstand a sustained assault by a large force. Having said that, it was good enough for defence against small bands sent on assassination bids. Which is what Lakshman suspected they would face.

Designed by Lakshman, it had been built by everyone in the camp; Makrant had named it ‘Lakshman’s Wall’.

‘Yes,’ said Ram.

Everyone rushed to the wall and crouched low, keeping their weapons ready. Waiting.

Lakshman hunched over and peeped through a hole in the south-facing wall. Straining his eye, he detected a small band of ten people marching into the camp premises. Led by a man and a woman.

The man in the lead was of average height. Unusually fair-skinned. His reed-thin physique was that of a runner; this man was no warrior. Despite his frail shoulders and thin arms, he walked as if he had boils in his armpits; pretending to accommodate impressive biceps. Like most Indian men, he had long, jet black hair that was tied in a knot at the back of his head. His full beard was neatly trimmed, and coloured a deep brown. He wore a classic brown *dhoti* and

an *angvastram* that was a shade lighter. His jewellery was rich but understated: pearl ear studs and a thin copper bracelet. He looked dishevelled. As though he had been on the road for too long, without a change of clothes.

The woman beside him faintly resembled the man, possibly his sister. Bewitching. Almost as short as Urmila. Skin as white as snow. It should have made her look pale and sickly. Instead, she was distractingly beautiful. Sharp, slightly upturned nose. High cheekbones. She almost looked like a Parihan. Unlike them, though, her hair was blonde, a most unusual colour. Every strand of it was in place. Her eyes were magnetic. Perhaps she was the child of Hiranyaloman Mlechchas: fair-skinned, light-eyed, and light-haired foreigners who lived half a world away towards the north-west. Their violent ways and incomprehensible speech had led to the Indians calling them barbarians. But this lady was no barbarian. Quite the contrary, she was elegant, slim, and petite, except for breasts that were disproportionately large for her body. She wore a classic, expensively dyed purple *dhoti*, which shone like the waters of the Sarayu. Perhaps it was the legendary silk cloth from the far-eastern parts of India; one that only the richest could afford now. For Raavan had established a complete monopoly on it and had jacked up the prices. The *dhoti* was tied fashionably low, exposing her flat tummy and slim, curvaceous waist. Her silken blouse was a tiny sliver of cloth, affording a generous view of her cleavage. Her *angvastram* had deliberately been left hanging loose from a shoulder, instead of across the body. Extravagant jewellery completed the picture of excess. The only incongruity was the knife scabbard tied to her waist. She was a vision to behold.

Ram cast a quick glance at Sita. ‘Who are they?’

Sita shrugged.

It was quickly clarified by the Malayaputras that the man was Raavan’s younger half-brother Vibhishan, and the woman his half-sister Shurpanakha.

A soldier next to Vibhishan held aloft a white flag, the colour of peace. They obviously wanted to parley. The mystery was, what did they want to talk about?

And whether there was any subterfuge involved.

Ram looked through the hole again, and then turned towards his people. ‘We will all step out together. It will stop them from attempting something stupid.’

‘That is wise,’ said Jatayu.

‘Come on,’ said Ram, as he stepped out from behind the protective wall with his right hand raised, signifying that he meant no harm. Everyone else followed Ram’s example and trooped out to meet the half-siblings of Raavan.

Vibhishan nervously stopped in his tracks the moment his eyes fell on Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and their soldiers. He looked sideways at his sister, as if

uncertain about the next course of action. But Shurpanakha had eyes only for Ram. She stared at him, unashamedly.

A look of recognition flashed across a surprised Vibhishan's face when he saw Jatayu.

Ram, Lakshman, and Sita walked in the lead, with Jatayu and his soldiers following close behind. As the forest-dwellers reached the Lankans, Vibhishan straightened his back, puffed up his chest and spoke with an air of self-importance. 'We come in peace, King of Ayodhya.'

'We want peace as well,' said Ram, lowering his right hand. His people did the same. He made no comment on the 'King of Ayodhya' greeting. 'What brings you here, Prince of Lanka?'

Vibhishan preened at being recognised. 'It seems Sapt Sindhuans are not as ignorant of the world as many of us like to imagine.'

Ram smiled politely. Meanwhile, Shurpanakha pulled out a small violet kerchief and covered her nose delicately. Lakshman noticed her fashionable and manicured finger nails, each one shaped like a winnowing basket. That was perhaps the root of her name. Shurpa was Old Sanskrit for a winnowing basket. And nakha meant nails.

'Well, even I respect and understand the ways of the Sapt Sindhuans,' said Vibhishan.

Sita watched Shurpanakha, hawk-eyed, as the lady continued to stare at her husband. Unabashedly. Up close, it was clear that the magic of Shurpanakha's eyes lay in their startling colour: bright blue. She almost certainly had some Hiranyaloman Mlechcha blood. Practically nobody east of Egypt had blue eyes. She was bathed in fragrant perfume that overpowered the rustic, animal smell of the Panchavati camp; at least for those in her vicinity. Not overpowering enough for her, evidently. She continued to hold the stench of her surroundings at bay, with the kerchief pressed against her nose.

'Would you like to come inside, to our humble abode?' asked Ram, gesturing towards the hut.

'No, thank you, Your Highness,' said Vibhishan. 'I'm comfortable here.'

Jatayu's presence had thrown him off-guard. Vibhishan was unwilling to encounter other surprises that may lie in store for them, within the closed confines of the hut. Before they came to some negotiated terms. He was the brother of the enemy of the Sapt Sindhu, after all. It was safer here, out in the open; for now.

'All right then,' said Ram. 'To what do we owe the honour of a visit from the prince of golden Lanka?'

Shurpanakha spoke in a husky, alluring voice. 'Handsome one, we come to

seek refuge.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' said Ram, momentarily flummoxed by the allusion to his good looks by a woman he did not know. 'I don't think we are capable of helping the relatives of ...'

'Who else can we go to, O Great One?' asked Vibhishan. 'We will never be accepted in the Sapt Sindhu because we are Raavan's siblings. But we also know that there are many in the Sapt Sindhu who will not deny you. My sister and I have suffered Raavan's brutal oppression for too long. We needed to escape.'

Ram remained silent.

'King of Ayodhya,' continued Vibhishan, 'I may be from Lanka but I am, in fact, like one of your own. I honour your ways, follow your path. I'm not like the other Lankans, blinded by Raavan's immense wealth into following his demonic path. And Shurpanakha is just like me. Don't you think you have a duty towards us, too?'

Sita cut in. 'An ancient poet once remarked, "When the axe entered the forest, the trees said to each other: do not worry, the handle in that axe is one of us."'

Shurpanakha sniggered. 'So the great descendant of Raghu lets his wife make decisions for him, is it?'

Vibhishan touched Shurpanakha's hand lightly and she fell silent. 'Queen Sita,' said Vibhishan, 'you will notice that only the handles have come here. The axe-head is in Lanka. We are truly like you. Please help us.'

Shurpanakha turned to Jatayu. It had not escaped her notice that, as usual, every man was gaping intently at her; every man, that is, except Ram and Lakshman. 'Great Malayaputra, don't you think it is in your interest to give us refuge? We could tell you more about Lanka than you already know. There will be more gold in it for you.'

Jatayu stiffened. 'We are the followers of Lord Parshu Ram! We are not interested in gold.'

'Right ...' said Shurpanakha, sarcastically.

Vibhishan appealed to Lakshman. 'Wise Lakshman, please convince your brother. I'm sure you will agree with me when I say that we can be of use to you in your fight when you get back.'

'I could agree with you, Prince of Lanka,' said Lakshman, smiling, 'but then we would both be wrong.'

Vibhishan looked down and sighed.

'Prince Vibhishan,' said Ram, 'I am truly sorry but—'

Vibhishan interrupted Ram. 'Son of Dashrath, remember the battle of

Mithila. My brother Raavan is your enemy. He is my enemy as well. Shouldn't that make you my friend?’

Ram kept quiet.

‘Great King, we have put our lives at risk by escaping from Lanka. Can’t you let us be your guests for a while? We will leave in a few days. Remember what the *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: “*Athithi Devo Bhava*”. Even the many *Smritis* say that the strong should protect the weak. All we are asking for is shelter for a few days. Please.’

Sita looked at Ram. And sighed. A law had been invoked. She knew what was going to happen next. She knew Ram would not turn them away now.

‘Just a few days,’ pleaded Vibhishan. ‘Please.’

Ram touched Vibhishan’s shoulder. ‘You can stay here for a few days; rest for a while, and then continue on your journey.’

Vibhishan folded his hands together into a *Namaste* and said, ‘Glory to the great clan of Raghu.’



## Chapter 31

‘There is no salt in this food,’ complained Shurpanakha.

It was the first hour of the fourth *prahar* and those in the Panchavati camp had settled down for their evening meal. It had been Sita’s turn to cook. While Ram, Lakshman, and the rest were enjoying the food, Shurpanakha had found much to complain about. The lack of salt was just the latest in a litany of complaints.

‘Because there is no salt in Panchavati, princess,’ said Sita, trying very hard to be patient. ‘We make do with what we have. This is not a palace. You can choose to stay hungry, if the food is not to your liking.’

‘This food is worthy of dogs!’ muttered Shurpanakha in disgust, as she threw the morsel of food she had in her hand back on the plate.

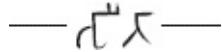
‘Then it should be just right for you,’ said Lakshman.

Everyone burst out laughing. Even Vibhishan. But Ram was not amused. He looked at Lakshman sternly. Lakshman looked at his brother in defiance, then shook his head and went back to eating.

Shurpanakha pushed her plate away and stormed out.

‘Shurpa ...’ said Vibhishan, as if in entreaty. Then he too got up and ran after his sister.

Ram looked at Sita. She shrugged her shoulders and continued eating.



An hour later, Sita and Ram were in their hut. By themselves.

While no Lankan except Shurpanakha had been troublesome, Lakshman and Jatayu remained suspicious of them. They had disarmed the visitors and locked their weapons in the camp armoury. They also maintained a strict and staggered twenty-four-hour vigil, keeping a constant watch on the guests. It was Jatayu’s and Makrant’s turn to stay up all night and keep guard.

‘That spoilt princess fancies you,’ said Sita.

Ram shook his head, his eyes clearly conveying he thought this silly. ‘How can she, Sita? She knows I’m married. Why should she find me attractive?’

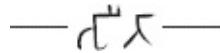
Sita lay down next to her husband on the bed of hay. ‘You should know that you are more attractive than you realise.’

Ram laughed. ‘Nonsense.’

Sita laughed as well and put her arms around him. ‘But you are mine. Only mine.’

‘Yes, My Lady,’ said Ram, smiling and putting his arms around his wife.

They kissed each other, languid and slow. The forest was gradually falling silent, as though settling in for the night.



The guests had been in Panchavati with the forest-dwellers for a week now.

Lakshman and Jatayu had insisted on continuing the staggered vigil, keeping a constant watch on the guests.

Vibhishan had announced that they would be leaving in a few hours. But Shurpanakha had insisted that she had to wash her hair before leaving. She had also demanded that Sita accompany her. To help her with her hair.

Sita had no interest in going with Shurpanakha. But she wanted to get rid of the spoilt Lankan princess as soon as possible. This had encouraged her to say yes.

Shurpanakha had insisted on taking the boat and going a long way downriver.

‘Don’t think I’m not aware that your disgusting camp-followers have been taking the opportunity to spy on me at my bath time!’ Shurpanakha said with pretended outrage.

Sita grimaced and took a deep breath, not saying anything.

‘Not your goody-goody husband, of course,’ said Shurpanakha, coquettishly. ‘He has eyes only for you.’

Sita, still silent, got into the boat, with Shurpanakha climbing in daintily. Sita waited for Shurpanakha to pick up one of the oars. But she just sat there, admiring her nails. Grunting angrily, Sita picked up both the oars and started rowing. It took a long time. Sita was irritated and tired before Shurpanakha directed her into a small hidden lagoon by the river, where she wanted to bathe.

‘Go ahead,’ said Sita. As she turned around and waited.

Shurpanakha disrobed slowly, put all her clothes into the cloth bag she had carried and dived into the water. Sita settled back, her head on the stern thwart, her body stretched out on the bottom boards, and waited. Feeling

uncomfortable after some time, Sita pulled up some jute sacks, bundled them together into a pillow on the plank and rested her head again. The lazy daylight filtering through the dense foliage was calming her down slowly, lulling her to sleep.

She lost track of time as she fell into a short nap. A loud bird call woke her up.

She heard Shurpanakha frolicking in the water. She waited for what she thought was a reasonable time. Finally, Sita edged up on her elbows. ‘Are you done? Do you want your hair untangled and tied?’

Shurpanakha stopped swimming for a bit and faced Sita with a look of utter contempt and disgust. ‘I’m not letting you touch my hair!’

Sita’s eyes flew open in anger. ‘Then why the hell did you ask me to come h...’

‘I couldn’t have come here alone now, could I,’ interrupted Shurpanakha, like she was explaining the most obvious thing in the world. ‘And, I wasn’t about to bring one of the men along. Lord Indra alone knows what they would do if they saw me in this state.’

‘They would drown you, hopefully,’ muttered Sita, under her breath.

‘What did you say?’ snapped Shurpanakha.

‘Nothing. Finish your bath quickly. Your brother wants to leave today.’

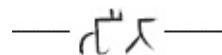
‘My brother will leave when I tell him we can leave.’

Sita saw Shurpanakha looking into the forest beyond the banks of the lagoon. Sita followed Shurpanakha’s gaze. Then she shook her head in irritation. ‘Nobody has followed us here. No one can see you. In the name of all that is good and holy, finish your bath!’

Shurpanakha didn’t bother to answer. Casting Sita a contemptuous look, she turned and swam away.

Sita held her fist to her forehead and repeated softly to herself. ‘Breathe. Breathe. She’s leaving today. Just breathe.’

Shurpanakha continued to steal glances at the forest. She couldn’t see anyone. She muttered under her breath, ‘None of these idiots are reliable. I have to do everything myself.’



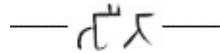
At the Panchavati camp, Vibhishan had come to speak to Ram.

‘Great one,’ said Vibhishan, ‘you know we are leaving soon. Is it possible to return our weapons to us so that we may get going?’

‘Of course,’ said Ram.

Vibhishan looked at Jatayu and his Malayaputras a short distance away, then in the direction of the Godavari, the great river hidden by the dense foliage. His heart was beating fast.

*I hope they have reached.*



'Enough!' said Sita, in irritation. 'You're as clean as you can be. Get out of the water now. We're leaving.'

Shurpanakha looked once again into the forests.

Sita picked the oars. 'I'm leaving. You can choose to stay or come along.'

Shurpanakha shrieked in anger, but surrendered.



Sita rowed the boat back in short order. It was a ten-minute uphill walk thereafter to the camp. She waited for Shurpanakha to step out of the boat.

Sita didn't expect, nor get, any help from Shurpanakha to pull the boat onto the banks so that it could be tied securely to a tree with a hemp rope. Shurpanakha was behind Sita as she bent, wrapped the boat-rope around her right hand, held on to the gunwale of the boat, and began to tug.

Focused as she was on her task, as well as the physical strain of pulling a boat up the bank all by herself, she didn't notice Shurpanakha reach into her bag, pull out some herbs and creep up on her.

Shurpanakha used a specific kind of soap and perfume that she had carried with her for her bath. It had a distinctive fragrance. Very different from the feral smell of the jungle.

It was this smell that saved Sita.

She reacted almost immediately, letting go off the boat. Just as Shurpanakha jumped at her and tried to stuff the herbs into Sita's mouth, she turned and hit the Lankan princess hard with her elbow. Shurpanakha fell back, screaming in agony. Sita lunged forward towards the princess of Lanka but the rope wrapped around her wrist made her lose balance. Sensing an opportunity, Shurpanakha pushed Sita into the water. But as Sita fell, she elbowed the princess of Lanka again. Shurpanakha recovered quickly and jumped into the water after Sita, trying again to push the herbs into her mouth.

Sita was taller, tougher and more agile than the posh Shurpanakha. She pushed Shurpanakha hard, flinging her some distance away. She spat out the herbs, quickly pulled out her knife from the scabbard and cut the rope loose.

She glanced at the herbs floating in the water, recognising them almost immediately. She pushed through the water to reach Shurpanakha.

Shurpanakha, meanwhile, had recovered. She swam towards Sita and tried to hit her with her fists. Sita grabbed and held both her wrists in her left hand; then yanked hard till the princess of Lanka was forced to turn around. Then Sita wrapped her arm around Shurpanakha's throat, holding her hard against her own body.

Then Sita brought the knife close to Shurpanakha's throat. 'One more move, you spoilt brat, and I will bleed you to death.'

Shurpanakha fell silent and stopped struggling. Sita pushed the knife back in its scabbard. Then used the remnants of the rope around her own wrist to restrain Shurpanakha's hands. She pulled Shurpanakha's *angvastram* and tied it across her mouth.

She reached into Shurpanakha's bag and found some more of the herbs.

'I'll push this into your mouth if you make any more trouble.'

Shurpanakha remained quiet.

Sita started dragging her towards the camp.

A short distance from the camp, the *angvastram* across Shurpanakha's mouth came loose and fell away. She immediately began screaming.

'Stay quiet!' shouted Sita, dragging her along.

Shurpanakha, though, kept screaming at the top of her voice.

A short while later, they emerged from the woods. Sita tall, regal but dripping wet and furious. Muscles rippling with the strain of dragging Shurpanakha along. The Lankan princess' hands remained securely tied.

Ram and Lakshman immediately drew their swords, as did everyone else present.

The younger prince of Ayodhya was the first to find his voice. Looking at Vibhishan accusingly, he demanded, 'What the hell is going on?'

Vibhishan couldn't take his eyes off the two women. He seemed genuinely shocked, but quickly gathered his wits and replied. 'What is your sister-in-law doing to my sister? She is the one who has clearly attacked Shurpanakha.'

'Stop this drama!' shouted Lakshman. 'Bhabhi would not do this unless your sister attacked her first.'

Sita walked into the circle of people and let go of Shurpanakha. The Lankan princess was clearly livid and out of control.

Vibhishan immediately rushed to his sister, drew a knife and cut the ropes that bound her. He whispered into her ear. 'Let me handle this. Stay quiet.'

Shurpanakha glared at Vibhishan. Like this was all his fault.

Sita turned to Ram and gestured towards Shurpanakha. She held out some

herbs in the palm of her hand. ‘That pipsqueak Lankan stuffed this in my mouth as she pushed me into the river!’

Ram recognised the herbs. They were normally used to render people unconscious before surgeries. He looked at Vibhishan, his piercing eyes red with anger. ‘What is going on?’

Vibhishan stood up immediately, his manner placatory. ‘There has obviously been some misunderstanding. My sister would never do something like that.’

‘Are you suggesting that I imagined her pushing me into the water?’ asked Sita, aggressively.

Vibhishan stared at Shurpanakha, who had also stood up by now. He seemed to be pleading with her to be quiet. But the entreaty was clearly lost in transmission.

‘That is a lie!’ screeched Shurpanakha. ‘I didn’t do anything like that!’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ growled Sita.

What happened next was so sudden that very few had the time to react. With frightening speed, Shurpanakha reached to her side and drew her knife. Lakshman, who was standing to the left of Sita, saw the quick movement and rushed forward, screaming, ‘*Bhabhi!*’

Sita moved quickly to get out of the way and avoid the strike. In that split second, Lakshman lunged forward and banged into a charging Shurpanakha, seizing both her arms and pushing her back with all his brute strength. The elfin princess of Lanka went flying back. Her own hand, which held the knife, struck her face as she crashed into the Lankan soldiers who stood transfixed behind her. The knife hit her face horizontally, cutting deep into her nose. It fell from her hand as she lay sprawled on the ground, the shock having numbed any sensation of pain.

As blood gushed out alarmingly, her conscious mind asserted control. She touched her face and looked at her bloodstained hands. The horror of it all reverberated through her being. She knew she would be left with deep scars on her face. Painful surgeries would be required to remove them.

She screeched with savage hate and lunged forward again, this time going for Lakshman. Vibhishan rushed to her and caught hold of his rage-maddened sister.

‘Kill them!’ screamed Shurpanakha. ‘Kill them all!’

‘Wait!’ pleaded Vibhishan, stricken with visceral fear. He knew they were outnumbered. He didn’t want to die. And he feared something even worse than death. ‘Wait!’

Ram held up his left hand, his fist closed tight, signalling his people to stop but be on guard. ‘Leave now, prince. Or there will be hell to pay.’

‘Forget what we were told!’ screeched Shurpanakha. ‘Kill them all!’

Ram spoke to a clearly stunned Vibhishan, who held on to a struggling Shurpanakha for all he was worth. ‘Leave now, Prince Vibhishan.’

‘Retreat,’ whispered Vibhishan.

His soldiers began to withdraw, their swords still pointed in the direction of the forest-dwellers.

‘Kill them, you coward!’ Shurpanakha lashed out. ‘I am your sister! Avenge me!’

Vibhishan dragged a flailing Shurpanakha, his eye on Ram. Mindful of any sudden movement.

‘Kill them!’ shouted Shurpanakha.

Vibhishan continued to pull his protesting sister away as the Lankans left the camp and escaped from Panchavati.

Ram, Lakshman and Sita stood rooted to their spot. What had happened was an unmitigated disaster.

‘We cannot stay here anymore,’ Jatayu stated the obvious. ‘We don’t have a choice. We need to flee, now.’

Ram looked at Jatayu.

‘We have shed Lankan royal blood, even if it is that of the royal rebels,’ said Jatayu. ‘According to their customary law, Raavan has no choice but to respond. It would be the same among many Sapt Sindhu royals as well, isn’t it? Raavan will come. Have no doubt about that. Vibhishan is a coward, but Raavan and Kumbhakarna aren’t. They will come with thousands of soldiers. This will be worse than Mithila. There it was a battle between soldiers; a part and parcel of war; they understood that. But here it is personal. His sister, a member of his family, has been attacked. Blood was shed. His honour will demand retribution.’

Lakshman stiffened. ‘But I didn’t attack her. She—’

‘That’s not how Raavan will see it,’ interrupted Jatayu. ‘He will not quibble with you over the details, Prince Lakshman. We need to run. Right now.’



## Chapter 32

They had been on the run for thirty days. Racing east through the *Dandakaranya*, they had moved a reasonable distance parallel to the Godavari, so that they couldn't be easily spotted or tracked. But they couldn't afford to stray too far from the tributary rivers or other water bodies, for the best chance of hunting animals would be lost.

They had been surviving on dried meat and jungle berries or leaves, for long. Perhaps the Lankans had lost track of them, they thought. With the frugal food and constant marching, their bodies were weakening. So Ram and Lakshman had set out to hunt, while Sita and the Malayaputra soldier Makrant had gone to fetch banana leaves.

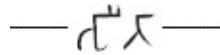
Secrecy was of the essence. So they were cooking their food in holes dug deep into the ground. For fire they used a very specific type of coal; anthracite, which let out smokeless flames. As added precaution, the buried cooking pot was also covered with a thick layer of banana leaves to ensure that even by chance, no smoke escaped, which could give their position away. It was for this that Sita and Makrant were cutting banana leaves. It was Sita's turn to cook.

Unknown to Sita, Raavan's *Pushpak Vimaan* had landed a short distance from the camp. Its ear-splitting noise drowned out by thunderous howling winds. Unseasonal rains had just lashed the area. A hundred Lankan soldiers had disgorged from the *Vimaan*, attacking the camp and killing most of the Malayaputras rapidly.

Some Lankans had fanned out to search for Sita, Ram, and Lakshman. Two of them had ambushed Sita and Makrant, who were on their way back to the camp. Makrant had died, hit by two arrows. One through his shoulder and the other through his neck. Sita had, through sheer skill, managed to kill these two Lankans, steal their weapons and reach the camp. There she had found that every single Malayaputra, except for Jatayu was dead. She had tried, heroically, to save Jatayu, but had failed. The Naga had been grievously injured trying to protect the one he worshipped as the Vishnu.

Kumbhakarna, the younger brother of Raavan, had ordered that Sita was to be captured alive. Many Lankan soldiers had charged at Sita at the same time. She had fought bravely, but was ultimately captured, incapacitated and rendered unconscious with a Lankan blue-coloured toxin.

They had quickly bundled her into the *Pushpak Vimaan* and taken off, just as Ram and Lakshman had reached the camp to find dead bodies strewn everywhere and the severely injured figure of Jatayu.



Sita couldn't remember how long she had been unconscious. It must have been hours. She still felt a little groggy. Light was streaming in through the porthole windows on the walls of the *vimaan*. A constant, dull repetitive sound was causing her pain in her head. It took her some time to realise that it was the sound of the *vimaan*'s rotors, muffled by the soundproof walls.

*Not soundproofed enough.*

Sita pressed her temples to ease the pain in her head. It worked only for a few moments. The pain was back soon.

Then she realised something odd.

*My hands aren't tied.*

She looked down at her legs. They weren't tied either.

She felt her hopes rise.

Almost immediately, it deflated and she laughed softly at her own stupidity.

*Where am I planning to go? I'm thousands of feet up in the sky.*

*That blue toxin has made me slow.*

She shook her head slowly. Trying to clear it.

She was on a stretcher fastened onto a platform close to the wall.

She looked around. The *vimaan* was truly huge. She looked up. It was perfectly conical from the inside as well. Smooth metal all the way to the tapering top, high up. There was a painting at the summit. Her vision was a little clouded so she couldn't see what it was. At the exact centre of the *vimaan* was a tall, perfectly cylindrical pillar, stretching all the way to the top. It was solid metal, obviously sturdy. She felt like she was inside a giant temple spire. But the interiors, while spacious and comfortable, had frugal furnishing. None of the luxurious and expensive accoutrements of most royal vehicles; or at least the royal vehicles in the Sapt Sindhu. The *Pushpak Vimaan* was basic, sparse, and efficient. Clearly, more of a military vehicle than one for pomp and show.

Because it placed function over form, the *Pushpak Vimaan* was able to

comfortably accommodate more than a hundred soldiers. They all sat silently, disciplined, in regular concentric arcs on the floor, right up to the *vimaan* walls.

She could see Raavan and Kumbhakarna seated on chairs that had been fastened to the floor. Their seating area had been screened partially. A curtain hung from an overhanging rod. They weren't too far. But they whispered. So, Sita could not hear much of what they were saying.

Still on the stretcher, she came up on her elbows. Making a heaving sound. She still felt weak.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna turned to look at her. They got up and started walking towards her. Raavan stumbled on his *dhoti*. Distracted.

Sita had managed to sit up by now. She sucked in her breath and looked defiantly at the two brothers.

'Kill me now,' growled Sita. 'Otherwise, you will regret it.'

All the Lankan soldiers stood up, drawing their weapons. But at a signal from Kumbhakarna, they held their positions.

Kumbhakarna spoke, surprisingly gently, 'We don't want to hurt you. You must be tired. You woke up very quickly. The toxin given to you was strong. Please rest.'

Sita didn't answer. Surprised by Kumbhakarna's kind tone.

'We didn't know,' said a hesitant Kumbhakarna. 'I ... I didn't know. We wouldn't have used that toxin otherwise ...'

Sita remained silent.

Then she turned towards Raavan. He was just staring at her. Unblinking. There was sadness on his face. Melancholy. And, his eyes appeared strange. Almost like there was love in them.

Sita shrank to the wall, pulling her *angvastram*, covering herself.

Suddenly, a hand appeared. A neem leaf. And, the blue-coloured paste. Her nose.

Sita felt darkness enveloping her vision. Slowly.

She saw Raavan looking to Sita's right, where the person who had drugged her was standing. There was anger on his face.

And, darkness took over.

—८—

Her eyes opened.

Diffused light streamed through the porthole windows. The sun was close to the horizon.

*How long have I been unconscious?*

Sita couldn't be sure. Was it a few hours? Or many *prahars*?

She edged up, again. Slowly. Weakly. She could see that most of the soldiers were asleep on the floor.

But there were no soldiers around the platform where she had been sleeping. She had been left alone.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna were standing near their chairs. Stretching their legs. Whispering to each other.

Her vision cleared slowly. Allowing her to judge the distance. Raavan and Kumbhakarna were not more than fifteen or twenty feet from her. Their backs to Sita. They were in deep conversation.

Sita looked around. And smiled.

*Someone has been careless.*

There was a knife lying close by. On the platform where her stretcher was affixed. She edged over. Noiselessly. Carefully. Picked up the scabbard and unsheathed the blade. Slowly. Without making any sound.

She held the knife tight in her hand.

She took some deep breaths. Firing energy into her body.

She remembered what she had heard.

*Kill the chief and the Lankans capitulate.*

She tried to get up. The world spun around her.

She sat back on the platform. Breathing deeper. Firing more oxygen into her body.

Then, she focused. She got up stealthily and crept towards Raavan.

When she was just a few feet from Raavan's back, she raised her knife and lunged forward.

A loud scream was heard as someone grabbed Sita from behind. An arm around her neck. A knife pressed close to her throat. Sita could feel that her attacker was a woman.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna whirled around almost immediately. Most of the Lankan soldiers got up too.

Kumbhakarna raised his hands slowly. Carefully. He spoke in a calm but commanding voice. 'Drop the knife.'

Sita felt the arm around her throat tighten. She could see that by now, all the Lankan soldiers were on their feet. She surrendered and dropped her knife.

Kumbhakarna repeated. A little harsher this time. 'I said, drop the knife.'

Sita knit her brow. Confused. She looked down at the knife she had dropped. She was about to say that she had no other knife, when she felt a prick on her neck. The attacker, holding her from behind, had brought the knife in closer. Its

tip drawing blood.

Kumbhakarna looked at Raavan before turning back to the attacker holding Sita. ‘Khara is dead. This will not bring him back. Don’t be silly. I am ordering you. Drop the knife.’

Sita could feel the arm clasped around her neck tremble. Her attacker was struggling with deep emotions.

Finally, Raavan stepped closer and spoke in a harsh, commanding, almost terrifying tone. ‘Drop the knife. Now.’

Sita felt the arm clasped around her throat relax. It was suddenly pulled back. And a soft whisper was heard.

‘As you command, Iraiva.’

Sita was stunned as she heard the voice. She spun around. Staggered. She fell back, holding the wall of the *vimaan* for support.

Willing breaths into her body, she looked again at the face of her attacker. The one who had wanted to kill her a few moments ago. The one who obviously had strong emotions for Khara. The one who obviously was under the complete control of Raavan.

The one who had saved her life once ...

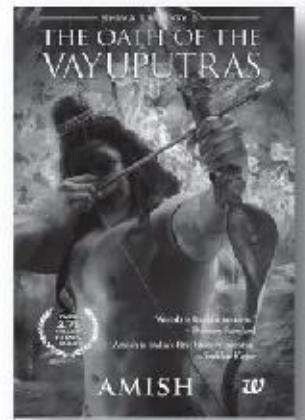
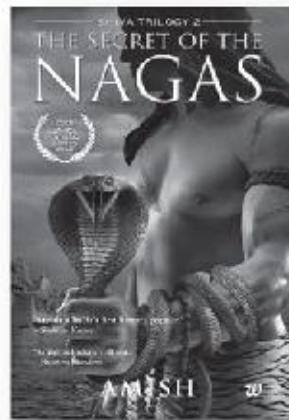
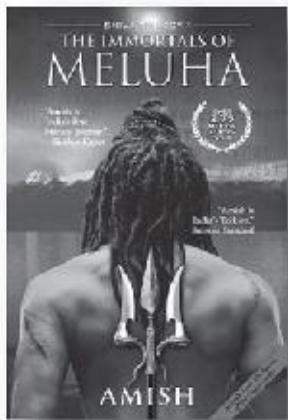
The one she had thought was her friend.

Samichi.

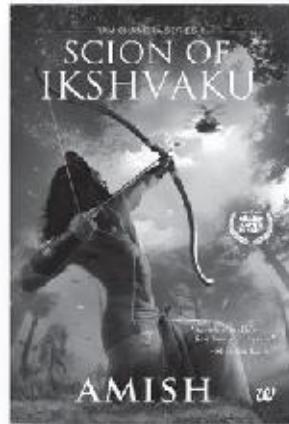
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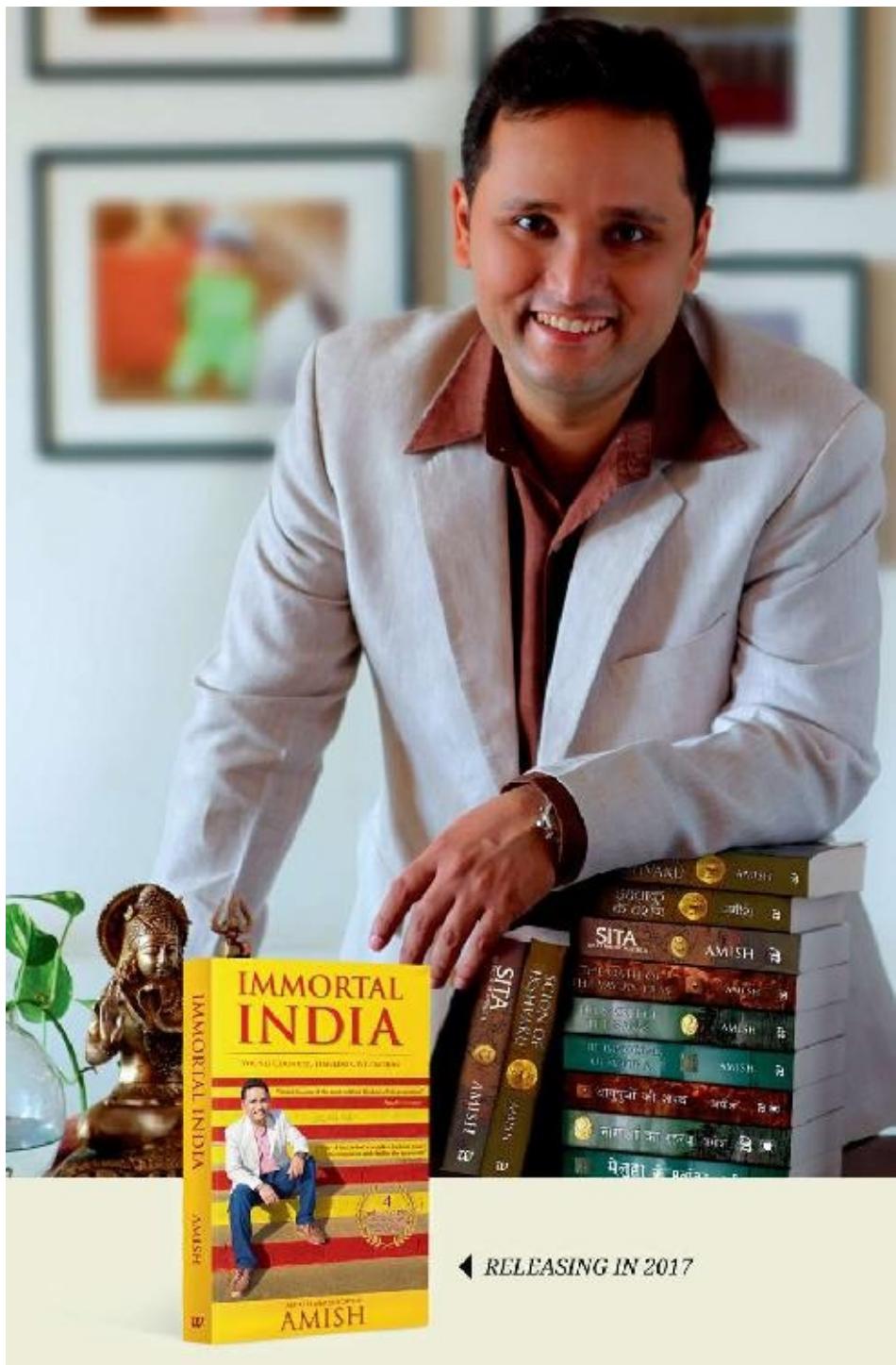
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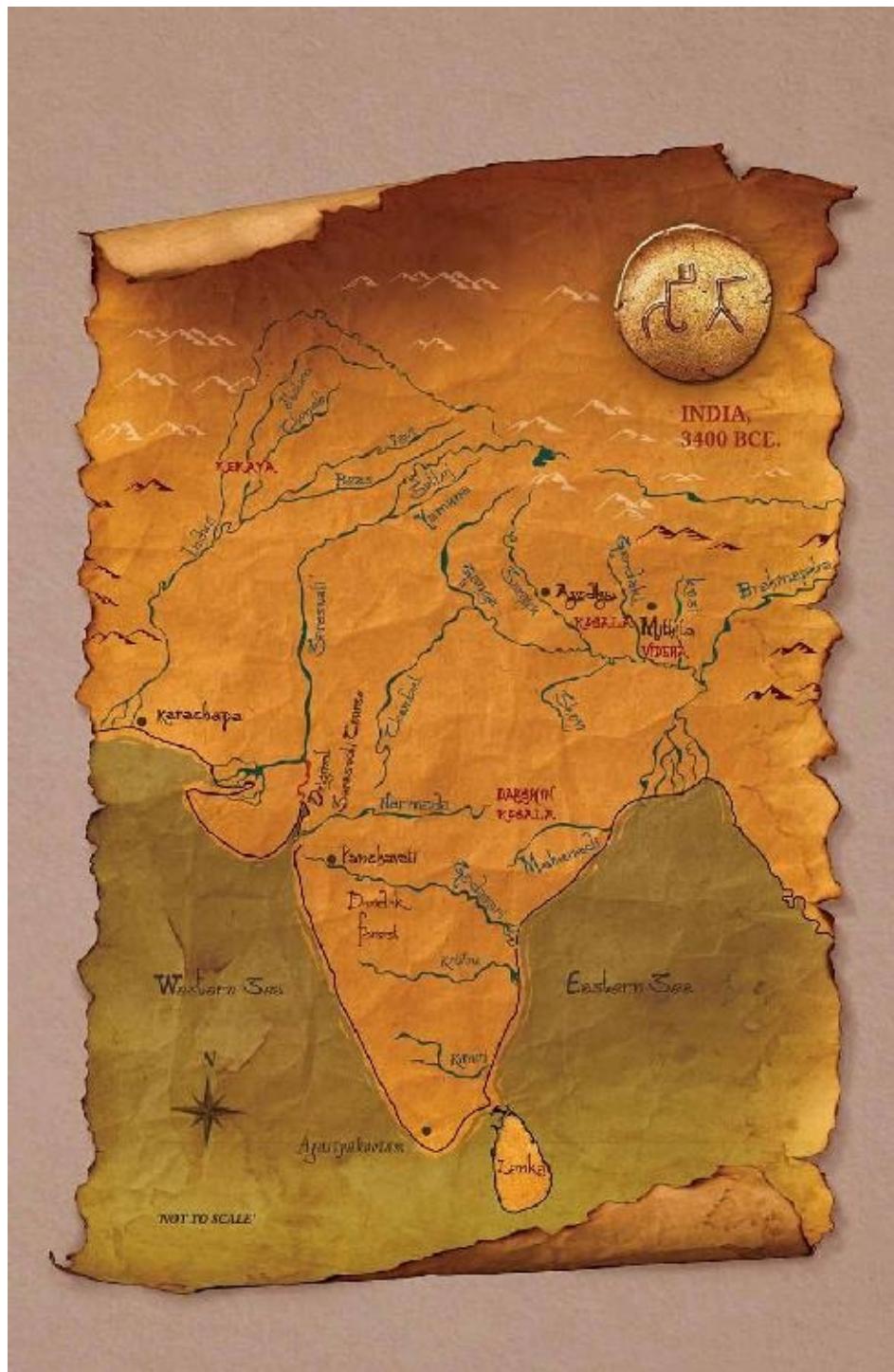


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# RAAVAN

## ENEMY OF ARYAVARTA



— 5 —  
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a fine blend of  
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## **Raavan – Enemy of Aryavarta**

Amish is a 1974-born, IIM (Kolkata)-educated, boring banker turned happy author. The success of his debut book, *The Immortals of Meluha* (Book 1 of the Shiva Trilogy), encouraged him to give up a fourteen-year-old career in financial services to focus on writing. He is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy, finding beauty and meaning in all world religions. Amish's books have sold more than 5 million copies and have been translated into over 19 languages.

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# Raavan

## Enemy of Aryavarta

Book 3  
of the  
Ram Chandra Series

# Amish



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Om Namah Shivāya  
*The universe bows to Lord Shiva.*  
*I bow to Lord Shiva.*

To You,

I was drowning,  
In Grief, in Anger, in Depression.  
You have pulled me into the open air of Peace,  
    If only for a little while,  
    By merely listening to my words.

And it is not Mere Words when I say,  
That you will always have my quiet gratitude,  
    You will always have my silent love.

‘When extraordinary good fortune of overwhelming  
Glory comes to a person,  
Retreating misfortune increases the power of its Sorrows.’  
– Kalhana, in *Rajatarangini*

Who among you wants to be great?  
Who among you wants to lose all chance at happiness?  
Is this Glory even worth it?

I am Raavan.  
I want it all.  
I want fame. I want power. I want wealth.  
I want complete triumph.  
Even if my Glory walks side by side with my Sorrow.



## List of Important Characters and Tribes

**Akampana:** A smuggler; one of Raavan's closest aides

**Arishtanemi:** Military chief of the Malayaputras; right-hand man of Vishwamitra

**Ashwapati:** King of the northwestern kingdom of Kekaya; father of Kaikeyi and a loyal ally of Dashrath

**Bharat:** Ram's half-brother; son of Dashrath and Kaikeyi

**Dashrath:** Chakravarti king of Kosala and emperor of the Sapt Sindhu; father of Ram, Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughan

**Hanuman:** A Naga and a member of the Vayuputra tribe

**Indrajit:** Son of Raavan and Mandodari

**Janak:** King of Mithila; father of Sita

**Jatayu:** A captain of the Malayaputra tribe; Naga friend of Sita and Ram

**Kaikesi:** Rishi Vishrava's first wife; mother of Raavan and Kumbhakarna

**Khara:** A captain in the Lankan army; Samichi's lover

**Krakachabahu:** The governor of Chilika

**Kubaer:** The chief-trader of Lanka

**Kumbhakarna:** Raavan's brother; also a Naga

**Kushadhwaj:** King of Sankashya; younger brother of Janak

**Lakshman:** One of the twin sons of Dashrath; Ram's half-brother

**Malayaputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu

**Mandodari:** Wife of Raavan

**Mara:** An independent assassin for hire

**Mareech:** Kaikesi's brother; Raavan and Kumbhakarna's uncle; one of Raavan's closest aides

**Nagas:** Human beings born with deformities

**Prithvi:** A businessman in the village of Todee

**Raavan:** Son of Rishi Vishrava; brother of Kumbhakarna; half-brother of Vibhishan and Shurpanakha

**Ram:** Son of Emperor Dashrath and his eldest wife Kaushalya; eldest of four brothers; later married to Sita

**Samichi:** Police and protocol chief of Mithila; Khara's lover

**Shatrughan:** Twin brother of Lakshman; son of Dashrath and Sumitra; Ram's half-brother

**Shochikesh:** The landlord of Todee village

**Shurpanakha:** Half-sister of Raavan

**Sita:** Daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila; also the prime minister of Mithila; later married to Ram

**Sukarman:** A resident of Todee village; Shochikesh's son

**Vali:** The king of Kishkindha

**Vashishtha:** Raj guru, the royal priest of Ayodhya; teacher of the four Ayodhya princes

**Vayuputras:** The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev

**Vedavati:** A resident of Todee village; Prithvi's wife

**Vibhishan:** Half-brother of Raavan

**Vishrava:** A revered rishi; the father of Raavan, Kumbhakarna, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha

**Vishwamitra:** Chief of the Malayaputras; also temporary guru of Ram and Lakshman



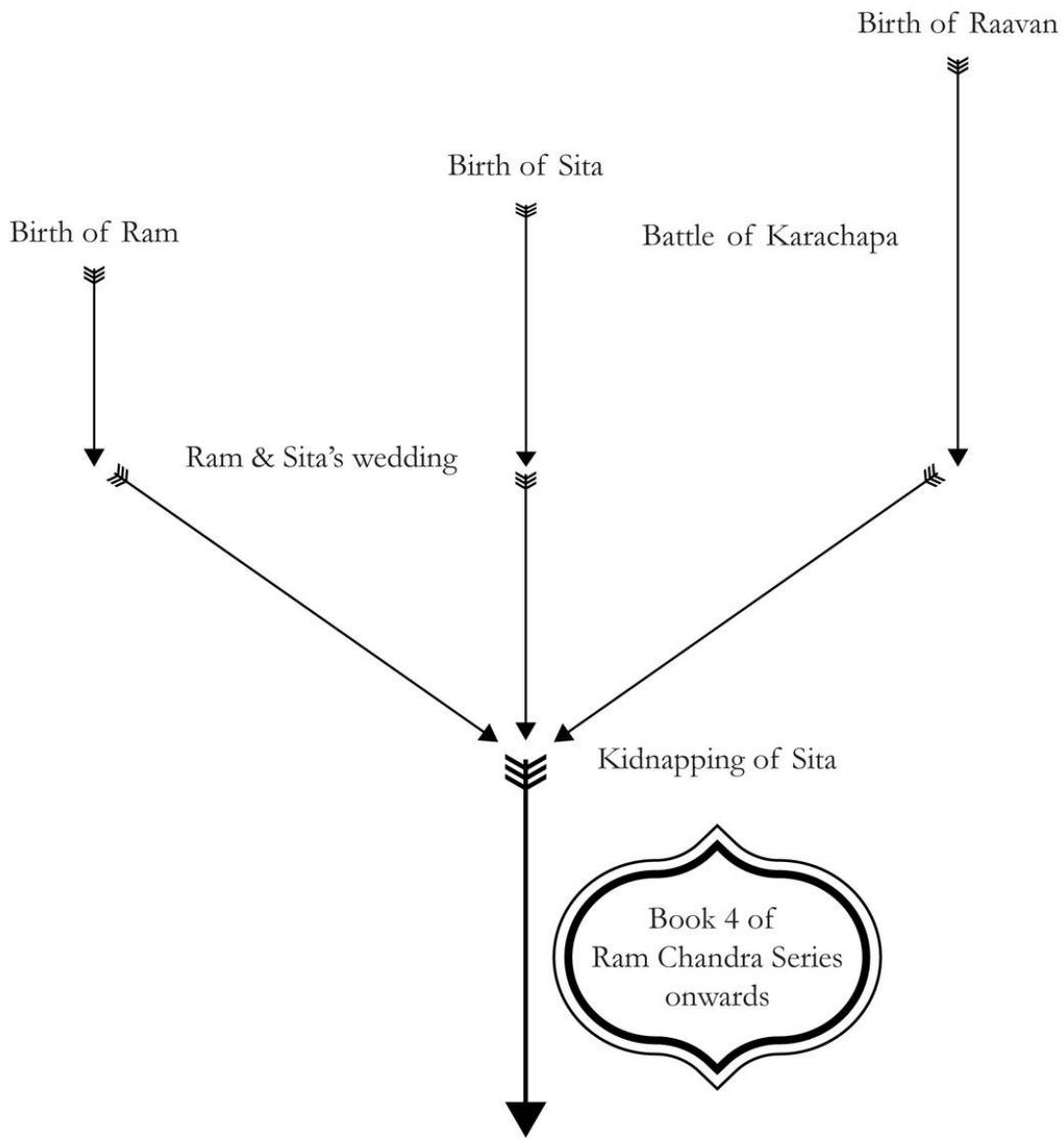
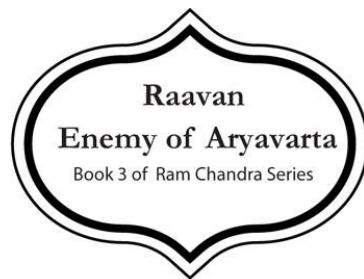
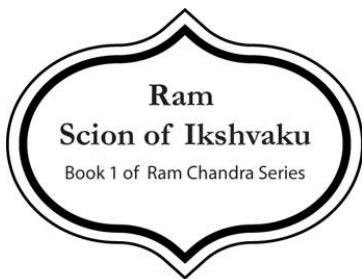
## Note on the Narrative Structure

Thank you for picking up this book and giving me the most important thing you can share: your time.

I know many of you have been patiently waiting for the release of the third part of the Ram Chandra series. My sincere apologies for the delay, and I hope the book will live up to your expectations.

Some of you may wonder why I decided to change the name of the book from *Raavan – Orphan of Aryavarta* to *Raavan – Enemy of Aryavarta*. Let me explain. While writing Raavan’s story, I realised a few things about the man. Right from when he was a child, Raavan raged against the circumstances he found himself in. He was very much a man in charge of his destiny. Initially, I felt Raavan had been cast aside by his motherland and was thus, in a sense, an orphan. But as the story unfolded in my mind, I felt the decisions that took him away from his motherland were deliberate. He *chose* to be the enemy rather than being cast into the role of the orphan.

As some of you know, I have been inspired by a storytelling technique called hyperlink, which some call the multilinear narrative. In such a narrative, there are many characters; and a connection brings them all together. The three main characters in the Ram Chandra series are Ram, Sita and Raavan. Each character has life experiences, which mould who they are, and each has their own adventure and riveting backstory. Finally, their stories converge with the kidnapping of Sita.



So while the first book explored the tale of Ram, the second the story of Sita, the third burrows into the life of Raavan, before all three stories merge from the fourth book onwards into a single story. It is important to remember that Raavan is much older than both Sita and Ram. In fact Ram is born on the day that Raavan fights a decisive battle—against Ram's father Emperor Dashrath!

This book, therefore, goes further back in time, before the birth of the other principal characters—Sita and Ram.

I knew that writing three books, in a multilinear narrative, would be a complicated and time-consuming affair, but I must confess, it was thoroughly exciting. I hope it is as rewarding and thrilling an experience for you as it was for me. Understanding Ram, Sita and Raavan as characters helped me inhabit their worlds and explore the maze of plots and stories that illuminate this great epic. I feel truly blessed for this.

Since I was following a multilinear narrative, I left clues in the first book (**Ram – Scion of Ikshvaku**) as well as the second (**Sita – Warrior of Mithila**), which tie up with the stories in the third. There are surprises and twists in store for you here, and many to follow!

I hope you enjoy reading **Raavan – Enemy of Aryavarta**. Do tell me what you think of it, by sending me messages on my Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter accounts given below.

Love,  
Amish

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## Acknowledgements

It has been a terrible two years. I have been cursed with more grief and suffering in this benighted period, than what I had experienced in my entire life before. Sometimes I felt that the structure of my entire life was collapsing. But it did not. I survived. The building still stands. This book worked like a keystone. And the ones I acknowledge below, have been my buttresses; for they have held me together.

My God, Lord Shiva. He has really tested me these last two years. I hope He will make it a little bit easier now.

The two men I have admired most in my life, men of old-world values, courage, and honour; my father-in-law Manoj Vyas and my brother-in-law Himanshu Roy. They are both up in heaven now, looking at me. I hope I can make them proud.

Neel, my 10-year-old son; and you will pardon this father's emotionality when I say, 'My boy is the best there ever was and ever will be!'

Bhavna, my sister; Anish and Ashish, my brothers, for all their inputs to the story. As always, they read the first draft. Their views, support, affection, and encouragement are invaluable.

The rest of my family: Usha, Vinay, Shernaz, Meeta, Preeti, Donetta, Smita, Anuj, Ruta for their consistent faith and love. And I must acknowledge the contribution of the next generation of my family towards my happiness: Mitansh, Daniel, Aiden, Keya, Anika and Ashna.

Gautam, the CEO of my publisher Westland, and Karthika and Sanghamitra, my editors. If there are people outside of my family, who are the closest to this project, it is this trio. They are an unbeatable mix of capability, politeness and grace. Here's hoping for a long innings together. The rest of the brilliant team at Westland: Anand, Abhijeet, Ankit, Arunima, Barani, Christina,

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Satya and his team who have shot the new author photos that have been used on the inside cover of this book. He made a rather ordinary subject look better.

Caleb, Kshitij, Sandeep, Rohini, Dharav, Heena and their respective teams who support my work with their business, legal and marketing advice.

Mrunalini, a brilliant Sanskrit scholar, who works with me on research. My discussions with her are enlightening. What I learn from her helps me develop many theories which go into the books.

Aditya, a passionate reader of my books, who has now become a friend and a fact-checker.

And last, but certainly not the least, you, the reader. I know this book has been delayed a lot. My sincere apologies for this. Life just took me away from writing. But it did bring me back. And I will not falter from here on. Thank you for your patience, love and support.



## Chapter 1

*3400 BCE, Salsette Island, west coast of India*

The man screamed in agony. He knew his end was near. He wouldn't have to bear this pain much longer. But he had to hold on to the secret till then. He had to. Just a little longer.

He steeled himself and repeated the chant endlessly in his mind. A chant that held immense power. A chant sacred to all in his tribe: the tribe of the Malayaputras.

*Jai Shri Rudra... Jai Parshu Ram... Jai Shri Rudra... Jai Parshu Ram.  
Glory to Lord Rudra. Glory to Lord Parshu Ram.*

He closed his eyes, focusing on the mantra. Trying to forget his present surroundings.

*Give me strength, Lords. Give me strength.*

His nemesis stood over him, preparing to inflict yet another wound. But before he could strike, he was pulled back roughly. By a woman.

She whispered in an angry, guttural voice, 'Khara, this is not working.'

Khara, a platoon commander in the Lankan armed forces, turned towards Samichi, his childhood love. Until a few years back, Samichi had been the acting prime minister of Mithila, a small kingdom in north India. But she had since abandoned her post and was focused on finding the whereabouts of the person who had appointed her. The princess she had once served: Sita.

'This Malayaputra is a tough nut,' Khara whispered. 'He won't break. We have to find the information some other way.'

'There is no time!'

Samichi's whisper was rough in its urgency. Khara knew she was right. The man on the rack was their best possible source of information for now. Only

he could tell them where Sita, her husband Ram, his brother Lakshman, and the sixteen Malayaputra soldiers accompanying them were hiding. Khara also knew how important it was to extract this information. It was their chance to get back into the good books of Samichi's *true lord*. The one she called *Iraiva*—Raavan, the king of Lanka.

'I am trying, but he will not last much longer like this,' Khara said in a low voice, trying to mask his disappointment. 'I don't think he'll talk.'

'Let me try.'

Before Khara could respond, Samichi strode up to the table where the Malayaputra lay shackled. She yanked off his dhoti and threw it aside. She then wrenched his langot away, leaving the poor man completely exposed and moaning in shame.

Even Khara seemed horrified. 'Samichi, this is—'

Samichi shot him a sharp look and he fell silent. Even torturers had a code of conduct. At least in India. But clearly, Samichi had no qualms about flouting it.

The Malayaputra's eyes were wide open in panic. Almost as if he could anticipate the pain that was to follow.

Samichi picked up a sickle lying nearby. It was dangerously sharp on one side, serrated on the other. A cruel design crafted to inflict maximum pain. She moved towards the torture rack, the sickle in her hand. She held it up, felt its sharp edge, letting it prick her finger and draw blood. 'You will talk. Trust me. You will talk,' she snarled as she poised the sickle between the Malayaputra's legs. Dangerously close.

She moved the sickle slowly, deliberately. It sliced through the soft epidermis and cut deeper. Deeper into the scrotum. Inflicting the maximum pain possible at a point that had an almost sadistic concentration of nerve endings.

The Malayaputra screamed.

He cried, he pleaded for it to stop.

It wasn't his Gods he cried to. This was beyond them now. He was calling out to his mother.

Khara knew then. The Malayaputra would talk. It was only a matter of time. He would break. And he would talk.

—८६—I—

Raavan and his younger brother Kumbhakarna sat comfortably inside the Pushpak Vimaan, the legendary flying vehicle, as it flew over the dense jungle.

The king of Lanka was quiet, his body tense. He clutched his pendant

tightly—the pendant that always hung from a gold chain around his neck. It was made of the bones of two human fingers, the phalanges of which were carefully fastened with gold links.

Many Indians believed in the existence of tribes of demonic warriors that adorned themselves with relics from the bodies of their bravest adversaries. In doing so, they were said to transfer to themselves the strength of the dead men. The Lankan soldiers, thoroughly loyal to Raavan, believed and propagated the legend that the pendant around his neck was made from the remains of an archenemy's hand. Only Kumbhakarna knew the truth. Only he knew what it meant when Raavan held the pendant tight, the way he was gripping it now.

Leaving his elder brother to his silent ruminations, Kumbhakarna looked around the Pushpak Vimaan. The gargantuan flying vehicle was shaped like a cone that gently tapered upwards. Its many portholes, close to the base, were sealed with thick glass, but the metallic window shades had been drawn back. The diffused light of the early morning sun streamed in, lighting up the interiors. Though the vehicle was reasonably soundproof, the loud sound of the main rotor at the top of the vimaan could be heard. Added to that was the noise of the many smaller rotors, close to the base of the aircraft, which helped control the directional and lateral movements of the flying machine.

The craft's interiors, while spacious and comfortable, were done in a simple, minimalist style. As Kumbhakarna looked up, his eyes fell on the only embellishment inside the vimaan—a large painting of a single rudraaksh, near the inner summit of the vimaan. A brown, elliptical seed, the rudraaksh literally meant the ‘teardrop of Rudra’. All those who were loyal to the *God of Gods*, the *Mahadev*, Lord Rudra, wore threaded rudraaksh seeds on their body or placed it in their puja rooms. The painting depicted a particular type of rudraaksh that had a single groove running across it. The original, much smaller seed, which was the model for the painting, was known as an *ekmukhi*. A rare kind of rudraaksh, it was difficult to find and extremely expensive. A specimen impaled on a gold thread was kept in Raavan's private temple in his palace.

Apart from the painting, the vimaan was mostly bare—more of a military vehicle than one designed for luxury. Because it placed function over form, it was able to accommodate more than a hundred passengers.

Kumbhakarna noticed with satisfaction that the soldiers sat silently, in disciplined arcs that fanned out across the vimaan. They had just finished eating. Fed and rested, they were ready for action. It was a matter of a few hours before they would descend on Salsette Island. There, Kumbhakarna had been told, Samichi awaited them with crucial information about the exiled Ayodhya royals—Ram, Sita, his wife, Lakshman, his younger brother—and their band of

Malayaputra supporters.

The Lankan soldiers believed they were on their way to avenge the insult to their mighty king's sister, Shurpanakha, who had been injured by Prince Lakshman. While cosmetic surgery would take away the physical marks of the injury to her nose, the metaphorical loss of face could only be avenged with blood. The soldiers knew that. They understood that.

But few of them stopped to wonder exactly what Princess Shurpanakha and Prince Vibhishan, the younger half-siblings of Raavan, had been doing so far away, deep in the Dandakaranya, with the exiled and relatively powerless royals of Ayodhya.

'They are complete idiots,' said Raavan gruffly, keeping his voice low. A curtain draped on an overhanging rod partially screened Raavan's and Kumbhakarna's chairs from the rest. 'I should never have trusted them with this mission.'

After a botched encounter and the resultant skirmish with Ram and the others, Vibhishan had taken Shurpanakha and the Lankan soldiers on a quick march back to Salsette, on the west coast of India. From there, led by Raavan's son Indrajit, they had taken a ship back to Lanka. Upon hearing of their failed mission, Raavan had left his capital city immediately, with as many soldiers as could be accommodated in the Pushpak Vimaan.

Kumbhakarna took a deep breath and looked at his elder brother. 'It's in the past now, Dada,' he said.

'Such fools! Vibhishan and Shurpanakha have taken after their stupid barbarian mother. They can't even handle a simple job.'

Raavan and Kumbhakarna were the sons of Rishi Vishrava and his first wife, Kaikesi. Vibhishan and Shurpanakha were also the sage's children, but by his second wife, Crataeis, a Greek princess from the island of Knossos in the Mediterranean Sea. Raavan abhorred his half-siblings, but had been forced to accept them, by his mother, after their father's death.

'Every family has its idiots, Dada,' said Kumbhakarna with a smile, trying to calm his brother down. 'But they're still family.'

'I should have listened to you. I should never have sent them.'

'Forget it, Dada.'

'Sometimes I feel like—'

'We'll handle it, Dada,' Kumbhakarna interrupted him. 'We'll kidnap the Vishnu, and the Malayputras will be left with no choice but to give us what we want. What we need.'

Raavan took his brother's hand. 'I've given you nothing but trouble, Kumbha. Thank you for always sticking by me.'

‘No, Dada. I am the one who has given you nothing but trouble since my birth. I am alive because of you. And I will die for you,’ Kumbhakarna said, his voice edged with emotion.

‘Nonsense! You will not die anytime soon. Not for me. Not for anybody. You will die of old age, many many years from now, when you have bedded every woman you want to and drunk as much wine as your heart desires!’

Kumbhakarna, who had been celibate and a teetotaller for several years now, laughed. ‘You do enough of that for both of us, Dada!’

—78I—

Strong winds buffeted the Pushpak Vimaan. The vehicle lurched and juddered, like a toy in the hands of a giant demonic child. The rain was coming down hard. They watched it fall in sheets, past the thick glass of the portholes.

‘By the great Lord Rudra, it can’t be my fate to die in a stupid air crash.’

Raavan double-checked the body grip that held him securely in his chair. As did Kumbhakarna. These grips had been specially designed to evenly distribute the force of restraint over the torso of the seated passengers. Even their thighs were restrained.

The Lankan soldiers, meanwhile, had attached themselves to the standard grips fixed to the floor and walls of the vimaan. Most of them were managing to keep calm, and the contents of their stomach within. Some of them, however, being first-time travellers in the vimaan, were vomiting copiously.

Kumbhakarna turned to Raavan. ‘It’s an unseasonal storm.’

‘You think?’ said Raavan, grinning. Nothing brought out his competitive spirit like adversity.

Kumbhakarna turned to look at the four pilots, who were struggling with the levers, trying to direct the craft against the wind with the sheer force of their bodies against the controls.

‘Not too hard!’ shouted Kumbhakarna, making his voice carry over the howling wind. ‘If the levers break, we are done for.’

All four men turned towards Kumbhakarna, who was probably the best vimaan pilot alive.

‘Don’t fight the wind so hard that the controls break,’ ordered Kumbhakarna. ‘Let it flow. But not too loose either. Just keep the vimaan upright and we’ll be fine.’

As the pilots gave the levers some slack, the vimaan lurched and swung even more vigorously.

‘Are you trying to make me throw up?’ asked Raavan, grimacing.

‘Puking never killed anyone,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘But an air crash would do the job most efficiently.’

Raavan scowled, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. He gripped his hand brace even tighter.

‘Plus, there is a positive side to this storm,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘These loud winds will drown out the noise of the rotors. We’ll have the element of surprise on our side when we attack them.’

Raavan opened his eyes and looked at Kumbhakarna, his eyebrows furrowed. ‘Are you crazy? We outnumber them five to one. We don’t need an element of surprise. We just need to land safely.’

—४१—

The battle was short and decisive.

There were no Lankan casualties. All the Malayaputras, save their captain Jatayu, and two of his soldiers, were dead or critically injured. But Ram, Lakshman and Sita were missing.

While Kumbhakarna set about organising the efforts to find the trio, Raavan stood staring at a Malayaputra soldier who lay flat on his back on the ground. The man was still alive, but barely. Moving rapidly towards his death with every raspy breath.

Thick blood was pooling around his body, soaking into the wet mud and discolouring the green grass. The vastus muscles on his thighs had been slashed through. Almost down to the bone. Blood gushed out in torrents from the many severed arteries.

Raavan stared. As always, he was fascinated by the sight of a slow death.

He could hear Kumbhakarna.

‘Jatayu is a traitor. He was one of us before he defected to the Malayaputras. I don’t care what you do to him. Get the information, Khara.’

‘Yes, Lord Kumbhakarna,’ said Khara. He sounded relieved. Samichi and he had proven their worth, with information and muscle. He saluted and marched away towards his quarry.

Raavan focused on the dying Malayaputra. He was losing blood fast. It seemed to be spurting out from what appeared to be a small incision on his abdomen. But Raavan could see that the wound was deep. The kidneys, liver, stomach, had all been cut through. The man’s body was twitching and shivering as the blood drained out of it.

Kumbhakarna’s words pierced his consciousness again.

‘I want seven teams. Two men in each team. Spread out. They can’t have

gone far. If you find the princes, or the princess, do not engage. One of you should come back and inform us while the other continues to track them.'

Raavan's attention was still on the Malayaputra. His left eye had been gouged out. Perhaps by a Lankan soldier wearing hidden tiger claws on his hand. The partially severed eyeball hung out of the eye socket, held tenuously by the optic nerve. Blood dripped weakly from the bloody, discoloured white ball.

The Malayaputra's mouth was open, his chest heaving. Trying to swallow air and pump oxygen through his body. Desperately trying to stay alive.

*Why does the soul insist on hanging on to the body until the absolute last minute? Even when death is clearly the better alternative?*

'Dada.' Kumbhakarna's voice broke his reverie. Raavan raised a hand for silence and his brother obeyed. Raavan looked on as the Malayaputra's life slowly ebbed away. His breathing grew more and more ragged. The harder he breathed, the more quickly the blood flowed out of his numerous wounds.

*Let go ...*

Finally, there was a deep convulsion. The last, shallow breath escaped out of the dying man's mouth. For a moment, all was still. He lay with his eyes wide open, as if in panic. Both fists clenched tight. Toes bent at an ungainly angle. Body rigid.

And then, slowly, he went limp.

A few moments passed before Raavan turned away from the corpse in front of him. 'You were saying?' he asked Kumbhakarna.

