Fire & Water

# Chapter 1

## Devi Speaks

My beloved little fish, I can feel you swim within my body. I imagine you’re dancing, every time you twirl, I, who am your partner and dancefloor, feel you turn around. So I will tell you my story, littlest one. You whose ears know only the rhythms of my blood, will hear now the testament of Devi Janaki, reviled by many, revered by some. You’ll hear the stories I’m sure, those who will say I am the Goddess, come to Vereshterem as a human girl. Some will tell you I was a monster, I split our land in two and caused the greatest catastrophe in Vereshtan history.

Maybe you’ll meet a man who loved Devi before she was revered, before she was reviled, and your father will tell you of a woman who wanted too much, whose songs burst from her throat, and whose hunger could not be tamed. And perhaps you’ll hear of me from Meena, sister of my heart and most bitter foe. I cannot know what she will say of me. Will she tell you about the little girls who told one another stories? Or will she tell you of her traitor sister, cast out of the Golden City for her monstrous deeds?

How will their stories begin, I wonder. With the baby in the belly of a fish? Or before then, with the childless royal couple, Transin the Blessed and his mage wife, Sunaina the seeress. I write this to you bec

The stories say I am the Goddess, Shakti come down to Bharat in the form of a human woman. The stories say my father, Janaka the Blessed, found me in a furrow of earth. The stories, dearest say much that happened and invent much that did not. Sita, Queen of Ayodhya, Sita, Daughter of the Earth, Sita, Revenger. Which of theseFor the truth of your mother’s lifeand the events that led to the breaking of the land and the disappearance of the last magician, only one storyteller was there, only one poet

# Chapter 2

## Sunaina, Goddessborn

Even in mid-winter, Mithila’s Sinhagad fort radiated warmth. The sandstone walls glowed with the heat they have captured all year, sunning themselves through the hot spring and blazing summer. Queen Sunaina, Lady of Mithila, pressed a cold palm to the stones and sighed. Delicious warmth traveled up her arms and over her shoulders. “Be welcome, Goddessborn” the stones whispered and Sunaina inclined her head. “Lioness of Mithila, greetings” she said into the empty chamber. Sinhagadh fort, the old grandmothers in Agrasa said, was once a woman. Born the second daughter of the royal House of Traksin, Sin-ha had been a princess with the heart of a lioness. She cared nothing for propriety and the duties of princesshood, and spent all her time in the deep woods of eastern Agrasa. Her father, the third Traksin, had taken her on a hunt when she was three, balanced before him on his great warhorse, Pavana Windswift. The little princess loved Windswift and fed him carrots from her tiny hands, his great head bending gently over her. So Sin-ha had ridden Windswift with her father, through the deepening woods, and the slow magic of the trees had woven its net about the princess. Aghast upon learning that her father’s party was hunting a legendary golden deer, the little girl had crept out of the royal tent at night, and prayed to the Goddess to save the creature’s life. The Goddess, ever responsive to the spelltouched, had smiled upon her little devotee, and the King’s party had returned empty handed but with bellies full of laughter at the little princess’s delight. From that moment on, Sin-ha was known to leave the palace, slip away at random times – at morning meal or at sandhyarati, or at odd hours of night. The guard

Sunaina knew Sin-ha.

Traksin, the current one, Sunaina’s Traksin, smiled at this story and said that it would be nice trick to turn the Agrasan army into lions at will. He had the goldsmith fashion a bracelet – a circle of gold, crested with two snarling lion heads — and gave it to Sunaina at the ninenight festival. “I remember every one of your stories, Suna '' he said, slipping it onto her wrist. Sunaina wore the lion-head bracelet always, stacked against the conch, coral and iron bangles of marriage. They knocked against the walls as an ocean wind blew into the room, bringing the smell of salt, fish, and underneath both the iron tang of blood. Sunaina started, her palms fell from the wall and the strong, reassuring presence of Sin-ha dissipated. In Mithila, the ocean wind brought danger. Sunaina ran to their bedroom, three floors below, and not finding Traksin there she went to the map room. “The wind” she said, out of breath from running.

King Traksin, twenty eighth, looked up at her, and read something in her face that made him dismiss the generals. Akhtar, his personal guard, stayed. “The wind” Sunaina said. “It’s brought a warning.” Traksin tensed, and gestured for Sunaina to sit down. “What do you know?” he asked her. “I came to you right away” she said, shaking her head. She drew in a deep breath and calmed her racing thoughts. She let her mind float on the waters of her consciousness, summoning an old trick, learned long years ago at the feet of her guru. As her thoughts fell below the waves, Sunaina began to hear the wind. “Godessborn, Priestess, Queen of Mithila” the wind whispered, sussurating as it blew through the leaves of neem and babul crowning the clifftop on which Sinhagadh stood. Sunaina welcomed the wind, she focused her attention on the sounds, the marine stench, the warmth it brought. Sunaina heard voices, speaking in a mix of Beorhten and the old languages of Ropa. She heard the thunder of wind in the sails, and the rhythmic gurgle and splash of oars. The wind brought her the smells of men, stuck all together – stewing their own bodies. She smelled “Beorhten”, she said, eyes still closed, “at least four ships, and they’re bringing horses.”