'They can't have gone far,' said Kumbhakarna. 'Khara will get the information out of Jatayu soon. We'll find the Vishnu. We'll get her alive.'

'What about Ram and Lakshman?'

'We'll do our best not to hurt them. And make them think that this is revenge for what was done to Shurpanakha. Do you want to go back to the vimaan and wait?'

Raavan shook his head. *No.*

—८१—

'Let me see Sita,' said Raavan.

'Dada, there's no time. King Ram and Prince Lakshman are close by, they might reach soon. I don't want to be forced to kill them. This is perfect. We've got the Vishnu, and Ayodhya's so-called king has not been injured. Let's leave now. You can see her once we are back in the vimaan.'

The Lankans were in a small clearing where the Malayaputras had set up their temporary camp. They were surrounded by dense forest, with almost

nothing visible beyond the tree line. Kumbhakarna was understandably eager to leave before the princes arrived on the spot.

Raavan nodded, and started walking towards the vimaan. His advance guard marched ahead, while Kumbhakarna strode alongside. The main body of soldiers followed, bearing the stretcher that carried a bound and unconscious Sita. The rear guard brought up the end.

Knowing that Ram and Lakshman were free and armed, the Lankans were on their guard. They did not want to be surprised by a hail of arrows.

Periodically, a voice sounded in the distance. Getting louder, and closer, with every repetition.

‘Sitaaaaaaa!’

It was Ram, the eldest son of the late King Dashrath of Ayodhya. Since Ayodhya was the supreme power in the region, Dashrath was also the emperor of the *Sapt Sindhu*, the *Land of the Seven Rivers*. When Ram was banished for fourteen years for the unauthorised use of a *daivi astra*, a *divine weapon*, during the Battle of Mithila, Dashrath had nominated Bharat to be the crown prince instead. However, when it was time for Bharat to be crowned emperor after Dashrath’s passing, he had, against all expectations, placed Ram’s slippers on the throne and begun ruling the empire as his elder brother’s representative.

Technically then, despite being in exile, Ram was the reigning king of Ayodhya and the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu. In absentia. Even though he had never formally been crowned king. Treaty obligations on other kingdoms within the Sapt Sindhu would be triggered if he was hurt or killed. These kingdoms would then be forced to mobilise for war against those who had harmed their emperor. And Raavan knew Lanka could not afford a war. Not right now.

But there was no such obligation with regard to the wife of the emperor.

The anguished voice was heard again. ‘Sitaaaaaaa...’

Raavan turned towards Kumbhakarna. ‘What do you think he’ll do? Can he rally the armies of the Sapt Sindhu?’

Kumbhakarna, surprisingly sprightly despite his massive size, kept pace alongside Raavan. He said thoughtfully, ‘It depends on how we play it. There are many who oppose Ram and his family in the Sapt Sindhu. If we can make it known that Sita was kidnapped to avenge the attack on Shurpanakha, it will give the kingdoms that don’t want to go to war an excuse to back out. Also, there are no treaty obligations that refer to the eventuality of any Ayodhya royal, other than the emperor, being hurt. So they are not treaty-bound to march just because we’ve kidnapped the emperor’s wife. Those who want to stay away can choose to stay away. I don’t think he’ll be able to rally a large army.’

‘So those idiots, Shurpanakha and Vibhishan, have proved to be of some

use after all.'

'Useful idiots,' offered Kumbhakarna, with a twinkle in his eye.

'Hey, I have the copyright on that term!' said Raavan, laughing and playfully slapping Kumbhakarna's massive belly.

The brothers had reached the Pushpak Vimaan and now quickly stepped in.

The soldiers followed and started taking their positions inside the craft. Raavan and Kumbhakarna were soon bracing themselves in preparation for take-off. The doors of the vimaan closed slowly with a hydraulic hiss.

'She's a fighter!' said Kumbhakarna with an appreciative grin, nodding in Sita's direction. The Lankan soldiers hovered around her, fastening straps around her unconscious body.

It had been a struggle to capture the brave warrior princess.

Thirty days had passed since the botched encounter between Shurpanakha and the princes, and the Ayodhyan royals had eased their guard, presuming that the Lankans had lost track of them. That day, they had decided to step out and get themselves a proper meal. Sita had gone to cut banana leaves with a Malayaputra soldier called Makrant. Ram and Lakshman had gone hunting in a separate direction.

The two Lankan soldiers who had discovered Sita had managed to kill Makrant, but were, in turn, killed by Sita. She had then stolen to the devastated Malayaputra camp and picked off several Lankans from behind the tree line, using a bow and a quiverful of arrows very effectively, moving quickly from one hiding place to another. But she had not been able to get to either Raavan or Kumbhakarna, who had been sealed off behind protective flanks of Lankan soldiers. Finally, she had been forced to come forward to save her loyal follower, Captain Jatayu. It was then that she was overpowered and rendered unconscious with a toxin, before being tied up and hauled to the vimaan.

'The Malayputras believe she is the Vishnu,' said Raavan, laughing softly. 'She'd better be a good fighter!'

According to an ancient Indian tradition, towering leaders, the greatest among greats, who could become the propagators of goodness and harbingers of a new way of life, were recognised with the title 'Vishnu'. There had been six Vishnus till now, and the tribe of the Malayputras had been founded by the sixth Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram. Now the Malayputras had recognised a seventh, one who would establish a new way of life in India: Sita. And Raavan had just kidnapped her.

The soldiers around Sita dispersed and returned to their positions.

She lay there, safely strapped onto the stretcher, some twenty feet away from Raavan. Her angvastram was drawn over her body, and the straps were

tight across her torso and legs. Her eyes were closed. Saliva trickled out of the corner of her mouth. A large quantity of a very strong toxin had been used to render her unconscious.

For the first time in their lives, Raavan and Kumbhakarna saw Sita's face.

Raavan felt his breath stop. He sat immobile, heart paralysed. Eyes glued to her face.

To Sita's regal, strong, beautiful face.



## Chapter 2

*Fifty-six years earlier, the ashram of Guru Vishrava, close to Indraprastha, India*

For a four-year-old, Raavan was quite sure and steady in his movements.

The precocious child was Rishi Vishrava's son. The celebrated rishi had married late, when he was over seventy years of age. Though you couldn't tell by looking at him: the magical anti-ageing Somras he drank regularly kept him looking youthful. In his long career spanning many decades, Rishi Vishrava had made a name for himself as a great scientist and spiritual guru. In fact, he was considered to be among the greatest intellectuals of his generation.

Being the son of such a distinguished rishi, the weight of expectations rested heavily on Raavan's young shoulders. But it appeared he would not disappoint. Even at this early age, he had a fearsome intellect. It seemed to all who met him that the child would someday surpass even the vast achievements of his illustrious father.

But the universe has a way of balancing things. With the positive comes the negative.

As the sun set on the far horizon, Raavan patiently tied the fragile legs of the hare he had trapped to two small wooden stumps sticking up from the ground. The creature struggled frantically as the boy pinned it down with his knee and pulled the ropes taut. It lay there with its limbs splayed, underside and chest exposed to the sky. The little boy was satisfied. He could begin work now.

Raavan had dissected another hare the previous day. Studied its muscles, ligaments and bones in detail, while it was still breathing. He had been keen to reach the beating heart. But the hare, having suffered enough already, died before he could cut through the sternal ribs. Its heart had stopped by the time Raavan got to it.

Today, he intended to go straight for the animal's heart.

The hare was still struggling, its long ears twitching ferociously. Normally, hares are quiet animals, but this one was clearly in a state of panic. For good reason.

Raavan checked the sharpness of his knife with the tip of his forefinger. It drew some blood. He sucked at his forefinger as he looked at the hare. He smiled.

The excitement he felt, the rapid beating of his heart, took away the dull ache in his navel. An ache that was perennial.

He used his left hand to steady his prey. Then he held the knife over the animal, the tip pointed at its chest.

Just as he was about to make the incision, he sensed a presence near him. He looked up.

The Kanyakumari.

In many parts of India, there was a tradition of venerating the *Kanyakumari*, literally the *Virgin Goddess*. It was believed that the Mother Goddess resided, temporarily, within the bodies of certain chosen young girls. These girls were worshipped as living Goddesses. People came to them for advice and prophecies—they counted even kings and queens among their followers—until they reached puberty, at which time, it was believed, the Goddess moved into the body of another pre-pubescent girl.

There were many Kanyakumari temples in India. This particular Kanyakumari who stood in front of Raavan was from Vaidyanath, in eastern India.

She was on her way back to Vaidyanath after a pilgrimage to the holy Amarnath cave in Kashmir, and had stopped at Rishi Vishrava's ashram. The holy cave, buried under snow for most of the year, housed a great lingam made of ice. It was believed that this cave was where the first Mahadev had unveiled the secrets of life and creation.

The Kanyakumari's entourage had returned from the pilgrimage with their souls energised but their bodies exhausted. The Goddess had decided to stay for a few weeks in Rishi Vishrava's ashram by the river Yamuna, before continuing on her journey to Vaidyanath.

The rishi had welcomed her visit as a blessed opportunity to speak to the Goddess and expand his understanding of the spiritual world. Despite his best efforts, however, the Kanyakumari had kept to herself and spent little time with him or the many inhabitants of his ashram.

But that had only added to the natural magnetism and aura of the living Goddess. Even Raavan, usually preoccupied in his own world, had stared at her

every chance he got, fascinated.

He looked up at her now, transfixed, knife poised in mid-air.

The Kanyakumari stood in front of him, her expression tranquil. There was no trace of the anger or disgust that Raavan was used to seeing whenever anyone from the ashram caught him at his ‘scientific’ experiments. Nor was there any sign of sorrow or pity in her eyes. There was nothing. No expression at all.

She just stood there, as if she were an idol made of stone—distant yet awe-inspiring. A girl no older than eight or nine. Wheat-complexioned, with high cheekbones and a small, sharp nose. Long black hair tied in a braid. Black eyes, wide-set, with almost ceaseless eyelids. Dressed in a red dhoti, blouse and angvastram. She had the look of the mountain people from the Himalayas.

Raavan instinctively checked the cummerbund tied around his waist, on top of his dhoti. It was in place, covering his navel. His secret was safe. Then he remembered the hideous pockmarks on his face, the legacy of the pox he had suffered as a baby. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he felt self-conscious about his appearance.

He shook his head to get the thought out of his mind.

‘*Devi Ka...* Kanyakumari,’ he whispered, letting the knife drop to the ground. His eyes were fixed on the *Goddess*.

The Kanyakumari stepped forward without a word, her expression unchanged. She bent down and picked up the knife. With quick, efficient movements, she cut the restraints on the wretched hare.

She then picked it up and gently kissed it on the head. The hare was quiet in her hands, its panic forgotten. The voiceless animal seemed to know that it was safe again.

For a fleeting moment, Raavan thought he saw the Kanyakumari’s eyes light up with love. Then the mask came back on.

She put the hare down and the animal bounded away.

The Kanyakumari looked again at Raavan and returned the knife to him. Her face remained impassive.

Without saying a word, she turned and walked away.

Not for the first time since she had arrived at the ashram, Raavan wondered what the Kanyakumari’s birth-name had been, before she was recognised as a living Goddess.

Raavan had slipped out of the house as soon as his mother, Kaikesi, fell asleep. He moved quickly towards his destination.

He was seven years old now. And already renowned in many ashrams, besides that of his father's, as a brilliant child with a formidable intellect. He had started his training in the martial arts as well, and was already showing great promise. As if that wasn't enough, he had a keen ear for music too. His favourites were the stringed instruments, especially the magnificent Rudra Veena. It was only a few months since he had started learning to play the veena, but he was already in love with it.

The Rudra Veena was named after the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, whom Raavan worshipped with a passion. The instrument was considered to be among the most difficult to play. He had been told that to master it required years of practice—each time he heard this, he drove himself harder, for how could Raavan be any less than the best?

As he walked quickly through the darkness, Raavan's mind was on the contest that had been arranged for the following morning, against a musician called Dagar. A young and already well-known Rudra Veena player, Dagar was visiting Rishi Vishrava's ashram.

Though it was only a friendly competition, Raavan had no desire to lose.

He thought again of the first time he had beheld the instrument of his choice. He had felt a deep reverence as he touched the rounded teak-wood fingerboard fixed on two large resonators: they were made of dried and hollowed out gourds, he had been told. On both ends of the tubular body were woodcarvings of peacocks, known to be the favourite birds of Lord Rudra. Twenty-two straight wooden frets were fixed to the fingerboard with wax and there were three separate bridges.

This most dramatic of instruments had eight strings—four main and three drone strings on one side of the player and one drone string on the other. All the strings were wound around the eight friction pegs on the tuning head.

During that first lesson, Raavan had watched as the older students sat on the floor and settled the veena with one gourd over the shoulder. Some of them rested it on their left knee. That was when he had realised that the instrument was customised for the person who handled it; there was no question of one-size-fits-all.

Anyone who has observed the structure of the Rudra Veena knows that it is an extremely complex instrument to understand, let alone play. Wire plectrums worn on the index and middle fingers of the right hand are used to pluck the main strings, while the drone strings are played with the nail of the little finger. The strings have to be manipulated with the left hand from beneath the horizontal neck, made more difficult by the fact that the right hand ends up blocking the drone string on the side.

But what truly separates the Rudra Veena from other stringed instruments is the dramatically higher quality of resonance, which is due to the two large gourds attached to its ends. The frequency and strength of the resonance have a significant impact on the tonal quality and the music.

*Damage the gourds. Damage the resonance. Damage the music.*

Raavan quietly slipped into the small hut where he knew the musical instruments were kept. Dagar's veena was there too. Musicians were known to worship their instruments every night and morning. It seemed Dagar was no different. Puja flowers and burnt incense sticks lay at the base of his Rudra Veena.

Raavan sniggered to himself.

*Dagar's prayers will not be answered tonight.*

He worked quickly, without a sound. First, he slipped the cloth cover off the instrument. Then he unscrewed the gourd on the left and felt its insides. Polished and smooth. He took out a metallic wrench from the pouch tied to his waist and used it to begin scratching the insides of the gourd.

Dagar would not be immediately able to make out that the resonance was not right, not even while tuning his instrument the next day. He would realise it only when playing the raga during the competition. By which time, it would be too late.

Raavan kept glancing towards the door as he worked. He couldn't think of a single excuse to offer if someone were to walk in just now. But there was no time to worry about that. He focused his energies on the task at hand.

—78—

The morning of the competition dawned clear and blue-skied. Much to the surprise of the ashram's inhabitants, the Kanyakumari of Vaidyanath was back amongst them. It had been a good three years since her previous visit. This time, she was on her way to Takshashela, the famed university-town in north-west India, along with her entourage. And Rishi Vishrava's peaceful ashram had proved to be an ideal resting point.

With the Kanyakumari as a witness, the two musicians began playing. The contest didn't last long. Dagar's damaged veena ensured that he gave up barely ten minutes into his performance, and his younger opponent was declared the winner.

But Vishrava knew his son well.

He dragged Raavan to their frugal hut immediately after the competition.

'What did you do?' he hissed, closing the door behind them so no one

could overhear the conversation.

‘Nothing!’ said Raavan defiantly, his head barely reaching up to his father’s chest, his eyes blazing. ‘I was just better than that idiot whom you like to favour.’

‘Mind your tongue,’ said Vishrava, his fists clenched with anger. ‘Dagar is one of the finest young Rudra Veena players of this modern age.’

‘Not fine enough to beat me,’ Raavan scoffed.

‘The Kanyakumari is here. How can I allow any subterfuge in her presence?’

Raavan didn’t know what the word meant. ‘Subterwhat?’

Kaikesi, who was standing behind them, spoke up in a gentle voice. ‘Vishrava, if you feel that Raavan is guilty of deceit, please publicly announce Dagar as the winner. Raavan will understand. Perhaps the Kanyakumari herself can—’

Raavan cut in. ‘But your husband is guilty of deceit too. He has been lying since the time of my birth. Why doesn’t he tell the Kanyakumari about that? Why doesn’t he tell everyone the truth about me?’

The old sage raised his hand in anger.

‘Please don’t!’ pleaded Kaikesi, rushing up and throwing her arms around her son. ‘You have to stop hitting him. It’s wrong... please...’

‘Silence! This is all your fault. I am suffering due to your karma. Your bad karma has infected his navel! And his mind!’ Vishrava’s voice was bitter.

‘Hey!’ said Raavan angrily. ‘Don’t talk to her. Talk to me.’

Enraged, Vishrava pushed Kaikesi aside and lunged at Raavan. He slapped the boy hard on his cheek. The seven-year-old went flying across the room. Kaikesi shrieked and ran to shield her son.

Vishrava looked at the boy lying on the ground. Raavan’s cummerbund had come undone, revealing a small purple outgrowth from his navel—his birth deformity. Proof that he was a Naga. All across India, people believed that birth deformities were the consequence of a cursed soul, of bad karma carrying over from the previous birth. And such blighted people were called Nagas.

Vishrava spoke with barely disguised disgust. ‘Cover that thing!’ He glared at his wife. ‘Your son will destroy my name.’

Raavan pushed his mother’s protective hand away. ‘Yes, I will. Because everyone knows I am better than you in every way.’

‘Arrogant brat! Lord Indra has bestowed his gifts on the wrong person,’ growled Vishrava as he turned to leave.

‘Yes, go away! Get lost! I don’t need you!’ Raavan shouted, struggling to keep his voice level despite the tears that threatened to well up.

The ever-present ache in his navel intensified. Growing in ferocity.

—८१—

Raavan was sitting by the side of the mighty Yamuna River, not far from his father's ashram. His cheek still burned, though the tears had long dried up.

He was staring at the ground, a magnifying glass in his hand. With great care, he focused the rays of the sun into a powerful band of light, burning the little ants that scurried about. He was breathing hard, raw anger still pulsating in every vein. His navel throbbed, the centre of constant pain.

The fragrance reached him first. He felt his breath catch.

He turned his head and saw her.

The Kanyakumari.

His body froze, the magnifying glass still in his hand. Burnt and shrivelled ants lay near his feet. The sun's concentrated rays singed the grass.

The Kanyakumari's expression remained calm. No sign of disgust. Nor anger.

She stepped closer and took the glass from Raavan's hand.

'You can be better than this.'

Raavan did not say anything. His mouth was suddenly dry. The long-held breath escaped in a sigh.

The Kanyakumari smiled slightly. An ethereal smile. The smile of a living Goddess.

She pointed towards the ashram, where the music competition had taken place in the morning. 'You can be better than that too.'

Raavan felt his lips move. But no words came out. His mind was blank. Unable to construct even simple thoughts and words.

His heart had picked up pace. He noticed that the ache in his navel had magically disappeared. For a few moments.

'At least try,' said the Kanyakumari.

She turned and walked away.

—८२—

'You would have won anyway,' Dagar said, smiling.

It was past sunset. Most of the ashram's residents were back in their huts. Raavan had come to see Dagar, bringing with him the holy lotus garland he had won earlier in the day. Reluctantly, his eyes unable to meet Dagar's, he had mumbled a confession. The older contestant had responded graciously.

Dagar, like most others present at the event, had suspected that something was not right with his instrument. He had examined the veena after the competition and quickly identified the problem. But he couldn't bring himself to be angry. Raavan was a child, after all.

Raavan did not say anything. He stood with his head bowed. Thinking of the Kanyakumari. She was to leave the next morning.

The sixteen-year-old Dagar, standing head and shoulders over the younger boy, ruffled his hair. 'You have talent. Use that to win. You don't need to do anything underhand.'

Raavan nodded silently. He didn't like his hair being ruffled by anyone.

Except her... he would do anything to get her to ruffle his hair.

'And don't worry,' said Dagar, with a smile. 'My veena is being repaired. No permanent damage done.'

Raavan let out a long breath. He had expected the ache in his navel to disappear. But it hadn't.

'And you can keep this,' said Dagar, returning the lotus garland to him.

Raavan grabbed it. And ran back home.



## Chapter 3

Two years passed. Raavan turned nine. Every day, he strove consciously to keep the Kanyakumari's words alive within him. *You can be better*, he often reminded himself. Very rarely did he do anything without considering what her reaction to it might be. And it appeared to be working. He got along more easily with the people in the ashram; some actually seemed to like him.

He had also started covering his navel with a cummerbund when he was at home. He knew it embarrassed his father that his son was a Naga, and he had been trying his best for the past two years to not aggravate the situation.

As a result, the fights with his father had reduced.

So had the pain. It was still there. But so mild that Raavan sometimes forgot about the growth on his navel.

Then, one day, Rishi Vishrava left the ashram for a long journey westward. To the island of Knossos in the Mediterranean Sea. The king of Knossos had expressed a desire to meet the eminent rishi, and Vishrava had decided to accept the invitation.

A few weeks after his departure, Kaikesi discovered that she was pregnant. She considered sending a messenger after the rishi, asking him to turn back. But then decided against it. She would surprise him on his return.

Also, truth be told, the thought weighed heavily on her mind: *What if the second child turned out to be a Naga too?*

Unaware of his mother's misgivings, Raavan was excited about the arrival of a younger sibling. He hung around his mother constantly, taking care of her and making sure she had everything she needed. Until, finally, the day arrived.

A wet nurse was attending to Kaikesi inside the house. Raavan waited outside, eagerly pacing up and down, almost like an anxious father-to-be. Waiting for news.

Many of the ashram's residents waited with him. But it was a long labour. Twelve hours had already passed. Slowly, people began returning to their huts, until only Raavan and Kaikesi's elder brother Mareech were left. Mareech had arrived several days earlier, to help his sister through her pregnancy in Rishi Vishrava's absence.

After some time, even Mareech decided to call it a night. 'I'm going to sleep, Raavan. So should you. The midwife will call us. I've given her strict instructions.'

Raavan shook his head. Wild horses couldn't drag him away.

'All right,' said Mareech, getting up. 'I'll be next door. You are to come and fetch me as soon as the midwife calls. Is that clear?'

'Yes.'

'As soon as you hear anything, call me immediately.'

'I heard you the first time, Uncle.'

Mareech laughed softly and ruffled Raavan's hair.

Raavan jerked his head back and looked at his uncle in irritation. Mareech laughed even louder and raised both hands in mock apology. 'Sorry... sorry!'

Chuckles to himself, he turned and walked away, and Raavan set his hair back in place. Neatly.

Now all alone, the young boy looked up at the starless sky. The tiny sliver of a new moon struggled to push the darkness away. Lamps had been lit around the open courtyard in front of the hut, creating tiny enclaves of light.

As he stared into the darkness, he thought he saw shadows lurking in the distance. The breeze picked up, the sound of it somehow eerie. Like ghost whispers. The nine-year-old shivered. The pain at the centre of his body returned. His navel throbbed in fear.

He folded his hands together in prayer and began chanting the *Maha Mrityunjay* mantra. *The great chant of the Conqueror of Death.* Dedicated to the Mahadev, the God of Gods. Lord Rudra.

As he repeated it, over and over again, he felt the fear disappear. Slowly. Leaving his muscles relaxed. His heartbeat slower.

The pain in his navel quietened once again.

He looked into the darkness with renewed confidence.

*Who will fight me? Come on! Who will fight me?*

*Lord Rudra is with me.*

Strangely, his navel began hurting again.

He began chanting even more fervently.

Suddenly, a loud scream resounded through the night. 'Raavan!'

It was Kaikesi.

Raavan sprang up and ran towards the hut.

‘Raavan!’

He could hear the sound of a baby crying.

‘Raavan!’

His mother’s cry was more urgent this time.

Raavan flung the door open and rushed into the hut.

It was dark inside. Only a few lamps threw shadows across the floor. His mother was still on the bed. Weak. Struggling to get up. Tears pouring down her cheeks.

The midwife was holding the baby. Rather, she was dangling it by one leg. It was a boy. Raavan noticed that the baby was quite large for a new-born. As he took in the scene in front of him, he realised to his horror that she was about to smash the baby’s head on the ground.

‘Stop!’ he screamed, dashing forward and drawing his short sword in one quick motion.

The midwife froze as she felt the blade against her abdomen.

‘Hand over my brother, now!’ Raavan said, his voice hoarse.

‘You don’t know what you are doing! I am saving your mother! I am saving you!’ the midwife screeched.

It was only then that Raavan noticed the outgrowths on the baby’s ears. The strange lumps made his ears look like pots. There were outgrowths on his shoulders too, like two tiny extra arms. The new-born was unusually hirsute. And he was howling.

Raavan pressed the sword against her skin, puncturing it. ‘I said, hand him over.’

‘You don’t understand. He has to die. He is cursed. He is deformed. He is a Naga.’

‘If he dies, so will you.’

The midwife hesitated, resisting the pressure of the sword that threatened to pierce her abdomen. She wondered if she could survive a stab wound if a physician attended to her immediately.

‘You will not survive this,’ snarled Raavan, as if reading her mind. ‘My sword is long enough to cut through your abdomen and slice your spinal cord. I have practised on animals. Even human bodies. No doctor will be able to save you. Just give me my baby brother and I’ll let you go.’

The midwife was in a dilemma. She had her orders, and she was expected to follow them. But she didn’t want to die as a consequence. She knew of Raavan’s experiments. She knew he was good with a blade. Everyone knew.

Raavan pushed closer. ‘Give. Him. To. Me.’

The midwife looked at the furious expression on his face with a sense of foreboding. She had seen it before, this bloodlust. On the faces of warriors. People who killed. Sometimes, simply because they enjoyed it.

And then she noticed.

Raavan's cummerbund had come undone. His navel was visible, and the ugly outgrowth. Proof that he, too, was a Naga.

The shocked woman stood rooted to the spot.

She could hear people gathering outside. They would support her. They knew what they had to do.

There was no reason for her to die. She thrust the baby into Raavan's arms and rushed out.

—८६—I—

Raavan could hear the angry voices outside. Arguments. People screaming about order. Ethics. Morals.

The door of the hut was closed. But there was no lock on it. Anyone could barge in at any moment.

He tried to control his breathing, his body tense. He gripped his sword tightly. Ready to kill anyone who entered. He looked back at his baby brother. Safe in his mother's arms. Suckling at her breast contentedly. Unaware of the danger they were in.

His mother's face, though, was a picture of terror.

'What are we to do, Raavan?' asked Kaikesi.

Raavan didn't answer. His alert eyes were glued to the door, ready to attack anyone who dared to try and harm his loved ones.

Suddenly, the door swung open and Mareech rushed in. His sword was drawn. Blood dripped from its edge.

Kaikesi moaned in fear and hugged her baby to her chest. She pleaded with her *elder brother*, 'Dada, please! Don't kill us!'

The baby pulled back from his mother and started crying again.

Raavan stepped in front of Mareech. Brandishing his sword. His voice surprisingly calm. 'You will have to fight me first.'

Mareech shot him an impatient look. 'Shut up, Raavan!' He turned to his sister. 'What's wrong with you, Kaikesi? I am your brother! Why would I kill you?'

Kaikesi looked at him, confused.

Without wasting any more time, Mareech yanked a cloth bag off a hook on the wall. And threw it towards Raavan. 'Two minutes. Pack whatever you need

for your brother and mother.'

The boy stood unmoving. Baffled.

'Now!' shouted Mareech.

Raavan snapped back to reality. He pushed his sword back into its scabbard and picked up the bag, rushing to obey his uncle.

Mareech turned to Kaikesi. 'Get up! We have to leave!'

Within a few minutes, they were outside the hut. Raavan had the cloth bag slung over his shoulder. His baby brother was secure in his mother's arms, the palm of her right hand supporting the new-born's neck.

The residents of the ashram were gathered in front of the hut. Angry faces, torches in their hands.

Three bodies lay on the ground. Cut down by Mareech's sword.

Mareech himself stood in front of his sister and her children, brandishing his sword at the crowd. The ashram's residents mostly comprised intellectuals and artists. Good at social boycotts. Good at verbal violence. Good at mob violence as well. But unequipped to handle a trained warrior.

'Stay back,' Mareech growled.

Slowly, he edged towards the stables, sword aloft. His eyes still on the crowd. Quickly, he helped his sister mount a horse. Raavan was soon seated on another. In a flash, Mareech opened the gates wide and vaulted on to his own horse.

And they galloped out of the ashram.

—८१—

The group had been riding for hours. Eastwards. The sun was already up, and rising higher and higher.

'Please, Dada,' pleaded Kaikesi. 'We have to stop. I can't carry on like this.'

'No' was the simple answer from a grim-looking Mareech.

'Please!'

Mareech bent and whipped Kaikesi's horse, sending it cantering again.

—८२—

It was almost noon by the time they sat down to rest.

Mareech didn't think much of the tracking and fighting skills of the ashram's residents. But better safe than sorry, he had said, each time Kaikesi begged him to slow down.

They were in the Gangetic plains, where the thick alluvial soil and low, rocky terrain made it easy for someone to track them. They had changed directions often. Riding through streams. Moving through flooded fields. Doing all that was necessary to avoid being hunted down.

The three horses were safely tethered and Kaikesi was resting against a tree, suckling her infant. Mareech had left Raavan on guard while he went foraging for food.

He was soon back with two rabbits. In the bag over his shoulder were some roots and berries.

They cooked and ate the food quickly.

'Twenty minutes of rest,' said Mareech. 'Then we ride out again.'

'Dada,' said a tired Kaikesi. 'I think we've left them far behind. Why don't we stay here for a little while?'

'No. It's safer to move on to Kannauj. Our family is there. They will protect us.'

Kaikesi nodded.

Mareech looked at Raavan, noticing he had not touched his food. 'Eat up, son.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'I don't care whether you are hungry or not. Do you want to protect your mother and brother? Then, you need to be strong. And for that, you have to eat.'

Raavan started to protest.

'Just eat, Raavan,' said Kaikesi.

Raavan looked at his mother, then turned back to his food and started eating.

'I don't understand how the ashram people can do this,' Kaikesi said. 'I am the wife of their preceptor. We are the family of their guru. How dare they!'

Mareech glared at his sister. 'Are you trying to play dumb, Kaikesi? Or are you in denial?'

'What do you mean?'

'Do you really think they made this decision on their own?'

'What are you insinuating, Dada?'

'It's clear as daylight. They were following instructions!'

Kaikesi shook her head in disbelief. 'No, it can't be. He left before learning of my pregnancy.'

'It was him. He suspected this might happen, so he left instructions. Those people were simply carrying out orders.'

'I refuse to believe it.'

'Refusing to believe the truth doesn't make it any less true. We had heard

about it in Kannauj. Why do you think I came to stay with you at the ashram?’

Kaikesi kept shaking her head. ‘No, no. It can’t be true.’

Raavan spoke up. ‘My father ordered them to kill us?’

Mareech looked at Raavan and then back at Kaikesi. He had forgotten the boy’s presence in the exchange with his sister.

‘I asked you something,’ said Raavan.

‘Kaikesi?’ Mareech said helplessly.

‘Uncle, did my father order our killing?’ asked Raavan.

‘Kaikesi...’ Mareech repeated.

His sister remained silent. Still shaking her head. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

‘Uncle...’

Mareech turned to Raavan. ‘You have to take care of your family now. You may as well know the truth.’

Raavan kept quiet. His fists clenched tight. He knew the answer already. But he wanted to hear it.

‘From what little I know, he didn’t order your death or your mother’s,’ said Mareech. ‘But he did order the killing of your brother, in case he turned out to be a Naga.’

Raavan drew in a sharp breath. Anger and grief clouded his mind. He looked at his brother, sleeping peacefully in his mother’s lap. The two short extra limbs at the top of his shoulders moved slightly in his sleep. The rest of his body was motionless.

Raavan bent and picked up his infant brother. He cradled him in his arms, his eyes radiating love. ‘Nothing will happen to you. Nobody will hurt you. Not as long as I am alive.’

Over his head, Mareech and Kaikesi looked at each other, nonplussed and, at the same time, overcome. Mareech touched the boy’s shoulder sympathetically, but Raavan shrugged the comforting hand away and continued to croon to the baby.



## Chapter 4

Two days had passed since Mareech had helped Kaikesi and her sons escape from Vishrava's ashram. They were camped in a clearing in the jungle for the night, the horses tied in a circle around the camp.

It was the third day of the waxing moon. With the dense jungle cover and the night-time fog, visibility was reduced to barely a few feet. So Mareech set about lighting a small fire. Not just for heat, but also for safety.

He sat hunched over a flat wooden board that had a notch cut into its surface. The fireboard. In his hands he held a long slender piece of wood, which spun when he rubbed his palms together. Patiently, he got the wooden spindle into the notch. Waiting for the glowing black dust, like smouldering coal, to collect. It was a primitive and time-consuming method, but their only option in the jungle.

As he waited, Mareech's eyes fell on the dark outlines of his sister and her infant son. They appeared to be sleeping, fatigued after the day's journey. The baby, only a few days old, had a name now: Kumbhakarna—the one with pot-shaped ears. It was Raavan who had suggested it and Kaikesi and Mareech had instantly agreed.

Mareech looked at Raavan, who sat close to him. The nine-year-old's knife was out of its scabbard. Mareech tried to get a look at Raavan's face.

*Were his eyes closed?*

He was about to scold Raavan and order him to help with the fire, when the boy brought down his knife in a flash. There was a loud screech. Mareech stared at him, stunned. It was too dark for him to be certain, but it appeared his nephew had just pinned down a hare with his knife.

Very few people could shoot arrows unguided by vision. Even fewer could throw knives based on sound alone. But to stab a fast-moving animal like a hare,

based only on sound, was unheard of.

Mareech looked at Raavan in awe, his mouth slightly open. Then he turned his attention back to where the smouldering dust had started collecting on the fireboard. Quickly, he slid the dust onto the small pile of tinder he had collected. Then he blew on it gently, till the tinder caught fire. One by one, he transferred the flame to the logs he had arranged beside the burning tinder. Soon there was a roaring fire in the centre of the small clearing.

The fire taken care of, Mareech turned to Raavan. The boy had begun skinning the hare's hind legs. With a start, Mareech noticed the animal was still alive. Making frantic, yet weak sounds, like an agonised pleading. In the light of the fire, Mareech could also see Raavan's expression.

A chill ran up his spine.

He got up, and in one fluid move, pulled out his own knife, took the hare from Raavan and stabbed it in the heart. He held the blade there for a few moments, till the hare stopped moving. Then he handed it back to Raavan. 'This animal has done nothing to you.'

Raavan stared at Mareech, his face devoid of expression. After a long, still moment, he turned back to the hare and started skinning it again. Mareech walked over to where his bag lay and pulled out some dried meat. He began heating it over the flame, using a slim, sharpened rod as a skewer.

'Uncle.'

Mareech looked up.

'I didn't thank you,' said Raavan.

'There's no need for that.'

'Yes, there is. Thank you. I will remember your kindness. I will remember your loyalty.'

Mareech smiled at the nine-year-old who spoke like an adult. And went back to heating the meat.

If only the night would pass quickly, and the dawn arrive soon. For the next day, they would finally be home, in Kannauj.

—76—

The ancient city of Kannauj had blessed many Indians with a great deal.

Situated on the banks of the holy Ganga, the city had been a great centre of manufacturing, especially of fine cloth, as far back as anyone could remember. It was known for its production of equally fine perfumes. It had also long been a centre of debate, research and shared knowledge, and was the heartland of the Kanyakubj Brahmins, a community of illustrious, if impoverished intellectuals.

The joke among the Kanyakubjas was that Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge, was very kind towards them, while Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity and Wealth, was wont to ignore them altogether.

As a seat of learning, the city was home to many of the finest thinkers and philosophers of the time, including the celebrated Rishi Vishwamitra, who had been born into the royal family of Kannauj. But it turned out to be not so understanding when it came to the weary band of runaways that showed up at its gates, seeking sanctuary.

Kaikesi and Mareech's parents, it transpired, had decided that it was best to excommunicate their daughter as soon as they heard that she had given birth to a Naga child. By this time, the well-kept secret of Raavan's identity had also been revealed. And, of course, everyone knew that it was Kaikesi's fault. After all, the revered Rishi Vishrava could not be responsible for the bad karma that gave birth to their Naga offspring.

Even those who sympathised with Kaikesi's plight had no inclination, or will, to take on their community or their elders.

Within a day of reaching Kannauj, the four of them found themselves outside the city once again, on the banks of the holy Ganga, wondering where they could go.

'What do we do now?' asked Kaikesi.

Mareech looked away at the river, his mind seething with anger. He couldn't believe that his family had turned its back on them. Even those who had initially supported his decision to go to Vishrava's ashram to protect his sister had changed their tune. They'd had the temerity to tell him, 'We didn't expect Kaikesi to actually give birth to a Naga! How could we have expected that?'

'Dada,' Kaikesi said again, 'what is to become of us?'

'I don't know, Kaikesi!' said Mareech. 'I don't know!'

Raavan had been using a smooth stone to sharpen the blade of his knife. He looked up and said, 'I do. Let's go further east. Let's go to Vaidyanath.'

'Vaidyanath?' asked Mareech, surprised. 'What's in Vaidyanath?'

*The Kanyakumari*, thought Raavan. But, for some reason, he didn't want to say it aloud. He started sharpening his knife again. 'I know who's not there: my father.'

Mareech kept quiet.

'Let's travel eastwards, towards the rising sun. Some light of wisdom may dawn on us as well.'

'You made that line up yourself?' Mareech asked, impressed.

Raavan glanced at him superciliously. 'No, I read it somewhere. You should try reading too, Uncle. It's a good habit.'

Mareech rolled his eyes and looked away. *Pesky kid.*

—78I—

They found lodgings in a charitable guesthouse in a small village, a short distance from the famous Vaidyanath temple. Vaidyanath was famed for its physicians, and Kaikesi lost no time in taking Kumbhakarna to one, to see if the outgrowths on his shoulders and ears could be removed. The doctor, however, advised against it. There was too much vascularity in the outgrowths, too many blood vessels, and removing them surgically could lead to the death of the child, he said. In any case, Kumbhakarna seemed like a happy baby whose outgrowths, unusually, did not cause him pain. It was best that he learn to live with them.

Kaikesi was deeply disappointed. So was Raavan. But the reason for his disappointment was different. Not that he spoke of it to anyone.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, they left for the main Vaidyanath temple. It would soon be time for the morning aarti, the public offering of devotion to the Mahadev, Lord Rudra.

The Vaidyanath temple was, in effect, a huge complex of many temples, set in the middle of a dense jungle. There were temples dedicated to the previous Vishnus, to the many Goddesses who protected India, to Lord Indra, Lord Varun, Lord Agni, and others. Of course, the largest temple was dedicated to Lord Rudra. The Mahadev. The God of Gods.

The temple complex was separated from the flood-prone Mayurakshi by marshlands and flood-plains that sponged the excess waters of the tempestuous river during the monsoon season, thus keeping the temples safe. Several species of medicinal herbs and roots grew in the swamp, making the small temple-town a treasure trove of medicines for the treatment of most diseases. In fact, its name derived from this: Vaidyanath, the Lord of the Medicine Men.

The main temple of Vaidyanath was shaped like a giant lotus. It had an uncomplicated but enormous core, with a hall, the sanctum sanctorum, and a spire built of stone and mortar, following the standards prescribed in the Aagama architectural texts. The main spire shot up a massive fifty metres from a fifteen-metre base. On top of the base, a hundred and eight wooden ‘petals’ had been affixed—an architectural triumph. Each petal was four times the size of a full-grown man. Made from the wood of robust sal trees, among the best hardwoods anywhere in the world, each petal had been further hardened through a process of chemical treatment and painted with a pink dye. They were laid out on four levels, one above the other, to create a gargantuan lotus flower that encompassed the core of the temple. The main spire was painted yellow and grew out of the

centre of this lotus like a giant pistil. The base was coloured green, to signify the stem of the lotus. The elongated base was hollow and functioned as a tunnel-shaped entry into the temple.

It was almost surreal. And deeply symbolic.

The lotus was a flower that retained its fragrance and beauty even while growing in slush and dirty water. It posed a silent challenge to the humans who visited the temple, to be true to their dharma even if those around them were not. The number of petals—one hundred and eight—was significant too. The people of India, the followers of the dharmic way, attached a huge significance to the number. They believed that it was a divine number repeated again and again in the structure of the universe. The diameter of the sun was a hundred and eight times the diameter of the earth. The average distance from the sun to the earth was a hundred and eight times the diameter of the sun. The average distance of the moon from the earth was a hundred and eight times the diameter of the moon. There were several other examples of this number appearing almost magically in the universe. Over time, it had been incorporated into many rituals. For instance, it was recommended that a mantra be chanted a hundred and eight times.

At the far end of the temple, in the sanctum sanctorum, was a life-size idol of Lord Rudra. The Lord sat cross-legged, like a yogi, his eyes closed in concentration. Right behind him was a massive three-metre high lingam-yoni—an ancient depiction of the One God. The lingam was in the shape of half an egg, and some ancients believed that it represented the Brahmanda, or the Cosmic Egg, which allowed creation to coalesce. Others believed that it was a representation of masculine energy and potential. At the base of the lingam was a yoni, often translated as ‘womb’, but literally the ‘origin’ or ‘source’; a symbol of feminine energy and potential. The union of the lingam and the yoni represented creation, a result of the partnership between the masculine and the feminine, an alliance between passive Space and active Time from which all life, indeed all creation, originated.

Outside the sanctum sanctorum, in the centre of the lotus-shaped temple, was the main gathering hall for devotees.

By the time Raavan and his family reached the temple, they had little time to admire either its beauty or symbolism. The aarti had already begun in the main hall. And it was spectacular.

Thirty massive drums were placed sideways on large stands positioned throughout the hall. Big, burly men holding drumsticks the size of their own arms stood beside them, pounding the drums repeatedly.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

The beat and the rhythm pulsated through Raavan's body. He could feel the waves of sound in his bones. And like everyone else in this throng of Lord Rudra's devotees, he too was compelled to dance to the tune. Even Kumbhakarna, the little baby, shook his arms excitedly.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

As the music gained in tempo, male and female devotees surged across the hall, towards the two-hundred-odd bells that hung from different points. They began ringing them now. In perfect harmony.

Then, in a low voice, the devout, in tune with each other, began chanting a simple disyllabic word. A word of immense power.

'Maha... dev!'

'Maha... dev!'

'Maha... dev!'

As the chanting gained momentum, the voices grew louder and louder. In ecstatic devotion to the Mahadev. The Greatest God. The God of Gods. Lord Rudra himself.

The drums kept pace with the chanting.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

Raavan looked around him. For the first time in his life, he experienced the sheer joy of being a part of something bigger than himself. He was a devotee of Lord Rudra. They all were. And there was no differentiation here. None at all. Rich men danced next to their visibly poor compatriots. Students pirouetted next to their teachers. People with deformities chanted beside soldiers blessed with formidably fit bodies. Purist priests danced with hedonist aghoras. Women danced with men and transgender people. Children with their parents. People of all denominations and castes. Indians and non-Indians.

No differentiation.

Freedom.

Freedom from judgement. Freedom from expectations. Freedom from right and wrong. Freedom from Gods and Demons. Freedom to be oneself. And revel in the union with Lord Rudra.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

'Maha... dev!'

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

'Maha... dev!'

The aarti ended on a high, with a wild, throaty cry that echoed through all of Vaidyanath.

‘Jai Shri Rudra!’

Glory to Lord Rudra.

As though on cue, the drums and the bells fell silent. Only the echoes remained, lingering in the hushed silence of a deep and blissful devotion.

The aarti had lasted no more than five minutes. But it gave the joy of a lifetime to all those who were present there. Raavan glanced around him. There was ecstasy on every face. He looked at his uncle Mareech and his mother Kaikesi. Tears of joy were flowing down their cheeks. Raavan felt his own cheeks and was surprised to find them moist.

He whispered to himself, ‘Jai Shri Rudra!’

Loud voices were suddenly heard from the crowd.

‘Kanyakumari!’

‘Kanyakumari!’

At the end of the aarti, it was customary for the Kanyakumari to perform the first traditional puja, the *Rudrabhishek* of the lingam-yoni. The Virgin Goddess had come forward to fulfil her duty.

Everybody looked up. Craning their necks. Balancing on their toes to look beyond those in front of them. All keen to catch a glimpse of their living Goddess.

But not Raavan. He kept his eyes on the ground. His fists clenched tight.

‘Is this a new Kanyakumari?’ asked Kaikesi.

Mareech glanced at his sister before turning back to look at the Kanyakumari, his hands held together in devotion. ‘Yes. I am told the previous Kanyakumari got her first period a few months ago. She has moved on and a new Kanyakumari has been recognised.’

Kaikesi swayed gently, rocking baby Kumbhakarna back to sleep. ‘I’ve always wondered what happens to them afterwards. Where do they go? What do they do?’

Mareech shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Maybe they go back to their villages once they are not Kanyakumaris anymore. But how can anyone find them? Very few even know their original birth-names.’

Raavan raised his head and stared at the new Kanyakumari. Hatred flashed in his eyes.

For a brief, insane moment, he considered lunging forward and striking her dead. That would get rid of her forever. But he banished the thought as quickly as it had occurred to him. It was pointless. They would simply recognise another girl-child as the Kanyakumari. *His* Kanyakumari was not coming back. He didn’t know where she was. He didn’t even know her real name.

He knew almost nothing. All he remembered were her words. Her voice.

And her face.

Her angelic face was burnt into his mind. A face that made all the pain go away.

The thought he had been avoiding finally burst through to his consciousness. He was never going to see her again. She was gone from his life. Forever.

He felt his breath constricting. As though he was suffocating.

He took his mother's hand. 'We have to go.'

'What? Why? The Kanyakumari—'

'You can ask for her blessings tomorrow. Let's go.'

Raavan turned and walked away.



## Chapter 5

‘Leave?’ asked Mareech, surprised. ‘Why?’

Mareech, Kaikesi, Raavan and Kumbhakarna were back in their small room in the guesthouse.

Raavan’s voice was calm. ‘I had hoped we could find a cure for Kumbhakarna here. But the doctors have told us there is not much they can do. So there’s no point in hanging around anymore.’

‘But we didn’t come here only to find a cure for Kumbhakarna. It’s a safe place, at least for some time.’

‘I don’t want to just be safe. I want to achieve something. I can’t do that here.’

Mareech sighed, a little irritated with this precocious young boy. ‘Raavan, you are nine years old. You are a child. Just take it easy and let the adults—’

‘I am not a child,’ said Raavan firmly, interrupting Mareech. ‘I am the eldest male in my family. I have responsibilities.’

Mareech tried hard to suppress a smile. ‘All right, great elder, tell me, which place do you think would be better than Vaidyanath? There is a tradition of selfless charity here. Your mother and brother can live on the free food and lodging that’s provided at this guesthouse. How will you feed them if we go elsewhere?’

‘I have read of great ports to the east which trade with lands like Bali and Malay. We could go there. We could work there.’

‘Raavan, don’t assume that it will be easy to find—’

‘I have already decided, Uncle,’ said Raavan. ‘I have spoken to maa as well. The question is, what do you want to do?’

Mareech looked at his sister in surprise. He didn’t know that she had already acquiesced to Raavan’s demand. The look on Kaikesi’s face was a

mixture of helplessness and resignation. Many years later, Mareech would remember this as the first of many surrenders. The moment when his relationship with Raavan changed. The moment Raavan went from being his young nephew to his future lord and commander.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Let’s go further east.’

—78I—

It had been four years since Raavan and his family moved east, to a small town on the shore of the Chilika lake.

Chilika was a vast lagoon, among the largest in the world, extending over more than 1,000 sq km, north-east to south-west, on India’s eastern coast. Some of the major distributaries of the mighty Mahanadi River, such as the Daya and Luna rivers, drained their waters into the lake. Fifty other minor rivers fed the Chilika besides. During the monsoon, the heavy downpour caused the lake to swell even more.

A first-time visitor to the kingdom of Kalinga, settled around the delta of the Mahanadi, could be forgiven for assuming that the fertile land, abundance of fresh water and a regular bountiful monsoon were responsible for its immense prosperity. In reality, while agriculture was indeed a munificent source of the kingdom’s riches, its overflowing coffers were the result of brisk trade with other regions, near and far.

And the centre of this trade was the Chilika lake.

Given its dimensions, Chilika allowed for the construction of several ports along its shores. The deep draught of the lake meant even the biggest seafaring ships could sail into it comfortably. Several islands in the lake, most of them close to its seaward side, served as minor ports for smaller ships, thus dividing the heavy traffic of vessels. Most crucially, the lake’s eastern boundaries, which separated it from the Eastern Sea, were marked by a series of sand flats. These worked as breakwaters to stop the stormy sea from intruding into Chilika, making the lake waters a calm refuge for ships. Two openings in these sand flats, the broader one at the northern end and a narrow one at the southern end, allowed ships to sail into the lake. Furthermore, from Chilika, one could sail up the Mahanadi to the kingdom of South Kosala and then travel northwards into the heartlands of the Sapt Sindhu.

Chilika provided a safe and secure harbour, and afforded easy access to a rich hinterland. In fact, the richest hinterland in the world.

At any point in time, there were at least a few hundred ships, large and small, anchored in the lake. And a smaller number of ships waiting to berth.

Cargo was constantly being loaded or taken off vessels. Traders could be heard negotiating aggressively, while Customs officials tried to extract the tax revenues due to the state. Sailors were routinely spotted making their way to the shore, on their day off, looking for wine and women. Tavern owners and women tried their best to attract as many sailors as possible. Meanwhile, soldiers on duty worked to maintain some semblance of order amidst the chaos.

What made Chilika a favourite among traders was that, unlike in other parts of India, trading activities were not unduly restricted here.

Over the past few decades, in many parts of the Sapt Sindhu, ordinary people as well as the ruling families had turned against the trading caste of Vaishyas on account of what was perceived to be large-scale corruption. Severe restrictions had been placed on trading activities. Traders needed licenses at every stage, and these had to be procured from non-Vaishya administrators. As it turned out, far from ending corruption, an element of bribery—large amounts at that—was added to the process. On top of that, the administrators, in their arrogance, did not think they were doing anything wrong in leeching bribes from the traders. They looked at it as a way of punishing the ‘thieves’.

Of course, any wise person would know that to blame an entire community for the faults of a few was to take an extremely myopic view of things. Every society needs entrepreneurs and merchants as much as it needs intellectuals, warriors and artisans. And an imbalance in the structure, favouring a particular class, ends up creating problems. Unfortunately, there was a shortage of wisdom in the ruling class in the Sapt Sindhu and the trading community continued to be persecuted.

Eventually, traders from across the Sapt Sindhu got together under the leadership of Kubaer, the wily businessman-ruler of Lanka. Kubaer struck a deal with the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu, and its subordinate kingdoms, by which he took over all their trading activities and paid the empire a large share of the profits. However, this did nothing to make the traders’ lives easier. Kubaer’s method of maximising his profits was to squeeze their margins. By allying with him, the traders, it turned out, had merely jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

The only kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu that had refused to join up with Kubaer so far was Kalinga. Therefore, while trading had become difficult in most parts of the country, it had intensified in Chilika. The port was under the control of the king of Kalinga, who ruled from his capital, Cuttack, over eighty kilometres north of the lake. ‘Cuttack’ literally meant military cantonment or royal camp, the name resonant of the warrior past of the Kalingans. But over many centuries, the people there had grown into a non-violent and peace-loving

community, whose interests lay in trading and in cultural and intellectual pursuits. This also made the Kalinga kings relatively liberal in their approach to the vexed issue of state controls. As a result, several Vaishya families chose to settle in Kalinga and ply their trade there.

But things were slowly changing. The anti-Vaishya mood in the rest of the country had begun to seep through to Kalinga. Everyone wanted to ingratiate themselves with Dashrath, the powerful king of Ayodhya, who was also the emperor and overlord of the Sapt Sindhu. And it was well known that the mood in Ayodhya was anti-Vaishya. Furthermore, the mighty kingdom of South Kosala, in the upper parts of the Mahanadi, not far from Kalinga, had recently forged a strong alliance with Ayodhya through marriage. Princess Kaushalya had become the first wife of Emperor Dashrath.

Influenced by its powerful relatives, South Kosala too had started placing severe restrictions on trade. Kalinga, sensing the shift in its immediate neighbourhood, had started realigning itself too. A Naharin administrator from the lands to the north-west of Babylon, in Mesopotamia, was brought in as the governor of Chilika to ‘discipline’ the wayward traders. Nobody knew the man’s original name, but he had taken on an Indian one: Krakachabahu, the one with ‘arms like a saw’. Regrettably, his style of administration was as repugnant as his name. However, the Kalinga king, far away in his capital city, left Krakachabahu to run Chilika by himself.

Soon, traders in Kalinga began suffering the same tax terrorism and countless regulations that their fellow traders endured in the other kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu. If they couldn’t do business even in Chilika, where could they? Despondent, some decided to give up trading altogether, but the majority laboured on, for it was the only profession they had any experience in. However, the feeling was gathering strength that they had to look for ways to bypass Krakachabahu’s oppressive restrictions.

It wasn’t long, then, before smuggled goods began to find their way from the Sapt Sindhu to the outside world. There was very little that Indians required from foreign lands since they had plenty of home-grown produce to live on. Even if something was smuggled in, it could get confiscated in any of the kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu if it lacked the customary permits. Understandably then, the smuggling market was geared more towards exports. The Sapt Sindhu produced many goods that the world wanted. Smuggling them out became a convenient way to avoid hefty export duties and make good profits.

A three-tier smuggling system evolved over time. The first tier involved transporting manufactured products from different kingdoms in the Sapt Sindhu to Chilika. This was relatively simple because many of these goods could easily

be mixed with legal exports. It was also the least risky—and the least profitable—of the tiers. The second-tier operators used small cutter-boats to run the gauntlet of Krakachabahu's tax-boats in Chilika before escaping into the sea, either undetected or after bribing the Customs officers. The third tier came into effect in the Eastern Sea, where large seafaring ships, anchored many nautical miles south of Chilika and hidden among other ships waiting to sail into harbour, picked up goods from the cutter-boats and sailed off into distant foreign lands.

Now, the second tier clearly constituted the riskiest part of the operation. And yet, since it was mainly done by young smugglers in small boats, who were desperate to make ends meet, the cream of the profits was skimmed by the third tier: the owners of the large seafaring ships. They negotiated prices down by playing one against the other, while they themselves charged the full and legal, duty-paid price in foreign markets like Arabia, Malay or Cambodia.

When they had first moved here, Raavan and Mareech had taken up employment as dock workers. They survived the hard toil for some time, but eventually, encouraged by the opportunities on offer, Raavan had hired a small cutter-boat and progressed to second-tier smuggling. He had quickly made a name for himself as a smart lad and a talented sailor who was willing to take risks and sneak out goods in the most adverse conditions. It was not a surprise, therefore, when he was approached by a smuggler called Akampana, who specialised in the third tier.

Normally, smugglers in the third tier were capable seafarers, raking in huge profits. Akampana, however, was a bit of a misfit in that category. His was among the least profitable third-tier operations. He was notorious for delaying payments to his crew or not paying them at all. It had reached a point where men simply refused to work for him. But he did have a major asset—his own ship. A large one. One that was capable of sailing on the high seas.

The only way a smuggler in the second tier could graduate to the profitable third tier was by owning or working on a seafaring ship. Knowing this, Raavan agreed to meet Akampana.

The next day, Raavan and Mareech, along with their regular crew of five cutthroats, sailed out in their cutter-boat to a small, hidden lagoon south of Chilika, where Akampana's house was located.

Raavan ordered his crew to row the boat close to Akampana's ship, which was anchored not too far from the shore.

'By the great Lord Varun,' exclaimed Mareech, invoking the name of the God of Water and the Seas in his surprise. 'Does this Akampana not do any maintenance work on his ship at all?'

One of the ways to classify ships was by the number of masts they

possessed. Most seafaring ships that came to Chilika had three masts. So did Akampana's. But the sorry state of the vessel was quite obvious. The rigging, including the sails, looked worn and incapable of drawing wind effectively. In fact, the sails hadn't even been furled up to prevent damage from sudden gusts of wind, which were quite common in the area. The masts were clearly in desperate need of fresh woodwork. The crow's nest on top of the main mast had most of its floorboards missing. The tar on the ship's hull, crucial for keeping the vessel waterproof and preventing leakages, needed recoating.

'I thought Akampana's ship had a reputation for speed,' Raavan said, equally surprised.

'So did I,' said Mareech. 'Are you sure you want to work with this man?'

Raavan stared at the ship, lost in thought. Then, abruptly, he threw his angvastram aside. 'Stay here.'

'What are you doing?' asked Mareech.

Before he could finish, Raavan had slipped into the water and was swimming towards the ship. When he got to it, he stopped and floated alongside, carefully examining the hull. He then dived underwater to look at the part just below water. He came back up and swam the length of the ship, this time not just looking at it but feeling it with his fingers, disappearing underwater and coming up every few minutes to take a breath before going back in again. On Mareech's orders, the cutter-boat followed, circling the ship and keeping abreast of Raavan.

When Raavan finally swam up to the surface and climbed onto the boat, Mareech looked at him questioningly.

'There's something odd about this ship,' said Raavan.

'What?'

'Not one barnacle. Not one mussel. No shipworms. The hull is as smooth as it must have been on the day it was made.'

Biofouling was a hazard as old as sailing itself. The wooden base of ships provided a ready breeding ground for barnacles and other sea creatures. They clung to the wet surface, multiplying and growing to cover much of the hull below water. Some ships were so badly infested that it was impossible to even see the wooden surface below the waterline.

These bumpy masses of barnacles drastically reduced the speed of a ship. Another peril was the infestation of shipworms, a type of clam that grew as long as two feet. These creatures bored holes into the wooden hull, causing slow, long-term damage. It was with good reason that they were called the termites of the sea. Raavan had never seen a seafaring ship, the hull of which was *not* infested with these creatures. But Akampana's ship was, strangely, completely devoid of them.

Raavan knew that the best way to clean the hull was in a dry dock where the ships were rested on a dry platform so that workers could scrape off the sea creatures and repair or replace the wood. But it was impossible for smugglers to get access to a dry dock. So what they usually did was careen the ship—essentially, ground it on a beach at high tide and turn it on its side. This allowed the hull to come up above the water so that it could be cleaned, and the old wood repaired or replaced.

As if on cue, Mareech spoke up. ‘Maybe they careened the ship and cleaned the hull?’

Raavan shook his head. ‘Uncle, if Akampana hasn’t had the sense to tie up the sails to prevent accidental damage, do you think he would have gone to the trouble, and the expense, of careening the ship?’

Mareech nodded. ‘Valid point.’

Raavan considered the facts before him. With no biofouling, Akampana’s ship could travel at nearly twice the speed of other ships. A huge competitive advantage.

He made up his mind.

—78I—

‘I cannot pay all of you a salary,’ said Akampana, ‘but I can give you a small share of the profits that we make.’

Raavan and Mareech had left their motley team at a distance, out of earshot. It would make negotiation easier. The three men sat on wooden chairs in an unkempt garden that had clearly seen better days. In the same compound stood Akampana’s large, crumbling mansion. The house was located not far from the shore, so Akampana’s ship was clearly visible from where they were seated.

As soon as Mareech heard what Akampana was offering, he looked askance at Raavan, waiting for his nephew to refuse the ridiculous offer. But Raavan remained silent, his expression inscrutable.

Akampana, a slim man of average height, shifted uneasily. He touched his forehead, unknowingly smudging the *tilak*, the *long, black mark* drawn across it. Finally he broke the silence.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘we can work out something for living expenses but—’

An angry female voice interrupted him. ‘What the hell is going on here?’

They turned to see a tall, sharp-featured woman marching towards them.

‘Are you trying to hire a crew again, Akampana?’ asked the woman, her exasperation evident to everyone.

Akampana was visibly nervous. ‘We have to do some business to earn money, dear wife. These people—’

‘Business? You don’t know how to do business! You keep making losses. I am not giving you any more money. I am not selling any more of my jewellery. Just sell that damned ship!’

‘No, but—’

‘You are a moron!’ shouted the woman. ‘You will be better off if you realise that and stay within your limits.’

‘But we need—’

‘No buts! Just sell that cursed ship! I could have gone with Krakachabahu, you know that. He was interested in me. I rejected the affections of the governor of Chilika and stuck by you. But I have had enough of your foolishness. Just sell that ship!’

Akampana looked away in embarrassment. But his silence only appeared to infuriate his wife further. Her tone became even more aggressive. ‘What is the matter with you? You know I am speaking the truth, right?’

‘Of course,’ simpered Akampana. ‘How could I think otherwise, dear wife?’

The woman shook her head, glared at Raavan and Mareech, then turned and stomped off.

Akampana watched the retreating back of his wife, an expression of intense loathing on his face. Then he checked himself, conscious of being in company. He cleared his throat and turned to Mareech, a weak smile on his face. It was Mareech’s turn to look away, embarrassed.

But Raavan didn’t seem affected at all. ‘Here’s what we’ll do,’ he said, as if they hadn’t been interrupted. ‘We’ll take the ship, repair it at our own cost, and start sailing it. You are welcome to join us if you wish. And the profits will be shared, ninety–ten.’

Akampana brightened. ‘Ninety seems fair.’

Raavan regarded Akampana with lazy nonchalance. ‘Ninety for me. Ten for you.’

‘What? But... but it’s my ship.’

Raavan got up. ‘And it can continue to rot here.’

‘Listen, I don’t—’

‘And I’ll also take care of your wife for you.’

Even Mareech, who had got used to his thirteen-year-old nephew’s ruthless ways over the last few years, looked at Raavan in shock.

Akampana glanced nervously in the direction his wife had gone, and then at Raavan. ‘What... what do you mean?’

‘I’ll do what you are too scared to even think about.’

Akampana swallowed visibly. But it was obvious from his expression that he was interested.

‘It’s a deal,’ said Raavan firmly.



## Chapter 6

In the two years since Raavan, now fifteen, had taken over Akampana's ship, he had already turned it into a hugely profitable enterprise. After repairing the ship, he had run many successful smuggling missions, supplying goods far and wide, and raking in revenues.

Since the north Indian ports were becoming more and more resistant to free and easy trade, Lanka had emerged as one of the most dynamic entrepôts in the Indian Ocean rim. Raavan had made frequent trips to the island in the past twelve months. On one of these, he had discovered that Kubaer, the trader-king of Lanka, was his guru-brother—a disciple of his father, Vishrava. But this was not something Raavan mentioned to anyone in Lanka. He didn't want any help from his father—not from the person, not even from the name.

As his business grew, Raavan decided to make the main port of Lanka, Gokarna—literally, the cow's ear—his base. The city was conveniently located in the north-east of the island. It had a natural harbour, with a deep bay and land jutting out on the seaward side, acting as natural breakwaters. It was in a position, therefore, to receive and safely anchor ships during any season in the year. A crucial advantage.

The *Mahaweli Ganga*, the longest river in Lanka, flowed into the Gokarna bay at its southern end. This was useful, for it offered a navigable channel for ships to sail deep into the heartland of the island. The river had been named many years ago by Guru Vishwamitra—the chief of the Malayaputra tribe, which had been left behind by the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram. Perhaps the venerable rishi wished to honour the river that flowed beside his own hometown, Kannauj, by naming this one the *Great Sandy Ganga*.

Guru Vishwamitra was held in high esteem in Lanka, not only because he was a great rishi, but also because he had helped settle the island and turn it from

a rural backwater into one of the powerhouses on the Indian Ocean trade routes. There was a time when Lanka was only known for being the surviving part of the great submerged land of Sangamtamil—one of the two antediluvian fatherlands of Vedic India. People used to travel from across the Indian subcontinent to pray at the ruins of the ancient temples built by their forefathers. But all that had changed. Now, they came here to grow rich. And most of those who had arrived recently were from Kalinga.

As things stood, most Lankans were happy with Kubaer's rule. And the trader-king and his people continued to accord the greatest respect to Vishwamitra. For it was he who had, more than a century ago, helped King Trishanku Kaashyap establish the great Lankan capital city of Sigiriya, and while very few mourned the deposition of the increasingly unpopular monarch some years later, Vishwamitra remained dear to them.

Raavan had never travelled inland to Sigiriya, which was a hundred kilometres south-west of Gokarna. He had, however, purchased a beautiful house in Gokarna, close to the great Koneshwaram temple, dedicated to Lord Rudra. It had been built in ancient times, on a promontory off the northern part of the bay that jutted out into the Indian Ocean. Kaikesi visited the temple every day, with the six-year-old Kumbhakarna in tow. Raavan's little brother was still too young to be sailing with him.

On that particular day, Kaikesi was visiting the Koneshwaram temple with a sense of purpose. She knew that Vishwamitra was in the city, en route to Sigiriya. Many years ago, she had met both Vishwamitra and his right-hand man Arishtanemi, at Vishrava's ashram. While the meeting with Vishwamitra had been all too brief, she had spent considerable time with Arishtanemi and had even started thinking of him as her brother. She had used her influence with him to wrangle a meeting with Vishwamitra. The fact that Kaikesi's own family, especially her grandfather, had once been a close friend of Vishwamitra's father, King Gaadhi, was not mentioned. With good reason.

'Please don't tell anyone that I used my husband's name to arrange this meeting,' Kaikesi pleaded with Arishtanemi, as she led Kumbhakarna by the hand.

Arishtanemi nodded. He knew of the strained relationship between Vishrava and his first wife's children. Especially now that Vishrava had married again, bringing home a foreigner from Knossos as his wife. 'Don't worry. I won't.'

Kaikesi smiled. 'Thank you, brother.'

Arishtanemi led them into the guesthouse attached to the Koneshwaram temple, where Vishwamitra was staying. 'Wait here for a minute.'

Kaikesi was confused. ‘But...’

‘Just do as I tell you,’ Arishtanemi said, before disappearing inside.

Standing outside the door, Kaikesi could hear snatches of the conversation.

‘I don’t have time to do all this, Arishtanemi. You should—’

Kaikesi walked in, pulling Kumbhakarna along.

A gigantic, barrel-chested man was sitting on the floor in the lotus position. Vishwamitra. He looked up as he heard Kaikesi walk in. He recognised her as Vishrava’s wife. And the granddaughter of his father’s closest advisor.

He made no attempt to hide his irritation. ‘Listen Kaikesi, your grandfather caused enough trouble after my father’s death and I am not—’

Vishwamitra stopped mid-sentence as he spotted the child standing next to Kaikesi, holding her hand. The six-year-old was big for his age and could easily pass off for a ten-year-old. He was also extraordinarily hairy. The rishi noticed the crude outgrowths from his shoulders and ears, which clearly established that he was a Naga. Only a doting mother would find a child as ugly as Kumbhakarna beautiful. But Vishwamitra had a big heart. Especially for those whom he perceived to be disadvantaged. His face creased in a smile. ‘What a lovely child.’

Kaikesi looked at Kumbhakarna with pride in her eyes. ‘He is.’

Vishwamitra beckoned to the boy. ‘Come here, child.’

Kumbhakarna nervously slid behind his mother, clutching the end of her angvastram.

‘His name is Kumbhakarna, noble Maharishi,’ said Kaikesi respectfully.

Vishwamitra bent sideways to catch the child’s eye. ‘Come here, Kumbhakarna.’

Kumbhakarna took a quick peek at the rishi. Then retreated behind his mother.

Vishwamitra laughed softly. He turned to Arishtanemi and pointed at a plate. His previous visitors had left some homemade sweets for him. Arishtanemi brought the plate to the maharishi.

‘I have some laddoos, Kumbhakarna,’ said Vishwamitra with a smile, as he chose one and held it out.

At the mention of his favourite sweet, Kumbhakarna stepped forward hesitantly. He looked up at his mother. She smiled and nodded. He ran to the maharishi and grabbed the laddoo. Vishwamitra laughed and held Kumbhakarna affectionately, then made him sit by his side.

Kaikesi, not nervous any longer, went down on her knees before the seated Vishwamitra.

‘Great Malayaputra,’ said Kaikesi, ‘I wanted to request... my son

Kumbhakarna... He is...'

'Yes, I know. Sometimes the outgrowths bleed a lot. It's painful. And it can be fatal if not controlled,' Vishwamitra said, looking straight into Kaikesi's eyes. The great sages of yore had the power to read a person's thoughts merely by looking closely at their eyes. Vishwamitra, one of the greatest modern sages, also had this capability.

'You know everything, Guruji. Can you help him?'

'I can't cure it completely. That would be impossible. But I can reduce the bleeding. And I can certainly keep this adorable child alive.'

Tears of relief filled Kaikesi's eyes as she brought her head down to rest on Vishwamitra's feet. 'Thank you, thank you.'

Vishwamitra touched Kaikesi on the shoulder and bade her rise. 'But he has to take my medicines every day. He can never stop. Never. Or death will start closing in.'

'Yes, Guruji. I will never—'

'They are rare medicines. And difficult to obtain. Arishtanemi here will ensure that you get them regularly. Make sure you keep the medicines away from bright light and heat. And use them exactly as Arishtanemi tells you to.'

'Thank you. Thank you, Guruji. How can I ever repay you?'

'You can tell your grandfather to apologise to me for what he did all those years ago.'

Kaikesi didn't know what to say. Her grandfather was no more. She said nervously, 'Guruji, my grandfather... he...'

'He's dead?' asked Vishwamitra, surprised. 'Oh!'

'Guruji,' said Kaikesi, the tears flowing freely again.

'In the name of Lord Parshu Ram, stop crying and speak.'

'Noble Maharishiji ...'

Vishwamitra looked into Kaikesi's eyes. 'Someone else has the same condition?'

Kaikesi wiped her tears and said, 'Nothing can be hidden from you, Guruji. My other son, Raavan... He is also a Naga.'

Vishwamitra exhaled softly. He smelt an opportunity here. *Raavan was a Naga too?*

'He's a... he's a...'

Vishwamitra cut in. 'I know he is a smuggler.'

Kaikesi looked at Arishtanemi anxiously and then back at Vishwamitra. Tears poured down her cheeks. 'We went through some very difficult times, Guruji. He... he did what he had to. He's my son, Guruji... I can ask him to stop the...'

Vishwamitra sat quietly, his mind racing.

*From what I've heard, Raavan is already gaining a reputation. He is young, but able to acquire and inspire followers. Efficient. Intelligent. Cruel, too. A potential warrior. He could serve my purpose. He could serve the purpose of Mother India.*

Kaikesi was still crying. ‘The growth on his navel has started bleeding, great Malayaputra. He will die like this. Please help him. He is not a bad person. Circumstances have forced him to become what he is.’

*If his outgrowths bleed, he will always need my medicines to stay alive. He will be under my control. Always.*

‘Please, Guruji.’ Kaikesi prostrated herself at Vishwamitra’s feet again. ‘Please help us. We are both from Kannauj, you and I. Please. Help me. Help my son.’

Vishwamitra smiled. ‘It has been difficult. I know.’

Kaikesi sobbed silently, still crouched at the maharishi’s feet.

Vishwamitra placed a benevolent hand on her head. ‘I will have medicines sent every month for the both of them. I will keep them alive. As long as I can and must,’ he said.

—८१—

As soon as Kaikesi and Kumbhakarna left, Arishtanemi turned to Vishwamitra. He looked puzzled.

‘Guruji,’ he said carefully. ‘I don’t understand why you want to help Raavan. Kumbhakarna is a child. He needs your help. But Raavan? I have heard stories of his ruthlessness. His cruelty. And he is not even an adult yet. He will only get worse.’

Vishwamitra smiled. ‘Yes, he is cruel. And you are right, he will only get worse.’

Arishtanemi looked even more confused. ‘Then why do you want to help him, Guruji?’

‘Arishtanemi, the Vishnu will rise during my tenure as Chief of the Malayaputras.’

The Malayaputras, the tribe left behind by the previous Vishnu, Lord Parshu Ram, had two missions to fulfil. The first was to help the next Mahadev, the Destroyer of Evil, whenever he or she arose. And the second was to identify from their midst the next Vishnu, the Propagator of Good, when the time was right.

Arishtanemi looked shocked. ‘Guruji, umm... I don’t mean to question

your judgement, but I'm not sure Raavan... you know... the role of the Vishnu is very...'

'Are you crazy, Arishtanemi? Do you think I would ever consider Raavan for the role of Vishnu?'

Arishtanemi gave a short nervous laugh, clearly relieved. 'I knew it couldn't be that... I was just...'

'Listen to me carefully. If you take away all the traditions and the hoopla, then who, or what, is the Vishnu to an ordinary Indian?'

Arishtanemi remained silent. He had a feeling that whatever he said would be the wrong answer.

Vishwamitra explained, 'A Vishnu is basically a hero. A hero that others willingly follow. And they follow the Vishnu simply because they trust their hero.'

'But what does that have to do with Raavan, Guruji?'

'What does every hero need, Arishtanemi?'

'A mission?'

'Yes, that too. But besides a mission?'

Arishtanemi smiled, as he finally understood. 'A villain.'

'Exactly. We need the right villain to act as the foil for our hero. Only then will people see the hero as their saviour, as the Vishnu. And only then will they follow the Vishnu along the path that we have determined. A path that will revive the greatness of this land. That will allow it to take its rightful place once again in the world. That will remove poverty and hunger. End injustice. End the oppression of the lower castes, the poor and the disabled. That will make the present-day Indians worthy of their great ancestors.'

'I understand now, Guruji,' said Arishtanemi, bowing his head. 'If all I've heard of Raavan is correct, he has the potential to be a good villain.'

'A perfect villain. For not only will he be a believable villain, he will also always be under our control,' Vishwamitra said.

'Yes. Without our medicines from Agastyakootam, he will die.'

Agastyakootam was the secret capital of the Malayaputras, hidden deep in the hills, in the sacred land of Kerala.

Vishwamitra nodded, as if confirming the plans to himself. 'We will help Raavan rise. And when the time is right, we will destroy him. For the good of Mother India.'

'For the good of Mother India,' Arishtanemi echoed.

Vishwamitra's expression changed as his mind harked back to the past. When he spoke again, it was with barely suppressed rage. 'That... that man will not stop me from fulfilling my destiny.'

Arishtanemi knew who Vishwamitra was talking about: his childhood friend turned mortal enemy, Vashishtha. But he knew better than to respond. He stood quietly, waiting for the wave to pass.

—८१—

‘Dada!’ Kumbhakarna screamed excitedly, running down the stairs. His elder brother was walking into the house accompanied by Akampana and Mareech.

The massive profits Raavan had made over the last few years had turned the seventeen-year-old into one of the wealthiest traders in Lanka. But his success had only made him hungry for more. He spent most of his time out at sea, working hard. As a result, visits to his lavish new mansion, perched on one of the hills that surrounded Gokarna, were rare. And these rare visits were a source of delight for his eight-year-old brother, Kumbhakarna.

‘Dada!’ yelled Kumbhakarna again, rushing into the large courtyard that formed the centre of the mansion, straight towards Raavan. His belly jiggled as he sprinted.

Raavan dropped the gifts he was carrying and spread his arms, laughing, ‘Slow down, Kumbha! You are too big for these games now!’

But Kumbhakarna was too excited to listen. He may have been only eight but he was already as big as a fifteen-year-old. The two extra arms on top of his shoulders shook wildly, as they always did when he was excited. With his unusually hirsute body, he resembled a small bear.

As Kumbhakarna jumped into his brother’s arms, the impact caused Raavan to stagger. Kumbhakarna giggled happily.

Raavan swung his brother around, laughing. For a few moments, the ever-present pain in his navel was gone.

Kaikesi emerged from the kitchen in the far corner of the ground floor. From her bloodshot eyes, it was clear that she had been crying. ‘Raavan.’

Raavan set Kumbhakarna down and looked at her, his expression changing to one of resignation. The pain in his navel was back. ‘What is it, Maa?’

‘Nothing.’

Raavan rolled his eyes. ‘Maa, what is it?’

‘If you need to ask, then you are not a good son.’

‘Well, then, I am not a good son,’ said Raavan, always on edge with his compulsively gloomy mother. ‘I’m only going to ask you one more time. What is the problem?’

‘You have come home after four months, Raavan. Don’t you want to spend time with your family? Why do I have to keep demanding this? Is money all that

matters to you?’

‘I can spend all my time with you and we can live in a hovel, dying of hunger. Or I can work and keep all of you in comfort. I have made my choice.’

Mareech and Akampana shuffled their feet uncomfortably. These testy exchanges between Kaikesi and Raavan were becoming more frequent.

Kaikesi was on the verge of reminding her ungrateful son that it was because of her, and the medicines she had obtained by pleading with Vishwamitra, that he was still alive. But she thought better of it. Raavan now had an independent relationship with Vishwamitra. He didn’t really need her.

Despite his young age, Kumbhakarna had already begun to assume the role of peacemaker between his beloved mother and brother. Now, gauging the tension in the air, he spoke up. ‘Dada, you promised to show me your secret chamber!’

Raavan looked at his younger brother with a smile. ‘But what about your gifts?’

‘I am not interested in the gifts!’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘I want to see your chamber. You promised!’

The room that Kumbhakarna was so eager to see was on the topmost floor of Raavan’s mansion. Off limits to everyone else, the room remained perpetually locked, with Raavan possessing the only set of keys. Even the windows were barricaded. During his short trips to Gokarna, Raavan spent hours by himself in the secret chamber. Nobody else was allowed in. Nobody.

But the last time he had come home, Kumbhakarna had managed to exact a promise from Raavan that he would be allowed into the chamber. There was almost nothing Raavan could refuse his not-so-little brother.

Raavan smiled broadly as he took Kumbhakarna’s hand in his own. ‘Come, Kumbha. Let’s go.’ As he was walking away, he pointed to where he had dropped the packages. ‘Maa, your gift is somewhere in there. Take it.’

—८८—

Raavan’s secret chamber was much larger than Kumbhakarna had imagined. And darker. He coughed softly as the dust that had settled over the room in the past few months flew around, assaulting his nostrils.

‘Wait here, Kumbha,’ said Raavan, as he dropped the keys in a bowl placed on a side table. Torch in hand, he walked around, lighting all the other torches placed in the room. Large polished copper plates ran the length of the walls. They reflected the light of the torches, illuminating every corner of the room.

‘Wow...’ whispered Kumbhakarna, delighted that he was now privy to a

part of his brother's life that nobody else was, not even their mother. He turned around and closed the door, pushing the latch in.

'Do you like it?' asked Raavan.

Kumbhakarna nodded, walking around in amazement, trying to soak it all in.

A majestic Rudra Veena was propped up against a wall. Kumbhakarna had heard the celestial sound of the instrument through closed doors, each time Raavan visited. Arranged in a row along the wall were other instruments—a tabla, dhol, damru, thavil, sitar, chikara, shehnai, flute, chenda and many others. Kumbhakarna had heard his brother play all of them.

'What's that, Dada?' asked Kumbhakarna, pointing at an instrument he had never seen before, or even read about.

The double-stringed musical instrument was kept on a gold-plated stand. Its bow was attached to a clip on the side.

'That is something I invented. I call it the Hatha.'

'Hatha?' asked Kumbhakarna. 'What does that mean?'

Raavan ruffled Kumbhakarna's hair and smiled before looking away. 'Hatha', in old Sanskrit, meant a man stricken with despair.

'I'll tell you some other time,' Raavan said, as the dull pain in his navel surged again.

'But if you have invented it, it should be named after you, Dada!' said Kumbhakarna.

Raavan looked thoughtful for a moment. His brother's suggestion was appropriate in more ways than one, considering the instrument's plaintive sound often reminded him of his own despair. 'Yes. You are right. I'll call it the Raavanhatha from now on.'

'Will you play it for me, Dada?'

'Some other time, Kumbha. I promise.'

Raavan had created the instrument in memory of the Kanyakumari. Playing it would only remind him of her.

Kumbhakarna squinted at the far wall. 'Are those paintings?'

Raavan reached for Kumbhakarna's hand. He wanted to lead him out of the chamber. He wasn't ready for this. Not yet. But then, for some reason he couldn't understand, he restrained himself. He had held on to his pain for too long, all alone. He realised that, deep in his heart, he wanted Kumbhakarna to know. He wanted to share his pain with his brother. He wanted to share his hopes.

Tears welled up unbidden in Raavan's eyes.

Kumbhakarna ran towards the paintings.

Raavan walked slowly behind him, taking the opportunity to wipe his eyes. And take a deep breath. That always helped.

Kumbhakarna stared at the painting on the far left.

It was that of a girl. A girl no older than eleven or twelve. A round face. Fair-skinned. High cheekbones and a sharp, small nose. Long black hair, tied in a braid. Dark, piercing, wide-set eyes and almost ceaseless eyelids. Her body was clad demurely in a long red dhoti, blouse and angvastram.

Divine. Distant. Awe-inspiring.

To Kumbhakarna, she looked like the Mother Goddess.

Kumbhakarna looked at his brother. ‘Did you paint this, Dada?’

Raavan was too choked up to speak. He nodded.

‘Who is she?’

Raavan took a deep breath. ‘She is the Kan... Kan... Kanyakumari.’

Kumbhakarna observed the painting closely. Even to his young eyes, the display of devotion, of worship and love, was obvious in every brushstroke.

He glanced again at his brother’s sad face, then turned back to the painting. That was when he noticed the other painting, to the right of the one he had been studying.

It was the same girl. Everything appeared to be the same. Except for the colour of her clothes. They were white.

He turned back to his brother. ‘She looks older here.’

Raavan nodded. ‘Yes. Exactly one year older.’

Slowly, Kumbhakarna walked along the wall, looking at the paintings. Each subsequent one depicted the same girl, only slightly older. Her breasts filled out. Her hips got curvier. She seemed to grow a little taller.

When he reached the tenth painting, Kumbhakarna stopped and stood quietly for a long time. It was the last in the series. The girl was now a woman. Perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two years old. Her clothes were a soft violet: the most expensive dye in the world and the colour favoured by royalty. She was tall. Striking. Long hair. Full, feminine body. Uncommonly attractive.

There was something otherworldly about her beauty. Her face. Her eyes. Her expression. She looked like a Goddess. The Mother Goddess.

‘Does she pose for you every year?’ asked Kumbhakarna, confused.

Raavan pointed to the first painting, of the adolescent girl. ‘That was the last time I saw her.’

‘So how did you paint these?’

‘I see her growing older in my mind.’

‘Why do you paint her, Dada?’

‘Looking at her makes the pain go away, Kumbha...’

‘What’s her name?’

‘I told you.’ Raavan closed his eyes and took a deep breath to steady himself. ‘Ka... Kanyakumari.’

‘That’s just a title, Dada. Even I know that. There are many Kanyakumaris. And she is probably not a Kanyakumari anymore if she is a grown woman. What’s her real name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Which tribe is she from?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘I don’t know.’

Kumbhakarna’s heart grew heavy. Tears welled up in his eyes. He walked up to Raavan and embraced him. ‘We will find her, Dada.’

The tears were flowing down Raavan’s cheeks now. There was no stopping them. He held his brother tight. The pain in his navel was excruciating.

‘We will find her, Dada, we will! I promise.’



## Chapter 7

‘It’s good to be home!’ said Kumbhakarna, his extra arms shaking slightly, as they always did when he was excited. Though he was only ten, his voice had already begun to change.

Two years had passed since Raavan had allowed his younger brother into his secret chamber. They were now on their way back from a short trip to the Nicobar Islands, an important port en route to South-east Asia. It was Kumbhakarna’s first trade voyage ever, and Raavan had wanted to ensure that it wasn’t too long and uncomfortable.

Raavan sighed. ‘I don’t like coming home. I prefer the sea.’

‘But home is home, Dada.’

‘And maa is maa... I can’t handle her constant crying. It’s like she produces tears at will, just to irritate me. One of these days, I’ll...’

Raavan stopped speaking as he saw Kumbhakarna’s expression change. He knew that as much as his younger brother loved him, he did not appreciate these rants against their mother.

‘All right, all right,’ he said, patting Kumbhakarna’s shoulder. ‘You know I won’t do anything drastic. But you handle her tears this time.’

The ship was slowing down gradually as it reached the mouth of the harbour. The brothers watched while the helmsman steered towards their allocated berth. As they passed other ships on their way in, heads turned to stare at the by now legendary ship as it prepared to dock. Its blinding speed on the high seas had given Raavan a huge competitive advantage in the cutthroat world of smuggling. With his fast growing profits, he had already built a fleet of five ships.

Raavan was conscious of being watched. He rather enjoyed the attention. But he continued to look straight ahead, pretending not to notice the admiring,

and jealous, eyes gawking at him. He would not preen in front of others. That would be a sign of weakness. And nineteen-year-old Raavan did not believe in letting his weaknesses show.

The trader-prince, they called him. He liked that.

‘Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna, nudging Raavan to draw his attention.

Raavan turned. Akampana was standing at the port, waiting for them, clearly excited about something.

‘Looks like the dandy has some news for us,’ Raavan said, preparing to disembark.

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‘Raavan, I’ve found the secret! I’ve found the...’

‘Quiet!’ Raavan said severely, tapping him on the head.

Akampana stopped speaking, looking suitably chastened.

They were still in the port area, surrounded by people. Raavan knew that the success of any trading operation depended on reliable information about the commodities and goods that various ships were carrying, and the destinations they were headed for. It was critical to hold on to one’s trade secrets.

He continued walking, as his bodyguards pushed people out of the way, clearing his path. Akampana fell into step behind him, smoothing his hair down. A few strands of hair had escaped their coiffure earlier, when Raavan had tapped him on the head. He turned to his assistant, who was walking alongside, for a towel. Some of the perfumed hair oil had come off on his hands.

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‘Now,’ said Raavan. ‘Start talking.’

They were in Raavan’s private chamber in his well-appointed mansion. Raavan was leafing through the many messages that had arrived for him while he was away. Mareech and Akampana sat across from him, on the other side of a large desk. Kumbhakarna was sitting by the window, drinking lemon juice.

‘I’m sorry, Raavan,’ said Akampana nervously. ‘I shouldn’t have spoken up at the port and it—’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Raavan interrupted, waving his hand dismissively without looking up. ‘Get to the point. I don’t have all day.’

Akampana leaned forward. The excitement in his voice was palpable. ‘I’ve found it. I know what the secret is.’

Raavan put the papyrus scroll down and picked up a quill. He dipped it in

the inkpot and started writing a note on the side of the message he was reading. ‘You know I don’t like riddles. Speak plainly. What have you found?’

‘I’ve got the information we were looking for. From one of the descendants of King Trishanku Kaashyap.’

Raavan stopped writing. He replaced the quill in its hold, leaned back in his chair and said, ‘Continue.’

‘You do know that Trishanku Kaashyap’s body was never found after—’

‘I know Trishanku’s entire story. Don’t give me a history lesson. Get to the point,’ Raavan snapped.

Trishanku Kaashyap was the first king of Lanka in the modern age. His kingdom had been established with the help of Vishwamitra. But over time, his subjects had wearied of Trishanku’s violent and selfish ways, and he had been deposed. Even Vishwamitra, realising his mistake in supporting Trishanku, had helped the people’s rebellion.

Mareech asked the question that was on everyone’s mind. ‘Have you found the secret?’

‘Yes!’ said Akampana triumphantly.

The secret in question related to Raavan’s main ship, once owned by Akampana. Despite the remarkably inept way in which Akampana had handled it, the ship had never suffered any biofouling and had continued to travel at twice the speed of other ships. Akampana himself did not know what made his ship special. All he knew was that it had once belonged to a descendant of Trishanku Kaashyap.

‘There is a special material that has to be ground and mixed with oil—an oil from Mesopotamia—and rubbed on the hull once every twenty years,’ said Akampana. ‘It keeps barnacles and other sea creatures away. It’s as simple as that.’

Raavan leaned forward. ‘And where does one find this special material, Akampana?’

‘It’s with your friends. The Malayaputras. They call it the cave material for some reason.’

‘I guess that’s because they found it in a cave,’ said Raavan sarcastically.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ said Akampana, oblivious as usual.

Raavan rolled his eyes and turned to Mareech. ‘Fix a meeting with them. Quickly.’

By a strange coincidence, Vishwamitra and Arishtanemi had arrived in Gokarna that very week, en route to Sigiriya. Raavan had lost no time in going to meet them. But he had insisted on going alone. Without Akampana, or even Mareech.

‘I have some plans for trading with it, Guruji,’ answered Raavan, his head bowed. He was always polite and deferential with Vishwamitra.

‘Are you planning to cut us out and sell directly to Kubaer? Are you planning to reduce our profits?’

Raavan knew that the Malayaputras sold the cave material directly to Kubaer. He had been told by Akampana that the material, whatever it was, was poisonous for humans. And that it was refined and used as a mixture in the fuel for the Pushpak Vimaan, the legendary flying vehicle owned by Kubaer. The other ingredients used for the fuel mixture were almost as costly. Which was one of the reasons the Pushpak Vimaan was used so rarely, and why similar vimaans had not been built. They were simply too expensive to run.

Raavan was prepared for the question. He looked up and folded his hands together in a namaste. ‘No, Guruji. Would I ever do that to the mighty Malayaputras? But having said that, Chief-Trader Kubaer isn’t buying the material from you anymore because it’s too expensive. As you know, he has even stopped using the Pushpak Vimaan.’

‘So are you planning to buy the Pushpak Vimaan and use it yourself?’

Raavan had guessed that the Malayaputras were not aware that the cave material helped prevent biofouling on ships or they would have been using it on their own vessels. Listening to Vishwamitra now, he became certain of this. If all went well, he would be the only one with the competitive advantage of superfast ships.

‘Leasing the Pushpak Vimaan is an option as well, Guruji. Chief-trader Kubaer never says no to an opportunity for making profits, does he?’

‘And what are you going to do with the Pushpak Vimaan?’

‘Oh, a little bit of this and a little bit of that.’

Although using the vimaan for trade would be a losing proposition because of the exorbitant running cost, Raavan did actually plan to use it. After all, he had to convince the ever-vigilant Malayaputras that he was buying the cave material only for the purpose of flying the vimaan. On prospecting trips maybe. Or even holidays!

Vishwamitra looked intently at Raavan, trying to read his mind. But he hit a blank wall. Raavan had by now learnt the technique of blocking even the most powerful rishi from reading his mind.

‘All right,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘You will have to pay five hundred thousand

gold coins per consignment. And you will have to take at least three consignments a year.'

It was a ridiculous price. Way beyond what Kubaer paid. And the insistence on a minimum purchase was unheard of.

But Raavan didn't flinch. He had done his calculations already. 'I agree to the price, Guruji. But I cannot agree to the minimum number of consignments. I don't know how often I will use the vimaan. I will try my best to buy three consignments every year. But there may be some years when I am unable to do so. I should not be penalised for that.'

Vishwamitra nodded. 'All right.'

Standing beside them, Arishtanemi could not believe his ears. Five hundred thousand gold coins per consignment! With that much money, the Malayaputras could begin the search for daivi astra material in earnest. The daivi astras were weapons of mass destruction, whose use had been severely restricted by the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra. He had decreed that they could not be deployed without the permission of the Vayuputras, the tribe left behind by Lord Rudra. But Vishwamitra had plans of his own. He wanted the Vishnu to rise in his time. For that to happen, and to manage the course of events, he had to have independent control of the daivi astras. This deal with Raavan would give him the funds to seek out and quarry the material required for the manufacture of the divine weapons. Arishtanemi could not help but smile at the irony: it was the pirate Raavan who would free them from their dependency on the Vayuputras.

'Thank you so much, Guruji,' said Raavan, bending to touch the maharishi's feet.

'Ayushman Bhava,' said Vishwamitra, blessing Raavan with *a long life*.

—८४—

'I wonder what he is planning to do, Guruji,' said Arishtanemi.

'I'm confused too,' said Vishwamitra. 'The only use for the cave material, other than as fuel for the Pushpak Vimaan, is as a poison.'

'Yes. But for all practical purposes, it's a pretty useless poison.'

Arishtanemi was right. The cave material was a very slow-acting poison. One would have to administer it regularly to the victim, for many weeks, for it to have any effect. And when it was refined into a potent poison, it emanated a distinctively foul smell, which rather defeated the purpose. The intended victim would smell it from miles away!

'Maybe he wants to be the only one in the world with a flying machine, even if it bankrupts him. I had thought Raavan would serve our purpose. That he

could grow into a worthy villain. But it looks like he's surrendered to mere vanity,' Vishwamitra said, looking disappointed.

'He can still serve our purpose, Guruji. With that much gold at our disposal, we can begin our search for the daivi astra materials in earnest.'

'True. But getting the cave material is difficult.'

'Please don't worry about that, Guruji,' said Arishtanemi. 'I'll ensure that we get all the material we need.'

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'Raavan, have you gone mad?' Mareech blurted. A steely look from his nephew forced him to control himself and check his tone. 'Listen to me, Raavan, we have worked hard... *you* have worked hard to build up all we have now. Five hundred thousand gold coins per consignment is too much. We can never—'

'My numbers are never wrong. I calculate that if we can build a fleet of two hundred ships as soon as possible, and run them continuously on the main trade routes—spice, cotton, ivory, metal and diamond—we will recover our investment in three years. After that, it's pure profit.'

'Two hundred ships? Raavan, I like your confidence, and I've always had faith in your vision. But this kind of scale is unimaginable. And unmanageable. The risks are too high.'

'On the contrary, scaling it up will reduce our risk.'

'But Raavan, no trader has ever owned a fleet of two hundred ships. It's unheard of!'

'That's because there has never been a trader called Raavan before this.'

Akampana tried to butt in. 'Are you sure we cannot negotiate further with the Malayaputras? Guru Vishwamitra and his followers live very frugal lives. I don't see what they need so much money for. Maybe there is still some room for negotiation...'

'I am not going back on a deal that I've signed already,' said Raavan firmly.

'Perhaps we can expand slowly, then? Start with say, twenty ships. One consignment of cave material is enough for that. We can see how it works and—'

Raavan cut in. 'No. We will begin with two hundred.'

'But, Raavan,' said Akampana, nervously fiddling with his many finger rings. 'Building two hundred ships means we will need ten consignments. That means we will need to pay five million gold coins.'

'That is correct.'

‘Raavan, listen to me,’ said Mareech. ‘Five million gold coins is more than the annual revenue of most kingdoms in the Sapt Sindhu. We will have to mortgage everything we have to raise that kind of money.’

‘Then we should do that.’

‘Dada,’ interrupted Kumbhakarna.

Raavan turned to his younger brother. ‘Yes?’

‘I have an idea.’

‘What?’

‘People talk freely in front of me because they think I am only a child and \_\_\_\_\_,

‘Please get to the point quickly, Kumbhakarna. You know Raavan does not like long-winded answers,’ Akampana interjected. He looked at Raavan for confirmation, but withered on receiving an angry glare. Raavan had all the time in the world for Kumbhakarna.

‘We may not need to borrow the money,’ continued Kumbhakarna calmly. ‘We can just steal it.’

Raavan shook his head. ‘Not a good idea. We’ll have to hit too many targets to raise five million. And each time we hit a place, the risk will increase.’

‘Not really, Dada. All we need to do is hit one big target.’

‘We can’t target royal treasuries, Kumbha. The security is too tight.’

‘I wasn’t talking about a royal treasury.’

‘There is someone in India, other than a king, who has five million gold coins?’ Raavan raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

‘Krakachabahu, the governor of Chilika.’

Mareech nearly choked on the cardamom-flavoured milk he was drinking. ‘Krakachabahu? How can we steal from him? The entire Kalinga fleet will be after us. We will not have a safe harbour anywhere in the Indian Ocean.’

‘But Uncle,’ said Kumbhakarna politely, ‘this is money that Krakachabahu has stolen from the king of Kalinga. He has been taking a cut from the Customs revenue for years. He keeps the money hidden in an underground vault in his palace. He will never be able to admit that he had it in the first place. That’s the beauty of stealing from a thief; he cannot complain.’

‘Hmm...’ Raavan’s eyes sparkled.

‘I’ve also heard that a lot of his wealth is conveniently in the form of precious stones. Small, lightweight, and easy to steal. And they can be converted to gold at any port in the Indian Ocean.’

Raavan turned to Mareech and Akampana, a proud smile on his face. ‘My brother!’

‘But Raavan,’ said Akampana, ‘we can’t just walk into Krakachabahu’s

palace. It's one of the best-guarded residences in India. And most of the guards are from his native land, Nahar.'

Mareech, who had begun to warm to the idea, countered Akampana. 'Yes, but the chief of the palace guards is Prahast.'

Raavan smiled as soon as he heard the name. 'He owes me one.'

'Exactly,' said Mareech. 'You saved his life once. And he has always wanted to work with you. The fact that he is greedy and ruthless makes him perfect for the job.'

'Let's start the preparations. We sail to Chilika in a month.'



## Chapter 8

‘The plan looks good, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna.

Two weeks had passed since Kumbhakarna had suggested looting Krakachabahu’s treasure. The brothers were reviewing their strategy, late in the evening, in Raavan’s wood-lined personal library, with its collection of thousands of manuscripts.

Knowledge was highly prized in India. Small manuscript collections were not uncommon in homes, though only universities and temples had large, well-stocked libraries. It was said, with reasonable confidence, that no individual had more manuscripts in his private collection than Raavan. What is more, he had actually read most of them.

‘I came up with it,’ said Raavan. ‘Of course it’s good!'

‘Maybe, but I came up with our target!’

‘Okay, okay,’ Raavan said, laughing. ‘You are the king of everything, Kumbha.’

Kumbhakarna bowed theatrically and laughed along. ‘I want to read something interesting, Dada. Anything you’d recommend?’

Raavan looked around his huge library. He was extremely possessive about his manuscripts. He didn’t allow anyone to borrow them. Except Kumbhakarna. There were very few things that he refused Kumbhakarna. ‘How about I read you a poem instead?’

‘A poem?’

‘Yes.’

‘Composed by whom?’

Raavan remained silent. He looked almost embarrassed.

Kumbhakarna raised his eyebrows. ‘By you, Dada?’

‘Yes.’

‘By the great Goddess Saraswati, how did this miracle happen? I had no idea you composed poetry!’

‘Will you keep quiet and listen?’

‘Of course!’

Raavan picked up a scroll, looking nervous and excited at the same time. He cleared his throat, then said, ‘It’s called “The Ballad of the Sun and the Earth”.’

‘How eloquent! I like it already.’

‘Shut up and listen, Kumbha.’

‘Sorry, I’ll try to be serious. Poetry is no joking matter after all.’ Kumbhakarna smiled impishly.

‘Well, it’s a story as much as it’s a poem. Now, listen:

‘The Ballad of the Sun and the Earth

The Clouds rush to the Mountain...’

Kumbhakarna interrupted. ‘What are the clouds and the mountain doing there? I thought this was about the sun and the earth.’

Raavan glared at Kumbhakarna, who immediately put his hands together contritely.

‘No interruptions, I am warning you,’ Raavan said. He took a deep breath and started again.

### *The Ballad of the Sun and the Earth*

The Clouds rush to the Mountain,  
they caress him gently,  
they fight for his attention,  
they rise to kiss his lips.

The Clouds believe the Mountain is smitten,  
that he stands so high to not let them pass,  
that he stands uncomfortably still, with rishi-like repose,  
because he waits for their return every year.

There’s no doubt in their mind:  
The Mountain loves them.

It’s sad that they’ll never know  
that the Mountain doesn’t care for them,  
he only wants the nourishing rain they carry,  
he doesn’t nudge them up to kiss them,

he does it to break them and get what he wants,  
and by the time they understand,  
it's too late.

It's sad that no Cloud survives to warn the others.

The River rushes to the Sea,  
her instincts tell her this is her destiny.  
She's grown up on stories of love,  
on tales of blind and illogical passion,  
and she's in too much of a hurry to meet  
her lover, to feel rather than think.  
But when she sees the Sea,  
his immensity, depth, power,  
she hesitates and meanders.  
But her innate romanticism wins,  
And she flows happily into his arms.

It's sad that she'll never know  
that the Sea doesn't love her,  
that the Sea is too lost in his own grandiosity  
to even notice the River.  
That her loving embrace doesn't change the Sea,  
that the water she received as a gift from the Sea  
was actually given to her by a philanthropic Sun.

It's sad that by the time the River realises the truth,  
She's already lost her identity.

And then there's the Earth.  
Unlike the others, she thinks more than feels,  
Her mind is more powerful than her heart,  
She sees the Sun,  
Luminous and spirited, alone and magnificent,  
Has so much and is so wasteful with it.  
The Earth, being smart,  
Uses the Sun's wasted energy,  
Nourishes herself and grows,

in character, in mind, body and spirit.  
She marvels at her own brilliance  
and what she's done with her life.  
She fears the Sun and his immense power,  
and detests the way he lavishes his God-given gifts.

It's sad that she'll never know that the Sun could have left,  
Yet he stands there all alone, so that he can give to the Earth.  
He burns himself, so she may benefit from it,  
He wants to come closer, but he knows he can't,  
He knows his passion is so strong that he'll hurt her,  
So he stands apart and admires his Lady.

It's sad that no one's around to tell the Earth  
Tell her just how much the Sun loves her.

Raavan put the scroll away and waited for his brother's response.  
Kumbhakarna looked contemplative.  
'Dada, that was powerful,' he said after a moment.  
Raavan smiled. 'Do you really like it?'  
'I love it! Trust me, Dada, there will come a time when even the Mahadevs  
and the Vishnus will quote this poem!'  
Raavan laughed. 'You really do love me a lot, kid brother...'  
'That I do! But seriously, Dada, you can play music, you sing, you write  
poetry, you are a warrior, you are wealthy, you are well-read, you are super-  
intelligent. There's no one like you in the whole wide world!'  
Raavan puffed out his chest exaggeratedly. 'Quite right. There is nobody  
like me!'  
They burst out laughing.

—78I—

A month had passed since the decision to rob Krakachabahu had been made. Raavan and his crew were to sail out of the Gokarna port the following day. Considering the speed at which the ship could sail, they expected to be in Chilika within a few days. Akampana, Mareech and a hundred soldiers would accompany him. Kumbhakarna had insisted on tagging along too, and after a few unconvincing attempts at dissuading him, Raavan had relented.

Mareech and Akampana had already struck a deal with Prahast. He would

first help Raavan steal Krakachabahu's treasure, and then leave Chilika with them. Most opportunely, Krakachabahu had recently sailed out to his homeland Nahar, situated in between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Half a world away from Chilika.

The night before the proposed heist, Raavan decided to visit his favourite courtesan, Dadimikali, the most expensive courtesan in the most elite pleasure house in Gokarna. Only the best would do for him!

He lay on the bed now, a sheet pulled up to his waist. Dadimikali was lying on her stomach, her head resting on Raavan's thighs. Nude as the day she was born. She was lithe of body and slim, with curves in all the right places.

'I don't think I'll be able to walk properly tomorrow,' she giggled. She turned towards Raavan and felt her way up. 'But it looks like you are ready for more.'

Raavan stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles. 'I don't think you can take it.'

Dadimikali gazed at his face lovingly. 'You know I can take anything from you.'

Raavan looked away. Bored. Dadimikali's affection was becoming increasingly cloying. His mind wandered to the dog he had killed a few months back. The one that had kept following him around.

*Mangy, pathetic-looking creature. Disgusting. It needed to be put out of its misery.*

'Raavan?'

Raavan didn't answer. He focused on his breathing. A long-dormant animal was slowly beginning to stir inside him.

'Raavan,' whispered Dadimikali. 'I think I love you.'

Raavan could feel the animal inside him awaken.

Dadimikali edged up and pressed her naked breasts against him. Love poured out of her eyes. 'You don't have to tell me you love me. I understand. I just want you to know that I love you.'

'What are you staring at?' growled Raavan.

He knew his swarthy skin was attractive to most women. But the pockmarks on his face always made him feel self-conscious. He was growing a beard and a moustache to hide as many of the marks as he could.

Dadimikali kept gazing at him. 'I'm looking at your beautiful face...'

She moved closer, pouting her lips in readiness for a kiss. Raavan grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head back.

'Which part of my face are you staring at?' he demanded.

Dadimikali knew that Raavan sometimes liked things rough. She lay back

on the bed with her hands clasped behind her head. Surrendering completely. ‘I am your slave. Do what you want with me.’

Raavan was gripped by desire. The desire to know what it would feel like to peel the beautiful skin off Dadimikali’s face and see the pink flesh underneath. To slice through it. Hacking at the tissue and arteries. Reaching the bone. Sawing through the bone. He felt his breath quicken with excitement. The animal inside him was roaring now.

Oblivious to the reason for Raavan’s excitement, Dadimikali edged closer once again. She kissed Raavan gently. Offering herself to him. Submissively.

He bit down on her lips. Hard. Drawing blood. She didn’t cry out. She remained still. Waiting for Raavan to do more.

Raavan’s breath quickened. His body urged him to finish what he had started. He felt intoxicated. Then, from the deep recesses of his mind, he heard a soft voice.

*Dada...*

Kumbhakarna’s voice. Filled with innocence. And fear.

*No. Not her. I can’t keep it quiet here. Kumbhakarna will find out...*

But the animal inside growled louder.

*I have the money to keep it quiet.*

He looked into Dadimikali’s trusting eyes. Her puckered lips. Her heaving chest.

*She wants it. She’s asking for it. She’s pathetic. Disgusting. She needs to be put out of her misery.*

He wrapped his arms tightly around her. Crushing her. She whimpered slightly. But did not complain.

‘I am yours. Do what you will with me...’

Suddenly, Raavan heard the familiar, calm voice in his head.

*You can be better than this.*

The voice of the Kanyakumari. The voice of a living Goddess.

His navel throbbed, the pain intensifying.

Raavan pushed Dadimikali away and leapt off the bed. She reached for him, trying to stop him from leaving. ‘What happened? What did I say?’

‘Get away from me!’ he hissed.

Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘Don’t leave me... please...’

Raavan turned and slapped her across the face. Savagely. As she fell back on the bed, he picked up his clothes and stormed out of the room.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna stood on the upper deck of the ship, admiring the view. They had just sailed into Chilika lake. Mareech and Akampana were on the lower deck, supervising the progress of the vessel towards the small island of Nalaban, in the centre of the lake.

The entire island had been reserved for Krakachabahu's use. His palace was on the top of a hill, right in the middle of the island. The hill was man-made, created from the earth that had been dredged up from Chilika lake to increase the depth of the water so large ships could enter. Much of the land around the house had been left undisturbed. Wild and lush. Nalaban was also a bio hotspot, welcoming large numbers of varied species of birds during their winter migration.

Krakachabahu was perceived to be a simple man, dedicated to his job. His apparent respect for Mother Nature and the simple gubernatorial palace helped him maintain appearances with the king of Kalinga, and hide his thieving. The truth was that he planned to take his illicit skimming of the Kalinga revenues and leave soon. He had stashed away enough money, and he intended to use it to raise an army to conquer Nahar. His long-term plan was to rule his home country.

But he didn't know that his plan was about to be upended by an upstart trader from Lanka.

'You remember my instructions, right?' Raavan asked his brother.

'I do, Dada, but can't I come with you?'

'No, you can't. We've discussed this already. Now repeat my instructions.'

'We'll sail to the secondary wharf on the island and present our manifest as a trading ship from Thailand. All of you will go in carrying empty chests, which you will fill with Krakachabahu's gold and precious stones. Then you will carry them back to the ship.'

Raavan laughed and ruffled Kumbhakarna's hair. 'Kumbha, that's what I need to do. Tell me what you are supposed to do.'

'Oh that, yeah... So, I'll be waiting at the wharf for you. In case I see any sign of trouble, I'll sound the ship's horn and sail out. I'll wait for you at the main wharf on the other side of the island. And you'll meet me there.'

The main wharf had been damaged a few months ago, when a craft lost control of its steering and rudder mechanism, and crashed into it. It was under repair now and all traffic had been directed to the secondary wharf.

'That's correct. Now, I am leaving some men here with you. But you will not attempt to be unnecessarily brave if there is trouble. You will sail out and meet me at the main wharf, the damaged one.'

'Yes, Dada.'

Raavan bent closer to Kumbhakarna. ‘Promise me that you will sail away and not do anything foolish.’

‘Have I ever disobeyed your instructions, Dada?’ asked Kumbhakarna, looking hurt.

‘Often,’ said Raavan sardonically. ‘Go on, promise me. Swear in the name of Lord Rudra.’

‘Dada! I can’t take Lord Rudra’s name so casually.’

‘Swear!’

‘Fine! I swear in the name of Lord Rudra. I’ll sail away at the first sign of trouble and meet you at the main wharf.’

‘Good.’

—८८—

‘By the great Lord Indra!’ exclaimed Raavan, turning the flawless pink diamond around in his hand. ‘It’s hard to believe this little rock is worth four hundred thousand gold coins.’

The colour of a diamond significantly determined its value. If a white diamond exhibited a yellow hue, its price went down. If it exhibited a pink hue, a much rarer phenomenon, its price shot up.

Mareech stepped closer to admire the precious stone. ‘It’s not little by any stretch of the imagination, Raavan. It’s the biggest diamond I have ever seen.’

Akampana stood to one side, looking around nervously.

‘Doesn’t it look like it’s bleeding from the inside?’ asked Raavan, enchanted. ‘I wonder how it got this pink hue.’

Nobody knew how or why a diamond acquired its colour. Some said it was because of the pressure exerted on the stone over many millennia. Others opined that the enormous forces unleashed by earthquakes caused a diamond’s colour to change. A few even considered a pink diamond to be unlucky. A carrier of bad karma.

‘Would you know?’ asked Raavan, showing the diamond to Akampana.

‘Raavan, it doesn’t matter how it became pink. As long as it is pink. Let’s leave. Please.’

Raavan laughed softly. ‘Always so nervous, Akampana.’

He stepped back from the tiny, secret chamber that had been artfully built into the thick wall. He looked at Prahast, standing at the far end of the room. Prahast’s loyal soldiers were positioned alongside him, their swords drawn. Dripping with blood. In front of them were three eunuchs on their knees. Part of Governor Krakachabahu’s Naharin security team. They bore the wounds of the

gruesome torture they had been subjected to, until they revealed the location of the secret chamber where the precious stones were kept.

Raavan nodded at Prahast. The men immediately swung their swords and decapitated the three eunuchs. Raavan's instructions had been clear. No eye-witnesses were to be left behind to identify the perpetrators of the robbery. Everyone in the palace—the security staff, the maids, the cooks, the helpers—had been killed. In cold blood.

Prahast had managed to corrupt half the security force, with loyalty earned over many years and large amounts of gold promised over the previous week. His men had launched a surprise attack on the other Naharins in the palace. Swift and clean.

Nobody outside had an inkling of the massacre that had taken place within the palace. In an attempt to mislead Krakachabahu, dead bodies had been brought into the palace earlier. Their faces had been smashed in to prevent identification. To convince the Naharin governor of Chilika that Prahast and the others in his security force had also been killed during the robbery.

It was a brutal plan. But also efficient and practical. Like Raavan himself.

On Prahast's advice, Raavan had decided against killing the workers whom they had seen repairing the damaged wharf, at some distance from the governor's residence. To kill them in the open was to risk exposure. In any case, the workers were never allowed near the palace or the secondary wharf. So the chances of them identifying Raavan and his gang were next to none.

Raavan's men had already carried the gold out of the palace in large chests. These were being loaded on the ship right now. He had stayed behind, with Mareech, Akampana and a few others to gather the precious stones. For just these stones were worth a little over two million gold coins.

Raavan stepped forward and stared at the decapitated bodies of the three Naharin eunuchs. As the blood continued to leak out of their gaping necks, he stood still, almost hypnotised. Drawn to the bloody spectacle before him.

He bent forward. Trying to distinguish the different arteries through which the thick red fluid was gushing out. The bodies were lifeless. But their hearts didn't seem to know that yet. They were still pumping. Weakly. But still despatching blood to heads that weren't there anymore.

Akampana touched Raavan's arm. 'Raavan...'

Raavan snapped out of his reverie and slipped the stone in his hand into the pouch tied to his cummerbund, where it clinked against the others. He took a deep breath and looked at the others. 'Let's go.'

Just then, the ship's horn sounded. Loud. Insistent.

'Run!' shouted Raavan.

Everyone reacted immediately. They knew what they had to do. The plan was clear. They had to rush to their horses and ride like the wind to the main wharf. Kumbhakarna would be waiting for them there, in Raavan's ship.

—८८—

'Hyaah!'

Raavan and his men rode their horses hard. Ten of them. Mareech in the lead. Raavan bringing up the rear-guard. They were riding downhill, fast and furious.

'To the right!' shouted Mareech, pointing.

A fork in the road was coming up. The road to the right led downhill to the damaged wharf. The other one went straight to the secondary wharf, which was visible in the far distance. Where Raavan's ship should have been. But it was missing. From high up on the hill, they could see another large ship moored there. It had just cruised in, for the sails were still up. So was the flag. It was Krakachabahu's vessel. He had returned early.

'Faster!' shouted Raavan.

He could see riders racing out of the secondary wharf. Riding up the main road. Up the hill. Towards them. Perhaps Krakachabahu had sensed something was wrong.

'To the other wharf!' screeched Akampana. He was riding in the middle of the group. Nervous as a cat on a hot metal roof.

The horses swerved onto the road to the right. It was about a five-minute ride downhill to the wharf. Raavan could see a forward scout rider galloping up the straight road, towards them. Krakachabahu's man.

Raavan pulled his knife out of its scabbard, took the reins of his horse in his mouth, and focused for a moment. Holding his breath, he flung the blade at the rider. It rammed into the man's throat. As he fell from his horse, Raavan swerved to the right, riding hard behind his men.

'Hyaah!'

As they thundered down the road towards the damaged wharf, through the dense forest vegetation, Raavan could see the road more clearly. It was now a straight ride to the wharf, which meant they would be easy targets for Krakachabahu's mounted archers. And he was right at the back of the line. The first target.

*Damn!*

Thinking quickly, he yanked the string that crisscrossed his shoulder and pulled the shield tied on his back upwards. He could survive an arrow in his

back. Not one that pierced his throat.

The wharf was just a little way ahead. The road was getting narrower. Much of it was taken up by the scaffolding built for port repairs. A few men were on the scaffolding, while others stood around on the road.

The horsemen thundered ahead.

‘Move!’ screamed Mareech, as he hurtled past.

The workers rushed to get out of the way, in a sudden state of panic. One of the more unfortunate ones came under Akampana’s horse. The riders didn’t slow down. The man was run over repeatedly by the many horses that followed Akampana’s. By the time Raavan passed, he had been pummelled to a pulp.

Since there were no posts to tie the ship to, Kumbhakarna had had the sailors drop anchor. Keeping the ship as close as he could to the edge of the wharf, with the help of grappling hooks. The strongest amongst the sailors hung close to the anchor line, a large axe in his hands, ready to strike and cut the thick rope as soon as Raavan and the others were on board.

There was a wide gap between the wharf’s edge and the ship. But the Lankan horses had been trained to jump high and far. Precisely for scenarios where a quick escape was necessary. Such as now.

Mareech did not slow down as he galloped through the damaged wharf.

‘Hyaah!’

He whipped his horse to a frenzy, causing it to gallop harder. Faster and faster. Right at the edge of the wharf, he screamed, ‘DASHA!’

Dasha was the old Sanskrit word for the number ten. Nobody knew why Raavan had insisted on this particular word when the horses were being trained, but his men had obeyed him unquestioningly, as usual.

Mareech’s horse knew the command well, and leapt forward. High and far. He landed neatly onto the ship’s deck. Mareech thundered on for a few feet more, clearing the way for the others behind him.

One after the other, the riders leapt onto the ship. One of Prahast’s Naharin soldiers timed his jump wrong. His horse fell short and dropped into the water. The man banged his head hard against the shipboards, breaking his neck. He died instantly. Nobody stopped to look at him. They had no time.

‘Come on!’ screamed Mareech. He was standing by the balustrade of the ship now, having dismounted from his horse. Prahast came speeding forward, timing his jump perfectly, and landed safely on the ship. Raavan was next. The last of them.

Krakachabahu and his men were closing in. Just two hundred metres away.

‘Come on, Dada!’ screamed Kumbhakarna.

One of Krakachabahu’s archers took his horse’s reins into his mouth,

positioned his riding bow in front of his chest, and released an arrow.

It was a lucky shot. At a fast-moving target.

The arrow slammed into the horse's digital flexor tendons on the lower part of his right hind leg. Severing it cleanly. It didn't seem like a big wound. There was hardly any blood. But it was debilitating for the galloping beast. The right leg, useless and incapable of bearing weight, collapsed. And the horse, because of the fearsome speed it was moving at, fell hard, its head hitting the ground, its neck twisting at an unnatural angle.

Raavan, alert as ever, had already untangled himself from the stirrups. Smoothly dismounting as the horse fell to the ground, he rolled away from it and was back on his feet almost instantly. He ran forward in the same smooth motion.

'Dada!' Kumbhakarna's voice was filled with anxiety and fear.

Everyone around him had the same thought.

*Raavan is not going to make it.*

Mareech looked at Kumbhakarna and then back at Raavan. 'Lord Rudra be merciful...'

There was no way a man could jump over the gap that most of the horses had strained to bridge.

But this was no ordinary man. This was Raavan.

He sprinted down the wharf. Dashing ahead, towards the edge. Towards the port crane meant for loading cargo on ships. It hadn't been used in months. It was about to be put to use in an unexpected way.

Krakachabahu's men were still raining arrows at him. Some flew past Raavan. Others missed him by a whisker. But none hit their target.

As he neared the edge of the wharf, Raavan leapt high and grabbed the hook block of the crane. One leg scissored out to kick the winch. His timing was perfect. The winch wound out quickly, allowing the hoist rope to spool out. Holding on to the hook, Raavan soared over the water, towards the ship, as arrows flew around him.

Kumbhakarna and the rest of the crew stood rooted to their spots. Transfixed by this adrenaline-charged display of athleticism.

As soon as he was at a suitable height, Raavan gathered momentum, swung his body forward, and let go of the hook. He soared high in the air, then dropped easily onto the ship's deck. He rolled smoothly to break his fall and was back on his feet immediately.

His men stood around him, awestruck. Silent.

'Let's go!' Raavan shouted.

Kumbhakarna turned to the man at the anchor rope. 'Cut it!'

The sailor swung the axe, and in one mighty blow, severed the thick rope. The grappling hooks were rapidly released.

‘Row now! Quickly!’ ordered Kumbhakarna.

On command, the pace setters in the galley deck below started beating their drums. The men began rowing in tandem. The ship lumbered ahead. Pulling out of the wharf.

Krakachabahu’s men continued to shoot arrows at them.

‘Get down!’ shouted Raavan.

The men went down on their knees, taking cover behind the balustrades.

‘Faster!’ ordered Kumbhakarna. The pace setters pounded up the beat and the rowers picked up their pace.

‘Unfurl sails!’

One of the sailors, who had been hiding behind the tabernacle, started turning the winch. This was an engineering innovation that Raavan had perfected. It allowed one of the sails to be unfurled rapidly, with the guidance of a winch rigged on the deck. The sail started spreading out quickly. It would catch the wind soon.

As the ship pulled away, Raavan could hear the angry shouts of Krakachabahu’s men in the distance. Safe behind the balustrade, he looked at Kumbhakarna and grinned.

Mareech clapped Raavan on the shoulder. ‘We’ve done it, Raavan! We’ve done it!’

Raavan smiled. He rose to his feet and made an obscene gesture at Krakachabahu’s men in the distance. One of the Naharins shot an arrow that whizzed past his face.

Mareech pulled his nephew down. ‘What are you doing? We are not out of danger yet. Stay down!’

Raavan’s face was pale, his body strangely still.

‘Dada?’ Kumbhakarna said worriedly, feeling Raavan’s body for any wounds.

Raavan pushed Kumbhakarna aside and rose to his feet. His gaze was directed at the workers who were cowering near the scaffolding. Another arrow whizzed by. But Raavan didn’t duck.

Mareech pulled him down again. ‘What is wrong with you? Stay down!’

Raavan fell back on the deck unsteadily. He looked like he had seen a ghost. His breathing was ragged. He pushed Mareech away and rose again.

This time an arrow hit him on the shoulder, slamming into him with brutal force. But Raavan didn’t flinch. His eyes were glued to the scaffolding.

‘Dada!’ Kumbhakarna screamed in panic, pulling him down again.

He noticed the sudden tears in his elder brother's eyes.

'Ka...' Raavan was crying. 'Kanya...'

This time, Kumbhakarna rose. He narrowed his eyes and looked towards the fast receding shore. At the scaffolding. At the workers there. At one person in particular, standing in the centre.

It was her.

He recognised her from the paintings.

While everyone else was cowering, she stood there unmoving. Upright. Like the living Goddess that she was. The signs of hard physical labour marked her and yet her face was luminous. She watched the ship go, her expression stately and calm. She radiated a quiet dignity. Almost like she was willing them to stop the violence. With her moral force.

There could be no doubt. It was her.

Mareech reached out and pulled Kumbhakarna down as another arrow whizzed by. He shouted angrily at his nephews, 'What has gotten into you both?'

Kumbhakarna looked at Raavan. He said what Raavan couldn't find the strength to say. 'The Kanyakumari...'

As if energised by the divine word, Raavan broke the shaft of the arrow buried in his shoulder. He stood up again and turned around. Ready to jump into the lake. Ready to swim to her.

'Raavan!' screamed Mareech, grabbing his nephew. 'Stop this madness!'

'Let me go!' Raavan cried hoarsely, struggling to free himself. 'Let me go!'

Everyone on the ship stared at their leader. Wondering what was going on.

Kumbhakarna held Raavan tight. 'Dada, you can't go back now! You will be killed!'

'Let me go!' Raavan tried to push the others away and get to his feet.

'Dada! Listen to me, please. You will die before you reach her!'

'Let me go!'

'I will come back for her, Dada! I will find her!'

'Let me go!' Raavan repeated in desperation.

Mareech was too stunned to react. He had never seen Raavan like this.

'Dada!' Kumbhakarna wouldn't let go of his brother. 'Please, trust me. I'll come back for her. I'll find her. I give you my word. But right now, you need to stay with us.'

'Let me go.' Raavan's voice was ragged. Broken.

'Dada, I will find her. I promise.'

'Let me go...'

The mast unfurled completely and caught the wind. The ship sailed out and

away from the shore. Away from Krakachabahu's arrows.

Away from her.

Away from the Kanyakumari.

'Let me go...'



## Chapter 9

In a little less than a month, Kumbhakarna was back in Kalinga. After the daring robbery on Nalaban Island, they had sailed to Lanka in a sombre mood. They had reached Gokarna in a day and a half, and the precious merchandise had been quickly unloaded and stored in the basement of Raavan's mansion, in a specially built and well-guarded chamber, with multiple locks for additional security. Kumbhakarna had immediately set about preparing for his journey back to the island. He had purchased a new ship, one that could not be traced back to Raavan in any way. He had also hired a small crew of young men from southern Africa. All of this had been accomplished in three weeks.

Then Kumbhakarna set off again, sailing up north. Towards Chilika lake. Towards the Kanyakumari.

By now, news had got around that a band of Naharins who had planned to follow the governor of Chilika into rebellion had double-crossed him and taken him prisoner. They had sailed out to Nahar with the captive Krakachabahu, intending to hand him over to the king. When a rebellion fails, it is pragmatic for the rebels to betray their leader to the incumbent ruler and save at least their own hides. Without the money that Krakachabahu had amassed over the years, the Nahar rebellion was as good as dead.

Nevertheless, sailing directly into the lake would have been risky, Kumbhakarna knew. He may be young, but he was not rash. There could still be some loyalists of Krakachabahu in Chilika.

So, Kumbhakarna sailed up north, beyond Chilika, intending to enter Kalinga via the mouth of the Mahanadi. But on the way, he decided to stop at the famous Jagannath temple in Puri, which lay between the lake in the south and the river to the north.

The Jagannath temple was considered to be one of the holiest spots in

India. It was close to the coast and clearly visible from the sea. Kumbhakarna anchored his ship and then set out on a rowboat to the shore, accompanied by ten African guards.

The temple complex, consisting of thirty temples, was built on an enormous stone platform spread over ten acres. The central temple, one of the tallest and largest in India, was the *Jagannath* temple; a shrine dedicated to the *Lord of the Universe*. The Vishnu. The Vishnu before all other Vishnus. The Vishnu who was the *Witness*. The *Saakshin*.

Unlike most idols in temples, which were made of stone or metal, the Jagannath idol was made of wood. The wood of a neem tree, to be precise. Every twelve years, it was replaced with a freshly carved one.

The dark idol had a massive head, emerging directly from the chest, without a discernible neck. The arms were in line with the upper lip. The eyes were large and round. The waist was where the form ended. No legs. No hands.

The Saakshin Vishnu was, strictly speaking, a witness. The rich *black colour, krishna* in old Sanskrit, was testimony to its provenance, that this God hailed from before the beginning of time. Before even light was created. For before light was created, all was dark. All was black.

The absence of hands signified that He would not enact any karma of His own. The absence of legs showed that He would not move, either towards you or away from you. He was neutral. He would take no sides in petty human rivalries. He was beyond personal likes and dislikes.

Some believed that it was inaccurate to even assign a gender to the God. He was beyond such petty divisions. He was unity. The source.

Most importantly, He had no eyelids. His eyes were forever open. He was always watching.

According to the ancients, this was the highest form of divinity that humans were capable of understanding. For the Saakshin Vishnu was the Primal Being. Floating through time. Witnessing it all, as people lived their lives and the universe breathed its karma.

The prayers that were offered to Him were also unusual.

Devotees did not go to the Jagannath temple to merely ask for His blessings. They went with a larger purpose, when they were ready to carry out their paramount karma. To ensure that it was recorded in the memory of the Primal Being. The account of their karma in the Saakshin Vishnu's memory would decide whether the devotee would get freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Kumbhakarna believed that he was about to embark on the greatest karma of his life. He went down on his knees in front of the great idol. His back bent.

His head touching the floor. Chanting. At long last, he rose and said what every devotee of the Saakshin Vishnu said when facing Him: ‘Witness me, My Lord.’

*Witness me as I carry out the greatest karma of my life.*

—८१—

It had been three years since the Nalaban Island robbery. Twenty-two-year-old Raavan had become reclusive and rarely ventured out of Gokarna. While he was still involved in the business and made the decisions on all key strategic issues, he did not go out to sea or travel. He remained in Gokarna, watching the sea from the heights of his hilltop mansion. Waiting for Kumbhakarna.

All this time, Kumbhakarna had been sending regular updates from Kalinga. The dock-repair workers they had seen the Kanyakumari with had travelled westward, deeper into the heart of Kalinga. The next time Raavan heard from Kumbhakarna, it was with the news that they were encamped at Vaidyanath, close to the Mayurakshi River. It wasn’t too far from Kalinga.

In the meantime, Mareech had started managing Raavan’s vast business empire. He had used the money looted from Krakachabahu to commission the building of large new ships. The best ship-builders in Gokarna and across the land had their entire capacity blocked by Raavan’s purchase orders. He was taking delivery of five or six ships every month; an unprecedented happening that shocked the trading community all across the Indian Ocean rim.

Gradually, Raavan built up a fleet of two hundred ships. An advance payment for the cave material had been made to the Malayaputras. Raavan’s men took each new ship, as soon as it was delivered, to Unawatuna, a hidden alcove on the southern coast of Lanka. They careened the ships there. The cave material was then kneaded, mixed with other ingredients, and painstakingly rubbed on to each ship’s hull. It was a long and laborious process. And done in secret by a small, loyal crew that was very well rewarded for its efforts.

As Raavan’s fleet grew, so did its reputation for speedy travel. Manufacturers and artisans found it profitable to trade with him. They knew that their goods would be delivered and sold much faster if they went to Raavan, as compared to other traders. On Raavan’s instructions, Mareech also began to use their vastly superior fleet to apprehend and loot other ships along the busy trade routes of the Indian Ocean. The pirate vessels would appear like the wind, plunder and kill the sailors on the target ships, and sink them to ensure that no trace was left of their crimes. Many of the ships they destroyed belonged to Kubaer. Because of the lack of witnesses, no one made the connection with Raavan. They believed the attacks to be the handiwork of pirates.

Of course, Raavan's plan did not end with merely raiding other ships for treasure. Exploiting the growing fear of pirate attacks at sea, he started building his own mini army under the leadership of Prahast. He claimed it was a protection force for his ships. Though it was unusual for a trader to have a standing corps of trained soldiers, many thought it was a logical way to protect profits. Some of the other traders started hiring the services of Raavan's protection force too. Not only did Raavan make profits from hiring out his force, his soldiers also became a source of information for him, about his rivals and their trading plans.

Profits flowed in at a tremendous pace. Raavan was already among the wealthiest traders in Gokarna. He would soon be one of the wealthiest traders in the world. Wealthy enough for even the richest man on the planet, Kubaer, to take notice.

Aware that they could not risk the Malayaputras finding out about the real use of the cave material, Mareech had gone about leasing the Pushpak Vimaan from Kubaer. He had negotiated very hard on the price so that it would seem like a credible deal. Kubaer, the ever-pragmatic trader, had readily agreed. The vimaan was so expensive to run that he had virtually stopped using it. And, like any machine not put to regular use, it was slowly rusting away. From his point of view, any deal was better than no deal.

When Mareech took over the Pushpak Vimaan, the first thing he did was to strip away all the luxuries that Kubaer had built into the flying craft. Out went the gold-plated bed with its soft mattress and the large, well-stocked kitchen for the preparation of exotic food. The vimaan was deprived of everything that smacked of ineffectual opulence without providing any practical value. Removing these luxuries vastly reduced the weight of the craft. The reduced payload meant that the quantities of cave material required to fly the aircraft came down drastically. This slashed the cost of running the craft.

Mareech also limited the use of the vimaan. It would now be used only for flights to distant lands. To seek information, and for trade in extremely valuable but light cargo, such as precious stones. Raavan sometimes accompanied him on these flights.

It was one such trip that Mareech had come to discuss with Raavan.

'Are you sure about this information?' asked Raavan gruffly, as he continued his workout.

Mareech and Raavan were on the first-floor balcony of his mansion. The house was situated on a tall hill that jutted into the sea. It afforded brilliant views of the Indian Ocean, which stretched as far as the eye could see. And beyond. Raavan came here every morning to perform the *Surya namaskar*, salutations to

*the Sun God*; a perfect combination of exercise and spirituality.

‘Yes, the sailor is from southern Africa,’ said Mareech. ‘It’s first-hand news. He has seen the things he speaks of.’

The man in question was Lethabo, one of the African sailors who had travelled to Kalinga with Kumbhakarna. He had turned up a few months ago with a message for Raavan, but an injury had prevented him from returning to his post with Kumbhakarna, who was presently in Vaidyanath. Mareech had gone to visit the sailor at the Gokarna Ayuralay where he was being treated. And that’s how he had learnt of the great mines full of precious stones, close to the southern tip of the African continent. Marked by a giant flat-topped mountain, which locals called the Table Mountain.

‘Hmm...’ Raavan remained non-committal as he finished his routine and did obeisance to the Sun God.

‘Raavan, it may be worth taking the Pushpak Vimaan there. Even if we find just a few precious stones, it will cover the cost of the trip. And if we do find a mine... well, I leave it to your imagination.’

Raavan walked to the edge of the balcony and rested his hands on the railing. He looked towards the ocean, then away at the horizon.

‘Raavan?’

Raavan remained silent.

‘Raavan, what is your decision?’

There was no response.

Mareech sighed. He walked up to his nephew and touched him on the shoulder.

‘Raavan...’

‘Kumbha...’

‘What?’

Raavan pointed to a ship at the edge of the horizon. Its sails raised high. A flag aflutter. The flag of Kumbhakarna.

‘How can you make out the markings on the flag from this distance?’ asked Mareech in disbelief.

‘It’s him. I know it is,’ said Raavan, his face radiating delight.

He turned around and almost ran outside, hollering at his guards to follow. He would board a ship quickly and sail out to meet his younger brother. He was too impatient to wait.

He had to have news of her as soon as possible.

News of the Kanyakumari.

‘Are you sure?’

Raavan had sailed out without delay, meeting his brother a few nautical miles from the Gokarna port. Kumbhakarna had been surprised by Raavan’s sudden appearance, but he could understand his elder brother’s anxiety. It had been three years.

After an emotional reunion, Raavan had taken Kumbhakarna aside, to one end of the upper deck. And fired his questions. Questions about the Kanyakumari.

‘Yes, Dada, I am sure. I have seen her myself.’

Raavan’s eyes lit up. ‘You’ve seen her?’

Kumbhakarna smiled. ‘Yes. Lucky me!’

Raavan smiled broadly. ‘Indeed. But how far away is this place?’

‘The village she stays in is quite far inland. In fact, it’s close to the Vaidyanath temple.’

‘Vaidyanath temple? Seriously? We stayed there for some time when you were a baby.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘I’ve heard the entire tale from maa.’

‘But the Vaidyanath temple is quite close to the local Kanyakumari temple, is it not? What is the name of the place? Trikut? Why would she go back to live as an ordinary woman in the land where she was once worshipped as a Goddess?’

‘Apparently, it’s quite common for former Kanyakumaris to settle down close to the temple where they once reigned as living Goddesses. It has been known to happen not just at the Trikut Kanyakumari temple, but at many other Kanyakumari temples across India. I guess with so many other former Kanyakumaris around, a support structure is available for them to rebuild their lives.’

‘Hmm,’ said Raavan, barely listening to what Kumbhakarna was saying.

*I should have gone to Vaidyanath much earlier. It was the logical thing to do, to search for her there. How foolish I have been! I’ve wasted so many years.*

‘Dada...’

‘What?’ asked Raavan, bringing his mind back to the present.

‘I just want to say that there is a slight problem.’

‘What problem?’

‘Umm...’

‘Come on, out with it. There is nothing that your dada can’t handle.’

‘Dada, the Kanyakumari... She’s... she’s married.’

Raavan waved his hand in dismissal. ‘Oh, that’s no problem. We’ll handle it.’

‘Handle it? How?’ Kumbhakarna looked anxious.

‘Don’t be stupid, Kumbha,’ Raavan scoffed. ‘We will not kill her husband. How can we? He’s the Kanyakumari’s husband. We’ll buy him off.’

‘But...’

‘You leave that to me. How quickly can we leave for Vaidyanath?’

‘We can leave in a few days.’

‘Good!’

Kumbhakarna laughed and mock-saluted Raavan. ‘At your command, Iraiva!’

Iraiva was a title that Akampana used for Raavan. It meant ‘True Lord’ in the dialect that was spoken in Akampana’s homeland, far away in the Pashtun regions of north-western India. The title had caught on. Many of Raavan’s sailors now called him Iraiva.

Raavan embraced his brother and ruffled his hair. Kumbhakarna, despite being nine years younger than Raavan, was nearly as tall as he was.

‘But you haven’t asked me the most obvious question, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘I guess I’ve been away too long. And you’re getting slower as time passes.’

Raavan pulled back from Kumbhakarna and frowned. ‘What question is that?’

‘Something you’ve wanted to know since forever. Ask me. I have the answer.’

Raavan’s face brightened as he caught on. ‘You know it? You know her name?’

Kumbhakarna nodded, laughing softly.

Raavan grabbed his brother by the shoulders. ‘Tell me, you fool! What is her name?’

‘Vedavati.’

Raavan held his breath. Letting the ethereal name echo in his ears. Through his body. Through his spirit.

*Vedavati.*

*The embodiment of the Vedas.*

Raavan looked away from his brother, towards the sea. He felt as if his heart would burst at the sound of that divine name. He dared not speak it out loud. His soul wouldn’t be able to handle it. He let the name echo softly in the confines of his mind.

*Vedavati...*



## Chapter 10

The brothers were to leave the next morning. The fastest ship in their fleet had been prepared for the journey ahead.

Surya, the Sun God, had called it a night. Fortunately, Som, the Moon God, had taken up the baton. It was a beautiful full-moon night. Some parts of the sea and the exquisite coastline of Gokarna were illuminated in the glimmer of the diffused moonlight. There were almost no clouds in the sky, and the star-studded night resembled a jewelled canopy. A cool, moist sea breeze soothed the senses. The discordant noises of the city had died down. Raavan looked up towards the sky.

Love was in the air. And the pirate-trader breathed it in.

‘I can’t wait till tomorrow!’ he said, drinking some more wine.

Kumbhakarna smiled. He had begged off sharing the wine with his elder brother. Their mother was home.

Raavan savoured the elegant flavour of his drink, holding the glass up in appreciation. He glanced at the bottle. Then at Kumbhakarna’s empty hands.

‘Seriously?’ asked Raavan. ‘She actually told you not to pick up my bad habits? Sometimes I think I should just—’

Kumbhakarna interrupted his elder brother. ‘Dada, does it really matter? She is our mother...’

Raavan sighed. He drank some more wine.

Though Kumbhakarna respected his mother’s wishes, at least in her presence, Kaikesi’s well-meaning warnings to her younger son went unheeded. Kumbhakarna idolised Raavan. His elder brother had always been his hero. Bad habits? He wanted to emulate *every* habit of Raavan’s. The only thing he wished his brother wouldn’t do was insult their mother.

‘So, tell me more about her,’ said Raavan. ‘The Kanyakumari...’

Kumbhakarna had noticed that despite knowing her name, Raavan could not bring himself to say it. He wondered what else he could tell Raavan about Vedavati. He had already described her physical form. It was remarkable how closely she resembled the woman in Raavan's paintings.

'She truly is extraordinary, Dada,' said Kumbhakarna. 'You know how hard life is for most people, right? Taxes have gone up and jobs have been difficult to come by.'

The anti-trader policies of most of the Sapt Sindhu kingdoms had resulted in a dramatic decline in business activities. An equally dramatic decline in tax revenues had followed. At the same time, royal expenditure had gone up due to the imperial preoccupation with war. So tax rates had been increased. This had further diminished the prospects for business and impacted job opportunities. In this atmosphere of desperation, crime too had increased. And as usual, the common folk suffered the brunt of it all. Mini rebellions were breaking out all over the country, especially against the petty nobles and landlords who served the kingdoms' rulers. But Raavan was not interested in the condition of the people at this moment.

'Tell me about the Kanyakumari.'

'It's linked to that, Dada. The Kanyakumari's husband...'

Kumbhakarna stopped as he saw Raavan's jaw clench.

Raavan looked away for a moment and then back at his brother. 'Yes, what about him?'

Kumbhakarna continued, 'His name is Prithvi. He is, or was, a businessman from Balochistan, in the far western corner of India. He settled in Vaidyanath many years ago and tried his hand at some business. But he ended up making heavy losses.'

'Loser.'

Kumbhakarna decided to let Raavan's jealous remark pass without comment. He had been told that Prithvi was an honest, straightforward, decent man. Even if he wasn't the sharpest businessman going.

'These losses in business,' continued Kumbhakarna, 'left him heavily indebted to the local landlord. To repay his debt, he is now working for the man.'

'So the Kanyakumari is stuck doing some menial job because of her idiot husband?'

'It appears she is there by choice, Dada. She too works for the landlord. Everyone in the area knows that she was the Kanyakumari and they respect her. Therefore, she is able to broker peace between the common people and the landlord, whenever it becomes necessary. The landlord ensures that there is enough food for his people. He also gets them jobs wherever he can, on his farm,

or at construction sites in and around Chilika. They are reasonably content because of this and have no reason to rebel. Theirs is one of the more peaceful villages you will find in the Sapt Sindhu. Which is an achievement in these times of penury and anger. And it is all underwritten by the moral authority of Vedavatiji.'

Raavan's takeaway from all this was just one thing. 'So, all we have to do is repay the debt to a petty village landlord and the Kanyakumari is free?'

'Umm... Dada, I don't know if it will be that simple.'

'It *is* that simple. There is so much you have to learn about life, Kumbha. You are still very young.'

—८१—

Raavan's ship was sailing up the eastern coast of India, towards Branga. Towards the mouth of the holy Ganga. They intended to sail up the river, to the point where it came closest to Vaidyanath. The crew would then march overland to the sacred temple town. The river Mayurakshi began its journey close to Vaidyanath, and flowed east to empty itself into the westernmost distributary of the Ganga. An amateur sailor might make the mistake of thinking that sailing up the Mayurakshi would be the fastest way to reach Vaidyanath. But Raavan was not an amateur. He knew that the Mayurakshi was a flood-prone river with treacherous and fast-moving currents. Sailing on it would be hard work, and slow. Better to sail further up the Ganga, and then walk or ride the rest of the way.

'Are you sure you are fit enough to ride all the way to Vaidyanath?' asked Raavan, playfully patting Kumbhakarna's immense belly.

The brothers were on the upper deck of the ship, walking down the corridor, towards the captain's cabin. Raavan had just finished an hour of dance practice on the open deck, accompanied by his favourite musician, Surya. He had hired Surya at considerable expense some time ago, and persuaded him and his wife Annapoorna to accompany them on the voyage so he could continue to practice the dance form he was currently attempting to perfect.

'Don't worry about me, Dada. I am not the one who goes breathless at the mere mention of that "divine name",' said Kumbhakarna, a mock-devout expression on his face.

Raavan burst out laughing and Kumbhakarna thumped him on the back, laughing even more loudly. They entered the cabin and Kumbhakarna shut the door behind them. Raavan walked up to an ornate cabinet and fetched a glass decanter and goblet. He poured himself some wine.

‘Maa is not here, Kumbha,’ said Raavan, holding the glass high. ‘You should try some.’

‘I have tried some already, Dada!’ Kumbhakarna grinned. ‘But I don’t like drinking at sea. It makes me feel like vomiting.’

‘Yuck,’ grimaced Raavan, ‘I did not need to know that.’ He flopped down on a chair placed near a porthole, across from his brother. ‘Anyway, now that I know you have tried wine already, I have to get you to try women. There are some very good courtesan-houses on the way. We’ll stop at one of them. Let you experience... shall we say, a woman’s touch.’

Kumbhakarna giggled. Embarrassed and excited at the same time. He had heard stories. But he had no idea what he was supposed to do with a woman.

‘The only problem with women is their mouth,’ continued Raavan. ‘They talk. And what is more, they talk utter nonsense. You do know that in some parts of the world, they believe that heaven is above and hell is below, right? Well, it’s the exact opposite with women. With women, there is heaven below and hell above!’

Raavan laughed aloud at his own joke. Kumbhakarna joined in somewhat uncertainly.

‘That is not true of all women, Dada,’ he offered. ‘When Vedavatiji speaks, one can sense the wisdom—’

Before he could complete the sentence, Raavan cut in. ‘The Kanyakumari is not just a woman. She is a living Goddess.’

‘Of course, Dada.’

Raavan looked out of the porthole, sipping his wine. Thinking of what he would tell her when he saw her. How he would woo her.

*Why will she refuse me? Especially when she finds out how I feel about her. When she gets to know how rich and powerful I am... and worthy of her love.*

‘Dada, I just want to be honest about something. You should consider it seriously too.’ Kumbhakarna’s voice interrupted Raavan’s thoughts.

Observing his younger brother’s grave expression, Raavan became serious too. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s just that...’ Kumbhakarna hesitated.

‘What happened, Kumbha? Out with it.’

‘Dada... don’t take this the wrong way... but honestly, I just don’t think the Kanyakumari will be impressed by your dancing. So don’t dance for her, please. I can guarantee that she will run away from you if you do.’

Raavan picked up a small cushion that lay nearby and threw it at Kumbhakarna, who collapsed in peals of laughter.

Raavan was laughing too. ‘You are certainly not the good little boy who

maa fears I will corrupt.'

Kumbhakarna grinned. 'Trying to follow your example, Dada!'

Raavan picked up another cushion that was at hand and threw it at Kumbhakarna. His younger brother caught it effortlessly, and put it behind his back. 'I think I'm comfortable enough now, thank you. I won't be needing any more!'

Laughter filled the cabin. As he wiped away the tears of mirth, Raavan looked at his younger brother with love. And pride. For these few light-hearted moments, even the ever-present pain in his navel seemed to have disappeared. Joy and hope filled his heart.

—८१—

Kumbhakarna couldn't stop smiling as he walked unsteadily back to the ship.

Raavan put his arm around his little brother's shoulders, leaned in close and whispered, 'How was it?'

They were in Mahua Island and Kumbhakarna had just visited a courtesan-house for the very first time. The island was at the mouth of the western-most distributary of the Ganga, at the point where the great river, burdened with water and silt, sluggishly met the Eastern Sea. There was a courtesan-house here, owned by a woman called Vasantpala, which was renowned across the region. Raavan had decided it was the perfect place for his brother's initiation into the world of carnal pleasures.

He had taken Vasantpala's advice and chosen a famous courtesan called Zabibi for his younger brother. Zabibi was from Arabia, and had come to India only recently, to make her fortune. She was no less than an *apsara*, a *celestial nymph*. Long-limbed and supple, she was blessed with lustrous black hair. Though new to the land, she was already famed for her beauty and her impeccable taste in clothes and jewellery. And most importantly, she was experienced in the art of love.

Only the best would do for Kumbhakarna.

'I think I am in love,' whispered Kumbhakarna, looking stricken and intoxicated at the same time.

Raavan burst out laughing. He continued walking, then stopped when he realised his brother was not next to him.

Kumbhakarna was standing still. Looking dreamily at the early morning sky. The two extra arms on his shoulders drooped, as if they too were inebriated. 'I am not joking, Dada. I think I am in love.'

Raavan raised his eyebrows.

‘I don’t want to leave her here. Can’t I have her forever? Can’t I marry her?’

Raavan walked back to where Kumbhakarna stood, put his arm around his shoulders, and started walking his reluctant brother along.

‘Dada, I am serious...’

‘Kumbha, women like Zabibi are meant to be used, not loved.’

The flash of anger on Kumbhakarna’s face gave Raavan pause.

‘Dada! Don’t speak of Zabibi that way!’

‘It was a transaction, Kumbha. She gave you pleasure, you gave her money. She is not interested in you. She is interested in the money.’

‘No, no! You don’t know what she told me. She couldn’t believe that I was just a boy. She said she had never been with a man like me.’

‘I paid her, Kumbha. She is a professional. Of course she said things that you wanted to hear.’

‘But she didn’t lie to me and say things to make me feel good. She meant what she said. She didn’t say that I was good looking. I know I am not. But she did say that I was intelligent. Which I am. And that I am strong. And...’ Kumbhakarna smiled shyly, ‘and good in bed.’

Raavan couldn’t help laughing again. ‘My naïve little Kumbha! This world is full of selfish people. They will tell you what you want to hear in order to get what they want from you. To protect yourself, you must know how to use them to get what you want. That’s the way the world works.’

‘But Dada, Zabibi is different. She is—’

‘She is no different. She is just clearer about what she wants. She wants money. And she’ll give you sex in return. It’s simple. Some men want honour. Why? I don’t know. But they do. So, give it to them. Give them an honourable way to die. And profit from it. Some women believe that flaunting their beauty is empowering. So, compliment them, have sex with them, and cast them away. Use people before they can use you. Most people in the world are contemptible. Many hide behind pretensions. The ones who succeed are the ones who are honest with themselves. Zabibi is honest. She doesn’t care about you. She cares about herself. She’s here for a few years to earn enough money, and then she’ll go back to her husband in Arabia.’

Kumbhakarna was shocked. ‘She’s married? She lied to me!’

‘Yes, she lied to you. But she didn’t lie to the most important person in her life—herself! You should not be shocked. Instead, you should learn from her. Be clear about what you want. But hide it well. It will help you get what you want.’

Kumbhakarna was silent for some time, thinking over what his brother had said. Finally he said, ‘That’s why we are attacking Kubaer’s ships, right? But we

do it in such a way that everyone thinks it's the work of pirates.'

'Exactly. Now you are learning. Kubaer's strength is his wealth, and the more of it we take away, the more insecure he will get. In his desperation, he will turn to the only person in Lanka with a league of well-trained and armed men—me. He will seek my help to secure his wealth. I will obviously help the hapless man. And become the chief of the army of Lanka. From there, it will be a short distance to becoming the king.'

Kumbhakarna's chest puffed out with pride. 'My brother, the king of Lanka!'

Raavan smiled. 'Always remember why we are strong, why we are successful. Because we don't fool ourselves that we are honourable or good. We know who we are. We accept it. We embrace it. That's why we beat everyone. That's why we will continue to beat everyone.'

'Yes, Dada.'

Raavan walked on, with Kumbhakarna ambling along beside him.



## Chapter 11

‘We have to go back, Dada!’

‘Kumbha, you are being silly. Go to your cabin.’

Their ship was to leave Mahua Island in a few hours. Kumbhakarna had just come rushing into Raavan’s cabin with some news. Earlier, when he had been with Zabibi, enjoying the courtesan’s attentions, he had barely noticed the very young girl, not more than eight years of age, who had served him alcohol and food. Before she left the room, he had seen her linger beside the chair on which he had casually flung his angvastram. He hadn’t thought much of it then.

Back in his cabin, he had noticed a small knot tied to the end of the fabric. He had opened it to find a tiny piece of papyrus. With two words written on it, in a childish handwriting. He handed the note to Raavan.

Raavan read it aloud. ‘Help me.’

‘We have to.’

‘Help whom?’

‘The little girl in the courtesan-house.’

‘How do you know it was her?’

‘I just know, Dada. She looked troubled. Now that I think about it, there was fear in her eyes. She needs our help.’

‘Kumbha, I gave you a long lecture only half an hour ago! We succeed because of our ability to exploit people. Not because we are do-gooders.’

‘Dada, you were the one who once told me that if you find someone vulnerable and in serious trouble, help them—and then make them your slave for life. If she is being abused, and we help her, she will be loyal to us forever. She could be useful.’

‘Nonsense, Kumbha. You just want to help her and you are trying to find a justification for it.’

‘Maybe I am. It will cost us very little. How much does it take to buy the services of a young girl after all? She will be worth it. I saw fire in her eyes.’

‘A moment ago, you said you saw fear in her eyes. Which was it? Fear or fire?’

‘Dada, I am telling you. This girl could be useful.’

Raavan shook his head in dismay. Then he pointed a finger at Kumbhakarna. ‘This is the last time I am helping some random person because of you.’

‘It’s not help, Dada. It’s business. It will be profitable. Trust me.’

—४१—

‘Vasantpala, it is a good price and you know it,’ said Raavan impatiently. ‘Ten gold coins. Take it and be done with it. Don’t waste my time.’

Raavan and Kumbhakarna had returned to Vasantpala’s establishment, accompanied by twenty guards. Raavan had thought this would be a quick negotiation. But he was in for a surprise.

The little girl Kumbhakarna wanted to rescue was standing by the wall. Head bowed. Hands clasped together. She was shaking. Perhaps in fear. Perhaps in anticipation of freedom.

‘It’s not that simple, my lord,’ said Vasantpala. ‘Ten gold coins may not be enough for her.’

Raavan was irritated. ‘You have made more than enough money from me over the years, Vasantpala. Don’t be a fool. You can easily get another serving girl or boy. Who has jobs these days?’

‘She is not just a serving girl.’

Raavan looked at the girl again. He noticed the ligature marks on her hands and feet; marks that indicated that she was often tied up. He knew that some men liked to have sex with very young girls and boys, even tie them up during the act. He had never understood it. It was disgusting. Abominable.

‘How much, then?’ he asked.

‘Two hundred gold coins. She is profitable.’

Raavan held his right hand out. One of his aides stepped up and gave him a papyrus sheet and pen. Raavan wrote on it, marked it with his seal and threw it at Vasantpala. ‘One hundred gold coins is my final offer. You can cash this *hundi* anywhere.’

Vasantpala picked up the sheet and read it carefully. She smiled. ‘Thank you, my lord, but this will not be enough.’

‘I am not haggling with you, Vasantpala. This is my final offer. Or we can

tear up that hundi and—’

Vasantpala interrupted him. ‘I wasn’t asking for more money for myself, my lord. This is good enough for me. But you will need to pay somebody else too.’

Raavan frowned. ‘Who?’

‘Her father,’ answered Vasantpala.

Raavan turned towards the little girl, shocked. But only for a moment. *All fathers are assholes. Just like mine.*

The little girl raised her head and looked at Vasantpala. Her eyes were burning with rage. And hatred. But almost immediately, her expression changed. She seemed stoic once more. Head bowed. Docile.

*Woah! This girl may actually be worth it.*

Raavan turned towards Vasantpala. ‘Her father?’

‘Who do you think sold her to us?’

—४१—

The little girl’s father lived a short twenty-minute walk away from the courtesan-house. One of Vasantpala’s aides led Raavan and his entourage there. On the way, he informed Raavan that the girl never spoke. They didn’t know if she had been born dumb. Raavan had a feeling that the girl’s loss of speech had more to do with the torture she had suffered at such a young age.

They reached the place to find a modest house in a relatively deserted locality. But it was in better shape than Raavan had expected, considering the state of the little girl. The area around the house was clean. The walls had been reinforced recently with fresh bricks. The roof looked new. There was a small garden outside, with a flower bed. All very tastefully done.

Vasantpala’s aide knocked on the door and stepped aside. A middle-aged man answered the door. He was shorter than Raavan and thin, except for a small potbelly. He wore an expensive silk dhoti. A thick gold chain gleamed around his neck. His long hair was neatly oiled and tied.

‘Is this your daughter?’ asked Raavan, pointing at the little girl.

The man looked at her and then back at Raavan. He noticed the daunting musculature of the pirate-trader. His eyes took in the expensive clothes and jewellery. Obviously, a rich customer. ‘Yes, she is.’

‘I have something to ask. I want to know—’

The man cut in. ‘One gold coin per hour. You can use a room in my house. If you want to do something different, like with her mouth or backside, the rates go up. However, if you want to tie her up, or beat her, we will have to negotiate.

Because if you break any bones, she will not be able to earn anything for a few months at least.'

Raavan stepped closer to the man.

'So, what will it be?' asked the father, a little uncertainly.

In answer, Raavan swung his fist viciously at the man's face. Hitting him squarely on the nose. The sickening crunch confirmed that he had broken a bone. As the man fell to the ground, blood spurting from his nose, Raavan turned to look at the little girl. She was staring at her father. At her father's blood.

She didn't blink. She didn't look away.

Raavan turned to his men. 'Tie him to that tree. On his knees.'

The man was howling in pain.

Raavan's men dragged him to a tall coconut palm close by and tied him to it. On his knees. Hands behind the trunk. Both legs secured. Face towards Raavan. Utterly helpless. Still screaming at the top of his lungs.

'In the name of Lord Indra, cover this idiot's mouth,' said Raavan, his face screwed up in revulsion.

One of the guards immediately produced a piece of cloth and stuffed it into the man's mouth. They gagged him with another, longer piece of cloth which was then secured around the trunk of the tree. Not only could he not create a racket now, he could barely move his head. Only soft, muffled sounds escaped his mouth.

Raavan turned to look at Kumbhakarna. Communicating with his eyes. *Watch and learn.*

'You,' said Raavan to the little girl. 'What's your name?'

The girl didn't say anything. Kumbhakarna was about to remind Raavan that she couldn't speak, but his elder brother signalled for him to be quiet.

'Come here,' Raavan said to her.

She stepped closer. The tall and extravagantly muscled Raavan towered over her. She barely came up to his waist. Suddenly Raavan pulled out a knife. The girl stepped back in alarm.

'Don't be afraid. This knife is for you.' Saying this, Raavan flipped the knife around and handed it, hilt first, to the girl.

She studied it closely. It was long, with a firm, metal hilt and cross-guard. The blade was sharp on the outer side and serrated on the inner. The sharper side helped the blade slide smoothly into flesh. The serrated side caused maximum damage and pain while pulling the knife out. Manufactured by the talented metalsmiths of Gokarna, it had been designed by Raavan himself.

The little girl held the knife tightly. Her hands were trembling. Then she looked at her father. The man's eyes widened with fear. His muffled cries

became more high-pitched.

*I am your father...*

*Forgive me...*

*I am your father...*

‘Come with me,’ said Raavan. He walked up to the pathetic figure tied to the tree. The little girl followed.

The man was now shaking, and in a state of utter panic. He struggled against the ropes that confined him. But he had been trussed up well. His muffled cries were the only sounds to be heard. Everyone else was silent.

Raavan slapped the man hard. ‘Oh, shut up!’

Raavan turned to the girl and pointed to the place on her father’s neck, at the base, where the jugular vein and carotid artery carried blood between the head and the heart. Almost as if imparting a lesson, he said to the little girl, making a slashing action with his hand, ‘Make a large, deep cut here, and your father will die in a few minutes.’ Then he pointed to the heart and pressed a hand on the man’s chest. ‘Stab here, and he will die much faster. But you have to make sure you get it right. You don’t want the knife to get deflected by the ribs. That is hard bone. Sometimes, the knife can ricochet back from the ribs and you may end up hurting yourself. So, I wouldn’t recommend trying it right now. You can train for it later.’

The little girl nodded. Like an eager student. A ferociously eager student.

‘Or,’ continued Raavan, pointing to the man’s lower abdomen, ‘you could stab him here. In the guts. No bones to deflect the knife. But the problem is that it will take time for him to bleed out. We may have to hear him scream for twenty, maybe even thirty minutes, as he bleeds to death. And if the wound is not deep enough, the blood flow will be very slow. It could take hours. And I don’t have that much time to waste on your father. So, if you are going to stab him here, make sure it’s a deep wound.’

The desperate man was struggling to free himself.

‘It’s up to you now,’ said Raavan.

The little girl looked at her father. All her reserves of self-control seemed to have run out as she shook in fury. She gripped the knife hard in both hands. Her father’s eyes were pleading for mercy. Tears mixed with sweat and blood.

Raavan stood aside, waiting for the girl to decide.

But even he was surprised by how quickly it happened.

The girl acted fast. No second thoughts. No hesitation. She stepped up and stabbed her father in the guts. Thrusting her shoulder forward as she did so. Choosing the slow, painful death for him. The man emitted a sound of sheer agony. His eyes were wide in panic and pain. His reactions only seemed to egg

the girl on. She pushed the knife in harder, using both her hands. When she finally yanked it out, a fountain of blood spurted out. Dyeing her hands red. Her clothes. Her body. Everything.

She didn't flinch. She didn't step back. She stood there drenched in her father's warm blood.

Raavan smiled. 'Good girl.'

But the girl was not done. She stepped forward and stabbed her father again. And again. And again. And again. Always in the abdomen. Always in the guts.

She was silent through it all.

No sounds of anger. No screaming. No shouting.

Just pure, silent rage.

She kept stabbing her father until his abdomen was ruptured, and the intestines started spilling out.

Kumbhakarna said to Raavan, 'Dada, make her stop.'

Raavan shook his head. *No*.

His eyes were fixed on the girl.

She raised the knife and stabbed her father again.

When she finally stepped back, she had inflicted nearly twenty-five wounds on his flailing body. Her face, her hands, her body, her clothes, were slick with blood. It was almost like she had bathed in her father's blood.

She turned around and looked at Raavan. He was momentarily staggered.

She was smiling.

She walked up to Raavan, went down on her knees, and placed the bloodied knife at his feet.

Raavan placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her to her feet.

'What is your name?' he asked.

The girl said nothing.

Raavan said, 'I am your master now. You will work for me. You will be loyal to me. And I will protect you.'

The girl remained silent.

Raavan repeated his question. 'What is your name?'

The little girl had heard what Raavan's followers called him. Iraiva. The True Lord.

She finally spoke. In a childish voice that was disconcertingly calm. 'Great Iraiva, my name is Samichi.'



## Chapter 12

Raavan and his entourage had reached the bungalow in Vaidyanath that Kumbhakarna had rented for their stay. It was a nondescript building at a safe distance from the temple complex, and had none of the luxuries Raavan was now used to. But the brothers had decided to keep a low profile. With so many major temples in the region, many members of the royalty and nobility from across the Sapt Sindhu frequented the area. That meant high security. And a well-known smuggler would be a prize catch for the tax inspectors and the police in the Sapt Sindhu. The brothers had even chosen fake names for themselves: Jai and Vijay, rather than Raavan and Kumbhakarna.

Within an hour of reaching their place of stay, Raavan and Kumbhakarna set out to find Vedavati. She was an hour's ride away, in a village called Todee.

Historically, temples in India were not just centres of worship, but also hubs of social activity around which community life revolved. Most temple complexes had ponds for the use of the local population. Food was provided for the poor, in the form of prasad. Free primary education was made available for children who lived in the villages nearby. Temples in larger towns offered higher education as well. Villagers could access basic medical help at temples in their neighbourhood. In addition, most temples acted as storehouses where essential grains were kept, to provide for people when the rains failed. If they were exceptionally wealthy, they even paid for local building projects, such as houses for the poor and check dams on streams. All of this was made possible because of the donations that the temples received from people, rich and poor.

But like most things now, the system was fraying. As trade declined, so did the donations. Even at the major temples, funds were beginning to dry up. To make matters worse, the royal families were using some pretext or the other to take over temples—ostensibly, to ‘run them better’. Soon, a significant portion

of the temple donations was being siphoned off into royal treasuries.

Naturally, the charitable work that most community temples funded also began to suffer. Local infrastructure too was badly hit.

But this was not the case in Todee. Here, the local landlord, Shochikesh, was working with the villagers to create a check dam on a stream that flowed close by. It would help conserve water for the dry season. The landlord had supplied the material and the villagers provided the labour. Everyone would benefit.

This seemingly impossible collaboration had only been made possible because of Vedavati. For, while the villagers did not find it easy to trust the landlord, everyone trusted the Kanyakumari. Everyone.

And there she was, supervising the operation. Standing on a slightly raised platform, uncaring of the sweat gathering on her forehead and the dust flying all around.

Work on the check dam was progressing quickly. All the able-bodied men of the village were on the job, with hardly any breaks. The landlord stood on the same platform as Vedavati, observing the work. They were racing against time and he felt the pressure. He had even managed to convince his wayward son, Sukarman, to come and help out. The check dam had to be completed very soon. Not because the rainy season was upon them—there were still many months to go for that. The reason was Vedavati.

She was pregnant. Very obviously pregnant. Work on the dam had to be finished before she went away to the hospital attached to the nearby Vaidyanath temple, to give birth to her child. Neither the villagers nor the landlord's men were sure they could work together without her calm presence. She was the only one who was capable and trustworthy enough to resolve all their disputes satisfactorily.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna tethered their horses a few hundred metres away from the worksite, and cautiously made their way towards it on foot. Raavan had decided they would spend the first day observing the Kanyakumari, without showing themselves.

‘Dada,’ began Kumbhakarna.

‘Softer!’ shushed Raavan. ‘Someone may hear us.’

Kumbhakarna looked around. There was no one to be seen. But he dutifully lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘Dada, why are we hiding? Nobody knows us here. We can tell people that you are a trader visiting the Vaidyanath temple and that you stopped here on your way back to your rest house. You can then go and speak with the Kanyakumari. Only she will recognise you.’

Raavan shook his head.

Kumbhakarna wondered if he was the reason for Raavan's cautiousness. 'I have been here before, Dada. The people around here do not have any biases against Nagas. I'm safe here.'

Raavan looked at Kumbhakarna. 'I'll rip out any eyes that glare at you,' he said quietly. He was walking carefully. Avoiding dry leaves or twigs that might snap under his feet.

Kumbhakarna smiled to himself. His big brother was nervous.

'Do you know that we lived close to Todee for a few days when you were a baby?' asked Raavan, keeping his voice low.

'You've told me, Dada.' Kumbhakarna raised his hand and held up three fingers. 'Only three times in the last five minutes.'

'Oh, have I? I guess I must have...'

Kumbhakarna smiled broadly this time. He had never seen his brother so anxious.

—४१—

The brothers had found the perfect hiding spot, behind some dense vegetation. It had a clear view of the worksite at the stream. None of the workers had noticed their approach. Nobody had noticed them hiding. They were pirate-traders after all. Concealing themselves when required was a necessary professional attribute.

There were over fifty people at the worksite. But Raavan had eyes for only one of them.

He was transfixed. Practically paralysed. His gaze focused on Vedavati, as she walked among the villagers.

He couldn't help thinking that the muse had truly blessed him, for she looked uncannily like his own paintings of her. She was tall for a woman. Fair, round face, high cheekbones, and sharp, small nose. Black, wide-set eyes with creaseless eyelids. Her long, black hair flowed down her back in a tight braid. Her image was burned into his mind. He had painted her as a curvaceous woman, with a full feminine body. She looked even more voluptuous now. Her frayed, yet clean clothes did not detract from her magnetism.

Kumbhakarna whispered, 'I'm sorry, Dada. I didn't know that the Kanyakumari was pregnant. It didn't show earlier...'

But Raavan wasn't listening. He just kept looking at her, unable to believe that he was finally in her presence.

It took Kumbhakarna a while to realise why, despite the resemblance, Vedavati looked just that bit different from Raavan's paintings of her. It was not her baby bump. It was something else. On Raavan's walls, she appeared divine

and awe-inspiring, but also quite aloof and distant. She was different in real life. She still looked divine, yes. Awe-inspiring, yes. But there was nothing distant about her. Warmth and kindness shone in her eyes as she moved among the villagers. Like a Mother Goddess.

‘Dada,’ whispered Kumbhakarna.

Raavan placed his hand on Kumbhakarna’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything, but the gesture was enough.

*Stay quiet, little brother. Let me look... Let me finally live my life...*

—೪೧—

Kumbhakarna said softly, ‘Dada, don’t you think it’s time we...’

He stopped speaking, as Raavan raised his hand to signal for silence.

A whole week had passed since their arrival in Vaidyanath. They had been coming to the worksite every day, changing their hiding place each time. Getting a different perspective of the worksite. Getting a different view of the people there. Getting a different darshan of the Kanyakumari.

What didn’t change was the fact that they hadn’t spoken to her yet. Not even made their presence known.

Kumbhakarna was at a loss. His mighty, indomitable brother simply couldn’t muster up the courage to speak to Vedavati. His confidence and easy charm with women seemed to have abandoned him. Bereft of his usual bravado, he just stood in hiding and stared at the object of his devotion.

His Kanyakumari. His Goddess.

But Kumbhakarna could not keep staring at the Kanyakumari forever. So he observed the others at their work, and at rest. Over the past week, he had seen enough of the villagers, and their interactions, to start forming opinions of them. Shochikesh, the landlord, seemed like a genuinely good man. He wasn’t attired as grandly as most landlords in Lanka, but he seemed to care for the villagers. The villagers appeared to respect him, even if they did not trust him. Shochikesh’s son Sukarman, on the other hand, was a spoilt brat. Lazy. Selfish. Slacking off, and once, even stealing money when nobody was looking. But always on his best behaviour whenever the Kanyakumari or his father were close by.

*Why am I wasting my time looking at these idiots?*

Kumbhakarna turned to his brother. ‘Dada...’

Raavan raised his hand again for silence.

Kumbhakarna refused to be silenced this time. He was at his wits’ end, waiting for Raavan to make a move. He imagined spending the rest of his life

hiding behind foliage and keeping an eye on the Kanyakumari. No, he had to do something. ‘Dada, why don’t we just kidnap her?’

Raavan glared at Kumbhakarna, horrified. ‘What the hell is wrong with you? She’s a Goddess! How can—’

Kumbhakarna interrupted his brother, laughing softly, ‘Dada, I still remember your speech in Mahua Island. The Power-of-using-and-exploiting-people speech. I thought we were good at that! What are we doing hiding behind bushes and looking at villagers going about their business?’

Raavan looked outraged for a moment. Then he smiled and shook his head. ‘*Vaamah kaamo manushyaaNaam yasmin kila nibadhyate; jane tasmiMstvanukroshah snehashcha kila jaayate.*’

He was quoting the words of a brilliant philosopher, one of the great Valmikis, the tribe left behind by the Lady Vishnu, Mohini. The line in old Sanskrit, a statement of helplessness by a man in love, translated as: *It is ominous for a man to feel desire; for a man who is bound up in desire feels compassion and fondness.*

The unspoken truth: such a man would be weak.

Kumbhakarna’s eyes twinkled with mischief as he smiled at his elder brother.

Raavan turned to look at Vedavati in the distance and whispered, ‘Tomorrow... We’ll go speak to her tomorrow.’

—४८—

‘Yes,’ said Kumbhakarna, politely folding his hands together in a namaste. ‘We are traders who came to visit the great Mahadev temple in Vaidyanath. We were on our way to the rest house when we heard that there was a check-dam project going on here. So, we thought we would come and see it.’

As decided, Kumbhakarna and Raavan had finally emerged from their self-imposed hideout. Both the brothers had, wisely, come dressed in relatively simple clothes. In these impoverished times, amidst a community that was making the best of its constrained circumstances, it would have been impolite, even dangerous, to show off their wealth. Kumbhakarna was only thirteen years old, but he understood one of the most basic of human emotions: jealousy.

Of course, to the landlord and the villagers, Kumbhakarna looked like a grown man of at least twenty. And to his credit, Shochikesh did not even glance at the outgrowths that marked Kumbhakarna as a Naga.

‘You are most welcome to share our lunch, noble travellers,’ said Shochikesh. ‘We may not be well-off, but we know our dharma. *Athithi devo*

*bhava.*’

Kumbhakarna folded his hands and bowed his head in respect, acknowledging Shochikesh’s recitation of an old Sanskrit line from the Taittiriya Upanishad. *Any guest is like God.* He nudged his elder brother, who followed suit. But Raavan’s attention was focused elsewhere. On the woman who was walking towards them.

The Kanyakumari.

The Virgin Goddess.

Vedavati.

‘What did you say your names are?’ asked Shochikesh.

‘My name is Vijay,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘And my elder brother’s name is Jai.’

Shochikesh smiled. ‘Both your names mean victory. Your parents must have had high hopes!’

Kumbhakarna laughed genially. ‘And we dashed those hopes!’

Shochikesh smiled. He pointed at his red hair. ‘Well, my parents named me *Shochikesh*. One with *hair like fiery flames*, apparently! But there is nothing else about me that is fiery!’

‘Maybe it is the duty of all children to disappoint their parents?’ Kumbhakarna kept the banter going, hoping his brother would snap out of his reverie soon.

Shochikesh chuckled. On some unspoken instinct, he turned to look at his son, Sukarman, who was sitting not far away, watching the others at their work. And the smile was wiped off his face. *Sukarman* meant *One who did good deeds*. Harsh truths, even when garbed in humour, continue to inflict pain. ‘In any case, you are most welcome to have lunch with us.’

Kumbhakarna did not get a chance to respond to Shochikesh. For Vedavati had made her way up to them. Her left hand was on her distended belly, supporting her unborn child. Kumbhakarna looked at her and smiled. Raavan, on the other hand, stood staring at the ground.

‘Our noble landlord Shochikesh is right,’ said Vedavati. ‘You are most welcome to have lunch with us.’

Raavan lifted his head slightly and smiled. This was the voice he had ached to hear all these years. It was like a salve for his soul. He let it echo inside him, in his entire being. The words themselves were of little consequence.

He tried to say something. To respond. But his vocal chords seemed constricted. No sound escaped his mouth.

Kumbhakarna looked at his tongue-tied brother, and then at Vedavati. The painful truth was obvious to him. Vedavati had no idea who Raavan was. She

didn't recognise him at all.

Kumbhakarna bowed and said politely, 'Great Kanyakumari, it is—'

'I am not the Kanyakumari anymore,' interjected Vedavati, smiling warmly.

Kumbhakarna nodded. 'Of course, noble Vedavatiji. But I don't know if we can stay for lunch. Because we have to—'

'We'll stay!'

If Kumbhakarna had not felt the firm hand of his elder brother squeezing his shoulder, he would probably not have recognised the voice. It was an alarmingly childish squeak. Not the usual baritone of the powerful Raavan.

'Wonderful!' Vedavati smiled at Raavan. Then she turned and walked away.

Kumbhakarna stared at his brother, who was now smiling absurdly at Vedavati's retreating form. He had a bizarre look on his face. Of ecstasy. He couldn't have been happier.

Kumbhakarna swallowed a lump in his throat. He had read somewhere that there was nothing worse than unrequited love. But they were wrong. There was something worse: Unrequited love that was not even aware of it being one-sided. He couldn't watch his brother, the man he admired above all, succumbing to such heart-break.

He looked away, his mind racing to find solutions to this strange new predicament.



## Chapter 13

‘It was quite shocking,’ said Vedavati. ‘We were going about our work as usual, when suddenly these people emerged out of nowhere and killed one of our colleagues. This is what the powerless are subjected to in our society.’

Raavan and Kumbhakarna were in Todee again. They had been coming back regularly for the last few days, under the pretext of wanting to learn the techniques of check dam construction.

On this particular day, they were having lunch with Shochikesh and Vedavati. Far enough from the work camp to be away from the dust.

Kumbhakarna had been curious to know more about safety measures at the work site. And they had got talking about past incidents and accidents that they had themselves encountered, or heard about. It was Shochikesh who had brought up the episode of a workman who had lost his life while working on a wharf three years ago. At Chilika Lake. Near Governor Krakachabahu’s residence.

Kumbhakarna had stiffened at the mention of the incident, though he had controlled himself in time. Raavan, however, had remained unruffled as they listened to Shochikesh, and then Vedavati, talk about that day, about the cruel men whose horses had trampled over the hapless young worker.

Shochikesh had gone on to expound some sketchy details of the robbery at the governor’s residence. Kumbhakarna had tried his best to pretend he was hearing it all for the first time. With appropriate expressions of shock and outrage.

‘From what we found out later,’ said Shochikesh, ‘the attack may have been the work of Governor Krakachabahu’s enemies from his native land, Nahar. When two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. We were the grass.’

‘But this is adharma,’ said Vedavati. ‘Whatever quarrels the Kshatriyas have with each other, they have to ensure that no innocents are harmed.’

Raavan nodded in agreement, his expression giving nothing away.

‘That’s true,’ said Shochikesh. ‘But who cares about dharma these days? We have forgotten our traditions and culture. We are an embarrassment to our ancestors.’

Kumbhakarna once again thanked his stars that he had been on the ship during the raid at Chilika, too far away for these people to recognise him. He assumed Raavan had ridden by so fast that nobody had got a good look at him, especially not Vedavati. Also, Raavan’s beard was fuller than it had been three years ago. And his face looked very different with the handlebar moustache he now sported.

*Maybe it’s a blessing that she doesn’t recognise him at all. Either from father’s ashram or from Chilika.*

—§I—

Vedavati was in the last stages of her pregnancy by now, and judging by the kicks that often took her by surprise, she was carrying a strong baby. And a strong baby needed robust nutrition. Rice cooked in milk, with a dash of cardamom and ginger, was considered excellent for the mother and her unborn child. But the small village of Todee did not grow or have access to cardamom. Black cardamom was usually grown in the foothills of eastern Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. It was expensive and difficult to obtain.

But what was difficult for others was easy for Raavan. He had sent out his men and procured five sacks of the fragrant spice. It was a huge amount, considering how little was required for one meal. He presented the cardamom to Vedavati, telling her that it was for the use of the entire village. He had also got some tools which he knew would make the construction work easier.

It was a deeply grateful Vedavati who sat with Raavan over lunch the next day. Shochikesh was away in Vaidyanath. And Kumbhakarna had suddenly, and conveniently, remembered that he had some unfinished work in the village.

As the two sat eating quietly, Raavan retained his calm demeanour, despite the storm in his heart.

‘Jai,’ said Vedavati, using what she had been told was Raavan’s name. ‘Are you from the Indraprastha region? From your accent, it appears that you are.’

Raavan did not want to reveal his antecedents to Vedavati. Not yet. ‘I have spent some time there. But not much.’

Vedavati looked uncertainly at him. ‘Jai, we are grateful for your generosity, of course, but I do hope you haven’t stretched yourself too much for us. If you don’t mind my asking, what is it that you do? How can you afford to

do so much charity?’

‘Oh, I work in... trade. Importing things people here may need, and exporting items from here that people in other lands may fancy.’

‘I see. And it’s profitable?’

*If I had misplaced that money spent on the cardamom and the tools, I wouldn’t even have noticed it.*

Raavan kept his thoughts to himself, and said, ‘Yes. It’s a little difficult with the new licenses and restrictions. But I can make ends meet.’

‘That’s good to know,’ said Vedavati. People who are innately decent and straightforward tend to accept others at face value. ‘Thank you, Jai. Your help means a lot to my village.’

Raavan shrugged. *It’s nothing.*

‘Not everyone who can help, does,’ continued Vedavati. ‘Not in these times.’

‘Not everyone is... Jai,’ Raavan said, laughing, and stopping himself just in time from giving away his real name.

Vedavati smiled, ignoring his conceit. ‘These villagers have suffered greatly. They are the real victims of all that’s going on these days. And most people don’t care about helping those less fortunate than themselves. The tradition of charity is slowly being forgotten in India. We are forgetting our dharma.’

Raavan blanched but held his tongue.

‘I don’t mean someone like you,’ said Vedavati, misinterpreting Raavan’s expression. ‘But across the land today, dharma has been reduced to just rituals and talk. The philosophy that underpins the rituals, and the reason why we follow them, is being forgotten.’

‘Oh, I agree with you,’ Raavan said. ‘There is a great deal of uncalled out hypocrisy everywhere. But...’

‘But what?’ asked Vedavati.

‘Well, I don’t think these villagers should be thought of as victims.’

Vedavati stopped eating, surprised. ‘You think they aren’t?’

‘Oh, they *are* victims.’

Vedavati smiled, shook her head and resumed eating. ‘I don’t understand what you are saying.’

‘Of course they are victims,’ Raavan said. ‘Just like every other person in the world. All of us *are* victims in some way or the other. But that doesn’t mean we should *think* of ourselves as victims.’

Vedavati looked up at Raavan, intrigued.

He continued, ‘All of us have been through times when life seemed unfair.

In such situations, we can choose to see ourselves as victims and blame the rest of the world. We can drown ourselves in the false comfort of knowing we are not responsible for our difficulties and expect others to change our lives. Or, we can pick ourselves up. Be strong. And fight the world.'

'It's true that all of us face adversity in life, Jai, but surely not everyone's troubles are the same. Some people are at a greater disadvantage than others. And they need our assistance. Of course, nobody should expect others to solve their problems entirely but the strong must help...'

'...help the "cult of victimhood"?' interrupted Raavan.

'What?'

'The lot who just want to whine and complain.' Raavan put his hands up and mimed in a high-pitched voice, 'Oh, poor me. Look at me. Look at how much I'm suffering. Somebody come and take care of me. I'm a victim of society.'

Vedavati bit her lip as though to stop a smile from forming, then frowned. 'Jai, we shouldn't indulge the weaknesses of others, but we shouldn't mock them either.'

'I'm... I'm not... Noble Kanyakumari, perhaps it was wrong of me to make fun of them. I'm sorry. But this is the way I see it: There is a lion and a deer within each of us. Only if we nurture the lion will we make something of ourselves. If we indulge the deer, we'll be running and hiding all our lives.'

'So... the hunter and the hunted.'

'Yes.'

'And we should always aim to be the hunter, I suppose? Because the hunted cannot possibly have any virtues to recommend them?'

'If we cannot fight for ourselves, how will we protect and provide for those who depend on us?'

'So that's how you see it? Every hunter is a magnificent warrior, and the hunted deserve no respect?'

'You don't agree, great Ve... Veda... Kanyakumari?'

Vedavati looked at him sympathetically. She thought Raavan had a stutter that became acute whenever he had to speak a name, especially one that began with a 'v'. So she had yielded to being called Kanyakumari by him.

'Jai, have you heard of the Panchatantra?'

Raavan nodded readily. 'Of course!'

Panchatantra, literally the five treatises, was a part of the primary learning of every child in India. It contained stories of talking animals, with a moral lesson embedded in each tale.

'Sometimes,' said Vedavati, 'we don't have to depend on animal fables to

learn lessons in dharma. Sometimes, we can learn from real animals too.'

Raavan leaned forward, his curiosity aroused.

'This happened a long time ago,' said Vedavati. 'I was still a Kanyakumari. I had travelled a great deal, including to the wonderful lands of the brave Andhras. Close to the river port of Amaravati.'

'I've been there. It's stunningly beautiful. Truly a city worthy of its name.'

'Yes, there are people who believe that the modern city of Amaravati is located in exactly the same place where, sometime in the faraway past, Lord Indra, the king of the Devas, lived.'

'Yes, I have heard that too. For all you know, it could be true.'

'Anyway, while we were there, the local ruler wished to take us on a tour of the jungle that lies between the holy Krishna and Godavari rivers. Much of it was open grassland, and we travelled on elephant back. Sometime during the day, we saw an old lion, with his cubs.' Vedavati paused before asking, 'Do you know what happens to many lions in their old age?'

'Yes.' Raavan nodded. 'There is no sight more painful than that of a powerful hunter past its prime. I've seen it often enough: an old lion challenged by another, usually younger, lion. If he is defeated but lucky enough to survive, he has to flee the territory. The young challenger takes over the pride, and the lionesses switch their allegiance to him. This younger lion might even kill the cubs of the older lion. The mothers watch from the side lines, helpless. They probably see it as a command from their new master—new rules in the new pride.'

'The ways of the jungle can be cruel.'

'Now, if this older lion you saw had his cubs with him, he must have managed to save them somehow. Maybe he and his cubs together escaped the wrath of the young challenger.'

'Very possible,' Vedavati said. 'So, as you know, hunting is difficult for an old lion. And if you happen to be one with a few cubs to feed, life can become a huge struggle. This lion's cubs were starving. He was starving. They were weak. And desperate.'

'What happened next, noble Kanyakumari?'

'When we saw this lion, he was at the other end of the grassland, with his three cubs behind him. He had just spotted a few deer that had probably got separated from the main herd. A mother, with her babies. There were four fawns. One of them was clearly weaker than the others. The runt of the family.'

'Food for his cubs...'

Vedavati noticed that Raavan's first thought was for the lion and his hungry cubs. He seemed to identify with the hunter, even when the hunter was old and

weak. ‘Of course. But remember, the lion was old. A hunter past his best days. What do you think he did?’

‘Why, he would have gone for the weakest fawn, of course. It would provide less meat, but at least he could be certain of catching it and feeding his cubs. A little food is better than no food. His cubs and he would survive another day. Become a little stronger.’

Vedavati smiled. ‘You understand the hunter’s mind-set well, Jai.’

Raavan returned her smile, though he wasn’t entirely certain she meant it as a compliment.

‘So, as you correctly guessed, the lion charged at the runt among the deer,’ continued Vedavati. ‘The doe, sensing danger, lifted her head up, her eyes searching for any movement. On spotting the lion, she moved instantly, alerting the fawns, and they fled towards the tree line, running and leaping over each other. They were swift. All except one. The lion increased his pace. He was weak, but he was still a lion. He began closing the distance to the tiny fawn. It was just a matter of time, a few seconds perhaps, before he would catch up with his prey. It seemed that the lion and his cubs would finally get their meal.’

‘And then?’

‘Then, much to our surprise, the doe slowed down. The bigger fawns had reached the edge of the clearing, and would vanish into the foliage any moment. Away from the lion. But the runt was still at risk. The mother stopped running, then came to a stop.’

Raavan found that he was holding his breath. ‘Then?’

‘The lion turned towards the doe. A full-grown deer would last him and his cubs much longer than the little one. He changed course. Since the mother deer was practically stationary, he was upon her in no time at all.’

‘Didn’t the doe bolt away at the last minute? Now that she had deflected attention from her baby?’

Vedavati shook her head. ‘No. She just stood there, watching the little one get to safety.’

‘What did the lion do?’

‘The lion also came to a halt. Just a few metres from the doe. He seemed confused. The runt, meanwhile, had caught up with his siblings. They turned to look at their mother, bleating frantically, as if pleading with her to flee. But the doe remained where she was. She made a sound, just once. Like she was ordering her children to run away. Perhaps she did not want them to see what was to follow.’

Raavan remained silent. *What a mother...*

Vedavati said, ‘The story doesn’t end there.’

‘So what happened next?’

‘The lion looked at the fawns, way out of his reach now. Crying and bleating for their mother. Then he looked at the mother deer, standing just one short leap away. And he seemed paralysed. Like he couldn’t bring himself to kill the splendid deer in front of him. And then, he turned to look at his own cubs in the distance. Hungry and waiting to be fed.’

Raavan watched the changing expressions on Vedavati’s face as she relived those moments in the jungle.

‘What should the lion do? What does dharma say? Should he be a good father and kill to feed his starving children? Or should he exercise his goodness and gift life to a magnificent mother?’

‘I... I don’t know,’ answered Raavan.

‘We assume that animals cannot think in terms of dharma. Perhaps they are not able to *express* dharma, since they cannot speak. But why should we assume that dharma does not touch them too? Dharma is universal. It touches everyone.’

Raavan remained silent, listening with his head and his heart.

Vedavati continued to speak. ‘Dharma is complicated. It is often not about the *what*, but the *why*. If the lion had been hunting for pleasure—which most animals are not capable of—we might call it an exercise in adharma. Since he was hunting to feed his starving children, it’s fair to say he was following his dharma. If the deer had allowed circumstances to overwhelm her and not attempted to save her children, it would have been adharma. But her sacrifice to save her children can only be thought of as dharma. In the field of dharma, intentions matter as much, if not more, than the act itself. But one thing is clear. *Only* if you put your duty above yourself do you even have a chance of attaining a life of dharma. Selfishness is the one thing that’s guaranteed to take you away from it.’

‘Life was unfair to both the lion and the deer,’ Raavan remarked thoughtfully. ‘Both were victims.’

‘Life is unfair to everyone. As Sikhi Buddha said, the fundamental reality of life is *dukha*. There is no escaping the *grief* that permeates every corner of this illusory world. Accepting this basic truth is the first step towards trying to overcome it.’

‘Everyone is struggling... I suppose we must try to understand and learn, rather than judge.’

‘Precisely. If you don’t judge, you can open the space in your heart to help others. And that will take you towards dharma.’

‘But how did it all end, noble Kanyakumari? Did the lion kill the doe?’

‘That’s not the point of this story, Jai.’

Raavan smiled. And stopped asking questions.

—८१—

'This is taking too long, Dada,' said Kumbhakarna. They had been in the Vaidyanath area for nearly a month already. 'Mareech uncle had wanted us to return as soon as possible. There's that business in Africa—'

Raavan stopped him with a gesture. 'It's nothing that Mareech cannot handle on his own.'

'But Dada, what about our crew? And Samichi. They're all sitting around doing nothing, probably wondering why they are cooped up in this guesthouse with no—'

Raavan interrupted his brother. 'Just give them something to do, Kumbha. Send them on some short trade mission or something.'

Kumbhakarna fell silent. Raavan looked dreamily out of the window. It was late at night. All they could hear was the chirping of crickets. Occasionally, an owl hooted in the distance. Raavan had returned to the guesthouse in the evening after a long conversation with Vedavati. He stared at the moon and sighed.

'Isn't it beautiful today?'

Kumbhakarna turned and stared at the moon. It looked pretty ordinary to him. He exhaled softly and looked back at Raavan. 'Dada...'

'Shhh!' Raavan picked up the Raavanhatha lying next to him. 'Listen. I've composed something new.'

He strummed the instrument, as though testing its sound. And began.

From the first time he had heard it, Kumbhakarna had thought of the Raavanhatha as an instrument of grief. It tugged at your heart and brought tears to your eyes.

But tonight, Raavan's deep, attractive voice, the lilt of the melody he had composed, and the whisper of the wind, combined with the ethereal sound of the Raavanhatha to create an island of ecstasy and bliss. He managed to coax the musical instrument of grief to create a melodious tune of joy.

The possibility to turn negative into positive always exists. But it takes a Goddess to inspire the change.



## Chapter 14

What do you do when a woman you love deeply, a woman you have dreamt of and worshipped, is lost to you forever? You steel your heart and reconcile yourself to life without her.

Then, by a twist of fate, you meet her again. And you find out that she is committed to someone else. You try to ignore this truth. Ignore the existence of another in her life. Suppress the instinctive hatred you feel.

But you cannot keep away from her. You get to know her better. Fall even more deeply in love with her—if that's possible. And then, you meet the other man. The... husband. And he is everything you did not expect. He is handsome. Honest. Kind. Generous. He is noble, in a way that you know you can never be.

And he loves her. Perhaps as much as you love her. He respects her. Perhaps more than you respect her.

And somewhere deep in your heart, a soft, monstrous, unwelcome voice is heard. You are forced to listen to the truth that you don't even want to acknowledge: that maybe, just maybe, he is better for her than you are.

What do you do then? What do you do?

The only logical thing to do is to hate and despise that man, even more than you did earlier.

It was logical. Raavan told himself that.

Prithvi, Vedavati's husband, had returned to the village. When he heard this, Raavan decided to stay away for a few days, pleading some personal work. Until, one day, he took the bit between his teeth and made his way to the worksite with Kumbhakarna.

It was late in the afternoon and a welcome breeze cooled the hot day. Shochikesh was away, ostensibly to make arrangements for some materials that were required for work to continue on the check dam. But Raavan knew better.

Shochikesh's son, Sukarman, had been caught stealing from the temple donation-box again; he claimed he had gambling debts to pay off. Shochikesh was trying to get the money back quietly, before word got around. Raavan kept the news to himself. He didn't want to cause any distress to the pregnant Vedavati.

'Thank you once again, Jai,' said Prithvi, addressing Raavan. Like many people from the Baloch region in the far west of India, Prithvi was tall, with clean-cut features and a clear, fair complexion. Even Raavan had to admit that he was a handsome man. 'The tools you donated have really helped pick up the pace of work here. It's heartening to meet a businessman who believes in dharma and charity.'

Raavan smiled and waved his hand awkwardly, not sure how to react to compliments from a man he loathed.

'So how was your trip, Prithviji?' asked Kumbhakarna.

Prithvi glanced at Vedavati before replying. 'It went very well. I made a good profit this time. Around six hundred and fifty gold coins.'

Raavan found it hard not to snigger. *That's a good profit? I earn as much in an hour.*

'Finally, I have enough to take care of my wife and child,' said Prithvi, taking Vedavati's hand in his.

Vedavati rested her head on Prithvi's shoulder. Raavan looked away, focusing on some birds on the treetops close by.

'And you have returned just in time,' said Kumbhakarna.

'Yes!' said Prithvi proudly. 'Just a few more weeks now before our child enters the world.'

Kumbhakarna nodded in agreement. 'By the way, I was thinking that some more tools might help advance the work on the check dam. If you have some time, I could show you what I mean.'

Prithvi looked at Vedavati.

'I'd much rather rest, Prithvi,' said Vedavati. 'My back is killing me.'

Prithvi smiled and caressed Vedavati's face gently. 'I'll be back soon.'

After Prithvi had left with Kumbhakarna, Raavan relaxed a little. 'How bad is it? Should I send for some medicines from Vaidyanath?'

Vedavati shook her head. 'No, I don't think that's necessary. We'll be leaving for Vaidyanath in a week in any case.'

Raavan nodded, trying not to let his feelings show.

'He is a good man, you know,' said Vedavati.

Raavan looked at her, startled. 'Of course he is. I would never think otherwise.'

‘And I love him. He is my husband.’

‘I... of course... I mean...’

Vedavati held Raavan’s gaze steadily. She was making sure her message carried without hurting his feelings.

‘So where did we first meet?’ she asked suddenly.

Raavan was taken aback. He wasn’t sure what she meant.

‘I asked Vijay one day, why it is that you both look at me like you know me from before. From my days as a Kanyakumari, perhaps. For some reason I can’t be sure of, you seem familiar to me as well. Not Vijay, to be honest. I would certainly have remembered him.’ Vedavati was too polite to state the obvious—Kumbhakarna’s Naga features made it difficult for anyone to forget him. ‘So, I am certain you and I have met before. But where did we meet?’

The lie came smoothly to Raavan’s tongue. ‘It could be when I came to Vaidyanath many years ago. I visited the Kanyakumari temple and you blessed me. It was so long ago, though. We were both children. It’s amazing that you find anything even remotely familiar about me.’

Vedavati stared into Raavan’s eyes. For a moment, he thought she was going to tell him that she knew he was lying. But she merely nodded.

‘So you are a devotee of Lord Rudra?’ Vedavati asked.

Raavan smiled and touched his ekmukhi rudraaksh pendant. ‘Yes, I am. Jai Shri Rudra!’

‘Jai Shri Rudra,’ repeated Vedavati, smiling and clasping her own rudraaksh pendant. ‘So, let me ask you: Are you a devotee of His actions or what He represents as the Mahadev?’

Raavan frowned. ‘Is there a difference?’

‘Of course there is.’

‘How so? A person is defined by what he or she does. By his vocation or career. Karma defines the individual. A person without karma may as well be dead.’

Vedavati smiled. ‘I didn’t say that karma is not important. But it’s not the *only* thing that’s important. There are other things too.’

‘And what are those other things?’

‘*Swatatva*, in old Sanskrit. Literally, the *essence of your Self*. Or more simply, your Being.’

‘Being?’

‘Being is a complex word, and not easy to understand. Like dharma.’

‘I understand dharma.’

‘Do you?’ Vedavati smiled.

‘All right. I admit dharma is a complex concept. We could debate its

nuances for many lifetimes. But surely, Being is not so complex.'

'It is. But to understand Being, you first need to understand karma. Your actions are your karma. It is what you do. Tell me, why do you perform any action that concerns others? Because you expect a reaction—hopefully, a reaction that will make you happy.'

'So, are you saying that karma is transactional and hence, selfish?'

*Does she know that I donated things to this pathetic village only to be close to her?*

Vedavati shook her head. 'Don't get into what is good or bad. It is what it is. That's all. Karma is most certainly transactional.'

'And Being isn't?'

'No, it isn't. That's what makes it so important. And powerful.'

'I don't understand.'

'I'm sure you've been told that the only way for the mind to find peace is by learning to be calm and centred.'

'Yes,' said Raavan, rolling his eyes.

'Why did you roll your eyes?'

'I didn't mean to. I'm sorry.'

Vedavati laughed. 'I didn't say it was wrong. I just asked why you did it.'

Raavan laughed softly. 'Because it's very easy to counsel people that they should be calm and centred. But no one tells you how to do it!'

'Exactly. That is the problem. People keep thinking that they have to do something to achieve that state. Be successful in their profession, perhaps, or go on a holiday, or make the right friends, or find a different spouse.... But even after they make that change, they find they are not calm. So then they think they have to do something more. Something different. It's a never-ending cycle. Basically, calmness and centeredness are always elusive because people assume they have to do something, gain good karma, to get there.'

'So, the problem is with our focus on karma?'

'Yes. It's very difficult to be calm and centred if your entire focus is on that. For karma is action in the hope of something in return. Like, if you give charity to someone, you expect at least respect in return. It's a transaction. And if the result of your actions is not what you expected, you feel let down and become unhappy. Even worse, if the karma you get in return for your actions is, in fact, what you expected, you discover that the happiness you derive from it is fleeting. If dissatisfaction is guaranteed, how can you find peace of mind?'

'How?'

'Simply by Being what you are meant to Be. By staying true to your Swatatva.'

Raavan leaned back. The beauty of the logic filled his mind.

Vedavati continued, ‘I am not saying we shouldn’t focus on action. Without our karma, we may as well be dead. But karma should not be the centre of our lives. If we truly discover our Being, our Swatatva, and live in consonance with what we are meant to be, then everything becomes easy. We don’t have to try hard to carry out our karma. Because we will not do anything in the vain hope of something else. We will do it simply because it is in consonance with our Being. With what we were born to Be.’

Raavan had never felt as centred or calm as in these last few weeks with Vedavati. She had answers for him. Answers to questions that he didn’t even know he had. ‘And what do you think I am born to Be, great Kanyakumari? What is my Swatatva supposed to be?’

‘A hero.’

Raavan burst out laughing. Vedavati remained silent, confident in the truth of her assertion.

Raavan controlled his mirth and said, ‘I apologise, Kanyakumari. I am not a hero. You certainly are. But not me. I am as close as anyone can be to a...’ Raavan stopped before the word ‘villain’ could escape his mouth.

Vedavati leaned forward. ‘Your Swatatva is demanding it of you. You want to be a hero. You want to be an *arya*. You want to be *noble*. That’s why, whatever your reasons for leaving the Sapt Sindhu, you came back here. I have been told that you live in Lanka. That’s where all the rich people in the Sapt Sindhu are escaping to. But you keep coming back here. Why? Because you want the acceptance and respect of the aryas here. You will never have peace of mind till you accept who you are.’

Raavan remained silent. His eyes glazed over. He was a small child again. Desperately seeking the approval of Vedavati. Of the Kanyakumari. His heart picked up pace. He could smell her fragrance again. The scent from all those years ago. He could hear her commands, her young voice, in his mind.

*You are better than this. At least try.*

*No, I am not.*

*Yes, you are. This is who you want to be.*

*I just want to hurt my father. I hate him.*

*Do you want to defeat him?*

*Yes.*

*Defeat your father, by all means. But don’t do it by hurting him. Do it by being better than him.*

‘Jai?’

Vedavati’s voice pulled Raavan out of his internal, tumultuous world.

‘Sorry... what?’

‘I am not suggesting that you desire the respect of the nobility in the Sapt Sindhu. There is nothing “arya” about them, no real nobility. But I can see you want the respect of the true aryas. Those who still remember our old ways. Those who are genuinely noble. Who may not be powerful today, but are dharmic. You want their acceptance. Jai, all you have to do is to accept who you are. And you will find peace.’

She looked at him intently. ‘At least try.’

—४१—

‘That didn’t go as planned,’ said Kumbhakarna.

He had just come back from Todee. Raavan had sent him to offer a job to Prithvi and had been waiting for him eagerly at the guesthouse. But the news was disappointing.

‘Did you tell them everything?’ asked Raavan. ‘Including the bit about the money?’

‘Yes I did, Dada. I know how important this is for you.’

‘All that idiot will have to do is to be my personal secretary,’ said Raavan. ‘Write letters. I am sure even he can manage that. I am willing to pay him two thousand gold coins every year for it! Why did he say no?’

‘Perhaps the offer was too kind for Vedavatiji.’

‘The Kanyakumari? Why did she get involved in this?’

‘Well, Prithviji was very enthusiastic about the offer. He said they could leave for Lanka a few months after the birth of their baby. Then he went to ask Vedavatiji about it. And she said no.’

‘But why? I thought she wants me to...’

‘Wants you to what?’

‘Nothing. Why did she refuse?’

‘She wouldn’t say.’

‘But did you ask her?’

‘I did, Dada.’

Raavan looked away. Staring out of the window.

‘And then she said the strangest thing.’

‘What?’

‘She told me to tell you that it took her some time, but she finally remembered.’

‘Remembered what?’

‘About the hare and the ants.’

Raavan turned to look at Kumbhakarna, stunned. He had been recognised. How much did she know? Did she know about the robbery too? She would hate him if she did. ‘Did she say anything about Chilika? About Krakachabahu?’

‘No. Why would she? I don’t think she connects that with us.’

Raavan remained silent.

‘But, Dada, what did she mean by the hare and the ants?’

Raavan did not respond.



## Chapter 15

‘I thought you wanted to encourage me to do good,’ said Raavan.

Raavan had come to Todee by himself to meet Vedavati. He knew he could not prolong his stay much longer and would have to leave for Lanka soon. He had been away too long. But how could he leave without her? Raavan was desperate—he had to convince her, somehow.

‘I can’t travel,’ said Vedavati.

‘After your baby is born? Perhaps you can come then.’

Vedavati remained silent.

‘Please... I am begging you.’

‘You know you don’t need me.’

‘I do! Please... Nothing needs to change. You can remain married to him. To... Prithvi. I will not make any demands on you. I just need you to be in Lanka. Just be there... just let me look at you every day. That’s all I ask for. Please... please... Veda... Ve... Please, great Kanyakumari.’

‘You don’t need me,’ Vedavati repeated calmly.

There were tears in Raavan’s eyes. ‘I do... I know what I need.’

‘No. You don’t know what you need. For then you would know that you already have it.’

‘But I don’t!’ Raavan couldn’t conceal his agitation. ‘I need you! I need you!’

‘You don’t need me. You need yourself.’

‘What does that mean? I don’t...’

‘Think about it. What have I been to you so far? Only an image in your mind. It’s you who wanted to be a better version of yourself. All you needed was an excuse. An excuse to motivate you, help you improve what you had become as a reaction to what your father did to you. You hung on to me as that excuse.

What I am trying to tell you is that you don't need the excuse anymore. In fact, you should never need someone else to better yourself. That is dangerous. I could die tomorrow. Then what will you...'

Raavan clenched his fists. 'I will destroy anyone who hurts you. I will rip their—'

'Why do you assume someone will hurt me? I could die of an illness. There will be nobody to blame then, right?'

Raavan fell silent.

'When you start on the most important journey of your life, you cannot be dependent on anyone else. For you would be binding your *purpose*, your *swadharma*, to the fate of another person. That is dangerous. Especially for someone as important as you are.'

'I am not...' Raavan stopped himself from cursing. 'I am not important. I am not even a good person. You don't know the kinds of things I've done.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself. You've been taking care of your mother and your younger brother since you were a child. You have built a trading empire almost single-handedly. You have strength, you have courage, and you are a capable man.'

'I... I have done some terrible things to build my empire. I am...' Raavan was struggling to be completely honest for the first time in his life. 'I am a monster. I know I am a monster. I enjoy being a monster. I need you to save me. You are my chance. My only chance, if I am to make something... something noble of myself.'

'That's where you are wrong. I am not your chance. You are your own chance. You think you are a monster? Which great man does not have a monster inside him?'

Raavan stared at Vedavati. Silent.

'What you term a monster is the fire every successful man has within him,' continued Vedavati. 'A fire that will not let him rest. A fire that drives him to work hard. To be smart. To be relentless. Focused. Disciplined. For those are the ingredients of success. That fire is like a monster that will not allow you to lead an ordinary life. But there is one thing that differentiates a successful man from a great man. One key thing: Does the monster control you or do you control the monster? Without the monster, you would have been ordinary. With the monster, you have a chance to attain greatness. Not a guarantee, but a chance. To seize that chance, you need to control the monster and use your unique and enormous abilities, in the cause of dharma.'

'I can't do it without you.'

'Me? I'm nobody.'

‘You are the Kanyakumari! You are a living Goddess! You are noble in a way I could never be. You are kind and generous. You are the purest person I have ever met. I am an impure, selfish bastard.’

Vedavati looked at him steadily without saying anything.

Raavan immediately turned contrite. ‘I didn’t mean to curse. I’m sorry.’

‘There is no need to use an expletive to emphasise a point.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Vedavati smiled. ‘So, you think I’m pure? Have you noticed that there are no fish to be found in water that is too pure?’

Raavan was quiet. It took him a few moments to realise that Vedavati was right.

‘I may be pure, but have I made any real difference in the lives of people? I may be noble in my actions, but I am not capable of commanding the attention of those outside my village. Only those who can reach millions of people can improve the lives of millions of people. Nobility without capability is limiting, it only results in good theory.’

‘But...’

‘Listen to me, Raavan. Truly great people, who have left a positive stamp on history and in the hearts of millions of followers, combined a cold, ruthless mind with a warm, dharmic heart.’

‘I don’t have it. I don’t have a heart. I don’t...’

Vedavati leaned forward and took Raavan’s hand in hers. It was the first time she had touched him. His heartbeat seized for a moment.

‘You *do* have a warm heart, Raavan. Don’t use it just to pump blood through your body. Let it also propel dharma through your soul. Rise to do good. Do good for this land of ours, which is suffering in poverty, chaos and disease. Help the poor. Help the needy. Do good.’

Tears pooled in Raavan’s eyes.

‘Lead India back to greatness, make it truly *Aryavarta* once again. Make it a *noble land* once more. And then I will come and live in Lanka. Not as your Goddess. But as your devotee. My husband and I will worship you.’

Raavan didn’t know what to say. He was surprised to see himself through Vedavati’s eyes. Was he really as capable as all that?

‘I have faith in you. You can do it. This long-suffering motherland of ours has enough villains already. It desperately needs a hero. Rise to become one.’

Raavan sat quietly, listening.

‘You are a devout worshipper of Lord Rudra, aren’t you?’ asked Vedavati, her voice kind and gentle.

Raavan looked up and nodded. Yes.

‘I am sure you know what the Lord’s name means. Rudra is the “One who roars”. The One who roars to protect good people. And what do you think Raavan means? What have you been told it means?’

Raavan didn’t say anything.

‘What did your father tell you? What does it mean?’

‘He told me it means “One who scares people”. Raavan is one who puts fear into people.’

‘Your father was only half right. The root of the word “Raavan” is “Ru”. So Raavan would be “the One who roars to frighten people”.

‘Are you saying that the root of my name and that of Lord Rudra’s is the same?’

‘It is. But the question is, what will you roar for, Raavan? Will you roar to frighten people? Or will you, like Lord Rudra, roar to shield those who need protection?’

Vedavati’s words sent a flood of positive energy and inspiration coursing through Raavan. More than ever, he felt connected to the Mahadev, the God of Gods.

‘Roar, noble Raavan,’ said Vedavati. ‘But roar in favour of dharma. Roar to protect the innocent, the poor, the needy. Be a true follower of the Mahadev. Be aggressive, but for the good of others. Be tough, but only to nurture the weak. Be fearsome, but only to fight for the virtuous. That is what Lord Rudra stood for. Follow the Lord’s example.’

Raavan didn’t say a word.

‘Jai Shri Rudra,’ said Vedavati.

‘Jai Shri Rudra!’

Vedavati smiled and gently let go of Raavan’s hand.

The first step on the path for all true followers of the Mahadev is a ritual sacrifice of the ego. Raavan knew what he had to do. He kneeled in front of the seated Vedavati. Taking a deep breath, he bent his hitherto unyielding back and brought his head down to the Kanyakumari’s feet. For the first time in his life, he sought the blessings of another living person.

Vedavati put both her hands on Raavan’s head and blessed him. ‘May you always live in dharma. May dharma always live in you.’

Raavan drew himself up to his full six feet and three inches, and pulled out a sheet of papyrus from the pouch tied to his cummerbund. ‘Please accept this, noble Vedavati. Don’t say no.’

For the first time, Raavan’s heart was in control as he spoke aloud that divine name. He didn’t stutter.

‘No to what?’ she asked.

‘My first act of genuine goodness.’

‘Why do you run yourself down like that? You have done good before. You have done good for your brother. For this village. For...’

‘Those were selfish acts. I protected those who were my own. Even the stuff I handed out here was meant to impress you. When I wrote and sealed this hundi, I had a selfish reason for it, but I don’t anymore. I am giving it to you because I know you will do good with it.’

‘Raavan, I cannot take money from you.’

‘It’s not for you, noble Vedavati. This is a hundi for fifty thousand gold coins, and it’s for this entire region. I know you will use it well.’

‘But...’

‘Please don’t refuse. Don’t stop me in my first act of genuine kindness. I will consider it a blessing.’

Vedavati took the hundi from Raavan’s hand, touched it to her forehead and said, ‘It is my privilege, noble Raavan. I will use it for the good of the common people.’

‘That means a lot to me. I intend to come back here as an arya and ask for what is due to me then.’

‘And it will not be denied. Prithvi and I will be honoured.’

Raavan folded his hands together in a namaste. ‘I will take your leave now, gentle Vedavati. My blessings for your unborn child. He or she is truly lucky to have a mother like you and a father like Prithvi.’

‘Thank you, great Raavan.’

Every time Vedavati said his name out loud, a pleasurable current ran through Raavan’s being. ‘Till we meet again, Vedavati. Jai Shri Rudra.’

‘Jai Shri Rudra.’

As Raavan walked away from her, he felt a lightness in his being that he had never felt before. Positive energy coursed through him. Even the pain in his navel had ceased to bother him. He walked with a spring in his step, the name of the Mahadev on his lips and the Kanyakumari in his heart.

A man with a purpose.

A man walking with dharma.

Neither he nor Vedavati noticed Sukarman, Shochikesh’s son, hiding behind the bushes. He had been there the entire time and had heard everything. But only four words from the conversation reverberated in his mind. *Fifty thousand gold coins!*

‘This is generous,’ said Kumbhakarna, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

‘This is only the beginning,’ Raavan responded, a serene smile on his face.

Kumbhakarna had never seen his brother smile as much as he had over this past week. In the seven days since Raavan had last met Vedavati, he had transformed into a new person—full of hope and enthusiasm. He had been planning how to use his immense wealth to help India. He was contemplating the conquest of a small kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu, to be set up as a model dominion for the common people

He also wanted to build a large hospital attached to the Vaidyanath temple, which would treat poor people from across the Sapt Sindhu, free of cost. The amount he was thinking of donating was sizeable and had led to Kumbhakarna’s comment on his generosity.

‘Are you sure, Dada?’ asked Kumbhakarna. ‘This is a huge amount of money.’

‘It’s only a drop in my ocean of wealth, Kumbha. You know that. Now, take the hundi to the local moneylender and get the gold. We will donate it and then leave for Lanka. There is a lot to do and not enough time.’

Kumbhakarna smiled and nodded. ‘Your word is my command, great devotee of the Ka... Ka... Kanyakumari.’

Raavan punched Kumbhakarna on his arm. ‘Stop teasing me, will you!’

Kumbhakarna was still laughing as he left the room.

—४१—

‘Wow,’ said the moneylender. ‘Two hundis from the great Raavan on the same day.’

Kumbhakarna took the receipt from the moneylender and put his seal on it. The moneylender would use this signed receipt and Raavan’s original hundi to get the amount reimbursed through Raavan’s closest trading office, in Magadh. And of course, earn a generous commission on the transaction.

‘Eighty thousand gold coins,’ continued the chatty moneylender, ‘is a lot of money for our small Vaidyanath. And all in the same day!’

‘And a good commission for you as well,’ said Kumbhakarna, good-humouredly.

‘Yes!’ beamed the moneylender. ‘I can finally buy the piece of land my wife and I have been eyeing for some time now.’

Kumbhakarna smiled as he handed the receipt over and took the outsized bags of coins. Two soldiers from his posse of armed men picked up the bags and moved towards their bullock cart. Kumbhakarna thanked the moneylender and

turned to leave.

Then suddenly, he stopped. His sixth sense prickled.

'The woman who came earlier to redeem Raavan's other hundi,' said Kumbhakarna. 'Did she—'

'Not a woman,' interrupted the moneylender. 'It was a man. He was here just an hour ago.'

*It was Prithviji then.*

'A very young man he was too,' continued the moneylender.

Kumbhakarna felt a sense of foreboding enter his heart. 'Show me the receipt.'

The moneylender shook his head. 'I can't show you the receipt. It would...'

He stopped talking as Kumbhakarna dropped fifty gold coins on the counter and extended a hand commandingly. Without any further hesitation, the moneylender reached into the small cabinet below the counter and fished out the receipt. Kumbhakarna took one look at it, turned, and ran for his horse.

He was soon galloping through the streets to the main stables of Vaidyanath. That was where a man would go, to hire a horse or find a place on a departing cart, if he wished to travel beyond the city limits.

He knew he had to rush. There was little time.

For the name on the receipt had been clearly inked: Sukarman.



## Chapter 16

Raavan slapped Sukarman viciously across the face. ‘Did you actually think you would get away with this?’

Kumbhakarna had reached the horse stand just in time. Sukarman and his five associates were about to leave with their ill-gained wealth. Kumbhakarna and his guards had easily overpowered the six youths and confiscated the coins they were carrying. The thieves had then been presented before Raavan.

‘You are lucky I am a changed man,’ growled Raavan. ‘Otherwise your tortured body would be lying here, half-dead by now.’

Sukarman strained against his captors, looking terrified.

Kumbhakarna gestured to the other five, who stood clustered around Sukarman. ‘Who are these men, Sukarman? I don’t recognise them. They are not from your village,’ he said.

Sukarman was shivering now, too petrified to answer.

‘Let’s take him back to Todee, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘We can let Vedavatiji decide what is to be done with him.’

Raavan continued to stare at Sukarman. Despite the show of anger, he was quite in control of his emotions. At the mention of Vedavati, he felt even calmer. ‘We could, but I suspect she will forgive him. And this bastard does not deserve forgiveness.’

Sukarman suddenly lost control of his bladder and wet himself. Raavan’s first reaction was to laugh, but then he stopped.

A thought too painful to consider mauled its way into his consciousness. For a few seconds, he was paralysed, afraid even to acknowledge it.

*Oh Lord Rudra... No...*

Stricken with horror, Raavan turned to look at his younger brother. His heart sank when he saw that Kumbhakarna’s expression mirrored his own. He

turned his gaze to Sukarman, as if in a trance. The colour had vanished from the man's face. He stood there, trembling, a wretched figure. Raavan felt his heart turn to ice. This wasn't just a robbery... This was...

*Lord Rudra, have mercy!*

It was Kumbhakarna who gathered his wits first. He moved swiftly, shouting as he ran, 'Guards! Everyone! We are riding out to Todee! Now!'

—೪೧—

Less than an hour later, Raavan's entourage of over one hundred soldiers thundered into Todee. Only Samichi had been left behind on Kumbhakarna's orders. Sukarman had been tied to the back of a horse, whose reins were in the hand of one of Raavan's mounted warriors. His five companions were being hauled back to Todee in a similar manner.

As the horses galloped into the village, it became immediately obvious that something was amiss.

There was a deathly silence all around.

Raavan whipped his horse and continued to race ahead, leading the way to Vedavati's house at the centre of the village. There was a massive crowd in the open square right outside it. Almost the entire village seemed to have congregated there.

Raavan vaulted off his horse and ran towards the house, pushing people aside. His heart was pounding. His mouth felt dry with foreboding.

Kumbhakarna was close behind him.

As Raavan shoved a scrawny villager out of his way, he nearly tripped over something lying on the ground.

Without so much as a glance, he straightened up and stumbled on, towards the modest hut that belonged to Vedavati and Prithvi.

It was Kumbhakarna who realised what it was that Raavan had tripped over.

Prithvi's bloodied and mutilated body.

*Oh Lord Rudra...*

There had clearly been a struggle. Prithvi had been stabbed multiple times, and had probably bled to death. It was clear that he had died slowly. A trail of blood on the ground suggested that he had tried to drag himself towards his house, till his body gave way.

Kumbhakarna looked up. Towards Prithvi's house. Where the pregnant Vedavati would have been.

And then he heard a cry.

It was the sound of raw, unfathomable anguish. The broken voice of a soul struck down with unimaginable grief.

He ran towards Vedavati's hut, roughly pushing aside everyone in his path. He emerged through the crowd to see Raavan on his knees outside the open door. Sobbing uncontrollably.

Steeling his heart, Kumbhakarna looked through the open door into the one-room hut. The sight made his blood curdle. Vedavati lay on the floor, her right arm twisted at a strange angle. Her left hand was on her belly, as if she was protecting her unborn child. Or had died trying to protect it. For most of the stab wounds were on her belly. She had been knifed at least fifteen to twenty times. The blood had flowed and congealed around her, a macabre red shroud cradling her dead body. Her face, always so still and serene, had not been spared either. The attacker had jabbed the knife straight into her left eye. By the look of it, it was a deep wound. Perhaps the wound that had finally killed her. The blow that had snuffed out the light of the Living Goddess.

Kumbhakarna bent over, unable to believe what he was seeing. Blinded by tears, he stumbled towards his brother and reached out to touch his shoulder.

Raavan shrank back at the touch, as though seared by fire. He looked at his younger brother. Tears streaming down his face.

Kumbhakarna collapsed on his knees. 'Dada...'

Raavan looked up at the skies. To the cloud palaces where the Gods were supposed to live. 'YOU SONS OF BITCHES!! WHY?! WHY HER?! WHY?!!'

Kumbhakarna embraced Raavan, not knowing what else to do, or say.

They say tears can wash away grief. They lie.

There are some kinds of grief that even a million tears cannot wash away. Which haunt you for life. For all time.

They say time heals all wounds. They lie.

Sometimes, the grief one is cursed with is so immense that even time surrenders to it.

The brothers held each other. Crying inconsolably.

—८१—

Raavan's men had slowly gathered around Raavan and Kumbhakarna. None of them truly understood what was going on. But they could see that their trader-prince was devastated.

The villagers, too stunned to do anything, stood around weeping.

Shochikesh slowly staggered up to Raavan. His eyes were swollen with tears and his body stooped with grief. 'I am so sorry, Jai... I...'

He still had no idea who Raavan was.

‘Where the hell were all of you when this happened?’ Raavan snarled. The rage of the entire universe seemed to sweep through him.

‘Jai... There’s nothing we could have done... We rushed here when we heard noises... but they were armed...’

Raavan felt the fury rise again within him. He looked around. There were at least two hundred villagers assembled near the hut. He looked at Sukarman and his five accomplices, each one securely tied to the trunk of a tree beside the hut.

Two hundred against six.

Raavan’s voice dropped to a menacing whisper as he addressed Shochikesh. ‘She was your Goddess. She held up this entire pathetic village. Cared for it like a mother. And all of you together could not protect her from six thugs?’

‘I am so sorry... we... Many got scared and ran away...’

Raavan rose to his full height, towering over Shochikesh. ‘Ran away? You sons of bitches ran away?’

Shochikesh looked at the Lankan trader’s bloodshot eyes, his own panic rising. He tried to reason with Raavan. ‘But... But what could we...’

The words remained frozen on Shochikesh’s lips. His eyes widened as he looked down to see a knife buried deep in his body. He stood in shock for a moment, before he let out an agonised scream. Raavan had drawn his long knife in one smooth, rapid arc and thrust it into the other man’s abdomen. The scream infuriated Raavan even more. He rammed the knife in further, twisting it viciously. The blade ripped through to the other side, the point bursting out of Shochikesh’s back. Raavan yanked his weapon out and pushed Shochikesh back. The flame-haired man fell to the ground, bleeding copiously. It would be a slow, painful death.

The villagers stood rooted to their spots, paralysed with fear.

Raavan looked down at Shochikesh’s body for a moment. Then the trader from Lanka hawked and spat on the Todee landlord.

Continuing to look down, Raavan ordered in a low growl, ‘Kill them all.’ Then he pointed to where Sukarman and his gang were tied up. ‘Except them.’

The villagers scattered and ran screaming in all directions as Raavan’s soldiers rushed to obey their lord’s command. The residents of Todee did not stand a chance. Every one of them was killed.

Corpses littered the ground. Men. Women. Children. Cut down where they stood. It was all over in just a few minutes.

Raavan stood next to one of Sukarman's associates, while Kumbhakarna stood on his other side. The Lankan soldiers, holding their bloodied swords, were at the back. Sukarman's hands had been nailed to a door that faced the trees where his associates had been tied up. He could see exactly what was being done to them.

Raavan held a burning log to the man's arm, letting the fire incinerate the skin and roast the flesh. The sickening smell of burning flesh pervaded the atmosphere. The blood-curdling screams of the man being slowly burnt alive rent the air.

But Raavan wasn't even looking at the victim of his torture. His eyes were focused on Sukarman's face. 'Did you do this only for money? Or were you ordered by someone to kill her?'

The petrified Sukarman began to blabber. 'I... so sorry... forgive me... please... forgive me... take all the money...'

Pure, unadulterated rage flashed in Raavan's eyes. He raised the flaming log and held it closer to his agonised victim's face. Then he turned his attention back to Sukarman. 'You think this is about money?'

Kumbhakarna spoke up. 'Where is the Kanyakumari's baby?'

When Vedavati's body was examined, her womb had been found to be empty. Which meant that she had given birth to her child before she was killed.

However, there was no trace of the baby.

'Sukarman, I asked you a question. Where is the baby?' growled Kumbhakarna.

Sukarman remained silent, looking down at the ground. Fear had made him lose control of his bladder again.

'Sukarman.' Kumbhakarna's fists were clenched tight. 'You'd better talk.'

Suddenly, one of Sukarman's associates spoke up. 'He ordered me to do it. Sukarman did. I didn't want to.'

'What did you do?' snarled Kumbhakarna, glaring at the man.

'He ordered me to. It's his fault...'

'WHAT DID YOU DO?'

The man fell silent.

Kumbhakarna strode up and looked him fiercely in the eye.

'What did you do? Tell me. And you will have mercy.'

The man looked at Sukarman and then back at Kumbhakarna. 'He ordered me to... throw the baby into the wild. And let the animals... eat... I mean...' His words stumbled to a stop. Even his pathetic barbarian soul was ashamed of the

terrible crime he had committed.

Indians believed that to kill a baby was a horrific sin, and it would pollute one's soul for many births. Sukarman's gang had thought they would get around this commandment by letting wild animals do the deed for them.

Kumbhakarna looked at Raavan, too shocked for words. He had not expected such an answer. Even for savages like these, this seemed abominably cruel.

*A baby left in the wild for wild animals to feast on... Lord Rudra have mercy.*

'Mercy,' pleaded the man. 'I told you the truth... Mercy...'

Kumbhakarna glanced at Raavan again. Raavan nodded. Kumbhakarna drew his sword and beheaded the man in one clean strike.

The decapitated head of the criminal flew in the air and hit the head of his associate tied up next to him. He screamed in panic, as a bloody fountain erupted through the gaping neck, on to him.

A loud flapping of wings made Raavan and Kumbhakarna look up. A kettle of vultures was descending on the village. They watched as one of the birds tentatively pecked at one of the dead bodies that lay scattered about on the ground. On discovering meat that was still warm, the bird squawked in delight and began feasting on it.

Raavan turned his attention back to the man burning beside him. Uncontrollable tears of rage flowed from his eyes as he looked at the now insensate, almost unrecognisable creature slumped against his bonds. He felt no pity, no remorse. Only fury.

—८१—

Raavan and Kumbhakarna sat on the ground, their backs against the wall. The five dead men were still tied to the trees. Sukarman, barely alive, had been yanked away from the door to which he had been nailed, and tied to a tree. Some of his bloodied flesh still clung to the nails. He had fallen unconscious under the slow burning and torture. But Raavan was careful to ensure that Sukarman didn't die. He had to suffer as much pain as was humanly possible. Pain, the very memory of which would terrify his soul for several lifetimes.

Meanwhile, Raavan's soldiers had carried the lifeless bodies of Vedavati and Prithvi to the village landlord's house. They had to be washed and clothed before the cremation ceremonies.

By now, the vultures had been joined by other creatures of the wild. Crows. Wild dogs. Hyenas. There was enough meat for everyone. The animals ate

quietly. They didn't fight with each other. They didn't make too much noise. They knew there was enough food to last them for several days.

It was an eerily macabre sight. Wild animals everywhere, feasting silently on dead human bodies. An unconscious man tied to a tree. Soldiers with bloodied swords standing to attention. And two brothers, braving their broken souls, sitting outside the house of the woman they admired. The person they loved. The Goddess they worshipped.

Raavan's eyes were bloodshot and swollen, his face drained of all expression. Kumbhakarna took his brother's bloodied hands in his own. The blood of the criminals who had killed Vedavati had soaked their limbs but it had done nothing to cleanse their grief. What words could alleviate anguish such as this?

At last, Raavan spoke. 'I hate this...' He stopped as tears began flowing down his cheeks again.

Kumbhakarna looked at his brother. Silent.

Raavan's voice emerged, raw with grief and anger.

'I hate this cursed land.'



## Chapter 17

Each time Sukarman slipped into unconsciousness, a bucket of water drenched his face. He had to be kept conscious, to experience every moment of the torture. Though his body hung limp, the taut ropes kept him upright against the tree. He had been stripped bare except for his loin cloth. Blood oozed from his numerous lesions and almost every inch of him was either scorched or slashed. Except his face.

When Sukarman finally managed to open his eyes, he saw the Lankan pirate-trader standing in front of him.

Raavan.

Among the richest men in the world. Certainly, the angriest man alive. A man with an intense craving for vengeance. ‘Why didn’t you just take the money?’ Raavan’s voice was a mixture of rage and desperate sadness. ‘Why? Why did you have to kill her?’

Hope flickered in some corner of Sukarman’s mind. He thought he might still have a chance to explain himself. And the thought fired some energy into him. ‘I did try... I tried so hard... But she wouldn’t... listen.’

Raavan looked at Kumbhakarna and then back at Sukarman.

‘I told her that she’d never cared about money before... so why now? But she wouldn’t agree... she was being... stubborn... Even that husband of hers suddenly grew a spine and snubbed me. She asked me to take everything else they owned... but she wouldn’t give me... your hundi... But everything else they owned was worth nothing... and I needed to settle my gambling debts... My debtors would have killed me... I told her that... but she was being so... unreasonable,’ he wheezed.

Raavan stared at Sukarman in disbelief.

Sukarman’s voice was barely audible as he continued, ‘I told her... that

you would give her more... that you... are fabulously rich... wouldn't care... but she refused to listen... She said she would not part with the hundi... said the hundi was holy... it had been given by someone who had discovered dharma... that she would not surrender Raavan's chance to discover the God within him...'.

A low moan escaped Kumbhakarna, as he clutched his hair in despair. But Raavan just kept staring at Sukarman, unable to respond.

Sukarman was not done. Misreading Raavan's silence, he mumbled, 'I was trying to reason with her, but one of the others lost his patience... I can't blame him... She was being... stubborn.'

Raavan had had enough. He lunged at Sukarman and unleashed a vicious upper cut that caught him on the chin. Sukarman's head snapped back and hit the trunk of the tree. Kumbhakarna stepped up and grabbed him by the hair, holding his head steady as he punched him squarely in the jaw, breaking it with an unmistakable crack. Then he pushed the broken jaw down, forcing Sukarman's mouth open.

Raavan picked up a small piece of half-burnt coal and pushed it into the slack mouth.

Sukarman's body convulsed as the red-hot coal singed the skin of his mouth before being pushed down his throat. Kumbhakarna held his mouth open, while some of the Lankan soldiers rushed forward with more pieces of burning coal. Raavan took them one by one and stuffed them down Sukarman's throat. He was using his bare hands, unheeding of the pain. As more and more pieces of burning coal found their way down Sukarman's oesophagus, his body flailed in agony.

He was being burnt alive, from the inside out.

But Raavan and Kumbhakarna would not stop. They kept forcing more coal pieces into Sukarman's digestive tract.

After some time, he stopped moving.

A pungent smell of burnt flesh permeated the air. Smoke was coming out of Sukarman's mouth. His stomach seemed aglow. As though his insides had caught fire. The wretched man was being cooked alive.

Still, the brothers did not stop.

Rage had taken over their souls completely.

They had lost everything.

Their Goddess. Their world. Their sanity.

They had lost it all.

Preparations for the ceremony were complete. Two large pyres had been prepared. The bodies of Vedavati and Prithvi had been cleaned, bathed and dressed in fresh white clothes. Sacred Vedic chants had been whispered into their ears. It was believed that the power of the mantras would give the souls of the departed the strength to continue on their journey.

Once all this had been done, holy water was poured into their mouths and tulsi leaves placed on their lips. Some more tulsi leaves were bunched together and placed in their nostrils and ears. Vedavati's hands were arranged on her chest, with her thumbs tied together. The big toes of her feet had also been tied together. The same was done for Prithvi. It was believed that this helped conjoin the right and left energy channels, thus ensuring the movement of energy in a circle within the body. Earthen lamps were lit at the precise spots where Vedavati and Prithvi had been found dead, with the flame facing south, in honour of Lord Yama, the God of Death and Dharma.

Through all of this, Raavan and Kumbhakarna remained outwardly calm. There was no space here for undignified crying and indecorous mourning. Dignity. Respect. Honour. That was what the Goddess deserved. The great Kanyakumari would leave this earth in the same manner in which she had lived. With dignity, respect and honour.

The two brothers stood beside Vedavati's unlit pyre. She would be cremated first, and then Prithvi.

Holy ghee was brought in an earthen pot. Kumbhakarna held the vessel as Raavan scooped out dollops of ghee and poured it over Vedavati's body. As he did so, both the brothers chanted from the *Garuda Purana*. When Raavan wiped his hands clean, some of his men came up and placed more wooden logs on Vedavati's body. Soon, only her face was visible.

As Raavan stepped back, a wooden log was brought to him, lit with holy fire.

Kumbhakarna gathered the courage to look at Vedavati's face one final time. The punctures had been covered. A patch had been put over the hole where her left eye had been.

Her face—even now, after all that she had suffered—was calm and gentle. Like that of a Goddess. Kumbhakarna struggled to hold back his tears. He would not be undignified. Not in front of her. Not in front of his Goddess.

He had heard it said enough times, that the tears of loved ones made it difficult for the departed soul to leave the world. The living had to control and suppress their grief, for the good of the dead.

He looked at Vedavati's still body waiting to be engulfed in flames, and unexpectedly, all of a sudden, the rage left him.

He looked around in a daze, as though waking up from a long sleep. In the village beyond, he could see that wild animals were still feasting on the dead bodies of the villagers. Men and women who could be called cowards, but not criminals. He looked back at Vedavati's face and was ashamed. Of himself, and of what he had done.

He knew that she would be disappointed in him and his brother. He turned to look at him now.

Raavan was holding the log with the holy flame and walking up to the pyre.

Kumbhakarna stepped back.

Raavan pushed the log into the pyre, setting it ablaze. Letting *Lord Agni*, the all-purifying *God of Fire*, consume the body of the Goddess.

Someone handed Raavan an earthen pot filled with holy water. He punctured it and, following the sacred tradition, started walking anti-clockwise around the blazing pyre. Water trickled out of the small hole in the pot as he walked. He performed the circumambulation three times. In doing so, he was, in effect, stating to the world that he would assume the responsibility for repaying Vedavati's debts. Not monetary debts, for money was meaningless to the soul—he was promising to repay her unfinished karmic debt and ensuring that she would be free of all attachments and responsibilities in this world. Her soul could then, hopefully, travel towards *moksha*, and be *liberated from the cycle of births*.

Kumbhakarna looked at his brother as he circled the pyre, and then at the village they had destroyed.

There was much to do. Much to atone for.

He hoped they wouldn't let her down.

—८१—

It was late in the morning the next day, when Raavan and Kumbhakarna woke up. They had spent the night on the banks of a lake not far from the village. Despite the exhaustion of the day, they had managed barely a few hours of sleep.

Both the pyres were still smouldering, though the flames had died out. The physical bodies of the noble Kanyakumari and her gentle husband had been reduced, mostly, to ash. Twenty of Raavan's soldiers had been stationed at the cremation ground through the night, to keep away any wild animals that might choose to venture there. Their fears were unfounded, though. There was enough food to keep the animals in the village.

After their ritual bath, Raavan and Kumbhakarna went back to the

cremation site. A few ceremonies still remained to be done. They began with Vedavati's pyre.

A bucket of holy water had been arranged. Tulsi leaves floated on its surface. Raavan took a coconut and smashed it on the ground. It broke vertically, from one narrow end to the other. This was rare and considered auspicious; the soul would certainly find moksha. The coconut water was added to the water in the bucket. The solution was stirred by hand as Sanskrit hymns were chanted. When this was done, Raavan ritually drizzled the holy water onto the smouldering pyre, extinguishing the last of the flames.

Four Lankan soldiers came up and removed the ashes from the platform. Kumbhakarna and Raavan bent over the pile and painstakingly sifted through it for the *asti*, the small pieces of bone that hadn't been reduced to ash in the pyre. Almost everything else that formed part of the body—flesh, organs, muscles—had been consumed. The ashes were to be returned to Mother Earth in an easily usable form. What remained of the bones would be immersed in the holy waters of the Ganga.

Raavan knew that *asti* was the root for the Sanskrit word *astitva*, which meant *existence*. These bones, which had tenaciously refused to be consumed by the holy fire, symbolised the remnants of existence. They had to go back to the source of it all, to the Mother Goddess, in the form of the flowing, nurturing river. They would merge with the water, in the bosom of the Mother Goddess, so that even the residual bits of existence could find peace.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna carefully washed each of the small bones, then placed them in an earthen pot. It was almost impossible to distinguish which part of the body they had been a part of. Then, to his utter surprise, Raavan came upon the bones of two fingers which seemed almost intact. The flesh, the muscles, the tendons, had all been burnt away. What survived were three bone phalanges from each of the two fingers. Six phalanges in all. Clearly distinguishable.

When most of the skull had not survived, what were the chances of these phalanges surviving?

As he held the fragile bones in his open palm, it struck Raavan—these were probably the vestiges of the hand with which Vedavati had held his hand. For the first time. Just a few days ago. She had never touched him again.

He would never see her again. But he could still hold her hand.

Raavan couldn't control himself anymore.

He wept as he touched the bones to his forehead, like they were hallowed relics of the most divine Goddess. And then he kissed them lightly.

She had left these for him.

He knew, then, that he would survive. That he would find a way to live the rest of his life. For he knew that he could hold her hand any time he wished to.

She had left these for him as a crutch. So that he could walk through the agony that he knew the rest of his life would be. With her hand as support.

With her hand to hold.

—78I—

Raavan turned the urn over and let Vedavati's remains slip into the holy river. Further down, Kumbhakarna did the same for Prithvi.

It had been three days since the cremation. The brothers had ridden out towards the river with all their soldiers, picking up young Samichi on the way. Despite Kumbhakarna's repeated pleas, Raavan had refused to conduct funeral ceremonies for the villagers of Todee and had left their dead bodies where they were. As rotting food for wild animals. He had no qualms about condemning their souls to suffering for all eternity.

Raavan watched closely as the earthly remains of Vedavati disappeared into the holy river. The asti were a part of the Mother now.

But he hadn't surrendered all of it. He had kept the finger phalanges, the remnants of Vedavati's hand. They hung around his neck now, bunched together to form an unlikely pendant.

He started up the steps of the river ghats, with the urn still in his hand.

'Dada,' said Kumbhakarna, stepping out of the water. 'You have to drop the urn into the river too.'

Raavan looked down at the urn—empty and bereft. As though it, too, was in mourning.

'Dada...'

Raavan did not respond. He looked around him. At the holy Ganga, the verdant banks, the dense forest cover... at the land of India. The land blessed by the Gods.

He closed his eyes. A feeling of disgust overcame him.

*A country that cannot honour its heroes doesn't deserve to survive.*

'Dada... the urn...' Kumbhakarna reminded him.

To Kumbhakarna's surprise, Raavan turned and started walking back towards the shore.

'Dada?'

Raavan reached the river bank, bent down, and picked up some soil—the earth of the Sapt Sindhu—and put it in the urn. Then he started walking back into the river, at a furious pace, like a man possessed.

‘Dada, what are you doing?’

Raavan bent and dipped the urn in the water, so that the soil was washed away. Like he was immersing the asti of the land itself.

‘Dada?’ Kumbhakarna’s voice conveyed his mounting anxiety.

Raavan filled the urn with water and poured it over his head. Like the ritual bath at the end of a funeral ceremony.

‘No, Dada!’ Kumbhakarna rushed forward, frantic to stop Raavan. But he was too late.

Raavan broke the urn on his arms and let the pieces fall into the river. Then he turned towards Kumbhakarna, eyes blazing and fists clenched tight. Rage poured out of every cell of his body. He gritted his teeth and said, ‘This country is dead to me.’

‘Dada, listen to me...’

‘Control the monster, did she say?’

‘Dada, what are you saying? Listen to me...’

‘I will unleash the monster! I will destroy this land!’



## Chapter 18

‘Magnificent piece, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna.

Two long years had passed since Vedavati’s death.

Twenty-four-year-old Raavan had been playing a raga dedicated to the *Devi*, the *Goddess*. Most of the ragas created in honour of the Goddess celebrated her motherly embodiment. There were others dedicated to her manifestation as a lover, a daughter, an artist and so on, but very few were dedicated to the warrior Goddess. The raga Raavan had composed captured the essence of this form—fierce, angry, and wild. Like nature in all its tempestuous and uncontrollable glory.

He called the Raga *Vaashi Santaapani*. The *roar of the furious Goddess*.

‘I have yet to hear another piece that’s as powerful,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘In fact, I think it’s the most beautiful raga I have heard in my life.’

Raavan nodded absentmindedly. He didn’t seem to care too much for the compliment.

‘Even the word *Vaashi* is so appropriate, Dada. The sound of a blazing flame—isn’t that its original meaning? I doubt you can get more evocative than that.’

‘Hmm.’

Kumbhakarna touched his brother on the shoulder almost tentatively. ‘You know, they say grief and tragedy often bring out the best in an artist.’

Raavan looked at his brother in irritation. ‘And who are these “they”? Whoever they may be, they are morons! Nobody goes looking for tragedy. Nobody wants to experience grief just to be able to create art.’

Kumbhakarna realised his brother was not in the mood for this conversation. He tried to change the subject. ‘I am happy that work is consuming more and more of your time, Dada. Drowning oneself in work is the best way to

push negative thoughts away.'

Raavan truly had been busy. Over the previous year and a half, he had leveraged his vast wealth and control over the only credible armed force in Lanka, to inveigle himself closer to the Lankan throne. Kubaer, the ruler of Lanka, had come to depend on him to provide security for his trading ships. Many other traders had taken to paying for the services of Raavan's security forces. And since, unknown to most, Raavan controlled both the pirates and the militia, whenever someone hired his men for protection, the pirate attacks on their ships stopped. Raavan's wealth and resources had grown exponentially, as had his clout and reputation. He was now on the verge of being formally appointed as the head of the Trading Security Force of Lanka. His plan was simple: to get his private militia appointed as the official Lankan Security Force. Not only would the cost of maintaining and arming his soldiers fall to the Lankan treasury, the soldiers would remain loyal to Raavan, even after their transfer. Over time, he would expand the force to make it as large and well-equipped as a regular army. An army trained to take on the Sapt Sindhu empire.

'Yes,' said Raavan. 'Work is a good distraction.'

Kumbhakarna smiled, glad to get a few words out of his brother. But he wasn't prepared for what came next.

'This silly female notion maa has, that talking about problems can help one come to terms with grief, is utter nonsense. The masculine way is better. Drown yourself in work. Suppress the grief. Don't think about it and don't let it come out. Let it remain trapped in some deep, dark dungeon of your heart, even if it festers there. And when you are old and tired, have a nice fatal heart-attack, and it's all over,' Raavan finished.

Kumbhakarna thought it wise to not say anything. It was obvious. Let alone suppress his grief, Raavan remained crushed by it. He had thrown himself into work with the single-minded ambition of bringing the Sapt Sindhu down, but nothing seemed to give him pleasure anymore. Kumbhakarna had thought he would tactfully broach the suggestion his mother had made, of an early marriage. But perhaps this was not the right time to speak of it.

—८१—

Kubaer looked extremely nervous. 'Raavan, I am not sure it's advisable to take on the most powerful empire in the world.'

Four years had passed since Vedavati's death.

Kubaer and Raavan were in the Lankan ruler's private office. Raavan and Kumbhakarna had moved to Sigiriya some time back, leaving their mother in

Gokarna. As soon as he had been appointed head of Lanka's Trading Security Force, Raavan had started making preparations to move closer to the Lankan throne. He had bought a huge mansion not far from Kubaer's palace.

Since moving to the Lankan capital, Raavan had also started working on his plan to trigger a war against the Sapt Sindhu. He needed a plausible reason to provoke the empire into attacking the small island kingdom, and he knew what it could be. As a first step, he proposed reducing the share of the profits that the Sapt Sindhuans appropriated from cross-border trade. After months of persuasion, he had finally managed to engage Kubaer in a discussion on the matter. Kubaer, a prudent sixty-nine-year-old compared to Raavan's impetuous twenty-six, was not a warrior; he was a businessman who valued pragmatism. He privileged profit over pride and thought caution was a necessary quality. His skill lay in charming and negotiating a beneficial deal, not inviting trouble.

'I've said it before and I'll say it again: Why should we give up nine-tenths of our profits to the Sapt Sindhu?' asked Raavan. 'Why should we do all the hard work and let them take most of our money?'

'We are not actually giving them ninety per cent, Raavan,' said Kubaer with a sly smile. 'Our accounts are creative. We overstate our costs. In actual fact, they don't get more than seventy per cent.'

Raavan had already anticipated Kubaer's comeback, but he decided to play along. He would not make the mistake of underestimating the chief-trader of Lanka, like the Sapt Sindhuans did, solely because of his physical appearance. Kubaer's round, cherubic face and smooth complexion belied his advanced age. But he was so obese that he waddled ponderously, like a duck. He usually wore brightly coloured clothes; today, it was a shocking blue dhoti and a yellow angvastram, and his body was bedecked with ornate jewellery. His effeminate mannerisms and life of excess had made him an object of ridicule for the warrior class. But Raavan knew the effete exterior hid a sharp, ruthless mind, devoted to one cause alone: profit.

'But even seventy per cent is too high!' he countered.

'Thirty per cent is good enough for me. I save a considerable part of it, while the Sapt Sindhu squanders away most of its share. So my wealth is greater than theirs. And do you know why they don't save anything?' Kubaer asked.

'Forget about their savings, Great One. Why should we care about how much money Ayodhya or its subordinate kingdoms have? We should care about our own wealth. If we reduce their commissions, we will have more profit for ourselves.'

'You didn't answer my question. I'll tell you why we have higher savings than they do, even though we earn less. It's because the Sapt Sindhu wastes a lot

of money on unnecessary wars. We don't. War is bad for business, it's bad for profits and wealth. If we reduce the commissions, they will certainly attack us. We will then be forced to mobilise our army and spend money, no, waste money, on a silly war. And that's—'

Raavan interrupted Kubaer. 'What if I agree to fund our war effort?'

Kubaer frowned with suspicion. 'The entire war?'

'Everything. You won't have to spend a single coin. I'll pay for it all.'

Kubaer had the natural mistrust of an astute trader for a deal that sounded too good to be true. Raavan, he knew, was too shrewd to do something only for glory. 'And why, pray, would you help me at all?' he asked.

'Because you will then share half the increased commissions with me.'

Kubaer smiled. Any kind of selfish interest, he understood and respected. Experience had taught him that the best business deals were struck when both parties were honest about their own interests. 'So, let me make sure I understand this. You can't declare war without my approval. And you think this war will be profitable.'

'Yes to both.'

'But what guarantee is there of victory?'

'None. But is there any guarantee that our ships will not sink in the sea when we send them out to trade? We estimate the probabilities and take the best bet. A calculated bet. We are traders. That's what we do.'

'All that is very well, but what if we lose?'

'Then you should do the pragmatic thing.'

'If we lose the battle,' said Kubaer, choosing his words carefully, 'the pragmatic thing would be to tell the Sapt Sindhuans that this was all your idea.'

'You are right. That would indeed be the pragmatic thing to do. If we fail, let me take the blame. It's my idea, after all. Keep yourself, and the other traders of Lanka, safe. But if we win, I get half the increased commissions.'

Kubaer smiled. 'All right, Raavan. You will have your war. Just make sure I don't make a loss. Nothing spoils my day like an unanticipated loss.'

'Honourable One, have I ever let you down?' Raavan asked with a smile.

—८१—

Kumbhakarna was worried. 'Dada, we may be over-reaching with this.... Are we biting off more than we can chew?'

The brothers were at home in Sigiriya, the capital of Lanka.

'We are not, Kumbha,' said Raavan. 'We'll bite it all. We'll chew it all. We'll digest it all.'

‘Dada, the Sapt Sindhu rulers do nothing except fight wars. We are traders. Our soldiers are essentially pirates. They fight for money, and money alone. If there is no profit in sight, they will abandon the battle. But the Sapt Sindhu soldiers actually celebrate “martyrdom” in battle. They die for bizarre causes like honour and glory. How are we supposed to defeat such morons?’

‘Through good tactics.’

‘I think you...’

‘No, I am not being overconfident.’

‘But even if we can defeat them, how are we going to turn a profit from it? The cost of the campaign will be too high.’

‘Don’t worry. Once we win, we will start taking ninety per cent of the profits, if not more.’

Kumbhakarna nearly choked on the wine he was drinking. ‘Ninety per cent! For us?’

Raavan frowned. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘Dada, I don’t think we can enforce a treaty like that. It will be too much for the Sapt Sindhu kings to swallow. They will have no choice but to keep on fighting. The ensuing rebellions will destroy them, but they will wear us out too. And we simply don’t have enough soldiers to control all the Sapt Sindhu kingdoms and their people in peacetime.’

‘We’ll break their spirit in one major battle. Destroy their entire army. I am not interested in imposing our rules on their citizens, so where is the need to control them? We’ll only impose our trade conditions on them. And slowly suck them dry.’

‘But, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna, ‘a commission this big will destroy the Sapt Sindhu economy over time. We would end up killing the golden goose that feeds us.’

Raavan’s expression gave little away as his eyes met Kumbhakarna’s.

‘Precisely,’ he said.

—४१—

Burly soldiers rowed the large boat in quick strokes towards the shore. Raavan sat in front, his right hand on the gunwale. Kumbhakarna sat behind him, observing his flexed arms, the massive triceps that were visibly tense.

*Dada is upset.*

Raavan looked straight ahead, towards the *Sapt Sindhu*—the *Land of the Seven Rivers*.

Kumbhakarna looked to his left, at Kubaer’s boat being rowed

rhythmically towards the shore by ten sailors.

It had only been a year since Raavan had convinced Kubaer to wage war against the Sapt Sindhu. Events had proceeded rapidly after that.

Within a matter of months, Raavan had mobilised and trained his army. He had also brought in mercenaries from around the world, promising them a rich share of the spoils.

Once the Lankan army was ready, Kubaer had sent an official communication to the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu, Dashrath. When his message reached Ayodhya, the capital city from where Dashrath ruled all the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent, it immediately set teeth on edge.

The old-elite royal families of the Sapt Sindhu, with their disdain for the trader-class Vaishyas, considered the effete Kubaer an upstart. They just about tolerated his existence. To receive a ‘royal communication’ from the trader-ruler of Lanka was seen as an affront. Traders were not supposed to send royal communications to emperors of ancient imperial dynasties. They were supposed to send humble, grovelling petitions. And as if that wasn’t outrageous enough, the demand to reduce the empire’s commissions on profits was seen as an intolerable insult to Kshatriya pride. Such a dishonour could not be stomached.

Dashrath had immediately rallied all of his subordinate kings across the land and mobilised an army. The plan was for his troops to march to Karachapa, one of Kubaer’s biggest trading hubs, on the west coast of the Sapt Sindhu. Dashrath planned to destroy the Karachapa fort and trading warehouses. He had assumed that this would be enough to bring Kubaer to his senses. If not, some of the other ports held by Kubaer would also be destroyed, and ultimately, Lanka itself would come under siege.

Raavan had anticipated that the Sapt Sindhuans would take exception to Kubaer’s message and march out to war immediately. His own troops were in a state of readiness. His specially designed ships, buffed with the enigmatic cave material, were prepared for battle. As soon as he received intelligence of the Sapt Sindhu army mobilising, and the direction of their march, the ships set sail, moving quickly up the western coast of peninsular India, to arrive at Karachapa.

There were too many ships in Raavan’s navy for even the massive Karachapa port to accommodate. Besides, Raavan knew the Sapt Sindhuans had spies within Karachapa and the last thing he wanted was to generate curiosity about the radically different designs of his ships. They were a part of his battle plan, his secret weapon. So most of the ships were anchored offshore.

Later in the day, Raavan and Kumbhakarna boarded a rowboat and headed up to the beach of Karachapa. The rowboat hit the sand with a lurch and four soldiers jumped off, into the shallow waters, and pulled the boat onto the beach.

Raavan remained immobile. Looking straight ahead.

Kumbhakarna could feel his breath quickening. They were returning to the Sapt Sindhu after five years. The last time they were here, they had immersed Vedavati's ashes in the holy Ganga.

It is said, and rightly, that whatever the memories associated with the past, every person's heart beats faster when they return to the land of their roots. The pain of separation, and the joy of homecoming, are universal. And nothing can compare to the sheer relief of returning to the lap of your mother, the most comfortable place in the world.

Kumbhakarna jumped off as soon as the boat was out of the water. He bent down and picked up some wet sand, the soil of his motherland, and with great veneration, brought it to his forehead. He touched it to both his eyes and kissed it. As he placed the sand back on the ground with utmost respect, he whispered, 'Jai Maa.'

*Glory to the Mother.*

He saw Raavan, who had gone slightly ahead of him, bend down to pick up some sand too. Kumbhakarna smiled.

*Perhaps returning to the motherland has finally thawed his heart.*

Kumbhakarna watched as Raavan brought his hand closer to his face and stared at the sand in it for what seemed like an eternity. He hesitated to go closer. Perhaps he should let his brother have this moment to himself.

He felt a vast sense of relief that the past was finally behind them. His elder brother had been through so much, raged against the world for so long, but it seemed he was finally ready to welcome some peace within. This war would be fought, of course. It had to be done. For profit. But, at least, returning to the motherland had alleviated some of Raavan's deep-seated sorrow. Or so Kumbhakarna thought.

Raavan opened the palm that cradled the sand, bringing it closer to his mouth. Then, slowly, deliberately, he hawked and spat into it. His entire body seemed to convulse in rage as he flung the sand to the ground and crushed it under his foot.

'Fuck this land.'



## Chapter 19

‘Shouldn’t we be going over to their camp?’ asked Kubaer nervously.

Dashrath, the overlord of the Sapt Sindhu, had marched right across his sprawling empire, from Ayodhya, its capital, to Karachapa. Within just a few hours of his arrival, he had sent a terse message to Kubaer, summoning him for a discussion on the terms of ceasefire.

In the early years of his reign, Dashrath had built on the powerful legacy he had inherited from his father, Aja. Rulers in various parts of India had either been deposed or made to pay tribute and accept his suzerainty, thus making Dashrath the Chakravarti Samrat, or the Universal Emperor.

‘We are not going to his camp, noble Chief-Trader,’ replied Raavan, trying hard to keep his irritation in check. ‘The Ayodhyan will see it as our weakness. If we have to meet, it has to be on neutral ground—neither their camp, nor ours.’

‘But...’

‘No buts. We have come to fight, not to surrender.’

Raavan’s approach had been clear from the start. Over the last week, he had ordered his troops to destroy all the villages in a fifty-kilometre radius around Karachapa. Standing crops had been burnt down. Harvested grain and livestock had been confiscated and commandeered as food for the Lankan soldiers. Wells had been poisoned with the carcasses of dead animals.

A scorched earth policy.

The Lankan army would be well fed and rested within the Karachapa walls. However, the Sapt Sindhu army, camped outside the city, would find it difficult to feed their five hundred thousand soldiers, given the ravaged countryside. Their numerical advantage would turn into a liability.

‘But what if Emperor Dashrath doesn’t retreat despite the food shortage?’ asked Kubaer, anxiously. ‘What if he attacks immediately?’

Raavan smiled. ‘I am counting on you, great Chief-Trader, to provoke Dashrath to do precisely that. I will take care of the rest.’

‘Emperor Dashrath,’ corrected Kubaer.

Raavan preferred to speak only the man’s name. No unnecessary respect towards an enemy. ‘Just Dashrath,’ he said quietly.

—78I—

Dashrath was in no mood for extended parleys.

‘I order you to restore our commission to the very fair nine-tenths of your profits and, in return, I assure you I will let you live,’ he said firmly.

After exchanging some terse messages, the adversaries had finally decided to meet on neutral ground. The chosen site was a beach, midway between Dashrath’s military camp and the Karachapa fort. The emperor was accompanied by his father-in-law King Ashwapati, his general Mrigasya and a bodyguard platoon of twenty soldiers. Kubaer had arrived with Raavan and twenty bodyguards.

The Sapt Sindhu warriors could scarcely conceal their contempt as the obese Kubaer waddled laboriously into the tent. The chief trader had disregarded Raavan’s advice to wear sober clothes and had dressed, instead, in a bright green dhoti and a pink angavastram. The jewellery he wore was flashier than usual. He had reasoned that a display of his fine taste would earn him the appreciation of the Sapt Sindhu leaders. What it did was to convince his opponents that they were dealing with an effete Vaishya; a peacock who knew little of warfare.

‘Your Highness...’ said Kubaer timidly, ‘I think it might be a little difficult to keep the commissions fixed at that level. Our costs have gone up and the trading margins are not what they—’

‘Don’t try your disgusting negotiating tactics with me!’ shouted Dashrath as he banged his hand on the table for effect. ‘I am not a trader! I am an emperor! Civilised people understand the difference.’

Raavan clenched his fists under the table. Kubaer was not following any part of his advice, either in demeanour or in speech.

Dashrath leaned forward and said with controlled vehemence, ‘I can be merciful. I can forgive mistakes. But you need to stop this nonsense and do as I say.’

Kubaer shifted uneasily on his chair and glanced at the impassive Raavan, who sat to his right. Even seated, Raavan’s height and rippling musculature were surprising to the Sapt Sindhuans. They had not expected to find a warrior like this amidst what they derisively called a trader’s protection force. Raavan’s

battle-worn, swarthy skin was pockmarked as a result of a childhood encounter with disease. His thick beard, accompanied by a handlebar moustache, only added to his menacing appearance. His attire was unremarkable and sober, consisting of a white dhoti and a cream angvastram. His headgear was designed to add to his intimidating presence, with two threatening six-inch-long horns reaching out from the top on either side. The message was clear: Raavan was no mere soldier; he was a bull among men.

The Sapt Sindhuans kept glancing at the well-built Lankan general sitting amongst them, expecting him to say something. But Raavan sat still, offering neither opinions nor objections.

Kubaer turned back to Dashrath. ‘But, Your Highness, we are facing many problems, and our invested capital is—’

‘You are trying my patience now, Kubaer!’ Dashrath snapped. ‘You are irritating the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu!’

‘But, my lord...’

‘Look, if you do not continue to pay our rightful commissions, believe me, you will all be dead by this time tomorrow. I will first defeat your miserable army, then travel all the way to that cursed island of yours and burn your city to the ground.’

‘But there are problems with our ships, and labour costs have—’

‘I don’t care about your problems!’ Dashrath was shouting now.

‘You will, after tomorrow,’ said Raavan softly.

The emperor had lost his temper. The time was right.

Dashrath swung around to look sharply at Raavan. ‘How dare you speak out of—’

‘How dare you, Dashrath?’ asked Raavan, his voice clear and ringing.

Dashrath, Ashwapati and Mrigasya sat in stunned silence, shocked that this mere sidekick of a trader should have the temerity to address the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu by his name.

Raavan suppressed a smile. They were behaving exactly as he had expected. *These people are so easy to play. Their egos will be their undoing.*

The time had come to twist the knife.

‘How dare you imagine that you can even come close to defeating an army that I lead?’ asked Raavan with a half-sneer on his lips.

Dashrath stood up angrily, and his chair went flying back with a clatter. He thrust a finger in Raavan’s direction. ‘I’ll be looking for you on the battlefield tomorrow, you upstart!’

Slowly and menacingly, Raavan rose from his chair, with his fist closed tight around the pendant that hung from a gold chain around his neck. Holding

her hand gave him strength. It was also a constant reminder of why he was doing all this.

As Raavan's fist unclenched, Dashrath stared at the pendant. It was obvious that the emperor was horrified by what he saw. He probably thought the Lankan to be a monster who vandalised the bodies of his enemies.

*Let Dashrath believe I am a cannibalistic beast. It will be a competitive advantage in battle.*

'I assure you, I'll be waiting,' said Raavan, with a hint of amusement lacing his voice, as he watched Dashrath gape at him. 'I look forward to drinking your blood.'

*That's enough. Let him stew in his anger.*

Raavan turned around and strode out of the tent. Kubaer wobbled out hurriedly behind him, followed by the Lankan bodyguards.

—८१—

'You weren't able to sleep either?' asked Kumbhakarna.

Raavan turned towards his brother and smiled, letting go of the pendant in his hand.

It was the fifth hour of the fourth prahar—just an hour before midnight. Raavan had been standing on the ramparts of the Karachapa fort, looking towards the Sapt Sindhu camp and the many fires lit there. The night was quiet, and the sounds of conversation and laughter carried all the way to the fort.

'Looks like the enemy isn't sleeping either,' said Raavan.

Kumbhakarna laughed. 'These Sapt Sindhu Kshatriyas think war is a party.'

Raavan took a deep breath. 'By this time tomorrow, we will own the Sapt Sindhu.'

'Technically, won't it be Kubaer who owns it?'

'And who the hell do you think owns that fat slob?'

Kumbhakarna burst out laughing, and a moment later, Raavan joined in. Kumbhakarna put an arm around his brother.

'You should laugh more, Dada,' he said. 'She would have liked that.'

Raavan's right hand instinctively sought the pendant again. 'The best way to honour her is to destroy the army that defends the filthy society that killed her.'

Kumbhakarna remained silent. He knew there was no point in saying anything to Raavan about this.

Raavan stared at the inky black sea. He couldn't see them, but he knew his

ships were there, anchored more than two kilometres from shore. Those ships, with their unusually broad bow sections, were crucial to his battle plans.

‘The ships are to remain where they are,’ said Raavan. ‘I don’t even want the rowboats to be lowered.’

‘Obviously,’ said Kumbhakarna.

Raavan liked how his brother always seemed to read his mind. With the Lankan ships far away, and the rowboats still aboard, the Ayodhyans would assume that the vessels would have no role to play in the battle. Even if there was a reserve force on board those ships, it would not be possible to bring them into combat quickly enough.

And that’s how the trap would be set.

‘Do you think they will fall for it?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

‘They have taken every bait so far, haven’t they? I have faith in their arrogance. Their assumption that we are stupid traders and incapable of battle is what will cause them to make mistakes tomorrow. Also, remember they have five hundred thousand soldiers. We have a little over fifty thousand in the city. The odds must look very good to them. And people do reckless things when they think the odds are in their favour.’

‘But unless the emperor commits them to an attack formation on the beach, our ships will be useless.’

‘Precisely,’ said Raavan, turning to look at Kumbhakarna. ‘That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘I’ll do it, Dada. I’ll lead some of the battalions outside the city walls and offer them—us—up as bait. And when the Ayodhyans charge at us, you can do the rest with the ships.’

‘You know almost exactly how my mind works,’ said Raavan, smiling.

Kumbhakarna grinned. ‘Almost? I always know what you are thinking.’

‘Not entirely. We’ll follow the battle plan that you just laid out. Except, I’ll be the bait. And you’ll be leading the ships.’

Kumbhakarna was aghast. ‘No, Dada!’

‘Kumbha...’

‘No!’

‘You’ve said to me often enough, that you’ll do anything for me.’

‘Yes, I will. I’ll put my life at risk. And you’ll win the battle.’

‘Kumbha, I’m asking you to do something far more difficult. I want you to allow me to put my own life at risk.’

‘That’s not possible, Dada.’

‘Kumbha, listen to me...’

‘No!’

‘Kumbha, that arrogant fool Dashrath hates me. I am the one who can drive him to act rashly. I have to be here.’

‘Then I’ll stay with you. Let Uncle Mareech lead the ships.’

‘My life will be at risk, Kumbha. You are the only one I can trust to have my back.’

‘Dada...’

‘You are the only one who will ensure that I don’t die.’

Kumbhakarna raised his hand to cover Raavan’s mouth. ‘Shhh! Maa has told you not to speak of your own death. Just because the Almighty has given you a mouth doesn’t mean you have to use it to say stupid things!’

‘Then make sure that I don’t have to speak of it again. Lead the ships.’

‘Dada!’ Kumbhakarna was exasperated.

‘It’s an order, Kumbha. I can trust only you. You have to do this for me. You have to ensure that the ships sail in on time.’

Kumbhakarna clasped Raavan’s hands tightly, not saying anything.

‘We will win tomorrow,’ said Raavan. ‘And then our era will begin. History will never forget the names of Raavan and Kumbhakarna.’

—४१—

The next day, by the fourth hour of the second prahar, Raavan was battle-ready. Mounted on his warhorse, and waiting at the frontline.

Much to the shock of his enemies, and even some of his own followers, he had surrendered the immense defensive benefits of staying behind the well-designed fort walls. Instead, he had arranged about fifty thousand soldiers—most of his army—in standard chaturanga formation outside the fort walls, on the beach.

The Lankans now had their enemy to the front and the fort walls behind them. Presenting a seemingly soft target to Dashrath and his army.

A Lankan bait for the warriors of the Sapt Sindhu.

And the bait had been taken.

The emperor of Ayodhya had arranged his army along the beach, in a *suchi vyuha*, the *needle formation*. Dashrath knew that charging the fort from the landward side was not an option. Raavan’s hordes had planted dense thorny bushes all around the fort, except along the wall that ran beside the beach. Dashrath’s army could have cleared the bushes and created a path to reach the fort, but that would have taken weeks. With the Lankan army having scorched the land around Karachapa, and the resultant absence of food and water outside the fort, the option was simply not viable. The army had to attack before they ran

out of rations.

Dashrath should have stopped to consider why Raavan had blocked all possible options of engagement except for the one along the beach. The king of Ayodhya had never lost a battle in his illustrious military career. His strategic instincts should have alerted him. But Raavan's insulting words the previous day still played on his mind, and he had let his pride get the better of his judgement.

The beach was wide by most standards, but it wasn't enough for a large army—hence Dashrath's tactical decision to form a suchi vyuha. The best of his troops would take position alongside him, at the front of the formation, while the rest of the army would fall into a long column behind them. They intended a rolling charge, whereby the first lines would strike the Lankan ranks, and after twenty minutes or so of battle, slip back, allowing the next line of warriors to charge in. It would be an unrelenting surge of battle-hardened soldiers aiming to scatter and decimate the enemy troops of Lanka.

Ashwapati, the king of Kekaya and Dashrath's father-in-law, had misgivings about this strategy. He had pointed out that only a few tens of thousands of their soldiers would be engaged in battle at any point of time, while most of the others waited at the back. By forcing the battle along the narrow beach rather than a large battleground, Raavan had negated the huge numerical advantage of the Sapt Sindhu army. But Ashwapati's concerns had been brushed aside by a confident Dashrath.

To Dashrath's mind, the Lankans were traders who were incapable of sophisticated battle tactics. The apparently stupid move of positioning the army outside the fort walls had only convinced him that Raavan and his troops had no understanding of what they were doing.

Far away, at the other end of the beach, Raavan looked to his right, to where his ships lay at anchor more than two kilometres out at sea. The rowboats were not visible. Kumbhakarna was following his instructions perfectly.

Raavan turned his gaze back to the Sapt Sindhuans.

His arrogant and overconfident enemies had not even sent spy boats out to investigate the broad bow sections of his ships. They really should have done that.

A smile played on his lips. *Bloody fools.*

Raavan flexed his shoulders and arms. The most irritating part of battle was the waiting. Waiting for the other side to charge. You couldn't allow yourself to be distracted and you couldn't waste energy either. He had warned his troops not to tire themselves out by screaming obscenities at the enemy or chanting war cries. They had been ordered to wait silently.

Clearly, Dashrath had given no such instructions to his soldiers. They were

roaring their war cries, their voices rising and falling in a frenzy. Charging themselves on adrenaline. And tiring themselves out in the bargain.

Raavan had worn his trademark battle helmet with its six-inch horns sticking out threateningly from the sides. It was a challenge to his enemies; to Dashrath.

*I am here. Come and get me.*

Dashrath, meanwhile, was on his well-trained and imposing-looking war horse, surveying his amassed troops. He ran his eyes over them confidently. They were a rowdy, raucous bunch, with their swords already drawn, eager for battle. The horses, too, seemed to have succumbed to the excitement of the moment, making the soldiers pull hard at their reins, to hold them in check. Dashrath could almost smell the blood that would soon be shed; the massacre that would lead to victory!

He squinted as he observed the Lankans and their commander up ahead in the distance. He felt a jab of anger as he remembered Raavan's words from their last meeting. The upstart trader would soon feel his wrath. He drew his sword and held it aloft, and then bellowed the unmistakable war cry of his kingdom, Kosala, and its capital city, Ayodhya. '*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*'

*The conquerors from the unconquerable city!*

Not everyone in his army was a citizen of Ayodhya, and yet they were proud to fight under the great Kosala banner. They echoed their emperor's war cry. '*Ayodhyatah Vijetaarah!*'

Dashrath roared as he brought his sword down and spurred his horse. 'Kill them all! No mercy!'

'No mercy!' echoed the riders of the first charge, taking off behind their fearless lord.

Riding hard, riding fearlessly, riding to their own destruction.

As Dashrath and his finest warriors charged down the beach towards the Lankans, Raavan's troops remained immobile. When the enemy cavalry was just a few hundred metres away, Raavan unexpectedly turned his horse around and retreated from the frontlines, even as his soldiers held firm.

Raavan's strategy was clear—what was important was victory, not a display of manhood and courage. For Dashrath, however, brought up in the ways of the Kshatriyas, personal bravery was the most important trait of a general. Raavan's apparent cowardice infuriated him. He kicked his horse to a gallop, intending to mow down the Lankan frontline and quickly reach Raavan. And the Ayodhyans followed their lord, racing hard.

This was exactly what Raavan had hoped for. The Lankan frontline swung into action. The soldiers suddenly dropped their swords and picked up

unnaturally long spears, almost twenty feet in length, which had been lying at their feet. Made of wood and metal, they were so heavy that it took two men to pick one up. The soldiers pointed these spears, tipped with sharp copper heads, directly at Dashrath's oncoming cavalry.

The mounted soldiers could not rein in their horses in time, and rode headlong into the spears, which tore into the unprepared beasts. Their riders were thrown forward while the horses collapsed under them. Even as the charge of Dashrath's cavalry was halted in its tracks, Lankan archers emerged, high on the walls of the Karachapa fort. They started shooting a continuous stream of arrows in a long arc from the heights of the fort ramparts, into the dense formation of Dashrath's troops at the back, shredding the Sapt Sindhu lines.

Many of Dashrath's warriors, who had been flung off their impaled horses, stumbled up to engage in fierce hand-to-hand battle with the enemy. Their king led the way as he swung his sword ferociously, killing all who dared to come in his path. But all around him, he could see the devastation being wrought upon his soldiers, who rapidly fell under the barrage of Lankan arrows and superbly trained swordsmen. Minutes later, Dashrath gestured to his flag bearer, who raised his flag high in response. It was the signal for the soldiers at the back to join the charge, in support of the first line.

This was the moment Raavan had been waiting for.

On Kumbhakarna's orders, the Lankan ships abruptly weighed anchor. Big ships always stay offshore, unless there is a proper harbour available. Naval warriors are transported to the beaches in small rowboats. But Kumbhakarna did not lower the rowboats. He ordered the ships themselves to speed to the beach! The sailors, who had been on full alert, extended oars and began to row rapidly to the shore. The ships' sails were up at full mast to help them catch the wind. Within minutes, arrows were being fired from the decks into the densely packed forces under Dashrath's command. The Lankan archers on the ships ripped through the massed ranks of the Sapt Sindhuans.

No one in Dashrath's army had factored in the possibility of the enemy ships beaching with speed; ordinarily, it would have cracked their hulls. What they didn't know was that these were amphibious crafts with specially constructed hulls that could absorb the shock of grounding. Even as the landing crafts stormed onto the beach with tremendous velocity, the broad bows of the hulls rolled out from the top. These were no ordinary bows of a standard hull. They were attached to the bottom of the hull by huge hinges, and they simply rolled out onto the sand like a landing ramp. This opened a gangway from the belly of the ships straight onto the beach. Cavalrymen mounted on disproportionately large horses imported from the West thundered out of the

ships and straight onto the beach, mercilessly slicing through the men who blocked their path.

The Sapt Sindhuans were now battling at both ends—at the frontlines against Raavan's soldiers at the Karachapa fort walls, and at the rear, with the unexpected attackers from the ships, led by Kumbhakarna.

The trained instinct of a skilled warrior seemed to warn Dashrath that something terrible was ensuing at the rear guard. As he strained to look beyond the sea of battling humanity, he detected a sudden movement to his left and raised his shield just in time to block a vicious blow from a Lankan soldier. With a ferocious roar, the king of Ayodhya swung brutally at his attacker, his sword slicing through a chink in the armour. The Lankan fell back, as his abdomen was ripped open and blood spurted out, accompanied by slick pink intestines that tumbled out in a rush. Dashrath turned away and looked behind him, to his troops in the rear formations.

‘No!’ he yelled.

A scenario he had never foreseen was playing out in front of his eyes. Caught in the vicious pincer attack of the archers and the foot soldiers at the fort walls in front, and the fierce Lankan cavalry from the beached ships at the back, the spirit of his all-conquering army was collapsing rapidly. Dashrath stared in disbelief as some of his men broke ranks and began to retreat.

‘No!’ he thundered. ‘Fight! Fight! We are Ayodhya! The Unconquerables!’

Meanwhile, with everything going exactly as he had expected, Raavan kicked his horse into a canter and led some of his men down the beach on the left, skirting the sea. It was the only flank that was open to counter-attack by the Ayodhyans. Accompanied by his well-trained cavalry, Raavan hacked his way through the outer infantry lines before they could regroup. He had to hold his position at the fort walls while Kumbhakarna massacred the rear lines.

Raavan wasn't interested in killing Dashrath. That didn't matter at this point. His focus was on victory. And to achieve that, he had to break this last remaining holdout of the Ayodhyans.

Slowly but surely, hemmed in by the soldiers at the fort walls, the attackers led by Kumbhakarna at the rear, and the crushing attack by Raavan's men along the flanks, Dashrath's army fell into disarray. Panic set in among the ranks. And before long, a full disorderly retreat began.

This was not a battle anymore. It was a massacre.

But Raavan did not stop. He did not order a ceasefire. He did not allow his troops to show mercy.

His orders were clear and he shouted them aloud: ‘Kill them all! No mercy! Kill them all!’

And his soldiers obeyed.



## Chapter 20

Raavan tapped his empty wine goblet reflectively. An attendant at the other end of the chamber began making his way forward, but slowed as he noticed Kumbhakarna rising from his seat to attend to his brother.

Kumbhakarna refilled the goblet before pouring some wine for himself. Then he looked up and signalled to the attendant to leave. The man saluted and withdrew from the room.

It had been five months since the rout of the Sapt Sindhu army in the Battle of Karachapa. Dashrath had barely survived, saved by the bravery of his second wife, Kaikeyi, the daughter of the king of Kekaya, Ashwapati.

‘Do you think we should have killed the emperor?’ asked Kumbhakarna, taking a sip of wine and settling back in his comfortable chair.

‘I did consider it,’ said Raavan, shaking his head. ‘But I think it’s better this way. A quick death on the battlefield would have been a blessing for him. The humiliation of the defeat will extinguish his spirit little by little. The military failure, and the treaty we have imposed, will destroy his mental peace. With an unstable and insecure leader, the morale of the Sapt Sindhu is unlikely to recover. They are not going to give us any trouble as we slowly squeeze the empire dry. If we had killed Dashrath, we would have turned him into a martyr. And martyrs can be dangerous. They can trigger rebellions.’

‘So you think the bravery of Queen Kaikeyi has actually helped us.’

‘She wasn’t trying to help us, she was only trying to save her husband. But she is a brave woman. And I have no doubt she will be treated poorly by her ungrateful subjects. They don’t know how to honour their heroes.’

‘Apparently, Emperor Dashrath and his first queen Kaushalya were blessed with a son the day we defeated him in Karachapa. They call him Ram.’

‘After the Vishnu?’ asked Raavan, laughing softly in derision. Ram was the

birth name of the sixth Vishnu, more commonly known as Parshu Ram. ‘They must have high expectations of that baby! ’

‘The funny thing is, they blame the poor child for their defeat in Karachapa. Apparently, he brought them bad luck.’

‘So our victory had nothing to do with my brilliant war strategies? It was all because some queen went into labour at the same time?! ’ Raavan laughed.

Kumbhakarna grinned back at him.

‘You should laugh more often, Dada,’ he said. ‘Vedavatiji would have liked you to.’

‘Stop telling me that again and again.’

‘But it’s the truth.’

‘How do you know it’s the truth? Did her soul come and inform you?’

Kumbhakarna shook his head. ‘Dada, you will not be healed till you are able to think of her with a smile on your face. If you feel sadness and anger each time you remember her, you’ll turn a beautiful memory into poison. It’s been so many years. You have to learn to move on.’

‘Are you saying I should forget how she died? That I should live in a state of foolish oblivion?’ Raavan snapped.

Kumbhakarna remained calm. ‘I did not say that. How is it possible for us to forget how she died? But that’s not the only memory of her we have, right? It’s one of the many memories she left behind. Spend time with those other memories too. The happy times you had with her. Then you will not drown in sadness whenever you think of her.’

‘Maybe I like the sadness. It comforts me.’

‘If you spend enough time with anything, you start liking it, even sadness.’

Raavan shook his head. Clearly, there was to be no more conversation on the subject.

Kumbhakarna fell silent.

‘Anyway, when is the first instalment of the war reparations reaching Sigiriya?’ asked Raavan.

‘In a few weeks, Dada. In a few weeks, Lanka will go from merely rich to fantastically wealthy. Perhaps the wealthiest kingdom in the world.’

Before the Battle of Karachapa, Lanka was entitled to retain only ten per cent of the profits from its trade with the Sapt Sindhu. Ninety per cent belonged to Ayodhya, the representative of the empire. Ayodhya would, in turn, share this commission with its subordinate kingdoms. After the battle, Raavan had unilaterally slashed Ayodhya’s commission to just nine per cent, keeping the rest for Lanka. In addition, he had drastically reduced the prices of all manufactured goods purchased from the Sapt Sindhu. If that wasn’t enough, he had also

ordered Ayodhya to return, with retrospective effect, the surplus amount that the kingdoms had been paid over the previous three years, going by the new calculation—as war reparations. Raavan knew that this sweeping reduction in commissions would pauperise the empire over time, while making Lanka extremely prosperous. Of course, since he was going to keep half the increased Lankan profits, he would soon be stupendously rich as well. And powerful.

‘What next, Dada?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

Raavan walked over to a large window in the chamber and looked out at the verdant gardens beyond. His mansion in Sigiriya was a short distance from the giant monolithic rock that housed the palace of Kubaer—chief-trader of Lanka and the richest man in the world.

Kubaer may not have known too much about warfare, but he did understand the need to protect his immense wealth. Over the last few decades, he had vastly improved the defensive systems of the city. Sigiriya was surrounded by rolling boulder-strewn hills. Each of the tall boulders had structures built on their flat tops, to house soldiers who could fight off any trespassers from an unassailable height. This was in addition to the sturdy walls and moats that surrounded the city.

But Kubaer did not concern himself only with security. Despite his garish taste in clothes and jewellery, he had a surprisingly fine eye for architecture. And he had turned what was already an achingly beautiful city into a truly exquisite symbol of grace and elegance.

The city, built on a large plateau, was adorned with stunning gardens and public walkways. Beautifully landscaped lawns, irrigated by waterways and underground channels, dotted the outskirts, while tall, evergreen trees spread their branches on either side of the main roads. Even the many boulders within the city had been incorporated into what the Sigiriyans called boulder gardens, with intricate fountains adding to their grace and beauty. There were tastefully designed halls for public functions, libraries, amphitheatres, lakes for boating, and everything else that was required for civilised living. Lanka was a part of the larger Vedic world and many temples to different Vedic Gods graced various parts of the city. The largest of the temples, of course, was dedicated to Lord Parshu Ram, the sixth Vishnu and the founder of the Malayaputra tribe. This temple had been built and consecrated by the great Rishi Vishwamitra himself.

Raavan, however, was not swayed by all of Sigiriya’s fineries. His attention was focused on the monolith called Lion’s Rock, which rose a sheer two hundred metres from the surrounding countryside. The city was named after this rock; Sigiriya harked back to the Sanskrit *Sinhagiri* or *Lion’s Hill*. At the top of the monolith was the massive palace of Kubaer. It represented the triumph of

human imagination over nature's bounty. Colossal, and yet delicately refined.

At the base of the monolith were roughly concentric terraced gardens that showcased the skilful use of water-proofed brick walls. Each of these gardens rose a little higher than the one next to it, and a winding road led up to the rock, through lush parks speckled with fountains. The pathway from the northern side led up to one of the most stunning architectural achievements of Sigiriya: The Lion Gate.

The Lion Gate was called so because there actually was a gargantuan lion's head carved high above the entrance. The gate stood between the lion's two front paws, each the height of an average man, while the massive head reared up, visible to all the citizens of Sigiriya from far and wide. The monolith itself was shaped like the body of a colossal lion, seated in regal splendour, its head surveying its territory from high above.

It was a magnificent sight.

On top of the monolith, across an area spread over two square kilometres, stood the massive palace complex of Kubaer, complete with pools, gardens, private chambers, courts, offices, and unimaginable luxuries designed to please the richest man in the world.

'What is next is that we take control of that,' said Raavan, pointing towards Lion's Rock.

'What!' Kumbhakarna couldn't conceal his shock. 'Isn't it too early to get rid of Kubaer, Dada? We are still not strong enough and...'

Raavan frowned. 'Not that,' he clarified. 'That.'

Kumbhakarna followed the pointing finger more closely this time. Raavan was pointing towards Lion's Rock, but not at Kubaer's palace. The steps going up from the Lion Gate led to a mid-level terrace, about one hundred metres lower than the top of the monolith. The pathway carved into the rock and leading to the terrace had a wall alongside it that was made of evenly cut bricks covered with polished white plaster. So highly polished that anyone walking by could see their reflection in it. It was called, rather unimaginatively, the Mirror Wall. Beyond the Mirror Wall, the rock was designed to look like a cloth saddle for the massive lion that the monolith represented. The saddle was covered with gorgeous frescoes depicting beautiful women. Nobody knew who these figures represented. They had been painted during Trishanku Kaashyap's time, and had been lovingly maintained. Beyond the frescoes, the pathway led to the lower-level palaces, behind lavish gardens, ponds, moats and ramparts which protected the upper-citadel, where Kubaer's personal palace stood.

It was these lower-level palaces that Raavan was pointing at.

'Meghdoot?' asked Kumbhakarna.

The lower-level palaces housed some of the concubines and younger wives of Kubaer. But one of these palaces was the home of Meghdoot, the prime minister, who was in charge of revenues, taxes, Customs and general administration. Raavan, being the general in command of the Lankan army and the police was, effectively, the head of all the muscle power. Meghdoot was head of all the money. Together, they ran the kingdom for Kubaer. If Raavan were to add Meghdoot's portfolio to his own, he would effectively have more power than the chief-trader. After that, replacing him would only be a matter of time. A soft coup.

Kumbhakarna was careful with his words, even though they were alone. 'You do realise that we would have to—'

'Yes, I do,' interrupted Raavan. 'But it must look like an accident. Otherwise it will be difficult for me to take over.'

'Hmm...'

'It's a difficult task. We can't have a thug do it. We need an artist.'

'I'll find someone,' Kumbhakarna said thoughtfully.

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It had been a month since Raavan had ordered the assassination of Meghdoot, the prime minister of Lanka, but Kumbhakarna had been unable to find a way forward. He had finally turned to their uncle for help. And today, Mareech had informed him that the man for the job had been found.

Eager to update his brother with this news, Kumbhakarna went looking for him, but he was nowhere to be found. Finally, he went down to the secret chamber hidden away in the deep interiors of the palace. No one apart from the two brothers was permitted entry here, just like in Raavan's private chamber in Gokarna.

As soon as he walked in, Kumbhakarna turned and locked the door behind him. A single torch had been lit. His brother was inside.

The first thing he saw in the semi-darkness was a gold-plated Raavanhatha. It lay on the ground, broken, its strings ripped apart. In the deathly quiet of the chamber, he thought he heard the sound of someone crying.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Kumbhakarna saw Raavan slumped on a tall wooden stool, his back to the door. His head was in his hands and his entire body shook as he cried. Deep, anguished sobs wrenched from the depths of sorrow and despair.

In front of Raavan stood an easel. On it, a vaguely familiar image had been scratched out with rough, angry strokes that nearly concealed its outlines. It took

a moment for Kumbhakarna to decode the drawing, but then he saw that it was an unfinished profile of Vedavati. Pregnant, her form full and voluptuous. The outlines sketched and ready for the colours to be filled in. The eyes were half drawn—and that's where Raavan seemed to have given up.

Kumbhakarna knew that Raavan had stopped painting Vedavati since that day of the gruesome killings. Until then, she had grown older in his imagination, gradually, year after year. And he had been able to see her in his mind's eye, in fine detail, almost as though she stood beside him while he painted. But after her death, the will to paint had died too, and now, when he sought to capture her on canvas again, it seemed that the blessing, the power of creative vision, had vanished.

Kumbhakarna was aware that even he couldn't fully comprehend the rage and resentment his brother felt. Only an artist can understand the despair of being abandoned by his muse, his lifelong inspiration. Only someone who has loved can know the immeasurable agony of losing the object of one's passion. Only a devout believer who has touched the Divine can know the soul-emptying misery of his Goddess being taken from him.

Kumbhakarna walked over to Raavan quietly.

He knelt beside his elder brother and put an arm around him. Raavan turned and buried his face in his brother's shoulder, weeping as though nothing could comfort him again, ever.

They held each other for a long while, not saying anything. Their shared grief drowned everything else out—all thoughts, all words.

It was Raavan who broke the silence. 'I need control... of Lanka... quickly.'

'Yes, Dada.'

'I need to destroy... I need to... those bastards... Sapt Sindhu... destroy completely...'

Kumbhakarna remained silent.

Raavan controlled himself with some effort, then said, 'Get me that assassin.'

'Yes, Dada.'

'Quickly.'

'Yes, I will.'

When you fill a clogged drain with more water than it can hold, it's bound to overflow and contaminate everything around it. When grief overwhelms someone, when they are enraged at what fate has done to them, their fury often overflows and is inflicted upon the world.

That's the only way in which they can cope with their own life—a life that

holds no meaning anymore.

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‘Are you sure?’ asked Raavan, his expression quizzical.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna had travelled to Gokarna for this meeting. They didn’t want to risk anyone in Sigiriya getting even a whiff of their plan.

Mareech and Akampana had just entered the house through a side entrance, hidden from view. They were accompanied by a young, wiry man.

Mareech said to Raavan, his voice soft but confident, ‘Trust me. I have seen some of his work myself. He is exceptional. Right up there with the Vishkanyas.’

The *Vishkanyas*, or *poison-bearing women*, were renowned assassins. They were raised from a very young age to be killers, with small doses of poison being administered to them daily. Eventually they became immune to the poison. But even a kiss from them was known to be fatal. And if their poison didn’t get you, their weapons would. They were the deadliest killers the world had ever known.

‘Right up there with the Vishkanyas?’ Kumbhakarna did not try to hide his scepticism, as he looked at the man who stood next to Akampana. ‘Really, Uncle, there has to be some limit to exaggeration.’

Mareech looked at the potential assassin. He could see why they did not think much of him. Of small build, with long curly hair and dimples on both cheeks, he exuded a genial charm. There was not a scar in sight. More than a cold-blooded assassin, he looked like a no-good philanderer who knew only how to seduce women.

‘Who’s next on the list?’ asked Raavan, irritated that he had come all the way to Gokarna to meet someone who was evidently unfit for the job.

Mareech didn’t answer. He turned to the assassin and nodded.

The lithe body moved with lightning speed, reaching behind Akampana in a flash. Before the dandy trader could even react, a finger had jabbed him hard and precisely on a pressure point at the back of his neck. Instantly, Akampana was paralysed from the neck down. The attacker grabbed him by the shoulders and gently let him slide down to the ground.

Akampana was able to move his head, just about. His eyes swivelled left and right in panic. ‘I can’t feel anything! I can’t feel anything! Help me! Oh Lord Indra!’ He called out to Raavan. ‘Iraiva! Iraiva! Please help!’

But his ‘true lord’ was laughing. Positively surprised by what he had seen. He turned to his brother. ‘This chap isn’t bad, Kumbha!’

Kumbhakarna wasn’t amused, however. He said to Mareech, who was

laughing along with Raavan, ‘Uncle, tell him to let Akampanaji go at once. This is not right. He is one of us.’

Akampana was still jabbering in terror. ‘Lord Raavan! Iraiva! Don’t kill me! Please! I haven’t done anything!’

Raavan controlled his mirth and asked Mareech, ‘Uncle, this is reversible, right?’

‘Yes, my lord.’ The cause of all the anxiety answered Raavan directly. ‘I can release the hold. But, if I have to, I can also kill him peacefully while he is still paralysed.’

Hearing this, Akampana moaned again in panic, ‘Iraiva! Help!’

‘Oh, shut up, Akampana!’ said Raavan, before turning to the assassin with keen interest. ‘So does the victim feel anything?’

‘Not when I work this particular pressure point. There are others that will leave him paralysed but feeling the pain.’

Raavan didn’t conceal the fact that he was impressed. ‘What is this man’s name, Uncle?’

‘His very name means death,’ said Mareech. ‘Mara.’

Raavan turned back to the young man. ‘All right, Mara. You are hired.’

‘Iraiva!’ screamed Akampana. ‘Release me!’

Raavan looked at Akampana and then at Mara. ‘Can you release his body but paralyse his tongue?’

Everyone burst out laughing. Even Akampana smiled weakly.

Kumbhakarna was still not amused. The two extra arms on top of his shoulders were stiff. He turned to his elder brother, disapproval writ large on his face. ‘Dada...’

‘All right, all right,’ Raavan said.

He gestured to Mara. ‘Release him.’



## Chapter 21

‘Not bad,’ said Vishwamitra, clearly impressed. ‘Not bad at all.’

Vishwamitra and Arishtanemi were in Agastyakootam, the hidden capital of the Malayaputras. It had been a year since the Battle of Karachapa.

‘Yes, Raavan truly is turning out to be the perfect villain,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘There is no person more hated in the Sapt Sindhu than him. Not only did he defeat the empire comprehensively, he has imposed such an extortionate treaty on them that they will soon go from being the wealthiest land in the world to among the poorest.’

‘When I heard of the conditions he had proposed, I assumed Raavan was asking for an outrageous cut so that when he finally settled for less, his magnanimity would be lauded. Clearly, that is not what he had in mind. He is actually ramming the terms of the treaty down their throats. Ayodhya has never been so weak. Which means that finally, that... that... spineless abomination of a man has been shown his place.’ Vishwamitra couldn’t bring himself to speak the name he despised above all.

Arishtanemi knew his guru was referring to Vashishtha, the *raj guru*, the *royal sage* of the Ayodhya court and chief adviser of the royal family. As always, the mere thought of Vashishtha was enough to agitate Vishwamitra.

Arishtanemi smoothly changed the subject. ‘Yes, Ayodhya is weaker now than it has ever been. And the way Raavan forced Kubaer’s hand was masterly, for the chief-trader himself would never have pushed the treaty and the war reparations to this extent. He may be greedy, but he is also a coward. And let’s not forget, the assassination of Meghdoot was a deft touch, impeccably timed.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ asked Vishwamitra, forgetting about Vashishtha for the moment. ‘Because I have heard conflicting reports. There are enough people who believe that his death was caused by drowning—accidental

drowning.'

'I am sure, Guruji. He didn't drown. He was drowned.'

'But—'

'It was beautifully planned. Everyone knew that Meghdoot was rehearsing for his role as the doomed poet Kalidas, in his favourite play, *Jalsandesh*. And we all know how that famous lake scene played out.'

'But I heard a wine glass and a decanter were found next to the pool where he drowned.'

'Also a part of the setup. Meghdoot was a colourful character who liked his wine and women, so it made sense to place a glass of wine there. A red herring, if there ever was one. Besides, there was no sign of injury on Meghdoot. No signs of any struggle. The post-mortem showed there was water in his lungs. He died by drowning. Everything fits too well to be true, Guruji. There is no reason for anyone to suspect anything.'

'So, you think it was too perfect?'

'Exactly. Real life is messy. Nothing is ever perfect, but this death was. That's what got me suspicious, and I decided to investigate.'

'So, who is the person behind this?'

'Someone called Mara. That's obviously not his real name. Which mother would name her child "death"? I don't know anything about his background yet, but wherever he came from, he is a genius. I suspect he is young and still honing his craft. There are things he needs to work on.'

'Such as?'

'Well, for one, he is not secretive enough. He has shown his face to too many people. He is good, but he can be trained to improve.'

'Is that what you intend to do?'

'I do believe Mara could be a useful asset for us, Guruji.'

'I'll leave that to you. Do what you have to. I am more interested in what Raavan is going to do next. When do you think he will take Kubaer out?'

'I don't think he will, for now. With Meghdoot gone, he controls both the revenue department and the military directly—the first Lankan minister to do so. He has, in fact, already started excluding Kubaer from *sabhas*, saying that the voice of the chief-trader is too pure to be heard in these petty *administration meetings*. He is, for all practical purposes, already the king of Lanka. There is no need for him to upset the balance by overthrowing Kubaer.'

'Hmm... clever move. But I am a bit sceptical about the wisdom of enforcing such ridiculous terms on the Sapt Sindhu. He will end up killing the golden goose that feeds him.'

'Is that relevant, Guruji? We have him exactly where we need him. He is

setting himself up to be the perfect villain. All of the Sapt Sindhu will grow to dread him. We should start searching for a Vishnu now.'

'Of course. But we can't lose sight of Raavan's motives either. We need to know what's going on in his mind so that we can control him better. It is important to understand exactly what is pushing him to take this position on Ayodhya. I don't think it's just his lust for money and power. He seems to be driven by a sort of unbridled, almost unhinged rage. Because his actions defy all logic—of business and politics.'

'I'll find out, Guruji.'

'Also, let's start charging him more for the cave material and the medicines.'

Arishtanemi chuckled. 'Yes, Guruji. I was thinking that too. We'll certainly put the money to better use than he will.'

—८१—

Raavan flung open the door to the ship's cabin and walked briskly in, his face sweaty and flushed.

Kumbhakarna, looking similarly exhausted, followed his brother. There were two Lankan soldiers with him. As he entered the cabin, he stopped the soldiers outside. 'Keep your swords drawn and stay vigilant. Don't allow anyone else in.'

Raavan had already poured two goblets of wine for them. He handed one to his younger brother.

'Thanks, Dada,' said Kumbhakarna, regarding the bloodstained goblet for a moment before draining the wine in one gulp. There was nothing like good wine after the exertions of a battle.

Raavan downed his glass just as efficiently. He was still trying to catch his breath.

It had been two years since the Battle of Karachapa. With the Sapt Sindhu having capitulated completely, money was pouring into Lanka at a furious pace. Raavan was now the prime minister of the island kingdom and the general of the Lankan army, making him the most powerful man in the land. Kubaer had been reduced to a ruler in name only.

Mareech and Akampana ran the twenty-nine-year-old Raavan's business empire under Kumbhakarna's able supervision. Mareech had been tasked with expanding the business as far and wide as possible and dominating global trade. He had already appointed 'approved key traders' in every kingdom of the Sapt Sindhu. All trade with the empire was done only through these appointees. This

was a strategic move—it gave the Lankans greater control over their trade with the Sapt Sindhu, and also allowed them to build loyal allies in each kingdom.

Akampana's task was to ensure that the accounting and financing of this vast enterprise—the biggest business corporation in history—was clean, with no scope for either employees or associates to drain money out through corruption.

All their plans had been executed smoothly so far. Raavan was now wealthier than Kubaer and had begun to focus more on enjoying his immense wealth. The richest man in the world wanted his lifestyle to reflect his newfound status—the finest wine and food, the most beautiful women, music and dance—only the best of everything would do for Raavan. He indulged in all that satiated his *desire*, his *kaama*.

The palaces situated on the lower levels of Lion's Rock had been taken over soon after the previous prime minister's unfortunate death. Raavan had evicted Meghdoot's family and Kubaer's junior wives and concubines, merging their palaces into a sweeping, opulent estate over which he presided with all the pomp of a ruler.

He had also begun to travel for pleasure—something he had rarely done before—accompanied by Kumbhakarna and a few of his chosen concubines. It was as they were sailing peacefully over calm seas towards the Arabian Peninsula that one of the ship's officers had burst into Raavan's cabin, with the news that a pirate vessel had been spotted speeding towards them. The brothers had just returned to the cabin after taking care of the unwanted diversion.

'Fools!' said Raavan. 'Attacking us! What were they thinking?'

Kumbhakarna rose from his chair, wine glass in hand, took Raavan's from him and walked over to the table. He put them down before cleaning his bloodied hands with a towel. Then he wiped the goblets clean. When he was done, he poured out some more wine and walked back to his brother, bearing the two goblets and the piece of cloth. 'Here, Dada. Use this to wipe your hands. Lord Indra alone knows whose blood that is.'

Raavan looked down at his bloodied hands. His clothes were stained red too. But not one speck of blood on his expensive clothes or his body was his own. There was not a cut on him. He sniffed the blood on his hand before sticking out his tongue and licking it.

'Yuck!' Kumbhakarna made a face.

'Hmmm,' said Raavan, thoughtfully. 'It's an interesting taste.'

Kumbhakarna, still looking nauseated, held the goblet away from Raavan. 'You need to clean your mouth first.'

'I'll just wash it down,' Raavan said, as he took the goblet from Kumbhakarna and gulped down the wine. He wiped his mouth with the back of

his hand, smearing some more blood on his face. ‘So, what were we talking about? Before those bonehead pirates attacked?’

Kumbhakarna shook his head, trying not to think about what he had just witnessed. ‘We were talking about meeting Vibhishan and Shurpanakha. You promised maa you would, remember?’

After Vishrava and his second wife, Crataeis, had passed away, Kaikesi had decided to adopt their children, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha. The two children, accompanied by some others from the ashram of the great sage Vishrava, had found their way to their wealthy half-brother Raavan’s abode in Lanka, seeking refuge. They had not anticipated the reception they would get there. Raavan, still angry with his father, had thrown his half-siblings out of his home and refused to shelter them. But Kaikesi had stood up to her son and insisted on bringing them back, saying she had responsibilities towards them.

Raavan did not approve of his mother’s act of apparent altruism. ‘Kumbha, you know what maa is really like. Her compassion is all fake. She’s only taken them in to show the world how virtuous she is.’

‘Dada, what’s wrong with you? How can you say that about maa?’

‘I haven’t said anything untrue. Tell me, what has she done to deserve any of this? What sacrifices has she made for our happiness? I am the one who is working hard and paying for her comfortable life in that magnificent mansion. I am the one who pays for all the charity that she does—and publicises. And I am the one who is paying for those useless half-siblings of ours whom she has decided to adopt and shower with attention. She just struts around exclaiming, “Oh, look! Look, how great I am.”’ Raavan opened his eyes wide and mimicked his mother’s slightly high-pitched voice. ‘She’s a fraud. Let her try to build her own life by herself. Then she can prance around the world teaching lessons in morality, for all I care. I am tired of her virtue signalling.’

‘Dada, I wish you wouldn’t be so harsh on her. Besides, what do Vibhishan and Shurpanakha have to do with any of this? They are little children.’

The outgrowths on Kumbhakarna’s shoulders were stiff and straight, a clear sign that he was upset.

Raavan sighed. ‘You are too genuinely kind for your own good, Kumbha.’

Kumbhakarna remained silent.

Raavan threw his arms up in surrender. ‘All right, all right! I’ll meet them when I get back to Sigiriya.’

Kumbhakarna smiled. ‘That’s my boy.’

‘Excuse me!’ said Raavan, straightening up. ‘What do you mean “boy”? Don’t forget I am your elder brother.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Kumbhakarna, laughing.

Raavan smiled at him. ‘I let you get away with too much.’

‘That’s because you can’t manage without me.’

‘Well, my life manager, tell me, what have you done about Kubaer?’

‘We’ve discussed this already, Dada. There’s no need to try and remove him. He’s practically your prisoner in any case. He can’t step out of his upper citadel without passing through our lower terraces. His bodyguards are our men. We control his life.’

‘But what is the point of having him around at all?’

‘Listen to me, Dada. Kubaer’s idea of doing away with taxes within Lanka was brilliant. We don’t need tax revenues in any case, with the flood of money coming in from the Sapt Sindhu. And by proclaiming that all citizens are exempt from paying any taxes at all, he has bought the loyalty of his subjects for life.’

Raavan shook his hand. ‘No. It’s been too long. I want to be known as the king of Lanka.’

‘Sounds to me like you already have a plan.’

‘Obviously. That’s why I am talking to you.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘I’ll tell you... but only after we’re finished with these guys.’ Raavan drained his glass and threw it away, then he got up and strode briskly to the door.

Kumbhakarna followed in his brother’s footsteps.

They were on the main deck of the ship in no time. It was a pleasure boat, so the deck was massive and grand. At the moment though, it resembled a battleground. The bodies of the pirates lay all over. Not one Lankan had been killed, though a few had suffered minor injuries. Next to the large ship, bobbing in the sea, was the much smaller pirate craft, attached to Raavan’s vessel with grappling hooks. The pirates had assumed their target carried some rich, chicken-hearted businessman whose crew could be easily overpowered. They had chased down Raavan’s ship and boarded it, screaming fierce battle cries. Regrettably for the pirates, that had been the extent of their fierceness. They had come face to face with soldiers who were amongst the finest warriors in the Indian Ocean. Most of the pirates were dead within the first few minutes of battle. The rest, many of them grievously injured, had been lined up at the far end of the deck, shackled and on their knees.

The brothers walked up to the prisoners, their loyal Lankan soldiers close behind them. They stopped in front of a stocky young man who was on his knees, blood flowing from a deep cut on his forehead.

‘So, Dada, what do you want to do with these morons? Should we find out who they work for? Maybe we can sell them as slaves somewhere in the Mediterranean?’

By way of answer, Raavan simply flexed his shoulders, then drew his sword and in one swift, mighty blow, beheaded the man kneeling in front of him.

Kumbhakarna shrugged. ‘Or we could do that.’

The Lankans followed the example of their lord and commander. They drew their swords and put every one of the pirates out of their misery.



## Chapter 22

Three years had passed since the Battle of Karachapa. Raavan was now the sole ruler of Lanka, having got rid of Kubaer. It had been surprisingly easy.

The main contact for trade in Ayodhya for the Lankans was a woman called Manthara. Over the years, Kubaer had come to trust her implicitly. However, a message from Raavan asking her to choose between higher commissions for compliance on the one hand, and severe punishment in case of disobedience on the other, had made the pragmatic Manthara switch sides in a hurry. On Raavan's instructions, she had put the idea in Kubaer's head that Raavan had hired an assassin to get rid of him. This was not the truth, but Kubaer believed it. To nudge him further towards the edge, Manthara let him know that his former prime minister, Meghdoot, had not died by accidental drowning but had, in fact, been assassinated on Raavan's orders. This, of course, was the truth.

The terrified Kubaer had quickly abdicated the throne, publicly announcing that he had nothing more to achieve. He now wished to retire to Devaboomi in the Himalayas, he said, and perhaps even go further, to Kailash. He was seen off in Lanka with the respect and honour due to someone who was on his way to taking *sanyas*. But *ascetism* was far from Kubaer's mind, especially since Raavan had allowed him to leave with most of his personal wealth, as well as his wives and favourite concubines. He had even allowed Kubaer the use of the Pushpak Vimaan to travel north—the flying vehicle was now officially Raavan's property. And Kubaer had been appropriately obsequious while publicly appreciating Raavan's generosity.

To ensure that there were no counterclaims or even grumbling about Raavan's right to the Lankan throne, Kumbhakarna had suggested that Kubaer himself crown the new king before he left. The ever-reasonable trader was only

too willing to place the crown on Raavan's head. Once a ruler had publicly abdicated his throne in favour of another, there could be no earthly reason for the latter to assassinate him. It was only logical.

As soon as he became the undisputed king of Lanka, Raavan abandoned the rather tame title Kubaer had preferred, of chief-trader. Instead, he assumed far more grandiose ones, such as the King of Kings, Emperor of Emperors, Ruler of the Three Worlds, Beloved of the Gods, and a few others. When Kumbhakarna joked about the pompous new titles, he was told by his brother to shut up.

With everything going just the way he wanted it to, Raavan should have been happy and satisfied. However, right at this moment, he didn't look particularly pleased.

'I don't know why I let you talk me into this,' he said.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna were on their way to the lower-citadel palace that was now Kaikesi's abode. The brothers had moved into Kubaer's magnificent palace on top of Lion's Rock. To reach the lower citadel, they had to pass through the large, flat piece of ground that had been converted into a landing pad for the Pushpak Vimaan. They were followed by a phalanx of one hundred bodyguards, who maintained a discreet distance from the king and his brother.

'Dada, I know you are unhappy about this, but they moved into their palace a week ago. They have been delaying the *grahpravesh puja* just for you. You know delaying such a ceremony is inauspicious. We can't keep them waiting anymore,' Kumbhakarna replied.

'She has deliberately brought some priests from the Sapt Sindhu for the ceremony. She knows that will irritate me. When will you understand how devious our mother is?' Raavan snapped.

Kumbhakarna thought it best to ignore his elder brother's dark mood and continued walking.

As they neared the palace, they could see Kaikesi standing at the entrance, with the young Vibhishan and Shurpanakha hiding behind her. Both children were under ten years of age, and were terrified of Raavan. The priests Kaikesi had invited were standing next to her, issuing instructions in a low voice. At least a hundred maids stood behind them, responding to every demand. Kaikesi was enjoying the luxuries that came with her son's good fortune.

As soon as Raavan was within hearing distance, Kaikesi glanced at the sun and declared, 'You are late.'

'I can leave,' said Raavan.

His mother pursed her lips and muttered something under her breath. Then

she took the puja thali from the priest standing next to her and looped it in small circles around Raavan's face. Three times. As Raavan stepped aside, she repeated the action for Kumbhakarna.

'Come in,' she said gruffly, waiting for Raavan and Kumbhakarna to enter before her. As Raavan was about to cross the threshold into the palace, she said loudly, 'Right foot first.'

Raavan stopped, glanced at his mother, then at the priests standing next to her, and put his left foot forward.

'Dada!' Kumbhakarna exhaled noisily in frustration, then conscientiously and carefully placed his right foot over the threshold. 'The palace looks beautiful, Maa,' he said. 'You have done a wonderful job, and in such little time.'

Kaikesi looked at her son and sighed, tears welling up in her eyes. 'Forgive me for being so emotional, my son. It's just that it's rare for me to receive compliments these days. I do so much for others, yet no one appreciates me.'

Raavan turned around abruptly and barked, 'I need to leave quickly, Maa. I have lots of work to do. Where is this stupid puja supposed to happen? Let's get it over with.'

Kaikesi raised her voice immediately. 'Mind your words, Raavan. It's not a stupid puja! It's the way in which we honour our ancestors and our culture. Don't be disrespectful!'

Raavan stepped closer to his mother. 'You're right. It's not a stupid puja. It's a *very* stupid puja.'

Kumbhakarna had had enough of this childishness. 'Stop it, both of you!' He looked around to see all the maids studiously examining the floor, while the priests seemed absorbed in setting out the materials for the puja. Only young Vibhishan and Shurpanakha looked visibly petrified. Kumbhakarna turned back to his mother and elder brother. 'Let's do the ceremonies quickly. Then you will not have to cause each other any more grief.'

'He doesn't need me to cause him any grief,' said Kaikesi bitingly. 'He's quite capable of doing it to himself.'

Raavan turned to her, fists clenched tight. 'What do you mean, Maa?'

'You know exactly what I mean.'

'I dare you to say it openly. What do you mean?'

Kumbhakarna tried to calm tempers once again. 'Listen, let's do this puja later. We'll come back. Let's...'

Kumbhakarna fell silent as Raavan raised his hand. He stepped closer to his mother, towering over her. The air between them bristled with hostility. 'Say it, Maa. What did you mean?'

Kaikesi didn't step back. The source of all her wealth and power was her

eldest son, yet she had grown to despise him. She also knew that however angry he was, Raavan would never harm her. She could get away with saying almost anything. ‘Don’t forget that I am your mother. I know every little detail of what happens in your life. And you know who I am talking about.’

‘Who are you talking about? Say it. Say it!’

Kumbhakarna pleaded with them again. ‘Maa, please don’t say anything.’ He turned to Raavan. ‘Dada, let’s go. Come on.’

Raavan continued to glare at his mother, molten rage in his eyes. ‘Say it!’

‘It was all your fault! If you had honoured your mother and listened to her as a good son should, none of this would have happened! Understand that the Gods punished you. They punished someone innocent because of you. It was because of your lack of dharma that the Kanyakumari, the noble Vedavati, was killed!’

‘MAA!’ Raavan screamed as he reached for his knife.

‘Stop!’ Kumbhakarna rushed to stand between them, pushing Raavan back and away from their mother. ‘Dada, no!’

Raavan was out of control now. He stabbed the knife in the air as he raged at his mother. ‘You bitch! You can’t survive a day without my protection! And you dare to take her name! You dare to insult the Kanyakumari! You dare to insult Ved...’

Raavan’s voice continued to resonate through the corridors as Kumbhakarna almost dragged his brother out of the palace.

—४१—

‘Love?’ asked Vishwamitra, genuinely surprised.

Following the great maharishi’s orders, Arishtanemi had investigated the likely cause of Raavan’s attitude towards the Sapt Sindhu. And he had, by chance, stumbled on the truth.

‘Yes. Apparently, he was in love with a Kanyakumari.’

‘Which Kanyakumari?’

‘Vedavati.’

Vishwamitra narrowed his eyes and looked at his lieutenant. ‘Arishtanemi, how am I supposed to know which Kanyakumari that is? You think I know all their birth-names? Which temple? And for what period?’

‘Sorry, Guruji. She was the Kanyakumari of Vaidyanath. And this was a long time ago. Probably two decades at least.’

‘So he met her when he was a child?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘But we never saw her with him, did we? Not since we began tracking him.’

‘Apparently they met in his father’s ashram and didn’t see each other for many years after. Then they met again, perhaps eight or nine years ago. I’m not entirely sure of the time.’

‘So you are saying he was in love with her all this time, through his childhood? Even though he didn’t meet her for several years?’

‘Apparently so.’

‘What sense does that make?’

‘It makes no sense, but that’s what happened. In any case, when he found her again, with his brother’s help, she was married to someone else.’

Vishwamitra leaned back as the realisation hit him. ‘Lord Parshu Ram be merciful! Is this the former Kanyakumari who was killed in her own village? What was the name of that place... Todee?’

‘Yes, Guruji.’

‘Her husband was also killed, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the entire village was exterminated? Brutally?’

‘Yes. Nobody really knows what happened, since there were no survivors. Some people from a neighbouring village discovered the bodies a few days later. They chased the wild animals away and performed the funeral ceremonies for all the dead villagers of Todee.’

‘But I remember hearing that the corpses of the Kanyakumari and her husband had been cremated with full Vedic honours.’

‘Yes. That’s what I heard as well.’

‘There’s only one interpretation possible then,’ Vishwamitra said.

Arishtanemi nodded. ‘I was thinking the same thing, Guruji. Raavan was attracted to Vedavati, but by the time he found her, she was married to someone else. She must have refused to leave her husband for him, and enraged at her rejection, Raavan killed her and her husband. Perhaps he tried to rape her... we will never know the complete truth. To wipe out any evidence of his crime, he must have massacred the entire village.’

Vishwamitra was too appalled to speak. He’d had a long life—there were some who thought he was at least a hundred and fifty years old—and had seen some terrible things in his time. The world had never been a kind place, but savagery of this magnitude was beyond his imagination. Not since the reign of Trishanku Kaashyap could he remember hearing of anything like it.

‘Well, Guruji,’ said Arishtanemi, ‘we wanted a villain, and we’ve got one. A monstrous one at that.’

‘Kumbhakarna could not have been involved in this, surely,’ Vishwamitra said. He had always had a soft spot for the little Naga boy who had come to see him with his mother many years ago.

‘I cannot be sure, Guruji. But he is completely under Raavan’s thumb.’

Vishwamitra clasped his hands under his chin, deep in thought. Then he took a deep breath and shook his head. ‘I met that Kanyakumari once, the Kanyakumari from Vaidyanath... I remember her. She was still a child then. Joyous, and kind to everyone, even animals. How a person treats those weaker than them is a good indicator of their character. Yes, I remember her... She could mimic the sound of a hill myna almost accurately. And she mimicked me as well.’ Vishwamitra smiled as he said this. ‘A wonderful girl, pure of mind and heart... a truly noble soul. She did not deserve to die the way she did.’

‘We have to create an India where such purity and nobility are respected once again, Guruji.’

There was a brief silence, then Vishwamitra said decisively, ‘We have to find the Vishnu now. Yes, we have to... We have to revive our great land. We have to make it worthy of our ancestors once again.’

‘We have the villain we were looking for,’ said Arishtanemi. ‘Now, we need to quickly identify the noble Vishnu who will take our plan to fruition.’

Master and disciple looked at each other, their eyes alive with a sense of mission.

—४१—

‘Dada!’ Kumbhakarna’s voice was low and uneven. He seemed to be struggling with his emotions.

It had been five years since the Battle of Karachapa. Raavan had been the ruler of Lanka for more than two years now. The royal family’s problems had spilled out into the open, with Kaikesi telling almost anyone who would listen to her that Raavan was not her son anymore, and she did not wish to be associated with him. Instead, she said, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha were to be treated like her own children.

It was obvious to everyone that Kaikesi’s status in Lanka—all the luxuries she enjoyed, the charities she funded, the honour she was accorded, and the power she wielded—was founded on her identity as Raavan’s mother. But no one had the courage to say this to her face. In fact, many fed her insecurities to get favours for themselves in return.

But of one thing there was no doubt: there was only one true power centre in Lanka, indeed in the entire Indian subcontinent, if not the world, and that was

Raavan. And no one dared to confront Raavan. On the contrary, they rushed to obey his every command and followed every instruction unquestioningly. Some went a step further in the hope of winning his approval. It was one such excess that was tormenting Kumbhakarna greatly.

‘What is it, Kumbha?’ sighed Raavan. ‘Just manage whatever needs to be managed.’

‘There is nothing left to be managed, Dada.’ Kumbhakarna’s tone was unfailingly polite, as it always was when he spoke to his brother in public, but he was visibly distraught.

Raavan stared at Kumbhakarna for a moment, and then nodded to the dainty woman sitting on his lap. She got up, picked up her blouse in a single, languid movement, and left. The other dancers in the chamber followed suit.

‘So what do you want me to do?’

‘You must remove Prahast from the army.’

Raavan’s forces were divided into two contingents. One of them, led by officers who had been given the title of MahiRaavan, were responsible for the territories on land. The other group, commanded by officers called AhiRaavan, managed the seas and the ports. Among the AhiRaavans was Prahast, who, since betraying the governor of Chilika, had become an officer in Raavan’s army and was greatly feared for his brutality.

‘Kumbha, if we need to control the seas, we need ruthless officers like Prahast. Are you forgetting that it’s thanks to him that we captured Krakachabahu’s wealth many years ago?’

‘Dada, there is a difference between ruthlessness and adharma.’

‘Don’t be immature, Kumbha! There is nothing called dharma or adharma. There is only success and failure. And I refuse to be a failure, ever. I am Raavan.’

‘And I am Kumbhakarna, Dada. Nobody in this world loves you as I do. And my job is to stop you from committing a great sin.’

‘The only real sin is to be poor and powerless, as we once were. Do you remember how helpless we were in our childhood? We will never go back to those days.’

‘Dada, how much more wealth and power do we need? You are the wealthiest man in the world. You are the most powerful man in the world. You don’t need more.’

‘Yes, I do. You say I am the wealthiest man in the world. Well, I cannot rest till I am the richest man in history. And once I achieve that, who knows, I may want to become wealthier and more powerful than the Gods! Maybe that’s not a bad idea, actually. The citizens of Lanka should learn to worship me as a

God.'

'Dada, if you want to be a God, then consider how a God would behave. Would he allow the kind of crimes that Prahast has committed?'

'Let me be the judge of how I should behave.'

'Dada, what Prahast has done in Mumbadevi is beyond evil!' said Kumbhakarna.

'Once again, let me be the judge of that. What did he do?'

The Mumbadevi port was situated on the western coast of India, at a strategic point on the sea route between the Indus–Saraswati coast and Lanka. Raavan wanted absolute control over trade in the Indian Ocean—the hub of global trade. Whoever dominated this ocean would dominate the world.

He had managed to gain control over most of the major ports across the Indian subcontinent and the coasts of Arabia, Africa and South-east Asia. In all of these places, he had managed to enforce his usurious Customs duties. He had also, through his ally, King Vali in Kishkindha, put restrictions on the land trade routes south of the Narmada River. He now had the most prosperous region in the world, the Sapt Sindhu, in a vice-like grip. And he squeezed it for riches for himself and for Lanka.

Mumbadevi alone stubbornly refused to charge high Customs duties or turn away any sailor who sought refuge there. The Devendrars, the ruling community of Mumbadevi, believed that commerce had to go hand-in-hand with service, and they would not veer from doing their duty, their dharma. Raavan had decided he had to stop this for the good of his business. There could be no challenge to his vice-like grip: not only would it mean a loss of revenue, it would also weaken his image as the all-powerful king of Lanka.

'He has taken control of the Mumbadevi port,' Kumbhakarna began.

'So? I ordered him to take control of the port. Are you questioning my orders?'

'No, Dada! I am not questioning your orders. I am questioning your subordinate's methods.'

'I don't care about the methods. He was supposed to deliver results. If he has, then that's good enough for me.'

'Dada, all of Mumbadevi is destroyed.'

'So what? We can use the Salsette Island close by as a port.'

Kumbhakarna was shocked. 'Dada, did you hear what I just said? Forget about Salsette. All of Mumbadevi is destroyed. Every single Devendar is dead. Their palace has been burned to the ground, their houses lie demolished. No one has survived—men, women, children. Their bodies were piled high on a mass pyre. The half-charred body of the kindly King Indran was also found. It looks

like they were all burned alive.'

Raavan did not react. It appeared that he was momentarily staggered by the news.

'They were all non-combatants,' continued Kumbhakarna. 'They were not warriors. Killing them like this is an act of adharma. I have heard that some of our soldiers were so disgusted by Prahast's actions that they have deserted the army. He has lost nearly a third of his five-thousand-strong brigade. Prahast has come back to Lanka with all the wealth of the Devendrars, hoping that mere gold will stop us from punishing him.'

Raavan looked down, deep in thought. His right hand instinctively reached for the pendant around his neck.

Kumbhakarna moved to kneel beside his brother. 'Dada, you have to punish Prahast. We cannot allow adharma like this. An example has to be set.'

Raavan remained silent for some time before looking up at Kumbhakarna.

'Dada?'

'Yes, an example has to be set,' Raavan said. 'So, here's what we will do. Prahast will be transferred. The wealth he looted from Mumbadevi will be confiscated and added to the Lankan treasury. And we will send out raiding parties after the deserters. A few of them will have to be publicly executed.'

Kumbhakarna looked at his brother in shock.

'Kumbhakarna, I agree with you. Prahast overdid it. But we cannot remove him from the army. We are hated by most of the world. We need his ruthlessness on our side. Also, we simply cannot allow desertions. It would destroy our army. We don't have to go after them all, that would take too much effort. We just need to find a reasonable number, maybe one or two hundred of the deserters. And execute them. That should serve as a warning for the rest.'

'Dada... but...'

'Do it, Kumbha,' said Raavan, the tone of his voice brooking no further disagreement.

The king of Lanka turned towards the door and clapped his hands. The dancers came rushing back in, some of them removing their blouses as they ran. Kumbhakarna knew that the meeting was over.



## Chapter 23

Eleven years after the Battle of Karachapa, Lanka's domination of global trade was complete. Not only had Raavan's personal wealth grown beyond measure, but he had transformed the small island kingdom into a world power. The heavy taxes levied on the Sapt Sindhu were bleeding the Land of the Seven Rivers dry, but even in its vastly reduced state, it remained wealthy. There was plenty for Lanka to continue to extract from.

Lanka by now had absolute control over the trade routes and every major port in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, it dominated the flow of trade across the world. The kingdom glittered with riches and had come to be known as Golden Lanka—with zero taxes, heavily subsidised living, free healthcare and education, twenty-four-hour water supply to homes through lead pipes, sprawling public gardens, sports stadiums, concert halls, and so on. There were no poor people in Raavan's Lanka.

Raavan himself, now thirty-eight, had acquired a God-like status in the kingdom. People had begun to worship his likeness in a few temples that had come up over the past year. Only his mother Kaikesi dared to oppose this deification: she had publicly declared that Raavan was dishonouring the ancient Vedic ways by encouraging such worship while he was still alive.

On the personal front, too, things had changed for Raavan. He had finally given in to Kumbhakarna's persuasions and taken a bride. Mandodari was the pious and beautiful daughter of a minor noble called Maya, who was the landlord of two small but prosperous villages in central India. Unfortunately, it soon became clear to her and to others around them, that Raavan had only married her to spite the land he professed to hate. As though he wanted the great empire of the Sapt Sindhu to acknowledge that he had the power not only to defeat their armies and seize their wealth, but to take away their women too. The

only positive consequence of the ill-fated union was the birth of a son, Indrajit, whom Raavan truly loved.

The twenty-nine-year-old Kumbhakarna, meanwhile, had become increasingly melancholic. He cherished his brother but was unhappy about some of the things that he was forced to do because of his unwavering loyalty to him. Torn between his love for his brother and a desire to follow his dharma, he had begun to look for excuses to escape Lanka as often as he could. He travelled far and wide, sometimes on trade missions and negotiations, and other times on military expeditions, to put down the menace of piracy on the high seas. He grasped at any legitimate reason to stay away from Sigiriya.

It was on one such trip that Kumbhakarna found himself in the Ethiopian kingdom of Damat, a long-standing ally of Lanka. For as long as anyone could remember, trade between the West and India had flourished via the Western Sea, access to which was through the narrow Mandab strait in the Red Sea or the strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, also called Jam Zrayangh by the locals. Any Egyptian or Mesopotamian trading ship had to enter the Western Sea at either of these points before sailing on to India. In a master stroke, Raavan had conquered the ports of Djibouti and Dubai, which controlled the two straits. Now, ships from Damat and other kingdoms that lay further west had to pay heavy Customs duties at either of these two ports to enter the Western Sea and the main Indian Ocean trade routes.

Kumbhakarna was in the kingdom to meet its ruler and fix the trade quotas and Customs duties for the next year. After the meetings were done, he had decided to stroll around the markets of the city of Yaha-Aksum, the capital of Damat. With just a day to spare before he left for Lanka, there wasn't enough time to explore all the sights and sounds of this beautiful city he was visiting for the first time.

Suddenly, a familiar sound caught his attention—a drumbeat that he did not expect to hear so far from home.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

He started walking in the direction of the sound, as if pulled by an invisible thread.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

A few minutes later, he found himself in front of a graceful stone structure that looked unexpectedly like an Indian temple—a large platform made of red sandstone at ground level and a spire shooting high up into the sky, like a namaste to the Gods. The outer walls were decorated with beautifully sculpted figures of celestial nymphs, rishis, rishikas, kings and queens, all of whom were

dressed Indian-style. The only difference was that their faces were distinctly African.

Kumbhakarna had met a few people from the African continent who had settled in India. He also knew of some rishis and rishikas who were originally from Africa. However, nothing had prepared him for a temple dedicated to Lord Rudra in the heart of Yaha-Aksum.

As he entered the temple, the drumbeats grew louder.

Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa-Dhoom-Dhoom-danaa.

Large stands were placed at different points in the main temple hall, before the sanctum sanctorum. On each of these stands were placed three massive drums, in a row. Tall muscular men, holding long drumsticks, stood on the sides, beating the drums rhythmically. The temple compound was filled with people dancing. A dance of sheer, ecstatic abandon.

The mood was electric, and it instantly infected Kumbhakarna. His body began to move of its own volition, and soon he was dancing as well. The booming ecstasy of Lord Rudra's music filled his mind and soul.

As the beat picked up pace, the dancing grew frenzied. The temple compound was alive with the raw energy of Lord Rudra's devotees. Gradually, the tempo built up till it reached a crescendo and ended with a loud triumphant cry of 'Jai Shri Rudra!'

Kumbhakarna raised his voice in ecstasy to join the call to the Lord.

*Glory to Lord Rudra!*

*'Jai Devi Ishtar!'*

*Glory to Goddess Ishtar!*

Kumbhakarna looked around at the happy faces around him, sweaty from the exuberant dancing. Some had tears of happiness flowing down their cheeks. Some were still in a trance. Strangers hugged, wishing each other well. Kumbhakarna too was embraced. No one seemed to notice that he had deformities, that he was a Naga.

'What brings you here, Kumbhakarna?'

Kumbhakarna turned to see a tall, distinguished-looking man with unblemished chocolate-coloured skin. While his features made it plain that he was a local from Damat, he was dressed in a saffron dhoti and angvastram, the colour of detachment and monkhood. A knotted tuft of hair at the top of his shaven head announced that he was a Brahmin. A flowing salt-and-pepper beard softened his face, and despite his imposing physical presence, he conveyed an impression of tranquillity, with his calm, gentle eyes. He was clearly a man at peace with himself.

Kumbhakarna frowned. 'I've seen you before.'

The Brahmin smiled and nodded.

‘Yesterday, at the court?’

‘Right,’ said the man. ‘I was standing at the back. You are observant.’

‘I tend to notice important people,’ said Kumbhakarna, smiling politely and folding his hands in a respectful namaste. ‘But I didn’t know you are a fellow devotee of Lord Rudra. What is your name, my friend?’

The man smiled and responded with a namaste. ‘You can call me M’Bakur, my friend.’

‘M’Bakur?’ Kumbhakarna was surprised. ‘Do you know, there’s an old Sanskrit word called Bakur—it means a war trumpet.’

‘I do. And, in our language, when we add the sound *M* to it, it means a *great* war trumpet.’

Kumbhakarna smiled broadly. ‘Great name. But you seem to be a man of peace.’

‘I’ve had enough of war. And I have the scars to prove it.’

‘So the mighty sword has been put down in favour of temple drums?’

M’Bakur laughed softly. ‘Dancing is much more fun than fighting, wouldn’t you agree?’

Kumbhakarna laughed too, and nodded.

‘I had my reasons for becoming a temple priest,’ said M’Bakur. ‘What is your reason for being a trade negotiator when your heart is clearly not in it?’

‘Excuse me? Are you telling me I am not good at it?’ Kumbhakarna was not sure whether to take offense.

‘I didn’t say that. I just said your heart isn’t in it. I watched the negotiations yesterday. I was surprised. You could have asked for better terms. You left too much on the table for us.’

Kumbhakarna remained silent.

‘It seemed to me that you were compensating for something. Overcompensating, perhaps. Like helping us would take some load off your mind.’

Kumbhakarna looked around. The temple had largely cleared out. Most of the devotees had left. He looked back at M’Bakur. ‘Who are you?’

‘Sit with me, my friend,’ said M’Bakur in a gentle voice.

They sat in the main temple hall, resting their backs against the pillars. Kumbhakarna looked towards the sanctum sanctorum in the distance. It housed a life-size idol of Lord Rudra: a tall, muscular figure with long, open hair and a flowing beard.

Lord Rudra, as he had been in real life—magnificent and fearsome.

Kumbhakarna folded his hands together and bowed in deep reverence, as

did M'Bakur.

The idol of a Goddess placed to the right side of Lord Rudra was nearly as tall as the Lord himself. The serene face had African features, though the body was dressed in an Indian-style dhoti, blouse and angavastram. An egg in the left hand and a long sword in the right identified her as the Goddess of Love and War. Kumbhakarna and M'Bakur bowed to the idol of Lady Ishtar as well.

The Lankan asked once again, 'Who are you?'

'Someone who can help you,' answered M'Bakur.

'Who says I need help?'

'Not everything needs to be said. When you see someone attempting to harm themselves, it is evident that they need help. But I guess you're wondering if you can trust me...'

Kumbhakarna remained silent.

M'Bakur bowed forward and whispered, 'I am a friend of Hanuman.'

Kumbhakarna looked at him, startled. Hanuman was a member of the legendary Vayuputra tribe. A gentle giant with a heart of gold, he was always on hand to help anyone in need. He had saved Kumbhakarna's life once, a long time ago. But he had extracted a promise from him never to speak of it, and Kumbhakarna had honoured that promise. However, he had remained forever grateful to Hanuman, and had always looked for an opportunity to repay that debt.

Any friend of Hanuman's was a friend of his.

'Are you a Vayuputra?' asked Kumbhakarna.

M'Bakur nodded. Yes.

'And you don't hate me?'

M'Bakur laughed softly. 'Why should I hate you?'

'I mean...' Kumbhakarna sighed. 'I am...'

'Go on.'

'Look, you are from the divine Vayuputra tribe. The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra. You are tasked with protecting the holy land of India. And I am the brother of the man who is destroying India.'

'Destroying India! Really?' asked M'Bakur, his eyes widening in mirth. 'Do you think your brother is all that powerful?'

Kumbhakarna was nonplussed. He was used to people speaking of his brother in exalted tones. He had never heard someone question his power or the extent of his influence. 'What? I don't understand.'

M'Bakur smiled. 'Tell me, how do you feel about someone destroying India?'

'It's... it's my land. I love my motherland.'

‘And is your motherland so weak that one man can destroy it? Or, let me put it another way. If a land is so fragile that a single man can destroy it, does it even deserve to survive?’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Have you heard of *Matsya Nyay*?’

‘Who hasn’t? The bigger fish will always eat the smaller fish. I suppose you could call it *the law of the fish*.’

‘You do know the law does not just apply to fish, right?’

Kumbhakarna laughed. ‘Yes, I do.’

‘It’s about the law of Mother Nature. The survival of the fittest.’

‘Yes, and it’s a cruel law. That’s why we’ve moved away from it. We don’t kill those who are weaker than us. We protect them.’

‘That is the human code of conduct, but nature doesn’t work that way. Cruelty and kindness are human concepts. Nature prioritises balance. And balance sometimes calls for tough love.’

‘Tough love?’

‘There’s love that weakens you, and then there’s love that prepares you for what lies ahead. Sometimes that love may appear tough, but it’s necessary. If you are a parent who is only concerned with the here and now, you will give your child whatever she wants, because you want to see a smile on her face. But if you are a parent thinking of your child’s future, you will realise that spoiling your child is the worst thing you can do.’

‘Yes, but if you are too tough, the child will break.’

M’Bakur smiled. ‘And that is the difference between nature and us. Mother Nature doesn’t keep track all the time, she lets the laws of survival take over. And yes, sometimes the weak break and go extinct. But human beings are different. We can think and... well, we can keep track. We can modulate the tough love to the right level; tough enough to strengthen, but not so tough as to break.’

‘What does this have to do with my brother, or me?’

‘Have you ever stopped to consider whether, like the play of Mother Nature, there are some larger forces controlling our lives too? That possibly, your brother is a puppet in the hands of such a force?’

Kumbhakarna was too surprised to answer.

M’Bakur changed tack suddenly. ‘Have you ever seen forest fires?’

‘I have.’

‘Are they good or bad?’

‘It depends.’

‘Depends on what?’

‘Depends on whether the fire is controlled or uncontrolled.’

‘Exactly. A controlled forest fire removes all the deadwood; deadwood, beyond a point, can turn toxic and destroy the forest. If small, controlled forest fires are not used to clear the ground, the chances of a massive, uncontrolled fire breaking out would increase. And an uncontrolled forest fire could destroy everything. That’s not good, right?’

‘That’s not good at all.’

‘Exactly. So a small forest fire is like using a small poison to kill a bigger poison.’

Kumbhakarna stiffened. ‘My brother is not a poison.’

M’Bakur smiled. He didn’t answer. He didn’t apologise either.

Kumbhakarna got up, ready to leave.

‘We haven’t finished,’ said M’Bakur.

‘What makes you think you are so much better than my brother?’ Kumbhakarna asked, sitting down again. ‘To me, your casual acceptance of people suffering for some apparent “long-term good” seems as wrong as what my brother does.’

‘You know, from Mother Nature’s perspective, the opposite of right is not wrong, it’s left.’

‘That’s just sophistry. What the hell do you mean?’

‘I mean that there is no one right way, no ideal solution. The world usually suffers most at the hands of those who believe in perfection, those who don’t realise that there is no one ideal. The truly wise, however, realise that you can only look for an optimal solution, not an ideal solution. A solution that could help *most* people is worth pursuing. Because there can’t be a solution that will help *all* people. India is suffering because the Kshatriyas have become all-powerful, and in their arrogance, they have been oppressing the Shudras and the Vaishyas. We need to break their stranglehold before society can be set right again. And that is the role that Raavan is playing. He can break the Kshatriyas.’

‘Why are you telling me all this? I could go and tell my brother how you are using him.’

‘And you expect him to listen to you?’ asked M’Bakur. ‘Do you think he will suddenly turn dharmic?’

‘Do you expect me to believe that you people are dharmic?’

M’Bakur smiled. ‘If only questions on dharma could be answered so simply.’

‘Try me.’

‘Dharma is complex. We could spend whole lifetimes discussing what it is and what adharma is. But what truly matters is whether our intentions are

dharmaic—the outcome is beyond our control and cannot therefore be a measure of dharma.'

'Intentions?'

'Someone may try to do good for others, like the Vayuputras, for instance, are trying to do. Will we actually succeed? Only time will tell. But we know that our intentions cannot be doubted. We are thinking of the good of others, and not just our own objectives. That is the first step towards dharma. When you ignore your own selfish interests for the sake of others.'

Kumbhakarna leaned forward. 'Once again, why are you telling me all this?'

'Because Raavan's demonic nature may well be used for the greater good. But we want his soul to be saved as well.'

Kumbhakarna frowned. 'And you think I am naïve enough to believe that the Vayuputras care about him?'

'Why not? We care about everyone. We may not be able to help everyone, but we care about everyone.'

'But what do you want from me?'

'We hope that you will help your brother.'

'And what do you think I have been doing?'

'Negotiating bad deals does not help your brother.'

'We have more money than we can ever use. I may as well spread it around a bit. At least some good will come of it. Every bit spent in charity is good for dharma.'

M'Bakur smiled. 'Have you heard of Lord Vidur?'

'Of course I have,' answered Kumbhakarna. 'Who has not heard of the great philosopher, one of the most brilliant men in history?'

'Lord Vidur said that there are two ways to waste money. One, by giving charity to the unworthy. Second, by not giving charity to the worthy.'

'I have been...'

'Your trade concessions help the rulers and traders in my kingdom. They don't need charity. It's the poor who need help. Not only in Damat, but everywhere. Find them and help them. Help them in the name of your brother. Earn some good karma for him. Don't give in to melancholy. Find purpose. I know your brother saved your life at birth. Now it is your duty to help his soul.'

Kumbhakarna looked thoughtful as he listened intently to M'Bakur's words.

'And don't give up on him,' continued M'Bakur. 'We live in a period of constant change. I am sure an opportunity to save Raavan's soul will come again. He may be too ignorant to see it, but he will need you to help him when

the time comes.'

Kumbhakarna spoke softly, his eyes moist. 'I have lost my brother. I love him, but I have lost him. I have lost him to his anger. To his pain. I have lost him to his grief over...'

'Over the death of Vedavati,' said M'Bakur. 'I know.'

Kumbhakarna stared at M'Bakur. Shocked that he knew something about Raavan that was so personal. And a secret from most.

'Don't forget that he loves you too. You and his son Indrajit are probably the only people alive whom he truly loves.'

'Indrajit loves him in return. Perhaps even more than I do.'

M'Bakur smiled. 'I know. But he is a little child. He cannot help his father, at least not yet. So it becomes your responsibility to save Raavan. That is your swadharma in this life. Do it well.'

—४८—

'Dada, this money makes no difference to us.' Kumbhakarna was upset and angry. The two extra arms on top of his shoulders stood stiff and straight.

It had been seventeen years since the Battle of Karachapa. Kumbhakarna was in Raavan's private chamber. As usual, there were some half-naked women dancing in the centre of the massive room. Raavan was on his reclining chair, his fingers idly playing with the hair of the woman on his lap. He had a marijuana-infused chillum in his free hand.

Kumbhakarna could have performed the act of charity by himself, with his own money. But he wanted this specific donation to go from Raavan's personal income. It had to be that way.

Raavan took a deep drag of the chillum and stared at Kumbhakarna, a lazy, inebriated smile on his lips. He spoke through the smoke rings. 'I will burn all my money, but I will not let any of it go to the Sapt Sindhu. Even if it is for a hospital in Vaidyanath.'

Kumbhakarna looked around the chamber. The women, the smoke, the alcohol, the marijuana, the excesses. 'You are burning your money already, Dada.'

'Well, I've earned it... I can do what I want with it.'

Kumbhakarna turned to the dancers and said sharply, 'Leave us.'

The women stopped dancing, but didn't leave the hall. They stood where they were, half defiant, half afraid, waiting for Raavan's order.

Kumbhakarna gestured to the woman on Raavan's lap. 'Get out.'

The woman tried to get up, but Raavan pulled her roughly back against his

chest. ‘Don’t cross your limits, Kumbhakarna,’ he snapped.

Kumbhakarna stepped forward and pointed at the pendant that hung around Raavan’s neck. ‘This hospital was a promise you made in the name of the Kanyakumari, Dada. We took on her karmic debts at her cremation ceremony. You may have forgotten it, but I have not. I am going to get that hospital built. It will treat patients free of cost and it will save lives. And you will stamp this hundi with your seal.’

Raavan was silent. There was no expression on his face, neither anger nor remorse, not even grief. He had sought refuge from his pain in drugs, alcohol and silly women. The price for that asylum was the surrender of his mind.

Kumbhakarna stepped forward, took hold of Raavan’s hand and pressed the ring on his forefinger, with the royal seal, on the document. The charity was now authorised to spend Raavan’s money.

Kumbhakarna glanced at the woman perched uncomfortably on his brother’s lap and said, ‘You have a wife, Dada. She should not be insulted like this.’

Raavan didn’t answer.

Kumbhakarna turned and walked out of the chamber.

The woman on Raavan’s lap edged closer to him and caressed his cheek. With an air of affected concern, she whispered, ‘I don’t like the way your brother speaks to you.’

Raavan’s reaction was swift. His fist shot out and hit the woman hard on her face. Breaking her nose. As she tumbled to the ground, screaming in pain, he shouted at the dancers in the distance, ‘Get out of here! All of you!’ He pointed at the sobbing woman lying at his feet, her face red, her nose streaming blood. ‘And take this bitch with you!’

As the women ran from his chamber, Raavan fell back in his chair and held Vedavati’s fingers tightly. Tears forced their way through his closed eyes and ran down his cheeks.

*You can be better than this. At least try.*



## Chapter 24

‘I don’t know if I am doing the right thing. I seem to be causing him a lot of stress,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘He is very weak these days.’

It had been a few months since Kumbhakarna had forced Raavan’s hand over building a charitable hospital in Vaidyanath. He was now in the temple-town, checking on all preparations before construction began. Money had been allocated. Doctors had been identified and hired. The building was to be ready in a few months. M’Bakur, who had remained in touch with Kumbhakarna over the years, was also in Vaidyanath to help wrap up work.

‘Your brother may be many things,’ said M’Bakur, ‘but he is certainly not weak.’

‘The truth is, it’s depressing to see him these days. He has almost surrendered to drugs and alcohol. He’s nearly forty-five years old, he can’t keep abusing his body like this. And I am making it worse with all the stress I am causing him.’

‘You’re wrong. Stress is good.’

‘Oh, come on, M’Bakurji. How can stress be good?’

M’Bakur gestured to a small stove on a platform behind them, on which was placed a vessel filled with water. Cooking in this boiling water was a simple lunch of eggs and potatoes.

‘You see this boiling water?’ M’Bakur said.

‘What does that have to do with stress?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

‘It will help you understand.’

Kumbhakarna sighed. ‘Why can’t you people not speak in riddles?’

‘Because speaking in riddles is fun. And you will understand a thought better if you decode it through a riddle. As someone said: *Parokshpriyaa Vai Devaaha.*’

The saying in old Sanskrit roughly translated to, *the Gods like indirect speech.*

‘So, philosophy can never be conveyed directly?’ questioned Kumbhakarna.

‘It can, of course. But it’s much more interesting to have it conveyed in the form of a complex riddle. Deciphering the message keeps the fun of philosophy alive. Also, the understanding thus derived feels like an achievement. If there is no sense of achievement or wonder, even the most important message fails to find its target.’

‘So, I am expected to understand the bigger point you’re trying to make with this boiling water?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

‘Not only will you understand it, you will arrive at it yourself.’

Kumbhakarna threw up his hands in exasperation. ‘All right, then. In answer to your question, yes, I see the boiling water.’

‘Both, the eggs and the potatoes, are in the same water, right?’

‘Yes, obviously. I can see that.’

‘So, they are both being cooked in water boiled to the same temperature, in the same atmosphere, and in the same vessel that is on top of the same fire?’

‘Yes.’

‘What will happen to the egg in this boiling water?’

‘It will become a boiled egg.’

M’Bakur laughed. ‘That much is obvious. What I want to know is, how is the boiled egg different from the original egg?’

‘It’s harder.’

‘Absolutely! Now, consider the potatoes. How will they fare in the water?’

Kumbhakarna smiled. ‘They will become softer.’

‘You see? The same boiling water, the same vessel, the same temperature, yet the eggs harden and the potatoes soften.’

‘So the boiling water is like stress. Different people react to it differently. It hardens some and softens others. Is that your point?’

‘That’s the obvious point, but think about it a bit more. What is the egg like before the stress of the boiling water hits it?’

‘It has a tough shell, but the inside is liquid.’

‘So the egg is hard on the outside but soft inside. And the boiling water, the stress, makes it hard inside as well, does it not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now consider the potato. How would you describe it?’

‘It has a flimsy peel—so, soft on the outside and hard on the inside.’

‘People respond to stress in much the same way. Those who are soft on the

inside become harder with the right amount of stress, and those who are hard on the inside become softer. If you think about it this way, then the right amount of stress becomes necessary to balance your character. Too much stress is not good —it may break you. But no stress is not good either. You need the right amount of stress to balance your character and make you grow.’

‘So, are you saying that the stress I’m causing my brother will toughen him up again?’

M’Bakur shook his head. ‘I am not talking about your brother. I am talking about you.’

Kumbhakarna frowned, taken aback.

‘There are people across the world with biases against your kind, the Nagas. You have a hard, scary exterior. But inside, you are gentle and sensitive. You are one of the finest men I have had the pleasure of knowing.’

Kumbhakarna didn’t say anything, though he flushed with pleasure at the unexpected compliment.

M’Bakur continued, ‘The truth is that you are the one who is feeling the stress of what’s happening to your elder brother. The stress is toughening you up. It’s preparing you to face what will come.’

‘What will come?’

‘The Vishnu.’

‘The Vishnu?’

‘The seventh Vishnu will come. It will be a tough time for those on the path of adharma. The responsibility of guiding and bringing your brother’s soul on to the right path will be yours, Kumbhakarna. You will also have to save the innocents of Lanka. You will need to be tougher.’

‘I have heard nothing about a Vishnu coming...’

M’Bakur smiled. ‘Only fools react to a fire when it is upon them. The wise see it coming many years before it’s even been lit.’

‘But why will the Vishnu go after my brother?’

M’Bakur looked at Kumbhakarna, his eyebrows raised at the obviously stupid question.

Kumbhakarna retreated quickly, a little shamefaced. ‘Who is this Vishnu? What is his or her name?’

M’Bakur hesitated for a split second before he replied, ‘The answer is not clear.’

M’Bakur knew he could not tell Kumbhakarna the truth, but he wasn’t lying either. At least, not technically.

‘You called for me, Dada?’ asked Kumbhakarna loudly, standing at the door of the chamber.

Twenty years had passed since the Battle of Karachapa. The previous year had witnessed a change in Raavan’s attitude. The forty-seven-year-old had worked consciously to subdue his addictions. He had started taking control of his business once again. He would even occasionally inquire about the hospital in Vaidyanath, though he had never visited it.

Kumbhakarna assumed his brother had been shaken out of his apathy and self-indulgence by the tragedy that had suddenly befallen Sigiriya a few years back. A mysterious plague had taken the city in a vice-like grip and all attempts to end it had failed. Strangely, its effects were most evident amongst children. Babies were being born prematurely, and many had died during childbirth. Those who survived were growing up with learning disabilities, loss of appetite, almost constant abdominal pain, sluggishness and fatigue. Some experienced hearing loss and had frequent convulsions or seizures. Adults weren’t free of pain either. Many of them suffered debilitating joint and muscle pains and crushing headaches. Large numbers of pregnant women suffered miscarriages and stillbirths and many had died during labour.

While the physical symptoms caused widespread distress, even more harmful was the lowering of morale across the land. The finest doctors in Lanka were unable to understand the cause of the plague, let alone find a cure for it. With almost the entire population suffering in some way or the other, rumours had started up about some kind of a curse that had fallen on Sigiriya.

What worried Raavan the most about the plague was the weakening of his army. He could have strengthened the Lankan forces by recalling a few battalions from the various trading outposts across the Indian Ocean, but that would have left those ports defenceless. Also, it would have alerted Lanka’s enemies to the fact that all was not well in the island kingdom, and that, in turn, would have stoked rebellions.

While Raavan applied himself to the task of supplementing the city’s defences without word getting out to the Sapt Sindhu, Kumbhakarna’s approach to the problem was to invest more money in research and the training of doctors and nurses. He was thinking about this now as he waited for his brother to respond.

Then he heard Raavan’s voice. ‘Yes, Kumbha. Come on in.’

Kumbhakarna entered Raavan’s secret chamber, where many of his elder brother’s favourite musical instruments and some of his most treasured manuscripts, numbering in the thousands, were stored. Most importantly, his precious paintings of the Kanyakumari were kept there.

‘Why is the lighting so low?’ He asked.

Raavan pointed to the torches on the wall. ‘You can fire them up now. I needed soft diffused light to complete this last part.’

Kumbhakarna lit the torches and reached his brother’s side to see what he had been working on. He gaped at the sight of the canvas.

Raavan asked, ‘What do you think?’

Kumbhakarna stopped himself from saying the words that came to his mind. *Scary and magnificent at the same time.*

It was a painting of Vedavati, but not the Vedavati he had known. In the painting, she was the same age she had been when she died, but that was where the resemblance ended. This woman was strong and powerful, her body muscular and sinewy. She was much taller than she had been in real life. Though Raavan had not meddled with her proportions, her curves looked less pronounced because of the more athletic frame. The cumulative impact of all of Raavan’s changes meant she looked less nurturing and more fierce, like a warrior princess. She was riding a magnificent horse, her open hair flying in all directions. One hand held a bloodied sword that was raised high, ready to strike again. In front of her, on the muddy ground, on their knees, were many of the kings of the Sapt Sindhu. They looked desperate and fearful. Some had their mouths open in a scream. A few had been beheaded already, while the others were clearly pleading for mercy. In the background, far in the distance, were the common people—the Indians—poor and worn out, but exuberantly cheering their Goddess as she massacred their oppressors.

*Scary and magnificent at the same time.*

‘What do you think?’ asked Raavan again.

‘It’s... it’s spectacular, Dada! I don’t know what to say,’ Kumbhakarna stammered.

‘I am glad you think so,’ said Raavan. ‘This is how the world should remember her. This is how the world will remember her.’

*But this is not how she was.*

Kumbhakarna kept his thoughts to himself.

‘Look at her face. I have painted her exactly as she was when we last met.’

‘Yes, Dada. It’s amazing that you still remember her so clearly, even after twenty years and more.’

‘How can a soul forget the reason for its existence?’

Before Kumbhakarna could respond, Raavan turned and picked up a letter, his eyes sparkling with excitement. ‘Look at this.’

Kumbhakarna took the letter and read it quickly. ‘What does this mean?’

‘What does it mean?’ asked Raavan. ‘Are you blind? Read it again. It’s

clear as crystal.'

'Yes, but...'

'But what?'

'It's an invitation from the kingdom of Mithila to attend Princess Sita's swayamvar.'

Mithila was a kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu whose best days were well behind it. It had been a wealthy river-port town once, settled near the Gandaki River. But the change in the course of the river many years ago, due to an earthquake, had vastly reduced the town's prosperity, and power. However, even in its diminished state, Mithila commanded respect across the Sapt Sindhu. It was a city loved by the rishis and rishikas, and at least in spiritual and intellectual terms, it remained one of the most venerated kingdoms in India.

'Exactly.'

'But why would...'

'Why would I go?'

'This is a trap, Dada. You know the Sapt Sindhu royals hate you. Why would they invite you? Please don't go.'

Raavan looked surprised. 'I thought you wanted me to try and make peace with the Sapt Sindhu.'

Kumbhakarna looked at the painting of Vedavati briefly before turning back to Raavan.

'I began that painting many months ago. I am willing to make a fresh start,' Ravan said. 'This invitation has made me think that maybe we can actually get along with the Sapt Sindhuans. Maybe our wealth can be used for some good too. The question is, are you with me?'

Kumbhakarna remembered M'Bakur's words from more than eight years ago. *I am sure an opportunity to save Raavan's soul will come again... he will need you to help him when the time comes.*

He stepped up to embrace Raavan. 'Of course I am with you, Dada!'

*If we can walk away from adharma, the Vishnu will have no reason to attack us.*

—८१—

Akampana was confused. 'But Iraiva, I don't understand. Mithila? They're... they're nobodies. They're only respected as intellectuals and philosophers. They have no real power.'

Akampana's true lord, Raavan, would normally have told him to shut up and do as he was told. But men of consequence, men who do big deeds, usually

have a weakness: they like to speak of their big deeds. They like to hear how great they are, if not in words, then with a look of admiration in the eyes of their acolytes. Raavan was no different. He normally spoke of his plans only to Kumbhakarna. Indrajit was still too young, and Raavan had little respect for anyone else. But lately, communication between the brothers had been strained. Kumbhakarna's constant talk of dharma had begun to weary Raavan.

'You will swear to never speak of this to anyone,' said Raavan.

Akampana immediately made a pathetic attempt at the standard Lankan salute. 'Of course, Iraiva.'

'Not even to Kumbhakarna.'

Akampana's chest swelled with pride. At last, his true lord had realised his value. He was placing greater trust in him than in his own blood. 'Wouldn't dream of it, Iraiva. I swear. I swear on the great Lord Jagannath.'

'So here is what I am going to do. As soon as I win the swayamvar, I will take over Mithila and have King Janak follow my commands. I will force him, and his rishi council, to acknowledge me as a living God. Mithila may be powerless in temporal matters, but when it comes to spiritual matters, it is among the most respected, perhaps even rivalling Kashi. Only the land along the Saraswati River commands greater reverence. If Mithila starts worshipping me as a God, then many other Sapt Sindhu kingdoms will follow its example. They will build temples to me while I am still alive. Then, and only then, can I be assured of immortality.'

There was another aspect to the swayamvar that excited Raavan. His marriage to Princess Sita would be the ultimate humiliation for the Sapt Sindhuans; it would show them that he was capable of taking not only their ports and wealth, but also their women. He had married Mandodari for similar reasons. But Mandodari was the daughter of a mere landlord. Sita was the daughter of a king—a true princess. The thought of snubbing the royals by marrying one of them gave Raavan immense satisfaction. But he couldn't say this to Akampana. Loyal servant though he was, Raavan couldn't possibly discuss his personal life with him.

The loyal servant, meanwhile, was still reeling with shock. 'But Iraiva, do you think that they will...'

'They will.'

'Who am I to disagree with you, great Iraiva? But, I mean... the Sapt Sindhu people are stubborn. They are not as open-minded as we Lankans are. Even the Vishnus and the Mahadevs did not have temples built to them while they were alive.'

Raavan leaned forward, his face close to Akampana's. 'Are you saying that

I am less than a Vishnu or a Mahadev?’

‘I wouldn’t dare suggest it, noble Iraiva! You are greater than them, of course. But I don’t know if the Sapt Sindhuans will see this obvious truth. Sometimes people refuse to acknowledge that the Sun God has risen even though it is midday!’ Akampana said with an unctuous smile.

‘You don’t need to worry about that. They will see the truth for what it is. Trust me.’

‘I am sure you are right, Iraiva. Why else would they think of inviting you?’

‘They didn’t think of it. I got them to do it.’

‘Really?’ Akampana was impressed.

‘Yes. Kushadhwaj, the king of Sankashya, is the brother of King Janak of Mithila. He is deep in debt to Lanka. His business affairs have been a mess since his prime minister, Sulochan, died suddenly of a heart attack some years ago. We forgave much of his debt and he arranged the invitation.’

‘That was very well handled, great Iraiva.’

Raavan looked pleased with Akampana’s compliment. ‘Yes, I did handle it well.’

‘By the way, we have someone in Mithila too, my lord.’

Raavan had official trade representatives in every kingdom of the Sapt Sindhu. But that was not all. He had also established a secret spy network throughout the kingdoms. These spies and loyalists worked for him undercover, quietly ensuring that his agendas were effectively pursued.

‘I didn’t think Mithila was important enough for us to have someone stationed there,’ said Raavan. ‘But I suppose it will serve us well. Who is it?’

‘Well, we haven’t been actively managing her for years. As you say, my lord, Mithila is not a very important kingdom, and we don’t do much trade with it. But our spy is quite high up in the kingdom’s administration—the chief of police and protocol in Mithila.’

‘Who is he?’

‘She, my lord. Her name is Samichi.’

Raavan froze at the mention of the girl. He had not wanted to associate with anyone, except Kumbhakarna, who had been with him when Vedavati was killed. Their presence only reminded him of that terrible day. All the Lankan soldiers who had accompanied him to Todee had been sent to nondescript posts where he would never have to see them again. Hearing Samichi’s name brought back memories and reminded him yet again of his failure to protect Vedavati.

‘You speak to her and make sure everything is arranged in my favour,’ he said.

‘Of course, Iraiva.’

‘Nothing must go wrong.’

‘Absolutely, Iraiva.’

‘And I don’t want to see or meet Samichi when I am there. Is that clear?’

Akampana was confused, but he readily agreed. ‘Whatever you say, Iraiva.’

—೪೧—

The Pushpak Vimaan hovered in the air for some time, as its rotors decelerated slowly. Then, very gently, it descended to the ground. Raavan had excellent pilots working for him.

As the doors slid open, Raavan emerged from the innards of his legendary flying craft, followed by Kumbhakarna. Vali, the king of Kishkindha and scion of the legendary Vaanar dynasty, stood at a safe distance, his entire court in tow.

Raavan’s corps of ten thousand soldiers had already left for Mithila, sailing up the east coast of India and then up the Ganga. They would march onward to Janak’s kingdom after disembarking from their ships, and wait for Raavan to arrive. Since there were enough days in between, Raavan had decided to stop at Kishkindha on his way to Mithila.

Strewn with massive boulders and rocky hills, the terrain of Kishkindha resembled a moonscape. The mighty Tungabhadra, flowing north-east, meandered through this surreal land before merging with the Krishna River up north. In consonance with the nature- and idol-worshipping ways of most of the Vedic people, great temples had been built in many parts of the city, venerating the sacred Tungabhadra, the land around it, and the ancient Gods. Each district of Kishkindha was built around a temple, which was surrounded by markets, amphitheatres, libraries, parks and houses. Vali was a wise and strong ruler. His land was prosperous and his people happy. And his reputation for bravery, honour and dignified conduct had spread far and wide.

‘Something is wrong,’ whispered Kumbhakarna, as they walked towards their waiting hosts.

There was no sign of the traditional Vedic welcome they had expected. No bedecked elephants, no ornamented cows, and no holy men holding ceremonial prayer plates. Not only that, the welcoming party was shrouded in an uncomfortable silence—there was no music or sounds of chanting.

Vali stood quietly at the head, his hands folded in a polite namaste. The king of Kishkindha was a fair, unusually hirsute and extraordinarily muscular man of medium height. He was dressed in full ceremonial attire, but he seemed

distracted.

‘I don’t see Sugreev,’ whispered Raavan to Kumbhakarna.

Sugreev was Vali’s younger half-brother, and in Raavan’s opinion, an effete moron. Most people agreed with Raavan’s low opinion of the man, seeing in Sugreev the spoilt, indolent sibling of a great king, one who could not match the accomplishments of his over-achieving elder brother and managed his insecurities by drinking and gambling. Sugreev had committed enough indiscretions to deserve being kicked out of the kingdom, but the protection of their mother, Aruni, had ensured that Vali had not expelled his younger brother.

‘Neither do I,’ said Kumbhakarna softly.

Raavan smiled, sensing an opportunity.

—८८—I—

Kishkindha had a matrilineal society. The ascendency to the throne did not pass from father to son, but from mother to daughter. The husband of the daughter succeeded the husband of the mother as king. But Lady Aruni, headstrong and powerful, had broken with tradition and made her capable elder son the king. She hadn’t been blessed with a daughter, and rather than letting the royal line pass to her younger sister’s female descendants as tradition dictated, she had decided to keep the throne within her immediate family.

Raavan was familiar with this history, but that was not what interested him right now, as he sat beside Vali in the guest wing of the Kishkindha royal palace. No one else, except Kumbhakarna, was around, not even Vali’s bodyguards.

Raavan’s expression was carefully calibrated to show concern. ‘You look distracted, King Vali. I hope the share of Customs duties being given to you is not too low? My men can be a little greedy at times,’ he said.

Vali smiled wanly. ‘Your people know that I cannot be pushed around. I am Vali.’

Raavan laughed heartily. ‘You’re the man, my friend.’

Vali looked at Raavan, a sad expression on his face. Though he remained silent, his bereft eyes seemed to convey a message. *Man? Me?*

Raavan was now confident that the information he had received this morning from his spies was correct. But he had to be certain before he made his move.

‘My friend,’ he said. ‘Where is Angad? I don’t see him anywhere. I hope he is well?’

Angad was Vali’s five-year-old son and the apple of his eye. The tough, stern and distant Vali, more respected than loved, was a different man when he

was with his only son. He played and laughed with him, and indulged him any chance he got. Even occasionally becoming a horse for Angad to ride around on. Since Angad's birth, Kishkindha's citizens, and even the royal family, had come to see a casual, fun-loving side to Vali.

'Yes... Angad... he's...' Vali stopped speaking, his face a picture of agony, his voice choked.

Raavan was now certain his information was correct. He controlled his breathing. He couldn't allow his excitement to show.

*Later. I'll take over Kishkindha later. After I've taken Mithila.*

Kumbhakarna, on the other hand, was shocked at the distraught look on Vali's face. He had never seen the mighty Kishkindha king like this. 'Great king,' said Kumbhakarna, 'is everything all right?'

Vali suddenly got up and stood in front of them, his hands clasped together. 'Forgive me, my friends. I... I must go. I will come back in a while.'

Raavan and Kumbhakarna also rose immediately.

'Of course, Vali,' said Raavan, his face a picture of concern. 'Please let us know if there is anything we can do.'

'Thank you. We'll speak later.' Saying this, Vali rushed out of the chamber.

Kumbhakarna stared at Vali's retreating form and then turned to his elder brother in bewilderment. 'I didn't realise King Vali was so close to his mother.'

Vali's mother Aruni had passed away just a month ago, after a brief illness.

'It's not about his mother,' said Raavan.

Kumbhakarna looked surprised. 'Then what is it? He looks almost frail. I've never known him to bow down to any misfortune. Something is worrying him.'

Raavan cast a quick glance at the doorway, making sure that they were, indeed, alone. 'What we are speaking of will remain between us. Strictly between us.'

'Of course,' said Kumbhakarna immediately. 'What is this about?'

'It's about Angad.'

'Angad? Has something happened to that lovely child?'

'Nothing has happened to him yet. What matters is what happened before he was born.'

'Before he was born?'

'Yes. Are you familiar with the tradition of niyoga?'

Kumbhakarna was taken aback. Niyoga was an ancient tradition by which a woman, whose husband was incapable of producing a child, could request and appoint another man to impregnate her. For various reasons, this man was usually a rishi.

For one thing, most rishis were revered for their high intellectual prowess, a quality they would hopefully pass on to their offspring. More importantly, since most rishis were wandering mendicants, it was almost certain that they would not lay claim to the child. According to the law, any child produced as a result of a union sanctioned by niyoga would be considered the legitimate child of the woman and her husband; the biological father could not claim fatherhood and would have to remain anonymous.

'From what my spies tell me,' continued Raavan, 'Vali was once very seriously injured while trying to save Sugreev. This happened many years back, during a hunt. The side effect of the medicines that saved his life was that he couldn't have children. This was, for obvious reasons, kept secret.'

'That useless brother of his,' said Kumbhakarna in disgust. 'So, you mean King Vali's wife Tara decided to...'

'Not Tara,' Raavan interrupted him. 'It was apparently his mother. The Queen Mother decided that Vali's child should rule Kishkindha after him. And turned to niyoga for a solution.'

'So what?' asked Kumbhakarna. 'What difference does it make if Angad is not his biological son? The rules are clear. Since King Vali is Queen Tara's husband, he will be considered the father of her son, even if the child was sired by someone else. And Angad is a wonderful boy. He will make a great ruler one day. I can see, even at this young age, that he has his noble father's spirit, drive and intelligence.'

'Well, it's a little more complicated than that.'

'How so?'

'You know what Aruni was like.'

'I have heard stories, yes, of the Queen Mother's headstrong ways...'

'Yes, in any case, I think when people are close to death, they start thinking about their souls. They want to repent for their sins and "speak the truth".'

'What truth did she tell King Vali?'

'Apparently, when Aruni decided that a niyoga was necessary for the sake of an unbroken lineage, she didn't want to take Vali's wife to a rishi.'

'So what did she do?'

'She wanted to ensure that it was *her* bloodline that continued to rule. So she...'

'Oh my God!' Kumbhakarna exclaimed, as the truth hit home.

*Sugreev.*

Kumbhakarna held his head, feeling Vali's pain. 'I can't even imagine how distraught he must be. Angad is his pride and joy. And now... to know the truth... that it's Sugreev's cowardly blood that runs in Angad's veins...'

‘Exactly,’ said Raavan.

‘Does Angad know?’

‘As far as I know, he does not.’

‘So the Queen Mother told King Vali this?’

‘Yes. On her deathbed, apparently.’

‘Why didn’t she just remain quiet about it?’

‘Guilt? She must have known that she did not do right by Vali and wanted to confess to him before her death.’

‘How incredibly selfish! To cleanse her own soul of bad karma, she confessed to her son and gifted him a lifetime of trauma.’

‘You know how selfish mothers can be...’

Kumbhakarna ignored the barb. ‘Did King Vali confront that coward, Sugreev?’

‘Yes, and he confessed to it, said he had no choice in the matter. That he had only complied with their mother’s order.’

‘Bullshit!’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘I am sure Sugreev was delighted at the prospect of his child ascending the throne someday.’

‘Vali threw Sugreev out of the kingdom when he found out the truth,’ said Raavan. ‘I would have killed him!’

‘Lord Rudra have mercy!’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘What a mess.’

Raavan sympathised with Vali, but he couldn’t help feeling pleased about the good fortune that had fallen into his lap. He could now use the fight between Sugreev and Vali to wipe out the Vaanar dynasty and bring wealthy Kishkindha under the Lankan yoke. Vali’s army would become his to command and could then be used for the defence of Lanka, if he so wished.

He breathed a sigh of relief. He might finally have found a solution to the problem he had been struggling with for so long: the depleting strength of his forces in Lanka.

But he didn’t think Kumbhakarna would approve of his plan. He would have to handle this alone.



## Chapter 25

The Pushpak Vimaan flew smoothly, thousands of feet above the holy land of India, travelling from Kishkindha to Mithila. Raavan and Kumbhakarna were seated in comfortable chairs, strapped in for safety. They would land in Mithila soon, in time for Raavan to attend Princess Sita's swayamvar.

At the moment, though, their minds were not on Mithila, or Sita.

'Celibacy, Kumbha?' sneered Raavan. 'Seriously? Women were created for one purpose alone. And you would deny them that purpose by turning celibate?'

'Seriously, Dada, why are you so disrespectful towards women?' asked Kumbhakarna. He knew he had annoyed his elder brother by announcing that he would undertake the forty-one-day oath that would allow him to travel to Shabarimala, the sacred Lord Ayyappa temple in the deep south of India. Raavan saw this as yet another sign that his brother was moving away from him and towards a strictly dharmic way of life.

'Would you rather I respect them, dear brother?' asked Raavan, laughing. 'Trust me, women are not looking for respect or honour. They want someone to pay their bills and to give them protection. In return, they are prepared to give love, or something resembling it!'

'Dada, you are about to get married for the second time. I really think you need to update your views on women.'

'Listen, Kumbha, I have more women in a fortnight than you have had in your entire life. I know how they think. They may say they like nice, sensitive men. But remember, women never say what they mean. In reality, they dismiss the gentle, domesticated sort of men as weak and unreliable. They want real men —tough, strong men.'

'Our dharma says that a real man is one who respects women.'

'So a real man is one who surrenders himself and becomes a doormat for

women?’

‘I never said that. A real man is one who respects himself and treats others with respect too.’

‘Bullshit. I can tell you from personal experience, four women don’t add up to the worth of one man. In fact, even four hundred women do not add up to the worth of one man.’

‘What nonsense! Do you even hear yourself, Dada?’

‘All the time. And I don’t hear anything wrong!’

Kumbhakarna took a deep breath to control his irritation. ‘Forget it. Your views cannot shake my beliefs or the vows that I will undertake for Lord Ayyappa.’

‘How does your being celibate please a God?’ sniggered Raavan, clearly trying to annoy Kumbhakarna.

‘It’s not only about celibacy, Dada,’ Kumbhakarna explained patiently. ‘By taking the vow, I am pledging my loyalty to Lord Ayyappa, the son of the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra, and the Vishnu, Lady Mohini. Though Lord Ayyappa is worshipped across the land in thousands of temples, the *vratham* applies only to the temple of Shabarimala. A small forest-dwelling community in that region, led by Shabari, the Lady of the Forest, maintains the temple. And for all devotees, the rules are clearly laid out.’

Kumbhakarna ticked off the rules on his fingers: ‘We will not eat meat or consume alcohol during the period of the forty-one-day vratham. We will sleep on the floor. We will not hurt anyone, either physically or with our words. We will stay away from all social functions. The point is to live simply and focus on high thinking.’

‘All that sounds very noble. But tell me something, you keep talking about how much you respect women. You do know that women are not allowed into the Shabarimala temple? Isn’t that disrespectful to them?’

‘Women are allowed! Of course they are. Only women who are in the reproductive stage of their life are not allowed in this particular temple. Basically, women who are capable of menstruating are forbidden entry.’

‘Aha! So you think reproduction is impure? And menstruating women will contaminate the temple? Do you know that in the Kamakhya temple in north-east India, menstrual blood is considered sacred and worshipped?’

‘You are misunderstanding me on purpose, Dada. The ban on menstruating women has nothing to do with menstrual blood being impure. How can any Indian think that? It’s about the path of *sanyas*, of *renunciation*.’

Kumbhakarna continued, ‘As you know, practically all the temples in India follow the *gruhasta* route, the path of the *householder*. The rituals in these

temples are built around the worldly life, celebrating relationships like that between a husband and wife, or a parent and child, or a lord and his subjects. The *renunciates* or *sanyasis* have temples too, many of them being rock-cut caves in remote mountainous regions; non-sanyasis are not allowed entry into these. The only way of entering a sanyasi temple is by giving up all worldly attachments, renouncing one's family and material belongings, and permanently joining a sanyasi order.'

Raavan pretended to be alarmed. 'Are you becoming a sanyasi? Are you going to leave me? What the hell!'

Kumbhakarna laughed. 'Dada, listen to me. The Shabarimala temple is not for those who have taken permanent sanyas. We just have to be sanyasis for the forty-one days of the vratham. It essentially gives us a short experience of the life of a sanyasi. If you understand this, then all the vows I mentioned earlier make sense. For these forty-one days, we have to stay away from all the pleasures and comforts of life, as well as extreme emotions. That's why the rule against consumption of intoxicants or meat, and sex. The temple is dedicated to the male sanyasi route, women in their reproductive phase are not allowed in, but young girls and older women are welcome. Similarly, there are temples dedicated to the female sanyasi path, where adult men are not allowed, like the Kumari Amman temple. There are temples for the sanyas of transgender people too. Misunderstandings arise because you worldly people don't know enough about our sanyasi ways.'

'Okay, okay, I give up,' said Raavan, holding his hands up in mock surrender. 'Go for your pilgrimage. When is it? In a few months?'

'Yes.' Kumbhakarna smiled and murmured, '*Swamiye Sharanam Ayyappa.*'

*We find refuge at the feet of Lord Ayyappa.*

While he may have been mocking his younger brother, Raavan was not about to disrespect Lord Ayyappa. The forest Lord was, after all, the son of Lord Rudra and Lady Mohini. He was considered to be one of the greatest warriors that ever lived.

He repeated after Kumbhakarna, '*Swamiye Sharanam Ayyappa.*'

Before Raavan could say anything more, a loud announcement was heard. 'We are about to land. Please check your straps.'

Raavan and Kumbhakarna double-checked the straps with which they were secured to their chairs. The hundred soldiers within the Pushpak Vimaan did the same.

Raavan looked down at *Mithila*, the *city for the sons of the soil*, through the portholes. From up in the air, Mithila looked very different from the other large

Indian cities, which were mostly located on the banks of rivers. Mithila had originally been a river-port town, but after the Gandaki River had changed course to flow westward a few decades ago, the fate of Mithila had altered dramatically. From being counted among the great cities of the Sapt Sindhu, it had witnessed a speedy decline. It was now far poorer than the other cities of the empire, which were themselves being rapidly impoverished by Raavan. So much so that Raavan had dismissed his appointed sub-traders in Mithila. There simply wasn't enough work for them.

'It's rare to see such a dense forest coming almost all the way up to the city,' said Raavan.

Being a fertile, marshy plain that received plentiful monsoonal rain, the land around Mithila was extremely productive. Since the farmers of Mithila had not cleared too much land, the forest had used the bounty of nature to create a dense border all around the city.

'Look at the moat,' said Kumbhakarna, surprised.

From the air, they could see a body of water around the fort that must have served as a defensive moat once, with crocodiles in it for preventive security. Now, it was a lake to draw water from.

The lake circumscribed the entire city within itself so effectively that Mithila was like an island. Giant wheels drew water from the lake, which was carried into the city through pipes. Steps had been built on the banks for easy access to the water.

'They don't have a proper defensive moat anymore!' said Raavan, astonished.

'I think it's a smart move. They don't need one. Why would anyone attack Mithila? There is no money to be looted here. And they freely distribute their only treasure: their knowledge.'

'Hmm... you're right.'

As the brothers looked at the moat around the fort, they observed an inner wall, about a kilometer inside the main fort wall. The area between the outer and the inner fort walls was neatly partitioned into plots of agricultural land. The food crops appeared ready for harvest.

Raavan was impressed. 'Good idea. At least someone in Mithila has military sense.'

Growing crops within the fort walls would secure the food supply during any siege. Also, since there was no human habitation there, this area would be a killing field for anyone who managed to breach the outer wall. An attacking force would lose too many men in the effort to reach the inner wall, without any hope of a quick retreat.

Kumbhakarna agreed with his elder brother. ‘Yes, it’s a brilliant military design; two fort walls with uninhabited land in between. We should try it too.’

As the Pushpak Vimaan hovered over the ground for a little while, they could see one of the main gates of Mithila. There were no coat of arms emblazoned across the gate, unlike in most forts in India.

Instead, an image of *Lady Saraswati*, the *Goddess of Knowledge*, had been carved into the top half of the gate.

There was a couplet inscribed below the image, but it was not readable from this distance.

‘I wonder what the couplet says,’ said Raavan.

‘I remember Akampanaji telling me about it,’ said Kumbhakarna.

*‘Swagruhe Pujiyate Murkhaha;  
Swagraame Pujiyate Prabhuhu;  
Swadeshe Pujiyate Raja;  
Vidvaansarvatra Pujiyate.’*

*A fool is worshipped in his home.  
A chief is worshipped in his village.  
A king is worshipped in his kingdom.  
A knowledgeable person is worshipped everywhere.*

Raavan smiled. Truly, a city dedicated to knowledge. Truly, a city beloved of the rishis. Truly, a city that would serve his purpose well.

Small, circular metal screens descended over the portholes, blocking the view.

‘We’re landing,’ said Kumbhakarna.

As the thunderous sound of its rotors dipped, the Pushpak Vimaan slowly descended to the ground. It touched down in the space earmarked for it, far outside the outer fort wall, in the clearing ahead of the forest line. Raavan’s bodyguard corps of over ten thousand soldiers had already gathered there, in orderly formation.

Raavan took a deep breath. ‘Time for action.’

—८८—

‘Something is not right, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘Let’s leave.’

Raavan had set up camp outside Mithila. Safer to be there, surrounded by his soldiers, than within the city walls of a Sapt Sindhu kingdom. A kingdom

that he had, through his trade policies, impoverished.

‘But King Kushadhwaj invited me himself!’ said Raavan, outraged. He had been waiting for Kumbhakarna and his aides to return from their visit to the royal court in Mithila, where they had gone to announce his arrival.

‘I know, but he was quiet throughout. So was King Janak.’

‘Then who the hell was speaking?’

‘Guru Vishwamitra.’

‘What in Lord Indra’s name is Guruji doing here? There is no debate during a swayamvar ceremony!’

‘I don’t know what he is doing here, but I can tell you that he seemed to be making all the decisions. And I was not even allowed to meet Princess Sita.’

‘What does this mean?’ Raavan was getting more and more agitated. ‘I am Lanka. Ruler of the most powerful kingdom in the world. The richest land on earth. I have done Mithila a favour by agreeing to come here to win the hand of Sita. How can they treat me this way?’

‘Dada, let’s just leave. The Sapt Sindhuans will never accept us. You tried. You did it with a clean heart. You wanted to make a fresh start. But these people won’t let that happen. To hell with this “Aryavarta”. Let us be happy in Lanka, in our own corner of India. Let’s leave.’

‘And let the entire world know I was humiliated? So that any insignificant bastard can rebel against me tomorrow? Never. I will not leave!’

‘Dada, listen to me. Guru Vishwamitra was trying to tell me, without actually saying so, that you would not be welcome at the swayamvar. Each time I looked at King Kushadhwaj, he was busy examining the floor. He didn’t say a word. None of this bodes well.’

‘Why didn’t you tell them that we were invited by that fool Kushadhwaj?’

‘What’s the point, Dada? He did not want to acknowledge us. We are not welcome here. Let’s just leave.’

‘No, we will not!’

‘Dada...’

‘Raavan will not be insulted this way! Lanka will not be insulted this way! I don’t care what they think. I will go to the swayamvar and I will win. I will leave with Sita, even if I just throw her into the dungeons of Sigiriya afterwards. I will win this swayamvar. I will redeem my honour!’

‘Dada, I don’t think that—’

‘Kumbhakarna! My decision is final!’

On the day of the swayamvar, Raavan and Kumbhakarna left their camp, accompanied by thirty soldiers. Fifteen marched ahead of them and fifteen behind. The soldiers were dressed in their ceremonial best, as the representatives of the richest kingdom in the world ought to be. They carried the standard of Lanka: black flags, with the head of a roaring lion emerging from a background of fiery flames.

Given that they were not welcome at the swayamvar, Kumbhakarna had arranged for a battalion of a thousand soldiers, armed to the teeth, to follow Raavan and his bodyguards. They were to wait outside the venue of the swayamvar. Kumbhakarna wanted to play it safe, but without provoking the Malayaputras.

The Lankans crossed the pontoon bridge over the lake and marched through the open gates of the outer wall, and then past the inner wall. The soldiers behind Raavan and Kumbhakarna blew on their conch shells, attracting as much attention as they could.

Most of the citizens of Mithila were headed to the swayamvar, or had already got there. The few who remained in the city came out of their houses to stare at the procession. The procession of the richest and most powerful man in the world. Faced with the pomp and grandeur of the Lankan party, the peaceful inhabitants of Mithila withdrew. They did not want to offend or aggravate the Lankans in any way.

Raavan kept his eyes on the path ahead, his posture that of a king returning victorious from battle. He refused to even glance at the meek citizens of Mithila.

The swayamvar had been organised in the Hall of Dharma, inside the palace complex, instead of at the royal court. The building had been donated by King Janak to the Mithila University and the hall regularly hosted debates and discussions on various esoteric topics—the illusion of this physical world, the nature of the soul, the source of Creation, the value and beauty of idol-worship, the philosophical clarity of atheism... King Janak was a philosopher-king who focused all his kingdom's resources on matters of spiritual and intellectual interest.

The circular hall was crowned with a large, elegant dome. Its walls were decorated with portraits of the greatest rishis and rishikas from times past. In some ways, the circular design embodied King Janak's approach to governance: a respectful regard for all points of view. During debates, everyone sat at the same level, as equals, without a regulating 'head', deliberating issues openly and without fear.

For the purpose of the swayamvar, temporary three-tiered spectator stands had been erected near the entrance to the hall. At the other end, on a wooden

platform, was placed the king's throne. A statue of the great King Mithi, the founder of Mithila, stood on a raised pedestal behind the throne. Two thrones, only marginally less grand, were placed to the left and right of the king's throne. A circle of comfortable seats lined the middle section of the great hall, where kings and princes – the potential suitors – were seated.

Accompanied by the loud cacophony of Lankan conch shells, Raavan and Kumbhakarna made their grand entry along with their entourage of thirty bodyguard. The battalion of one thousand soldiers waited outside the hall. Out of sight, but close at hand. Ready to charge to the aid of their king if summoned.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna walked ahead, looking around at the arrangements.

The upper levels of the three-tiered spectator stands were packed with ordinary citizens, while the nobility and the rich merchants occupied the first platform. The contestants sat in a circle, on comfortable chairs, in the middle section of the hall. Every seat was occupied. Princess Sita would be able to see all that was going on without being visible herself, as she had decided to make it a *gupt swayamvar*.

In the centre of the hall, placed ceremoniously on a table top, was an unstrung bow. The legendary Pinaka, the bow of Lord Rudra Himself. A number of arrows were placed beside it. Next to the table, at ground level, was a large copper-plated basin. Competitors were required to first pick up the bow and string it, which itself was no mean task. They would then have to move to the basin, which was filled with water, with more trickling in steadily from the top. This created gentle ripples within the bowl, spreading out from the centre towards the edge. To make things more difficult, and unpredictable, the drops of water were released at irregular intervals.

A hilsa fish was nailed to a wheel, which was fixed to an axle that was suspended from the top of the dome, a hundred metres above the ground. The wheel revolved at a constant speed. The contestants were required to look at the reflection of the fish in the unstill water below, and use the bow to fire an arrow into the eye of the fish. The first to succeed would win the hand of the bride.

Raavan did not pause to look at the task set for the potential suitors. Neither did he appear to notice that his entry into the hall had interrupted the speech of the great Malayaputra, Guru Vishwamitra. This was an unprecedented insult to the maharishi. But Raavan did not seem to care. For something else had caught his attention. Every seat in the competitors' circle was occupied.

*They haven't reserved a place for me! The bloody bastards!*

Raavan's entourage moved to the centre of the hall and halted next to Lord Rudra's bow. The lead bodyguard made a loud announcement. 'The King of

Kings, the Emperor of Emperors, the Ruler of the Three Worlds, the Beloved of the Gods, Lord Raavan!'

Raavan turned towards a minor king who was sitting closest to the Pinaka, grunted softly, and gestured with his head. The terrified man rose without question and scurried away to stand behind another competitor. Raavan walked towards the chair, but did not sit. He planted his right foot on the seat and rested his hand on his knee. Kumbhakarna and his men fell in line behind him. Then, almost lazily, Raavan turned his gaze to the other end of the hall, where the thrones were placed.

Maharishi Vishwamitra was seated on the royal throne of Mithila, the one customarily reserved for the king. The present king of Mithila, Janak, sat on the smaller throne to the right of the great maharishi, while the king's younger brother, Kushadhwaj, sat to the left of Vishwamitra.

Raavan spoke loudly to Vishwamitra in the distance. 'Continue, great Malayaputra.'

Raavan did not even deem it fit to apologise for the great insult of interrupting the chief of the Malayaputras in the middle of his speech.

Vishwamitra was furious. He had never been treated so disrespectfully. 'Raavan...' he growled.

Raavan stared back at him with complete insouciance.

Vishwamitra managed to rein in his temper; he had an important task at hand. He would deal with Raavan later. 'Princess Sita has decreed the sequence in which the great kings and princes will compete.'

Raavan took his foot off the chair and began to walk towards the Pinaka while Vishwamitra was still speaking. The chief of the Malayaputras completed his announcement just as Raavan was about to reach for the bow. 'The first man to compete is not you, Raavan. It is Ram, the prince of Ayodhya.'

Raavan's hand stopped a few inches from the bow. He looked at Vishwamitra and then turned around to see who had responded to the sage. He saw a young man, around twenty years of age, dressed in the simple white clothes of a hermit. Behind him stood another young, though gigantic man, next to whom was Arishtanemi. Raavan glared first at Arishtanemi, and then at Ram. If looks could kill, Raavan would have certainly felled a few today.

*This is that little kid born in Ayodhya on the day I defeated his father! And Vishwamitra has the gall to put this child up against me? Against the king of Lanka? Against the ruler of the world?*

Raavan turned to face Vishwamitra, his fingers wrapped around Vedavati's finger-bone pendant that hung around his neck. He needed her. He needed her voice. But he couldn't hear anything. Even she had abandoned him during this

great humiliation.

Raavan growled in a loud and booming voice, ‘I have been insulted!’

Kumbhakarna, who stood behind Raavan’s chair, was shaking his head imperceptibly. Clearly unhappy.

‘Why was I invited at all if you planned to make unskilled boys compete ahead of me?!’ Raavan’s body was shaking with fury.

Janak looked at Kushadhwaj with irritation before turning to Raavan and interjecting weakly, ‘These are the rules of the swayamvar, Great King of Lanka...’

A voice that sounded more like the rumble of thunder was finally heard. It was Kumbhakarna. ‘Enough of this nonsense!’ He turned towards Raavan. ‘Dada, let’s go.’

Raavan suddenly bent and picked up the Pinaka. Before anyone could react, he had strung it and nocked an arrow on the string. Most people could not even lift the mighty Pinaka easily. Yet Raavan, in a supreme display of strength and skill, had smoothly picked it up, strung the bow and nocked an arrow before anyone could react. The speed and dexterity with which he moved was mind-numbing. Even more remarkable was the target of his arrow.

Everyone sat paralysed as Raavan pointed the arrow directly at Vishwamitra, the great maharishi and the chief of the legendary Malayaputras.

The Malayaputras were the tribe left behind by the previous Vishnu. So their chief was, in a way, a representative of the Vishnu. For someone to even say a rude word against the chief Malayaputra was unprecedented. But for someone, even a man as powerful as Raavan, to point an arrow at Vishwamitra? It was unthinkable.

The crowd gasped collectively in horror as Vishwamitra stood up, threw his angvastram aside, and banged his chest with his closed fist. ‘Shoot, Raavan!’

Everyone was stunned by the warrior-like behaviour of the great maharishi. Such raw courage in a man of knowledge was rare. But then, Vishwamitra had been a warrior once.

The sage’s voice resounded in the great hall. ‘Come on! Shoot, if you have the guts!’

*I should shoot him. The pompous nutcase... But the medicines... For Kumbhakarna... For me...*

Raavan shifted his aim ever so slightly and released the arrow. It slammed into the statue of King Mithi behind Vishwamitra, breaking off the nose of the ancient king.

The king of Lanka looked around. He had insulted the founder of the city. The ancient king was respected and idolised by all. His memory remained sacred

even today. Raavan expected at least some Mithilans to respond with righteous rage.

*Come on! Fight for King Mithi's honour. Give me an excuse to order all my soldiers in and massacre all of you!*

But no Mithilan stood up. Shamefully, swallowing their pride, they remained seated even at the public insult to the memory of the founder of their kingdom.

*Cowards!*

Raavan dismissed Janak with a wave of his hand as he glared at Kushadhwaj. He threw the bow on the table and began to walk towards the door, followed by his guards.

In all this commotion, Kumbhakarna stepped up to the table, quickly unstrung the Pinaka, and reverentially brought the bow to his head with both hands.

*My apologies, great Lord Rudra. My brother did not mean any insult to your sacred bow. He has surrendered to his emotions. Please don't hold this against him.*

With utmost respect and dignity, Kumbhakarna placed Lord Rudra's bow, the Pinaka, back on the table. Then he turned around and briskly walked out of the hall, following a seething Raavan.



## Chapter 26

‘How dare they!’ Raavan was pacing up and down inside the stationary Pushpak Vimaan. ‘How dare they? I am Lanka! I am their lord! How dare they?’

Kumbhakarna tried to calm him. ‘Let it be, Dada. I told you what to expect. Let’s just leave.’

‘Leave? Leave? Are you crazy, Kumbhakarna?’

Kumbhakarna knew that if his elder brother was calling him by his proper name instead of ‘Kumbha’, he was in no mood to listen to any brotherly advice about staying calm.

‘These pathetic losers have insulted me,’ Raavan hissed, his fists clenching and unclenching. ‘They have humiliated me in public. They will pay the price!’

‘Dada,’ Kumbhakarna said, his tone even. ‘What do you intend to do?’

Raavan pointed towards Mithila. ‘I’ll burn the city to the ground! I’ll kill everyone in it! I’ll grind this city of the sons of the soil into the soil!’

‘Dada, why punish innocent civilians for the crimes of their leaders?’

‘If civilians don’t rebel against the crimes of their leaders, then they are criminals too!’

‘But Dada—’

‘No buts! I said they are criminals too!’

Kumbhakarna changed tack, trying to appeal to reason rather than compassion. ‘Dada, the crown-prince of Ayodhya is in there. Apparently, he won the swayamvar for Princess Sita’s hand. He will not abandon his wife and escape Mithila. My intel also tells me that, over the last few years, Prince Ram has become Emperor Dashrath’s favourite son. If we end up killing him, the emperor will almost certainly declare war on us. And if the emperor calls for war, treaty obligations will force other kingdoms to join too. You know we cannot afford to fight a war right now. It’s only our reputation that keeps us safe.’

Raavan cursed. Kumbhakarna was right. The plague had weakened the Lankan army. An all-out war was out of the question.

But Raavan's anger would not be pacified easily. 'Whatever it is, we are not leaving,' he said.

'Dada, I was told by Akampana, who had it from Samichi, that there are nearly four thousand policemen and policewomen in Mithila. They will be able to put up a fight.'

'But we have ten thousand Lankan warriors.'

'Even a five-to-two advantage will be negated by their defensive double walls. You know that.'

Raavan was not ready to give up. 'I've heard that there's a secret tunnel on the eastern side of that inner wall. We can send a small force to enter the city through the tunnel. Once our soldiers overpower the guards at the gateway and fling the main city gates open, the army can take over. We will massacre them!'

Kumbhakarna had also heard about the secret tunnel from Akampana, who had sourced the information from Samichi. Akampana had told Kumbhakarna that while agreeing to lead them through the secret tunnel, Samichi had exacted a promise from the Lankan that Princess Sita would not be harmed during the attack. This was a bizarre demand from someone who had sworn loyalty to Raavan and Lanka. Maybe all the talk of a secret tunnel was a trap. Kumbhakarna doubted Samichi's loyalty. Clearly, Raavan did not.

'Prepare for an attack,' he said.

'Dada, I still think—'

'I said, prepare for an attack!'

Kumbhakarna took a deep breath, bowed his head and whispered unhappily, 'Yes, Dada.'

—78I—

It was late at night, the fourth hour of the fourth prahar. Torches lined the Lankan camp. Raavan's bodyguards had been working feverishly through the evening, chopping down trees in the forest and building rowboats to carry them across the moat. Simply marching across was out of the question since the Mithilans had destroyed the pontoon bridge.

Raavan was standing beside the lake, looking across the water to the fort walls. He wore armour that covered his torso. Two swords and three knives hung from his waist. Two smaller knives were hidden in his shoes. An arrow-filled quiver was tied to his shoulders, across his back. He held a bow in his left hand. Raavan was ready for battle.

Standing next to the king of Lanka was Kumbhakarna. He had even more weapons on his person than Raavan, since the extra arms on top of his shoulders were also capable of flinging knives.

Their soldiers were armed and ready too. Ten thousand Lankans stood at a distance, close to the boats—on full alert, and with a reputation to protect.

Raavan lowered the scope he was looking through. ‘They have nobody on the outer walls.’

Kumbhakarna pulled up his own scope and looked through it, examining the walls thoroughly. ‘Hmm. That makes sense. They want us to scale the outer wall. Most of their soldiers are on the ramparts of the inner walls. While we are rushing towards the inner walls, they will fire arrows on us and hope to kill as many of our soldiers as possible in that zone of death.’

Raavan sniggered. ‘Somebody in that namby-pamby city of intellectuals has battle sense, but not enough to match ours. We won’t be climbing over the inner walls. We’ll be racing through the open gates.’

Kumbhakarna nodded.

‘When are we likely to get news?’ asked Raavan.

Kumbhakarna continued to stare at the fort as he replied, ‘The fact that we haven’t got news till now does not bode well.’

‘I don’t care. We are not retreating.’

Kumbhakarna turned to his elder brother. ‘I know, Dada.’

Just then, Akampana came rushing towards them. ‘Iraiva! Iraiva! It was a trap!’

‘Softly, you fool!’ hissed Raavan.

‘What happened?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

‘The secret tunnel had already collapsed onto itself, great Iraiva. Even worse, that traitor Jatayu and his Malayaputras were on top of the wall, firing arrows at us. We lost half the platoon. Ten of the men escaped somehow to give me the news. Perhaps Samichi has been discovered and forced to reveal our battle strategy to them.’

‘Or Samichi lied to us,’ said Kumbhakarna.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Raavan. ‘We are still attacking.’

‘Dada...’

‘I have a backup plan.’

Kumbhakarna looked towards the boats. Large wooden contraptions were being loaded on to them. ‘What’s that?’

‘My backup plan,’ said Raavan. ‘Let’s go.’

The soldiers began to push their boats into the moat. It would take half an hour for all the ten thousand soldiers to cross the lake and assemble on the other

side of the water, outside the fort.

The Battle of Mithila had begun.

—४१—

The Lankans organised themselves outside the outer walls with great efficiency.

Since there was no resistance—no Mithilan soldiers on the ramparts shooting arrows at them or pouring down boiling oil—they could move about freely.

Kumbhakarna, meanwhile, was staring in wonder at Raavan's innovation —his backup plan.

'This is brilliant, Dada. It just might work,' said Kumbhakarna.

'It *will* work!' said Raavan.

'You're the man! You still have it.'

'I never lost it!' said Raavan.

The object of Kumbhakarna's admiration, a device Raavan had invented, was simple in design and devastating in its potential to destroy. It consisted of a large stand with an enormous bow, almost the size of a man, fixed at the far end, horizontal to the ground. The bow was fastened to an axle at the centre, with an extremely thick bowstring attached to it. A rough seat had been built at the other end of the stand, where the archer would sit. The job of the archer was to load an enormous arrow, almost the size of a small spear, onto the bow, then pull the bowstring back with both hands and let it fly. A system of gears and pulleys allowed the stand to be adjusted so that the direction and angle of the arrow could be controlled.

There were a thousand of these stands, with one thousand bows mounted on them.

Essentially, Raavan had adopted the standard tactic of an attacking army firing arrows at soldiers on a fort wall and turbo-charged it.

They already knew, thanks to Samichi's information, that the 'soldiers' on the Mithila side were mere police personnel, not warriors. They would not have metallic shields, only wooden ones. Shields that were good enough to stop a hail of arrows but were certainly not sturdy enough to stop missiles the size of spears.

'They won't know what hit them,' Kumbhakarna said. 'They'll keep wondering how we are managing to reach them with spears thrown from outside the outer walls. They'll wonder if we have monsters and giants in our army!'

Raavan grinned, the bloodlust rising in him. Nothing got his heartbeat going like the heat of battle. 'They won't have time to wonder. They'll be too

busy dying.'

'Should I order the attack?'

Raavan looked around. Long ladders had been set up against the outer walls of the fort. Spotters had been stationed on top of the ladders, each with a scope, to focus on the inner walls of Mithila and report the destruction that would follow shortly. Raavan expected the Mithilan soldiers to flee as soon as the attack of the spears began. But a good general trusts hard data more than his expectations. Unlikely though it was, there was still the chance that a few courageous Mithilans would put up a fight. Once he received confirmation that there were no Mithilan defenders in sight anywhere near the inner fort wall, the Lankan soldiers would scale the outer walls and charge.

Raavan looked at Kumbhakarna. 'Let's begin the massacre.'

Since this was a charge at night, orders could not be conveyed through flags. Kumbhakarna turned to his herald and nodded. The herald immediately raised a conch shell and blew into it. The signal rolled out, the length and the breaks in the sound conveying Raavan's message to the soldiers. The other heralds across the Lankan lines repeated the signal.

The archers began putting arrows to the massive bows. After a brief pause, the conch shells signalled again and a fusillade of Lankan spears was released. A thousand missiles flew together on their deadly journey towards a city built for knowledge and not war. The Mithilans cowered behind their wooden shields. Shields that were utterly inadequate for blocking the spears coming their way.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna waited for a sign from the lookouts. A moment later, each of them could be seen raising a closed fist, almost in unison.

A loud cheer went up from the Lankans on the ground below.  
*'Bharatadhipa Lanka!'*

*Lanka, the Lord of India! Or more accurately, Lanka, the ruler of India!*

'Direct hit!' roared Raavan. The spears had torn into the Mithilan ranks amassed at the inner fort wall. 'No time to waste! Fire one more volley.'

The archers bent to their task immediately. It would take a few minutes for all the bows to be ready.

'We cannot fire once our men scale the outer wall,' said Kumbhakarna. 'We may hit our own soldiers while they are running towards the inner wall.'

'That is why I want another round of spears fired,' said Raavan. 'I want the Mithilans in retreat before we charge.'

Kumbhakarna looked up at the lookouts. Almost all of them had both hands above their heads in a swinging motion.

'Look, Dada! We may not have to fire another round,' said Kumbhakarna. 'They are in retreat already.'

Raavan grunted in disgust. ‘Bloody cowards. Can’t even withstand one volley!’

‘Should we charge?’

‘No. Fire another round for safety’s sake.’

The lookouts were now holding their arms over their heads, crossed together. The Mithilans were in full retreat.

Kumbhakarna looked at Raavan as another booming, ominous whoosh was heard. A thousand more spears sprang out of the bows and flew towards the inner ramparts, ripping into the stragglers among the fleeing Mithilans.

At least one thousand of the four thousand Mithilan warriors were downed in those devastating few minutes. Without a single Lankan life being lost.

The lookouts were now clapping their open palms together above their heads. The signal was clear. There were no Mithilans on top of the inner wall anymore. They were either dead or had run away.

‘Charge!’ roared Raavan.

The heralds announced the orders down the line, and the Lankans began scaling the outer wall, roaring their battle cries. Weapons drawn. Ready to kill. Ready to destroy the hapless residents of Mithila.

They were in for a surprise.

Mithila was a poor city, and the little wealth it had was distributed unfairly. The rich were too rich. And the poor, too poor.

As a consequence of this, the rich lived in luxurious mansions in the heart of the city, while the poor lived in decrepit slums and hovels close to the walls of the fort. Sita, the princess of Mithila and its prime minister, had not been able to countenance such injustice. So she had raised money, through taxes and support from outsiders, to redevelop the slums. Since there wasn’t enough land to construct large houses for all the slum-dwellers, she had come up with an ingenious solution—a four-storied honeycomb structure, which extended right up to the inner fort walls.

Because of its shape, this massive building that had replaced the slum was called the Bees Quarter. Many of the former slum-dwellers had punched windows through the walls of the fort, which were also now the walls of their homes. Sita had not stopped them. Considering the minor status of Mithila within the Sapt Sindhu power structure, security had never been as paramount for her as the upliftment of the poorer citizens.

The windows in the walls had been temporarily sealed for the swayamvar, with wood-panel barricades. But now, the Mithilans had quickly broken and removed these barricades, giving them a clear view of the empty grounds between the two fort walls—and an easy outlet for shooting arrows at the

Lankans who came rushing from the outer fort wall towards them. Since the Mithilans were inside the Bees Quarter, the roof protected them from any further missile attacks. Basically, a makeshift improvisation in urban engineering had turned into an immense strategic advantage during battle!

The Lankans, unaware of the danger that awaited them, were charging forward in a frenzy. They ran towards the inner wall, carrying ladders. Ready to scale the second wall, weapons in hand, and ravage the hapless citizens of Mithila. They expected no resistance.

‘Kill them all!’ thundered Raavan, running shoulder-to-shoulder with his soldiers, bloodlust in his eyes. ‘No mercy! No mercy!’

In the tremendous din that the Lankans were making, Raavan didn’t hear a loud command in the distance. From within the Bees Quarter. An order bellowed by Sita and her husband, Ram. ‘Fire!’

To the shock of the charging Lankans, arrows suddenly came raining down on them. Raavan looked up at the inner ramparts before realising that the arrows were being shot from the windows lower down, within the wall. Windows they did not even know existed.

The Lankans were caught off-guard as the arrows cut through their lines. The losses were heavy, with almost every missile finding a mark, since the soldiers had been hurtling forward in dense formations. In the confusion, part of the charge stalled, with some of Raavan’s men running helter-skelter to avoid the projectiles aimed at them, while others cowered behind their shields. The Mithilans shot their arrows without respite, killing as many of the enemy as they could.

The soldiers around Raavan and Kumbhakarna pulled their shields forward, protecting the brothers.

‘Retreat, Dada!’ shouted Kumbhakarna. ‘We are in a death zone.’

‘Never!’ roared Raavan. ‘All we need to do is scale the inner wall. Our army will finish them off! A few more minutes!’

‘Dada! In a few more minutes, you will not have an army left!’

Kumbhakarna could see that Raavan was seething. He also knew he could not give the order to retreat without Raavan’s permission. ‘Dada, they are shooting us down like fish in a barrel! Give the order!’

Behind the protective barrier of shields, Raavan looked around. At his loyal soldiers falling all around him, cut down ruthlessly.

The king of Lanka nodded, the movement barely visible in the darkness.

Kumbhakarna turned to his herald. ‘Retreat!’

The conch shells were sounded, and their tune was picked up by heralds across the Lankan line. But this time, they played a different strain. At the signal,

the Lankans turned and ran, retreating as rapidly as they had arrived.

A loud cheer went up from the Mithilans in the Bees Quarter.

The first Lankan attack had been repelled.



## Chapter 27

It was the fifth hour of the first prahar the following day.

The sense of shock in the Lankan camp was greater than the actual devastation. They had expected an easy victory against the apparently peace-loving Mithilans. What they had not expected was a strong counter-attack.

Raavan had initially been incensed at the previous night's outcome, but on reflection, he realised the odds were still in their favour. The Lankans had lost a thousand men the previous night. But so had the Mithilans, according to the intelligence from Samichi. The loss of a thousand soldiers weighed a lot more on the smaller Mithilan force. While Princess Sita's army was now made up of three thousand irregular soldiers drawn from the police force, the Lankans still had nine thousand battle-hardened veterans. Furthermore, they had received word from Samichi that the ordinary citizens of Mithila were horrified at the devastation wrought by the Lankans the previous night. Morale was at an all-time low and Princess Sita was trying hard to rally her citizens to fight, but it seemed unlikely that she would succeed.

The more he thought about it, the more Raavan was convinced that his forces still had the strength to conquer and destroy the city of King Mithi. And now, more than ever, it was a matter of prestige.

The Lankans had been hard at work all night. The injured were being treated inside makeshift hospital tents, while parts of the forest were being cleared at a rapid pace. By the morning, they had enough wood for their needs. Some of the soldiers worked in groups to saw and shape the hardwood into planks. Others linked these planks into giant rectangular shields with sturdy handles on the sides as well as at the base. Each shield was capable of protecting twenty men.

Raavan, accompanied by Kumbhakarna, walked up and down the lines,

supervising the work.

‘The tortoise shields are coming along well,’ said Kumbhakarna. Though he had not been enthused at the prospect of battle at first, Kumbhakarna knew that leaving was out of the question. If they retreated after their unsuccessful first attempt, news would spread throughout the Sapt Sindhu that a tiny, powerless kingdom had managed to beat back the mighty Lankans in battle. This would electrify Raavan’s enemies. If they had avoided battle in the first place, the effect would not have been as devastating. But it was too late now. They would have to fight and defeat Mithila to forestall other rebellions.

‘Yes,’ said Raavan. ‘Tonight, we will charge again. We will break the outer walls, there’s no need to scale them. In any case, no Mithilan will be out there. Once we are past the outer walls, protected by our tortoise shields, we’ll breach the inner walls. These fools are not prepared for a siege. We underestimated them earlier. We will not make the same mistake again.’

Kumbhakarna nodded. But it continued to bother him that Guru Vishwamitra and some of his Malayaputras were still inside the fort. One never took the mighty Malayaputras lightly. Never.

Raavan’s mind was still on the battle to come. ‘Once we breach their walls, we will destroy them all. Nobody should be left alive, not even the animals.’

Kumbhakarna did not say anything.

‘You continue checking the shields,’ said Raavan. ‘I want to read the spy reports.’

‘Yes, Dada.’

Kumbhakarna walked away, deep in thought. He knew they had to fight this battle, but he couldn’t shake off the sense of foreboding that gripped him.

He was moving among the men, checking the tortoise shields, when he heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow whizzing through the air. He ducked instinctively, only to see the arrow slam into a plank of wood at his feet. He looked up in surprise.

*Who in Mithila can fire an arrow that travels this distance with such unerring accuracy?*

He stared at the walls. All he could make out were two unusually tall men standing on the inner wall ramparts, and a third, who was a trifle shorter. The third man held a bow; he seemed to be looking directly at him.

Kumbhakarna stepped forward to examine the arrow that had buried itself in the wood. There was a piece of parchment tied to its shaft. He tugged it off, untied the note, and read it quickly.

*Lord Rudra have mercy!*

‘You actually believe they will do this, Kumbhakarna?’ asked Raavan, snorting with disgust as he threw the note away.

Kumbhakarna had come running to Raavan and taken him aside to show him the note. It was from Ram, the crown-prince of Ayodhya and now the husband of Sita, the princess-prime minister of Mithila. The short note warned, very clearly, that the Malayaputras had set up an Asurastra missile on the inner fort walls of Mithila, out of reach of the Lankan soldiers. And that if the Lankans did not demobilise their army and retreat, Ram would fire the Asurastra. Raavan had one hour to decide.

‘Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna, ‘if they fire an Asurastra, it could be—’

‘They don’t have an Asurastra,’ interrupted Raavan. ‘They’re bluffing.’

The Asurastra was considered by many to be a daivi astra, used as a weapon of mass destruction. Lord Rudra, the previous Mahadev, had banned the unauthorised use of daivi astras many centuries ago, and practically everyone obeyed his diktat. Anyone who broke the law, he had decreed, would be punished with exile for fourteen years. Breaking the law for the second time would be punishable by death. The tribe left behind by Lord Rudra, the Vayuputras, would enforce this punishment strictly.

However, there were those who insisted that the Asurastra was not, strictly speaking, a weapon of mass destruction, only of mass incapacitation. And since it could not be termed a daivi astra, it could possibly escape Lord Rudra’s ban. Raavan did not concern himself with whether the Asurastra qualified as a daiva astra or not. He simply refused to believe that the Malayaputras had an Asurastra at all. He knew it was extremely difficult to access the core material for building one—there was none to be got in India for sure. He did not see the point in worrying about a weapon that his enemy was unlikely to possess.

‘But Dada, the Malayaputras do have—’

‘Vishwamitra is bluffing, Kumbhakarna!’

Shocked to hear Raavan refer to Guru Vishwamitra by his name alone, Kumbhakarna fell silent.

Nearly three hours had passed since the Lankans had received the warning. By now, even Kumbhakarna had begun to wonder if the note had been a bluff, though the vague sense of impending doom refused to leave him.

‘Are you convinced now, Kumbha?’ asked Raavan. ‘You know I am never wrong.’

Kumbhakarna wished he could share his brother’s conviction, but his own instincts said otherwise.

‘You are aware of the punishment for firing a daivi astra, right?’ asked Raavan. ‘Do you expect the Malayaputras to break Lord Rudra’s law? Guruji knows very well that even if we kill everyone else in Mithila, we would not dare touch them. They are safe.’

What Raavan didn’t know was that the Malayaputras were out of options. Even though they were mindful of Lord Rudra’s laws, they had to protect Sita at any cost.

Kumbhakarna’s instincts were right.

‘Can I please have your permission to step out now?’ asked Raavan sarcastically.

On Kumbhakarna’s insistence, Raavan had grudgingly remained within the parked Pushpak Vimaan. One of the metals used to build the fuselage of the vehicle was lead, and it was well-known that lead was an inhibitor of the effects of various daivi astras, including the Asurastra. That’s why it was sometimes called a magic metal. Kumbhakarna had been keeping an eye on the section of the Mithila fort from where the warning arrow had been fired. At the first sign of trouble, he intended to close the vimaan door, so that his brother would be safe.

Kumbhakarna shook his head. ‘No, Dada. Please. It’s my job to protect you.’

‘And it’s my job to protect you from your own stupidity! Step aside now. I need to go check if the boats are ready for the weight of the tortoise shields.’

‘Dada, please listen to me.’

‘In the name of Lord Rudra, have you gone insane, Kumbhakarna?’ Raavan asked, exasperated.

‘Please, Dada. Your safety is most important.’

‘I am not a child who needs your protection!’

‘Please stay here, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘I will go and check the boats.’

‘Dammit!’

‘Dada, just think you are doing it to humour me. I have a bad feeling—’

‘We can’t make battle plans based on your “feelings”!’

‘I beg of you. Stay in the vimaan. I’ll go and check on the boats.’

Raavan sat back angrily. ‘Fine!’

Kumbhakarna was at the lake, instructing the Lankan soldiers to load the tortoise shields on the boats. He still had one wary eye on the fort, checking for any sign of the Asuraastra being fired.

He turned to look at the vimaan parked some distance behind him and was relieved to see a scowling Raavan standing just inside the flying craft.

Kumbhakarna gestured for Raavan to remain where he was, then turned back to watch the work on the boats.

All of a sudden, that sense of foreboding inside him seemed to strengthen. Painfully. Like someone had grabbed his guts and was squeezing them dry.

He looked towards the fort. Towards the section of the inner wall that had the Bees Quarter abutting it. His eyes widened in alarm.

What Kumbhakarna did not know was that the Malayaputras had finally found someone to trigger the Asuraastra. Someone to take the blame, and the punishment, for possibly breaking Lord Rudra's commandment. Someone whose desire to save the woman he loved was strong enough to make him break the law, something he would not normally consider—Sita's husband, Ram.

A flaming arrow shot by Ram was tearing through the air at a fearsome speed.

*Lord Rudra have mercy.*

Kumbhakarna turned around instantly, screaming, 'Dada!'

He charged towards the Pushpak Vimaan, running as hard as his legs would allow.

Meanwhile, at the top of the Bees Quarter, the flaming arrow slammed into a small red square on the Asuraastra missile tower, pushing it backwards. The fire from the arrow was captured in a receptacle behind the red square, and from there it spread rapidly to the fuel chamber that powered the missile. There was a flash of intense light, and a series of soft explosions. A few seconds later, heavy flames gathered near the base of the tower.

Kumbhakarna reached the vimaan and leapt for the entrance, throwing his weight on his elder brother, who went flying backwards into the vimaan. Kumbhakarna's momentum carried him inside as well.

But the door of the craft was still open.

The Asuraastra missile took off and flew in a high arc over the walls of Mithila, covering the distance in a few short seconds. The Lankan soldiers on the outer side of the moat-lake looked up in surprise and panic. The missile could mean only one thing.

A daivi astra.

They were doomed. They knew that.

There was no time to react. No time to run. And where would they run and

hide?

They were out in the open. Easy prey for the Asuraastra.

Even while devastation sped towards them, none of the Lankans could tear their eyes away from the spectacle. As the missile flew high above the moat-lake, there was a small, almost inaudible explosion, like that of a firecracker meant for a child.

The terror in the soldiers' hearts was quickly replaced by hope.

Maybe the daivi astra had failed.

But the Malayaputras and the princes of Ayodhya, who stood at the top of the Bees Quarter, knew better. They had covered their ears, as instructed by Guru Vishwamitra.

The assault of the Asuraastra had not yet begun.

Kumbhakarna, meanwhile, had sprung to his feet, even as Raavan lay sprawled on the floor of the vimaan. He rushed to the door and hit the metallic button on the sidewall with the full weight of his body. The door of the vimaan began to slide shut slowly. Too slowly.

*The door will not close in time.*

Without a second thought, Kumbhakarna took up position. Just inside the vimaan. Just behind the doorway. As the sliding door moved into place, closing slowly, agonisingly slowly.

Kumbhakarna. Blocking the still open part of the doorway with his gigantic form.

So that the effects of the explosion would not travel beyond him.

Kumbhakarna. Ready to sacrifice himself. For the man he loved.

For his brother.

For his dada.

The Asuraastra hovered above the Lankan soldiers for a moment, and then exploded with an ear-shattering sound that shook even the walls of Mithila in the distance. The Lankans felt their eardrums burst painfully, the air sucked out from their lungs.

But this was only a prelude to the devastation that would follow.

An eerie silence followed the explosion. Then spectators on the Mithila rooftops saw a bright green flash of light emerge from where the missile had splintered. It burst with furious intensity and hit the Lankans below like a flash of lightning. They stayed rooted, stunned into a temporary paralysis. Fragments of the exploded missile showered down on them.

Kumbhakarna saw the flash of green light just as the door of the Pushpak Vimaan slid shut. Even as the door sealed and locked automatically, saving those inside the flying vehicle from any further injury, Kumbhakarna collapsed,

unconscious.

‘Kumbhaaaaaaa!’ Raavan rushed to his younger brother, screaming.

Outside the vimaan, the Asuraastra was still not done. The real damage was yet to come.

A dreadful hissing sound radiated out, like the battle-cry of a gigantic snake. Simultaneously, the fragments of the missile that had fallen to the ground emitted demonic clouds of green gas, which spread like a shroud over the stupefied Lankans.

The gas was the actual heart of the Asuraastra. The real weapon. The explosions and the paralysing green light primed the victim. The thick green gas was the slayer.

In a few minutes, the deathly gas enveloped the Lankans, who lay paralysed in the clearing outside the Pushpak Vimaan. It would put them in a coma that would last for days, if not weeks. It would kill some of them. But at the moment, all was deceptively calm. There were no screams and no cries for mercy. No one made an attempt to escape. They simply lay on the ground, motionless, waiting for the fiendish astra to push them into oblivion. The only sound in the otherwise grim silence was the hiss of the gas spewing from the missile fragments.

Inside the vimaan, a devastated Raavan was on his knees, holding his younger brother in his arms. Tears streamed down his face as he shook the body of his paralysed brother repeatedly, trying to wake him up. ‘Kumbha! Kumbha!’

—४१—

Some thirty minutes had passed. The Asuraastra had completed its devastation of the Lankan troops.

A small, skeletal crew present inside the craft had escaped. One of them was a doctor. As standard operating procedure, the vimaan was always manned and ready for flight.

The doctor had managed, with the help of his emergency kit of medicines, to release Kumbhakarna from the paralytic effects of the missile. His body was still immobile and his breathing was ragged, but he could move his head a little. He lay on the floor of the vimaan. Blood seeped very slowly from his Naga outgrowths. His head was on his elder brother’s lap.

He tried to say something, but his tongue was swollen and his speech was slurred and unintelligible.

‘Be quiet,’ whispered Raavan, his cheeks wet with tears. ‘Rest. You will be fine. I won’t let anything happen to you.’

‘Thatha... thuuu... thokay?’

Raavan’s tears flowed more strongly as he understood what his younger brother was saying. Even in this state, Kumbhakarna was more concerned about Raavan’s wellbeing. The king of Lanka kissed his younger brother’s forehead gently. ‘I am okay. You rest, little brother, you rest.’

Kumbhakarna’s partially paralysed face shaped itself into a crooked smile. ‘Thuuu... thowe... thmee.’

Raavan smiled through his tears. ‘Yes. Yes, I owe you, my brother. I owe you.’

Kumbhakarna shook his head slightly, the crooked smile still on his face. ‘Thust... thoking...’

‘Rest, Kumbha. Rest...’

Kumbhakarna closed his eyes.

Raavan held his brother’s head close to his chest, crying. ‘I am so sorry, Kumbha. I am so sorry. I should have listened to you.’

‘My lord,’ whispered one of the Lankan soldiers, looking through a porthole.

Raavan looked up.

‘The gas is still visible,’ the man said. ‘It has wrapped itself around our men. What do we do?’

Raavan knew what that meant. All his soldiers who lay on the ground outside the Pushpak Vimaan would be paralysed for days, if not weeks. They would be in a coma, from which some of them would never awake. He couldn’t step out either. For the effects of the gas could still be strong.

The Battle of Mithila had been lost. His bodyguard corps was destroyed. He had no soldiers left, besides the few within the vimaan. There was nothing he could do.

But that didn’t seem to matter so much now.

He looked down at his brother. And pulled him closer.

All that mattered was his brother. He had to get Kumbhakarna back on his feet.

Raavan looked at the pilots of the Pushpak Vimaan. ‘Fly us out of this cursed place.’



## Chapter 28

Raavan breathed deeply. ‘Finally, a chance to get back at the Malayaputras,’ he said.

A little more than thirteen years had passed since the Battle of Mithila. Raavan and Kumbhakarna were in Sigiriya, in the king’s private office in the royal palace. The memory of the battle had faded with time, but the wound was still raw for Raavan.

The humiliating defeat and the devastating destruction of Raavan’s ten-thousand-strong bodyguard corps had not had as much of an impact across the Sapt Sindhu as he had feared. For a short period after the Battle of Mithila, others within the Sapt Sindhu had started dreaming of challenging Lankan authority. They had even begun to see Ram, the prince of Ayodhya, as the leader of the resistance. But before the movement could gather force, Ram had been banished for fourteen years from the Sapt Sindhu by King Dashrath, for the unauthorised use of the daivi astra, in accordance with the laws of the previous Mahadev. All dreams of a rebellion had died with his departure. The fact that Ram’s wife Sita, the princess of Mithila, and his younger brother Lakshman had left with him had hit morale further.

Raavan had endured a loss of prestige too. His people had expected him to return to Mithila and destroy it to avenge the defeat he had suffered, but Raavan knew that the Lankan army was in no condition for an all-out war. Besides, the Malayaputras had left Mithila with the Lankan soldiers, who had been revived and then imprisoned. The price for returning them was Raavan’s solemn oath, in Lord Rudra’s name, that he would not attack Mithila or any other kingdom in the Sapt Sindhu.

To ensure that Raavan kept his word, Guru Vishwamitra had warned him that if he so much as thought of mobilising his army to attack the Sapt Sindhu,

he would stop receiving the medicines that kept him and Kumbhakarna alive. To drive the point home, he had further raised the price of the medicines and the cave material. Though burning with humiliation, Raavan had had no choice but to accept these terms. But he had been waiting for a chance to get back at the Malayaputras, and it seemed now that an opportunity had finally presented itself.

‘It’s not about vengeance, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘It’s about getting what we want. We have to be careful. Very careful.’

‘That may be true for you. For me, getting back at the Malayaputras is just as important. But I would never do anything silly, or in anger. I am not stupid.’

Kumbhakarna threw up his hands in acceptance. ‘All right.’

‘The important thing is, they have a Vishnu now. And an interesting choice of a Vishnu too,’ Raavan said thoughtfully.

‘Yes,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘Suddenly a lot of things are making sense. For instance, I could never understand why the Malayaputras were so desperate to save Mithila. They used the Asurastra, defying the ban by Lord Rudra and possibly damaging their relations with the Vayuputras permanently. An insignificant kingdom like Mithila was surely not worth such a risk. But it’s apparent now that they were not trying to save their precious city of sages, but their Vishnu! They knew that you were so angry, you would have killed everyone there that day.’

Raavan nodded. ‘True. They don’t care for their own lives. They care only about their mission. And for their mission to succeed, they need the Vishnu.’

‘Princess Sita.’

‘Who would have thought they would select someone from tiny, powerless Mithila for a Vishnu,’ said Raavan, flexing his right shoulder. He was close to sixty years old now, and aches and pains had become a constant part of his life. Also, the medicines that kept him alive were taking a toll on his strength. The mysterious plague ravaging Sigiriya was only causing further damage.

‘She wasn’t the only candidate,’ said Kumbhakarna.

Raavan looked at his younger brother, surprised.

‘The Vayuputras and Guru Vashishtha believe that Ram should be the next Vishnu,’ said Kumbhakarna.

Vashishtha was the raj guru and chief adviser to the Ayodhya royal family. But his position within the Sapt Sindhu royalty wasn’t the main reason he was held in such high esteem across the land. He was also a *maharishi*, a *great man of knowledge*, whose intellect was unmatched. His only equal, perhaps, was the chief of the Malayaputras, Maharishi Vishwamitra. It was also well known that Maharishi Vashishtha was very close to the Vayuputras, the tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev, Lord Rudra.

‘Ram? Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s awkward,’ said Raavan. ‘What are the Vayuputras and Guru Vashishtha trying to do? Create marital discord between Ram and Sita?’

Kumbhakarna laughed. ‘In any case, what the Vayuputras or Guru Vashishtha think about the Vishnu has no bearing on the final choice. The Vishnu is selected by the Malayaputras alone. And Guru Vishwamitra has made his choice. Sita will be the next Vishnu.’

Raavan leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. ‘What is the cause of this fight between Guru Vashishtha and Guru Vishwamitra? Weren’t they friends once?’

‘I don’t know, Dada. That’s something for another story, another book. It has nothing to do with us.’

‘But you do know a lot about most things,’ said Raavan. ‘How did you find out so much about this Vishnu business?’

‘It’s best if you don’t know.’

‘Why?’

‘Just trust me, Dada.’

Raavan stared at Kumbhakarna. ‘Why do I get the feeling sometimes that we are pawns in a much bigger game?’

‘Every human being is a pawn, Dada. But in chess, the pawn that breaches the other side suddenly becomes very powerful.’

Raavan raised his eyebrows and smiled. ‘There is a difference between chess and real life, little brother.’

‘Of course. But chess is a representation of real life. How you play chess says a lot about how you live as well.’

‘Wise words,’ said Raavan. ‘In any case, I trust you completely, Kumbha. Any time I have not trusted you, I have suffered.’

Kumbhakarna laughed and stifled a yawn.

‘Feeling sleepy again?’ asked Raavan, a guilty look on his face.

The Asurastra had had a debilitating effect on Kumbhakarna. Born a Naga, he had suffered aches and discomfort since his childhood. His outgrowths were painful at the joints, and would bleed profusely during his childhood. The Malayaputra medicines had helped keep the pain and bleeding in check. However, exposure to the noxious Asurastra’s green light had caused a massive deterioration in his condition. Furthermore, at fifty-one, he was not as strong as he had once been. The renewed bleeding and pain were almost unbearable now.

The Malayaputra physicians had visited Sigiriya and formulated some new medicines that helped manage the pain and the bleeding to some extent, but they

also made Kumbhakarna extremely lethargic. He slept for most part of the day, every day. The only way he could get his focus back was by avoiding having the medicines for a few days. But the pain would return almost immediately, and the bleeding would restart if he skipped the medicines for more than five days. Anything beyond that, and his life itself would be at risk.

And all this because he had put himself in danger to save his brother's life during the Battle of Mithila.

Raavan had not been able to forgive himself. He had curtailed all his other plans over the last thirteen years—from the expansion of the Lankan empire to the takeover of Kishkindha. He focused instead on ensuring that his younger brother remained alive and as healthy as possible.

Kumbhakarna smiled at Raavan. 'I'm all right, Dada.'

Raavan smiled and patted his brother's shoulder.

'In any case,' Kumbhakarna continued, 'we have nothing to do with the Vayuputras or Guru Vashishta. We only need the Malayaputras under our control. And that will happen when we take the Vishnu away. They will want to free her at any cost, and that's when we can really squeeze them dry. We'll demand the medicine supply we need for the next twenty years in one shot—without paying their ridiculous prices. Nothing stops us from demanding more from the Malayaputras as long as the Vishnu remains imprisoned in Lanka.'

Raavan nodded.

'Do we go ahead then?' asked Kumbhakarna.

'Yes, we have to kidnap Sita.'

'Remember, Dada, it's not about vengeance. We will only ask for what we want. We just need some leverage over the Malayaputras. We will not kill the Vishnu.'

Raavan nodded.

'She will be our prisoner.'

'Yes.'

'A political prisoner. She will be kept in one of the palaces in Lanka, not in the dungeons.'

'I get it, Kumbha! You don't have to go on about it!'

Kumbhakarna smiled and put his palms together in apology.

—८६—I—

'Dada, I don't think this is a good idea,' whispered Kumbhakarna.

Raavan was in his private chamber in the royal palace of Sigiriya, with Kumbhakarna. Raavan's son, the twenty-seven-year-old Indrajit, was also

present. Indrajit had the same intimidating physical presence as his father. He was tall and astonishingly muscular, with a voice that was deep and commanding. He had also inherited his mother's high cheekbones and thick brown hair, which he wore in a leonine mane, with two side partings and a long knot at the crown of his head. An oiled handlebar moustache sat well on his smooth-complexioned face. His clothes were sober—a fawn-coloured dhoti and a creamy white angvastram. He wore no jewellery, except for the ear studs that most warriors in India favoured. The plague that was ravaging Lanka had had no impact on Indrajit, which made Raavan proud.

The king of Lanka adored his son. He had picked the name himself: *Indrajit* meant *one who could defeat the king of the Gods, Indra*.

Indra was the legendary king of the Devas in the hoary past. The name had, over time, become a title for all who were considered the kings of the Gods. Raavan's high aspirations for his son were no secret.

'I agree with Kumbhakarna Uncle,' said Indrajit, speaking quietly so his voice wouldn't carry far. 'This is an important mission. I think we should be the ones to carry it out. We can't leave it to Uncle and Aunty, who are a hideous combination of arrogance and incompetence.'

Raavan regarded the man and the woman who stood at a respectful distance from him. Vibhishan and Shurpanakha—his half-siblings and Indrajit's 'uncle and aunty'. The two had volunteered for the job of kidnapping Sita. Raavan could barely keep his revulsion from showing on his face when he looked at them. They were born of a father he hated and a stepmother he despised, and if that wasn't enough, his rent-a-tear mother Kaikesi had adopted and nurtured them. She would go to any length to undermine him, he thought again.

'We'll take care of it, Dada,' said Vibhishan politely to his much older half-brother.

Vibhishan was of average height and unusually fair-skinned. His reed-thin physique was that of a runner. But he held his thin arms wide, as if to accommodate impressive biceps. His long, jet-black hair was tied in a knot at the back of his head. His full beard was neatly trimmed and dyed a deep brown. He wore a rich purple dhoti and a pink angvastram, with a lot of jewellery. He was a complete dandy and, according to Raavan, full of false politeness and humility.

'I am not your dada,' said Raavan firmly. 'I am your king.'

'Of course, my lord,' said Vibhishan, immediately correcting himself and holding his ears in respectful apology.

Raavan rolled his eyes.

'Our idea will work, my lord,' Vibhishan said.

Raavan's spies had informed him that Sita, Ram and Lakshman were camped in Panchavati, a peaceful spot along the Godavari River, with sixteen Malayaputra soldiers for their protection. Raavan was suspicious of the fact that only sixteen soldiers had been tasked with the security of someone as important as the Vishnu, but he was told that Sita was still angry with the Malayaputras for forcing Ram to fire the Asurastra. She had refused their support. The soldiers with her were under the command of Jatayu, whom she considered her brother—which apparently was the only reason she had agreed to their presence.

Vibhishan proposed that they use Shurpanakha's beauty to distract Ram and Lakshman. An encounter with her would presumably lead to the two men letting their guard down. Shurpanakha would then find some pretext to lead Sita away from Ram and Lakshman, and kidnap her. The Ayodhya princes would be told that Sita had attacked Shurpanakha out of jealousy, and in the fight that ensued, she had accidentally drowned in the river. Since the Godavari was prone to swift currents, it was likely that her body would never be found.

This way, Vibhishan reasoned, they would be able to kidnap Sita without having the blame fall on Lanka.

'Why not just send in our soldiers and pick her up?' asked Kumbhakarna.

'What if Ram gets injured or hurt in the process?' Vibhishan responded with a question of his own.

What Vibhishan left unsaid was obvious to all. Ram was, technically, the king of Ayodhya, and the king of Ayodhya was considered to be the emperor of the Sapt Sindhu. If he died at the hands of a Lankan, treaty obligations would force all the kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu to declare war on Lanka. And Lanka could not afford to fight a war right now. The army was too weak to go into a battle.

Kumbhakarna was still not convinced. 'I am sure we can find a better way to separate Ram and Sita without using our own sister as bait.'

'We fight with the weapons we have been blessed with, Dada,' said Vibhishan. 'And Shurpanakha has been blessed with extraordinary beauty.'

Shurpanakha smiled proudly, pleased with the compliment. She resembled Vibhishan, but unlike her sickly brother, she was bewitching in appearance. She had more of her Greek mother's genes than her Indian father's. Her skin was pearly white, and her eyes magnetic. She had a sharp, slightly upturned nose and high cheekbones. Her hair was blonde, a most unusual colour in India, and every strand of it was always in place. Everything about her petite frame was elegant. She wore a classic, expensively dyed purple dhoti, which was tied fashionably low, exposing her slim, curvaceous waist. Her silken blouse was a tiny sliver of cloth, affording a generous view of her cleavage. Her angvastram, deliberately

hanging loose from a shoulder, revealed more than it concealed. Extravagant jewellery completed the picture of excess.

Shurpanakha seemed convinced of her ability to pull off this plan. Kumbhakarna, however, was still sceptical. He turned to Indrajit for his opinion.

The confident young man spoke up immediately. ‘Vibhishan Uncle, please don’t think I am being rude, but I have honestly not heard a more stupid idea in my life. I don’t see how this will work.’

Vibhishan tensed in anger, but controlled his tongue with superhuman effort. Being insulted by his elder brother was something he had learnt to live with. But to hear such words from this pup? It was intolerable!

‘Do you think any man with a heart that beats can even think of resisting this?’ asked Shurpanakha, pointing at herself.

‘Good God, Shurpanakha! You are my sister. How can you say such things in my presence?’ Kumbhakarna was appalled.

‘You have turned celibate, Dada,’ said Shurpanakha to Kumbhakarna, almost tauntingly. ‘You will not understand.’

Kumbhakarna turned to Raavan. ‘Dada, I don’t approve of this. I say we go with our original plan.’

‘Dada,’ said Shurpanakha to Raavan—she had none of the diffidence that Vibhishan was saddled with—‘I will handle this. You don’t need to get your hands dirty. Allow us to earn your trust.’

Raavan thought about it. Kumbhakarna was already looking tired and sleepy. He would have to be given his medicines soon. Then there was Indrajit—his pride and joy. His heir. If there was a way to avoid putting these two at risk...

‘Also, my lord,’ said Vibhishan, ‘many people believe that we are not close to you. So, even if we are caught out, in all likelihood, Sita’s disappearance will not be linked to you. It will be like an independent act by relatives you don’t like. Your hands will remain clean.’

Raavan narrowed his eyes. *That does make some kind of sense.*

‘Dada,’ Shurpanakha persisted, ‘you have nothing to lose. If we fail, you can go to Panchavati with your soldiers in any case. What’s the harm in giving us a chance?’

*Yeah... What’s the harm?*

‘All right,’ said Raavan.

Shurpanakha whooped in delight, clapping her hands together.

Vibhishan went down on his knees ceremoniously and brought his head down to the floor, paying obeisance to Raavan. ‘You will not regret this, my lord.’

Raavan looked at him. *Pretentious moron.*



## Chapter 29

It had been many weeks since Vibhishan and Shurpanakha had sailed out of Lanka, to the port of Salsette, on the western coast of India. Located north of the ruined Mumbadevi port, the island was now the primary Lankan outpost in the area. It was also the port closest to Panchavati, where Ram, Sita and Lakshman were camped, along with sixteen Malayaputra soldiers.

Indrajit had accompanied his uncle and aunt to Salsette, but had been ordered to take no further part in the mission. Raavan did not want to put his son's life at risk. The brave young man had protested vociferously, but had finally submitted to his father's directive.

From Salsette, Vibhishan and Shurpanakha had marched with a company of soldiers to Panchavati, with the intention of kidnapping Sita.

But the mission had turned out to be a disaster.

'I am sorry,' Raavan said to Kumbhakarna. 'I should have listened to you.'

Raavan and Kumbhakarna were in the Pushpak Vimaan, accompanied by a hundred soldiers, flying towards Salsette.

Not only had Shurpanakha failed to kidnap Sita, she had been caught and bound by her. Sita had dragged the bleating Lankan princess to the Panchavati camp, where the waiting Lankan soldiers had nearly come to blows with the followers of Ram and Sita. Worse, Shurpanakha had been accidentally injured on her nose by Lakshman.

Vibhishan had quickly ordered a retreat without offering a fight, thus keeping himself, his sister and their soldiers alive. They had rushed back to Salsette, and from there, led by Indrajit, had sailed back to Lanka, to appraise Raavan of their plight.

Raavan had responded by setting off from Lanka immediately, with as many soldiers as could be accommodated in the Pushpak Vimaan. While

cosmetic surgeries would, over time, take away the physical marks of Shurpanakha's injury, the metaphorical loss of face could only be avenged with blood.

Raavan couldn't stop cursing his inept half-siblings all through the flight, but he also realised, with some prodding from Kumbhakarna, that he finally had a legitimate excuse to attack Ram's camp. After all, any outrage against a member of the Lankan royal family had to be responded to. It was a matter of honour, and any reasonable person would agree that it could not be construed as an act of war. And that would hopefully nullify the treaty obligations which bound other kingdoms within the Sapt Sindhu to come to Ayodhya's aid.

Kumbhakarna looked at his brother and smiled, waving the apology aside. 'It's all right, Dada. We've spoken about this already and cussed out our idiot half-siblings enough. Let's focus on what we have to do right now. We have to kidnap the Vishnu. That's it. Let's keep our minds clear.'

'True,' said Raavan, smiling. He stretched his arms over his head. 'You know what the most irritating part of an attack is?'

'What?'

'The waiting.'

'That is true.'

'It's excruciating to know we will be in the heat of battle soon, but till it starts, we have to sit around doing nothing. We have to talk and behave normally, keeping our heartrate in check and bloodlust high, but not so high that we lose control.'

Kumbhakarna laughed. 'But you will keep your bloodlust in check out there as well.'

Raavan glowered at Kumbhakarna.

'Dada, be realistic. You are not what you used to be. You are nearly sixty years old now. Your navel outgrowth and the continuous use of medicines have weakened you. You've fought enough battles. Let the soldiers do the fighting now.'

'Well, you're not exactly fighting fit either!' Raavan exclaimed petulantly.

Kumbhakarna glanced towards the pilots of the craft, who were within earshot.

'Which is why I will avoid fighting as well,' he said, keeping his voice low.

'They attacked our family. And you want us to not react?' Raavan spoke in an angry whisper.

'No, Dada. I want you to react intelligently.'

'I am not a coward!'

'I didn't say you are.'

‘Then I must fight.’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘You don’t have the right to order me around, Kumbhakarna.’

‘You are right, I don’t. But I do have the right to demand the first of the three boons you promised me.’

In a fit of guilt and remorse after the Battle of Mithila, where his mistake had caused permanent damage to Kumbhakarna’s health, Raavan had told his younger brother that he could demand three boons from him, at any time in the course of their lives. And that those three demands would be met, come what may. Kumbhakarna had not asked for anything. Until now.

Raavan grunted angrily. He knew he had no choice. ‘You are not playing fair, Kumbha!’

‘We’ll get the Vishnu, Dada. We’ll kidnap her. But there is no need for you to put your life at risk.’

Raavan looked away, fuming.

Kumbhakarna laughed softly. ‘Look at the bright side, Dada. I only have two boons left.’

—४१—

Raavan looked out of the porthole at the land of Salsette below him.

They had stopped briefly at the port, to pick up Samichi and her lover, Khara, who was also a captain in the Lankan armed forces. The vimaan had taken off once again, with its course set towards the Godavari River.

Ram, Sita, Lakshman and the Malayaputras with them had abandoned Panchavati soon after the botched encounter with Shurpanakha and Vibhishan. Lankan intelligence had lost track of them. But Samichi had managed to find the exact location of the Vishnu and her companions by brutally torturing a captive Malayaputra. It turned out that they were still close to the river, though much further down from Panchavati. As soon as Kumbhakarna was informed of this, he had ordered them to join his raiding party.

Raavan looked at Samichi, and then at his younger brother. ‘Why do we need to take this woman along? I don’t like having her around!’

‘I know it troubles you, Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna calmly. ‘But she knows their exact location.’

‘So what? We have the information now. We can go by ourselves.’

‘Samichi knows Princess Sita better than any of us. She was in the service of the Vishnu for many years. Her advice may prove useful.’

‘You could have debriefed her thoroughly before we left Salsette. I still

don't see why she has to travel with us.'

'It's better to have her with us.'

'She was there during the Battle of Mithila. A fat lot of good that did us. She was useless!'

'But she is trying to make herself useful now. Let's give her the opportunity. What do we have to lose?'

Raavan took a deep breath and did not answer.

'Dada, trust me, please. It's important that we get the Vishnu; that we capture her alive. Let's put our emotions aside and focus on that.'

'You can be really infuriating, Kumbha! I don't know why I even painted you,' Raavan burst out suddenly.

'You've made a painting of me?' Kumbhakarna was genuinely surprised. He knew that every painting created by Raavan had only one constant character in it. 'You painted me with the Kanyakumari?'

Raavan nodded in the affirmative.

'When do I get to see it?' asked Kumbhakarna.

Raavan picked up a cloth bag lying next to him and pulled out a rolled-up canvas.

'What? You have it with you?' Kumbhakarna was delighted.

Raavan handed over the canvas to his brother.

Kumbhakarna unrolled it, shifting a little to make sure nobody else in the vimaan could see it. 'Wow!'

Raavan's eternal muse, the Kanyakumari, was at the centre of the painting. She looked older. Her hair was almost completely grey and her face was finely lined. She had a slight stoop. She looked at least sixty years old, if not more. But her face still had that angelic splendour—of grace, beauty and kindness.

She was helping a small child who was trying to climb a wall.

Kumbhakarna smiled. 'This child looks familiar!'

Raavan laughed softly, for the child was Kumbhakarna. Hairy, almost bear-like, with pot-like ears and two extra arms sticking out on top of his shoulders. Despite his oddities, the child looked adorable. Happy and huggable.

'Where am I going?' asked Kumbhakarna, his eyes fixed on the painting.

Raavan pointed to the fencing on top of the wall. A circular symbol in the shape of a wheel was repeated several times, to form a railing. Kumbhakarna recognised it only too well.

'The wheel of dharma.'

'Yes,' said Raavan. 'You will rise to achieve your dharma.'

'I don't see you in this painting. Where are you?'

Raavan didn't answer.

‘Where do you see yourself, Dada?’

Raavan remained silent.

Kumbhakarna examined the painting closely. He then turned towards his elder brother, clearly unhappy. ‘Dada—’

On the wall, visible only if one looked closely, were ten faces. Nine of them exhibited the *navrasas*, or *nine major emotions*, as described in the *Natyashastra*: love, laughter, sorrow, anger, courage, fear, disgust, wonder and tranquillity. The tenth face, in the centre, had no expression at all. A blank slate.

Kumbhakarna could see what Raavan had attempted in the painting. The king of Lanka was sometimes addressed as *Dashanan* by his subjects, for they said that he had the knowledge and power of *ten heads*. Raavan had sought to play on this name, and the symbolism that attaches to emotions in the Indian artistic tradition, to convey a much deeper meaning. Traditional wisdom says that true spiritual awakening is possible only when one transcends the wall of emotions that keeps one imprisoned in this illusory world. In the painting, Raavan had made himself the wall that the child Kumbhakarna was trying to scale.

‘Climb over the wall of emotions you have for me, my brother,’ said Raavan. ‘Leave me, and find dharma. I am too far gone. There is no hope for me. But you are a good man. Rediscover your childhood and your innocence. Leave me and start from the beginning once again. Walk the path of dharma, for I know that is what your soul desires.’

Kumbhakarna rolled up the canvas tightly without a word, and slipped it back into Raavan’s cloth bag.

‘Kumbha... listen to me.’

‘I am carrying out my dharma, Dada,’ he said.

‘Kumbha—’

‘Enough now.’

—८१—

An unseasonal storm had buffeted the Pushpak Vimaan as the Lankans approached the temporary campsite of the exiles. The pilots had somehow managed to land the craft without any damage. Dangerous as the storm was for the flying vehicle, it had inadvertently helped the Lankans. The howling winds had drowned out the sound of the vimaan’s massive rotors. They had managed to disembark without being noticed and had successfully maintained the element of surprise as they attacked the temporary camp.

The battle had been short and sharp.

The Malayaputras were heavily outnumbered, so it was no surprise that there were no Lankan casualties. All the Malayaputras, save Captain Jatayu and two of his soldiers, were dead or critically injured.

But Ram, Lakshman and Sita were missing. Kumbhakarna had organised seven teams, of two soldiers each, to spread out and search for the trio.

At the same time, Captain Khara had been tasked with extracting information from the surviving Malayaputras, especially Captain Jatayu.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna stood at a distance, where they wouldn't have to get their hands dirty. Thirty soldiers stood close to them, ready to protect their royals at the first sign of trouble.

'This is taking too long,' muttered Raavan to Kumbhakarna.

'Should we go back and wait inside the vimaan?' asked Kumbhakarna.

Raavan shook his head. *No*.

Khara was still working on Jatayu, who was now on his knees, held by two Lankan soldiers. The Malayaputra's hands were tied behind his back. Jatayu had been brutalised; he was severely injured and bleeding, but he was not broken.

'Answer me,' said Khara, as he slid the knife along Jatayu's cheek, drawing some more blood. 'Where is she?'

Jatayu spat at him. 'Kill me quickly. Or kill me slowly. You will not get anything from me.'

Khara raised his knife in anger, about to strike at Jatayu's throat. Suddenly, an arrow whizzed in from behind the forest line and struck his hand. The knife fell to the ground as he yelled in surprise and pain.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna whirled around, startled. The Lankan soldiers close to them rushed in and formed a protective cordon around them. Kumbhakarna grabbed Raavan's arm to restrain his impulsive elder brother from charging into battle.

Other Lankan soldiers raised their bows in the direction that the enemy arrow had been fired from. They couldn't see anything. Somebody had shot the arrow from deep behind the forest line, behind the visually impenetrable line of trees.

'Don't shoot!' ordered Kumbhakarna loudly. He wanted the Vishnu alive.

The Lankan bows were swiftly lowered.

Khara broke the shaft, leaving the arrowhead buried in his hand. It would stem the blood for a while. He looked into the impenetrable line of trees. Into the darkness. And scoffed in disdain. 'Who shot that? The long-suffering prince? His oversized brother? Or the Vishnu herself?'

There was no response.

'Come out and fight like real warriors!' Khara shouted

There was no response to that taunt either.

Raavan and Kumbhakarna remained well protected by their soldiers, their shields raised high.

‘Send the soldiers in,’ said Raavan, pointing towards the part of the forest that the arrow had been shot from.

‘No,’ said Kumbhakarna. ‘We should not thin out our force any further. There are three of them. They could have spread out. They can pick you off if our soldiers aren’t with us.’

‘Kumbha, I am not that important. Get those—’

Kumbhakarna interrupted his elder brother. ‘Dada, you are the entire reason for this raid. We are kidnapping the Vishnu to keep you alive with the Malayaputra medicines. I will not put your life at risk.’

Before Raavan could argue any more, five more arrows were shot in a rapid-fire attack. In quick succession. Right where Raavan and Kumbhakarna were. But this was from a different direction. Far from where the first arrow had been shot.

The arrows hit the soldiers surrounding the brothers. Five Lankans went down. But the others did not budge. The cordon around Raavan remained resolute. Ready to fall for their king.

The bodyguards were showing the mettle they were made of.

‘It looks like there are two of them in the forest,’ whispered Kumbhakarna. ‘I hope the Vishnu hasn’t escaped.’

Raavan didn’t say anything. He was getting suspicious. There was too much of a time lag between the first attack on Khara and the second five-arrow attack directed at himself and Kumbhakarna.

Some of the Lankan soldiers took off in the direction that the latest attack had come from.

Then came the sound of someone stepping on a twig. From another direction. Three soldiers rushed towards the sound.

Raavan was sure now. ‘There is just one person. He is moving around quickly behind the forest line to confuse us.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Kumbhakarna.

Before Raavan could respond, Khara moved. He stepped behind Jatayu, and using his uninjured left hand, held a knife to his throat.

One can chase hidden attackers in all directions. Or, one can draw them out with a well-targeted threat. Khara was smart. He did the smart thing.

‘You could have escaped,’ he said tauntingly. ‘But you didn’t. So I’m betting you are among those hiding behind the trees, great Vishnu. And you want to protect those who worship you. So inspiring... so touching...’ Khara

pretended to wipe away a tear.

Raavan, far in the distance, his view of Khara blocked by the many Lankan soldiers surrounding him, smiled. He turned to Kumbhakarna. ‘I like this Khara.’

Khara continued aloud, ‘So I have an offer. Step forward. Tell your husband and that giant brother-in-law of yours to also step forward. And we will let this captain live. We will even let the two sorry Ayodhya princes leave unharmed. All we want is your surrender.’

No response.

Khara grazed the knife slowly along Jatayu’s neck, leaving behind a thin red line. He said in a sing-song voice, ‘I don’t have all day...’

Suddenly, Jatayu struck backwards with his head, hitting Khara in the groin. As the Lankan doubled up in pain, Jatayu screamed, ‘Run! Run away, my lady! I am not worth your life!’

Three Lankan soldiers moved in and pushed Jatayu to the ground. Khara cursed loudly as he got back on his feet, still bent over to ease the pain. After a few moments, he inched towards the Malayaputra and kicked him hard. He surveyed the treeline, turning in every direction that the arrows had been fired from. All the while, he kept kicking Jatayu again and again. He bent and roughly pulled Jatayu to his feet.

This time Khara held Jatayu’s head firmly with his injured right hand, to prevent any head-butting. The sneer was back on his face. He held the knife to the Malayaputra’s throat. ‘I can cut the jugular here and your precious captain will be dead in just a few moments, great Vishnu,’ he said. He moved the knife to the Malayaputra’s abdomen. ‘Or, he can bleed to death slowly. All of you have some time to think about it.’

There was still no response.

‘All we want is the Vishnu,’ yelled Khara. ‘Let her surrender and the rest of you can leave. You have my word. You have the word of a Lankan!’

A feminine voice was heard from behind the trees. ‘Let him go!’

Kumbhakarna whispered to Raavan, ‘It’s her. It’s the Vishnu.’

Khara shouted, still holding the knife to Jatayu’s abdomen, ‘Step forward and surrender. And we will let him go.’

And Sita, the princess of Mithila, the one recognised as the Vishnu by the Malayaputras, stepped out from behind the forest line. Holding a bow, with an arrow nocked on it. A quiver tied across her back.

The Lankan royals could not see the Vishnu. Raavan tried to push through the cordon surrounding him, to catch a glimpse of her. But he was pulled back by Kumbhakarna.

‘Dada,’ said Kumbhakarna, ‘her husband and brother-in-law could still be

hidden in the trees. We cannot risk you being in the open.'

'Dammit!'

'You promised me, Dada.'

Raavan remained where he was. Angry. But compliant.

'Great Vishnu,' sniggered Khara, letting go of Jatayu for a moment, and running his hand along an ancient scar at the back of his head. Stirring a not-quite-forgotten memory. 'So kind of you to join us. Where is your husband and his giant brother?'

Sita didn't answer. Some Lankan soldiers began moving slowly towards her. Their swords were sheathed. They were carrying *lathis*, long bamboo sticks, which were good enough to injure but not to kill. Their instructions were clear. The Vishnu had to be captured alive.

Sita stepped forward and lowered the bow, an arrow still nocked on it. 'I am surrendering. Let Captain Jatayu go.'

Khara laughed softly as he pushed the knife deep into Jatayu's abdomen. Gently. Slowly. He cut through the liver, a kidney, never stopping...

'Nooo!' screamed Sita. She raised her bow and shot an arrow into Khara's eye. It punctured the socket and lodged itself in his brain, killing him instantly.

'I want her alive!' screamed Kumbhakarna from behind the protective Lankan cordon.

More soldiers joined those already moving toward Sita, their bamboo lathis held high.

'Raaaam!' shouted Sita, as she pulled another arrow from her quiver, quickly nocked and shot it, bringing another Lankan down instantly.

It did not slow the pace of the others. They kept rushing forward.

Sita shot another arrow. Her last. One more Lankan sank to the ground. The others pressed on.

'Raaaam!'

The Lankans were almost upon her, their bamboo lathis raised.

'Raaam!' screamed Sita.

As a Lankan closed in, she lassoed her bow, entangling his lathi with the bowstring, snatching it from him. Sita hit back with the bamboo lathi, straight at the Lankan's head, knocking him off his feet. She swirled the lathi over her head, its menacing sound halting the suddenly wary soldiers. She stopped moving, holding her weapon steady.

Conserving her energy. Ready and alert. One hand held the stick in the middle, the end of it tucked under her armpit. The other arm was stretched forward. Her feet spread wide, in balance. She was surrounded by at least fifty Lankan soldiers. But they kept their distance.

‘Raaaam!’ shouted Sita, praying that her voice would somehow carry across the forest to her husband.

‘We don’t want to hurt you, Lady Vishnu,’ said a Lankan, politely. ‘Please surrender. You will not be harmed.’

Sita cast a quick glance at Jatayu.

‘We have the equipment in our Pushpak Vimaan to save him,’ said the Lankan. ‘Don’t force us to hurt you. Please.’

Sita filled her lungs with air and screamed yet again, ‘Raaaam!’

She thought she heard a faint voice from a long distance away. ‘Sita...’

A soldier moved suddenly from her left, swinging his lathi low. Aiming for Sita’s calves. She jumped high, tucking her feet in to avoid the blow. While in the air, she quickly released her right-handed grip on the lathi and swung it viciously with her left. The lathi hit the Lankan on the side of his head. Knocking him unconscious.

As she landed, she shouted again, ‘Raaaam!’

She heard the voice of her husband. Soft, from a distance. ‘Leave... her... alone...’

Kumbhakarna heard the faint voice too. He looked towards Raavan. And then shouted his order to the soldiers. ‘Capture her now! Now!’

Ten Lankans charged in together. Sita swung her lathi ferociously in all directions, incapacitating many.

‘Raaaam!’

She heard the voice again. Not so distant this time. ‘Sita...’

The Lankan onslaught was steady and unrelenting now. Sita kept swinging rhythmically. Viciously. Alas, her enemies were one too many. A Lankan swung his lathi at her, from behind. Into her back.

‘Raa...’

Sita’s knees buckled under her as she collapsed to the ground. Before she could recover, the soldiers ran in and held her tight. She struggled fiercely as a Lankan came forward, holding a neem leaf in his hand. It was smeared with a blue-coloured paste. He held the leaf tight against her nose. And Sita keeled over into unconsciousness.

‘Carry her to the vimaan! Quickly!’

Kumbhakarna turned to his elder brother. ‘Let’s go, Dada.’

‘Let me see Sita.’

‘Dada, there’s no time. King Ram and Prince Lakshman are close by, they might get here soon. I don’t want to be forced to kill them. This is perfect. We’ve got the Vishnu and the king of Ayodhya has not been injured. You can see her once we are all in the vimaan. Let’s go.’

Raavan and Kumbhakarna started walking towards the craft, still surrounded by their bodyguards. The Lankan soldiers followed, carrying Sita, unconscious on a stretcher.

—८१—

The Lankans began climbing in and taking their seats in the Pushpak Vimaan.

The last of the soldiers pressed a metallic button on the sidewall and the door began to slide shut with a hydraulic hiss.

As the brothers reached their seats, Kumbhakarna turned towards the pilots. ‘Get us out of here quickly.’

While Raavan and Kumbhakarna braced for take-off, the unconscious Sita was being strapped on to a stretcher fixed on the floor of the Pushpak Vimaan.

‘She’s a fighter!’ said Kumbhakarna, with an appreciative grin.

When the attack took place, Sita, accompanied by a Malayaputra soldier called Makrant, had gone to cut banana leaves for dinner. Ram and Lakshman were away hunting. They had all assumed that the Lankans had lost track of them.

The two Lankan soldiers who had discovered Sita had managed to kill Makrant but were, in turn, killed by Sita. She had then stolen to the devastated Malayaputra camp and had killed several Lankans from behind the tree line, using a bow and a quiver full of arrows very effectively from her hiding places. But her desire to save her loyal follower Jatayu had been her undoing.

‘The Malayaputras believe she is the Vishnu,’ said Raavan, laughing. ‘She had better be a good fighter!’

Just then, the Lankans who were crowded around Sita left her and went to find their own seats in the vimaan.

Her unconscious body lay on a stretcher, some twenty feet away from where Raavan sat. She wore a cream dhoti and a white single-cloth blouse. Her saffron angvastram had been drawn over her entire body, with the straps of the stretcher tight across her. Her head was turned to the side, and her eyes were closed. Saliva drooled out of her mouth.

It was a large quantity of a very strong toxin that had been used to render her unconscious.

For the first time in their lives, Raavan and Kumbhakarna saw Sita.

The warrior princess of Mithila. The wife of Ram. The Vishnu.

Raavan stared at her.

Breath on hold. Heart immobile. Transfixed.

A shocked Kumbhakarna looked at his elder brother, and then at Sita. He

couldn't believe his eyes.

*The baby had survived. Thirty-eight years. She was a woman now.*

Sita was unusually tall for a Mithilan woman. With her lean muscular physique, she looked like a warrior in the army of the Mother Goddess. There were proud battle-scars on her wheat-complexioned body.

But Raavan's eyes were glued to her face. One that he had seen before.

It was a shade lighter than the rest of her body, with high cheekbones and a sharp, small nose. Her lips were neither thin nor full. Her wide-set eyes were neither small nor large; strong brows arched in a perfect curve above creaseless eyelids. Her long, lustrous black hair had come undone and fell in a disorderly manner to the side of her face. She had the look of the mountain people from the Himalayas.

He knew this face well. It was a little thinner than the original. Tougher. Less tender. There was a faint birthmark on the right temple; perhaps a remnant of a childhood injury.

But there could be no doubt. Mother Nature had crafted this face from the same mould.

It was a face that Raavan could never forget. It was a face that he had seen grow old in his mind. It was a face that he loved.

The vimaan began to ascend as the mighty rotors roared to life, spinning powerfully.

Raavan could not breathe. He clutched his armrest tightly, trying to find a stable hold in a world spiralling out of control.

Perhaps the time had come, to finally settle an old karmic debt.

*Ka... Ka...*

The vimaan lurched, buffeted by a sudden gust of strong wind. But Raavan didn't notice.

He continued staring, wordlessly.

His breathing ragged.

His heart paralysed.

Time standing still.

It was obvious. It was obvious from her face.

Sita was the child of Prithvi.

Sita was the daughter of Vedavati.

—८१—

‘Guruji! Guruji!’

Arishtanemi rushed into the modest private chamber of his guru in

Agastyakootam, the hidden capital of the Malayaputras.

Vishwamitra opened his eyes slowly, roused from his deep, meditative state. Normally, no one would dare to interrupt him at such a time. But this was an exception. He was expecting some news and had ordered Arishtanemi to inform him the moment it was received.

‘Yes?’ he asked now in his distinctive voice.

‘It has happened, Guruji.’

‘Tell me everything.’

‘Raavan and Kumbhakarna received intelligence from Samichi about the whereabouts of Sita, Ram and Lakshman. They flew there in the Pushpak Vimaan and carried out a surprise raid.’

‘And?’

‘They have kidnapped Sita. Everyone in the camp was killed. I have been told that Ram and Lakshman survived only because they were out hunting at the time.’

Vishwamitra leaned back, a slight smile on his face. *We’re back in the game.*

‘Guruji, I don’t know why we delayed sending more Malayaputras to their aid. We knew Raavan would seek vengeance for what happened with Shurpanakha. We could have saved—’

‘Saved whom?’

‘Jatayu and the other Malayaputras with them. They were all killed in the raid.’

‘They sacrificed themselves for the greater good of Mother India. They are true martyrs. We will honour them. We will build temples to Jatayu and his band.’

‘But what about Sita, Guruji? The Lankans have our Vishnu. From what I have heard, they captured her alive. But I don’t know if Raavan can be trusted to not hurt her. Or, even worse, kill her.’

‘He will not hurt her. Trust me.’

‘Guruji, you and I both know he is a monster. Who can predict how a monster will behave?’

Vishwamitra looked at Arishtanemi thoughtfully. The time had come to reveal the secret.

‘A monster, you say? Let me ask you then, do you know of any person this monster has been good to?’

Arishtanemi frowned at the strange question. ‘I can only think of his brother, Kumbhakarna. And even he has been ill-treated at times.’

‘Only his brother? Really? Nobody else?’

‘Well, obviously, he is kind to his son. Oh yes! Also, his long-dead love, Vedavati.’

‘Vedavati is the reason he will not hurt Sita,’ said Vishwamitra.

Vishwamitra had long suspected that their earlier interpretation of the events at Todee had been off the mark. Many years ago, he had sent Arishtanemi and a few others, once again, to unearth more details. Arishtanemi had spoken to the men who had discovered the corpses at Todee and learned that a few bodies had been found tied to the trees close to Vedavati’s house. Each of them bore clear signs of extreme torture. The bodies of the others who had died had been found strewn all around the village, suggesting that they had been chased and struck down while trying to escape. The corpses had been left to be eaten by wild animals. Arishtanemi had also ascertained that the only bodies that had been treated with respect and cremated with full Vedic honours were those of Vedavati and her husband Prithvi.

All this had caused Vishwamitra to revise his opinion on what had transpired. Perhaps Raavan had behaved honourably, contrary to what they had thought. Perhaps the men who had been tied to the trees and tortured were the ones who had killed Vedavati and her husband.

The conclusion was clear: Raavan had loved Vedavati deeply and had treated her well, till the end. The massacre was a result of his anguish at losing her. He must have ordered the killing of the villagers in a rage, after her death.

Vishwamitra was fairly certain that the tribe of the Mahadev, the Vayuputras, had reached the same conclusion. But he suspected they were unaware of what had happened after the massacre. They had not made that last crucial connection. That Vedavati’s child had survived. Or they would have behaved differently towards Sita.

Arishtanemi was still looking puzzled. ‘What connection can there be between Vedavati and Sita, Guruji? Why will Raavan not hurt her?’

‘He will not hurt her because Sita is Vedavati’s daughter.’

Arishtanemi was stunned. ‘What?’

Vishwamitra nodded, the hint of a smile on his face. *Yes, we’re definitely back in the game.*

‘How long have you known this, Guruji? When did you find out?’

‘Just before my decision to appoint Sita as the Vishnu. When she was about thirteen years of age.’

‘By the great Lord Parshu Ram! That’s nearly twenty-five years ago!’

‘Yes. And it was the sound of a hill myna that helped me make the connection.’

‘A hill myna? Really?’

‘Yes. When I realised the connection, I became even more certain that my choice was right. Sita will be the perfect Vishnu, the ideal hero. Because the villain will never be able to bring himself to kill this hero.’

Arishtanemi bowed to his chief, in awe. ‘You are truly worthy of being Lord Parshu Ram’s torch-bearer, my lord.’

Vishwamitra acknowledged the compliment with a smile and said, ‘Jai Parshu Ram.’

‘Jai Parshu Ram,’ repeated Arishtanemi. ‘What now, Guruji?’

‘Now, we use all our resources, our soldiers, our money—and Hanuman—to attack Lanka. Sita will destroy Raavan. And all of India will accept her as the Vishnu.’

‘Why Hanuman? Considering he is close to...’ Arishtanemi stopped himself just in time. He had been about to name his guru’s arch-rival, Vashishtha.

‘Many reasons,’ said Vishwamitra. ‘The most important one being that Hanuman loves Sita like a sister. And Sita trusts him like she would a brother.’

Arishtanemi smiled, shaking his head in wonder. ‘There is nobody like you, Guruji. No one else could have planned this.’

‘Wait and see. I have no doubt that Mother India will be saved. And she will be saved by our Vishnu. We will be remembered forever for this. Our ancestors will be proud of us,’ Vishwamitra declared.

Arishtanemi put his hands together in respect and said, ‘*Jai Shri Rudra. Jai Parshu Ram.*’

*Glory to Lord Rudra. Glory to Lord Parshu Ram.*

Vishwamitra repeated the chant of the Malayaputras. ‘*Jai Shri Rudra. Jai Parshu Ram.*’

—८१—

‘Divodas! Turn around and face me!’

Vashishtha, known as Divodas during his gurukul days, turned to face the man who had once been his closest friend: Vishwamitra.

‘Kaushik...’ said Vashishtha, through gritted teeth, using the gurukul name of Vishwamitra. ‘This is all your fault.’

Vishwamitra looked at the cremation pyre and then back at Vashishtha. ‘She’s dead because of you. Because you simply couldn’t do what had to be done! Sigiriya and Trishanku were supposed to be—’

Vashishtha stepped closer, interrupting Vishwamitra. ‘Don’t you dare! She died because of you, Kaushik! She died because you insisted on doing something

*that should never have been done. I told you! I warned you!’*

*Vashishtha was thin and lanky to a fault. His head was shaved bare but for a knotted tuft of hair at the top of his head, which announced that he was a Brahmin. His flowing black beard gave him the look of a philosopher. At the moment, though, he looked anything but gentle. He was shaking with fury, fists clenched tight. Rage poured out of his eyes.*

*As tall as Vashishtha was, he was dwarfed by the strapping Vishwamitra, who stood facing him. Almost seven feet in height, dark-skinned and barrel-chested, with a muscular torso and a rounded belly, Vishwamitra intimidated people just by his presence. His long black beard and knotted tuft of hair flew wild and free in the wind. He looked like he was fighting for control, to stop himself from wringing Vashishtha’s neck.*

*‘Get out of here,’ snarled Vishwamitra. ‘I will not kill you in front of her.’*

*Vashishtha stepped even closer and stared coldly at Vishwamitra. Their friendship was long dead. Its remains burned in the pyre that was consuming the woman they had both loved. From that same seething fire, a new enmity was being born. An enmity that would last more than a hundred years.*

*‘You think I am scared of you? Bring it on! Let’s battle! Say when!’ Vashishtha proclaimed.*

*Vishwamitra raised his hand, then with great effort, controlled himself and stepped back. ‘I will fulfil her dream. I will show her that I am better, better than you are.’*

*‘You are nobody to do anything for her! She was mine. I will—’*

*‘Guruji!’*

Vashishtha opened his eyes, coming back to the present from the ancient, nearly-century-old memory.

He said a quick prayer in his mind and asked, ‘What happened?’ He had sent his friend Hanuman to save them, to save Sita and Ram. He could only hope Hanuman had reached in time.

‘We received word from Lord Hanuman, Guruji. I am sorry, but Raavan has kidnapped Princess Sita.’

‘And Ram?’

‘The Lankans killed all the Malayputras who were with Princess Sita. But from what we’ve been told, Prince Ram and Prince Lakshman are still alive. Our Vishnu is safe. The news is not as bad as it first seemed.’

The Vayuputras had supported Vashishtha’s decision to recognise Ram as the Vishnu. They too believed that it would be good for India. Technically, though, as the tribe of the previous Mahadev, they only had the right to recognise the next Mahadev and not the next Vishnu.

‘The news *is* bad, my friend,’ said Vashishtha. ‘The war has been triggered.’

‘But... but I am not sure Raavan wants a war, Guruji. We know that Lanka is very weak.’

‘It doesn’t matter what Raavan wants. He’s a mere puppet. He’s not the one who is behind this.’

‘Then who is?’

‘Vishwamitra.’

‘But—’ The Vayuputra messenger held his tongue. He knew of the animus between Vashishtha and Vishwamitra. The worst enemy you can have is someone who was once a dear friend. He knew better than to get in the way of a battle as titanic and malignant as that between Vashishtha and Vishwamitra.

‘What do we do now, Guruji?’

Vashishtha’s fists were clenched tight, his muscles tense. His eyes, normally kind and gentle, burned with fury. His face was a picture of determination.

‘Now... we fight!’

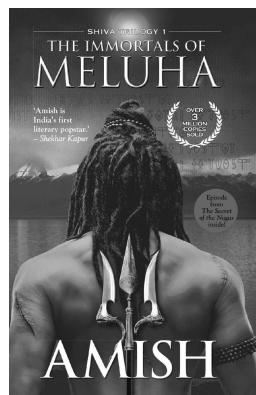
*... to be continued.*

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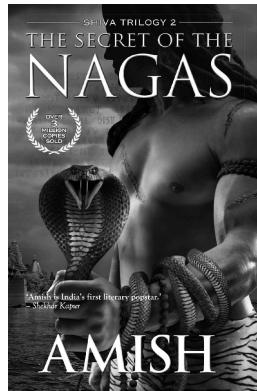
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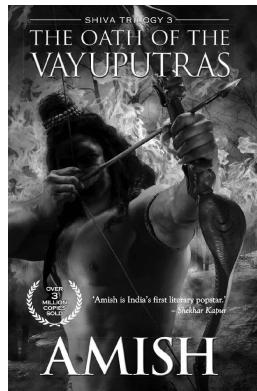
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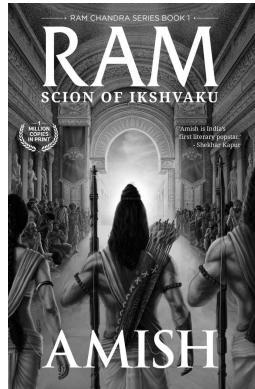
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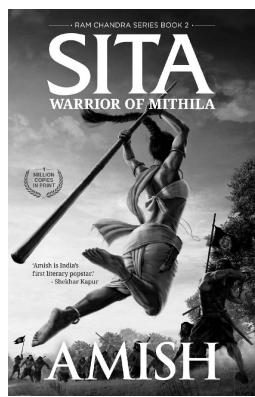
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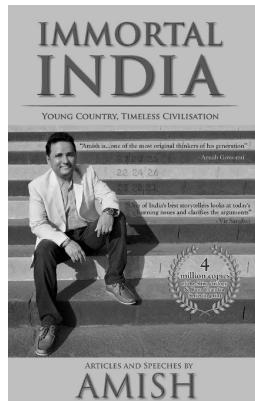


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