Traksin and Akhtar sprang into motion as soon as Sunaina began to speak, Traksin went to the table and opening a writing box, he took out a pen and ink bottle. Thick white sheets of Sinean paper waited in another box, and Traksin wrote very quickly, every word that Sunaina said.

Sunaina neither heard nor saw what occurred around her in the room, she was within the wind, and with it. In the seawind, she could not see clearly, and felt tumbled about

# Chapter 3

## Introduction to Devi

“Ma, tell me a story.”

The little girl traipses along at her mother’s waist, asking questions about everything she sees. Where are we going Ma? Why is the river green in the middle but brown at its edges? Is that Grandfather Crocodile lounging in the sun? She runs into the shallows of the great river, squelching her toes through the mud. She giggles at the cold, squishy feeling, and runs back to her mother’s side. “Ma tell me a story!”

The mother smiles down at her, and tucks the flying end of her pall into her waist. “A story, eh. What kind of story will you have?”

“A story about me! How did I become me?”

This is a familiar request, the mother laughs.

“Well, then. A story about the naughtiest little girl to ever breathe on the banks of Mother River? So it shall be. Let it be so and let it be known.”

She looks at the girl, who solemnly repeats, “Let it be so, and let it be known”

“Well my darling Devi, you came from me and from your Baba. We made you, like you make your dolls from Mother River’s mud.”

“You made me from mud?” Devi wrinkles her nose.

“No silly, are you made of mud?” The mother pokes Devi gently, and they both giggle. “Doesn’t feel like mud to me.”

“So what did we make you from?”

“You made me from words! And magic!”

“Yes, and now if you keep interrupting me, we will never finish the story. So no more interruptions while I tell the tale of Devi the Spectacular”

Devi nods, burying her face in her mother’s exposed waist above the petticoat band. Ma smells of cardamom and smoke.

“A long time ago, in the First Age of this world, the devas in Swarga and the danavas in Naraka grew bored.The devas lived in the cold vastness of space, creating the miracles of Fire and Water, Earth, Wind, and Void. The daanavs lived in the fiery hearts of stars, and they made Words and Time. The Mad One and the Allmother smiled, watching their children play and make toys, for my dear one, these things which we fear and revere - the fire and the wave, time and the void - are all toys for the gods and the demons. But the devas and the daanavs grew bored again, and went to the Allmother and the Mad One. “Greatest of all, we are bored. We have nothing to do, no reason to continue existing. Please permit us to make a world together, a third world, where we might play. We shall build the world on the waves of the Ocean of Milk.”

The Mad One smiled. The Allmother lifted her hand in blessing. Did they know what was to come? They know all, for in the icy lakes atop Mount Himavant, they see all that is and will be, and they see every possible way a thing may be. Do you understand Sita?”

The little girl knits her brows together, concentrating. “I understand, Ma. In the ever-ice of Lake Manasa, the Allmother and the Mad One can see things that happened a long time ago, and things that will happen many years from now?”

The mother smiles, and kneels down so her face is level with Sita’s. “Very good my Sita. But there is more in the ever-ice. The ever-ice shows the Mad One and the Allmother everything that *could* happen.”

Sunaina can see in her daughter’s face that Devi doesn’t understand. “For example, Sita, what are we doing now?”

“Telling and listening to a story. And also walking to the river to bring water for the dusk ritual”

“Right. Now, what other things could we do instead?”

“We could”, Devi draws out the word, as if to cram the syllables with all her imaginings “We could have been at home, in the Rajmahal I mean, chatting with Baba. Or, we could have gone to the gardens, to pick flowers for the dusk ritual and sent Nandini here for the water. Or, you might have rested, and I might have gone with Baba to watch Akhtar Chacha train the boys. Or.”

“Good, good, enough” Sunaina smiles, “so you see there are the things we do and the things, all the things we don’t do. The ever-ice shows all the things that happen and also all the things that don’t happen.”

Devi crunches up her face in an effort to understand and Sunaina’s heart wrenches at her. She wraps her arms about Sita, smelling her earth and flower scent. She sends a quick prayer to the allmother, “protect your child, Lady, protect my heart”. Devi wriggles out from Sunaina’s arms and skips ahead, calling out behind her, “Come, ma, hurry! Or the ever-ice will show Queen Sunaina and Devi the Spectacular rushing home late for the dusk ceremony”

She turns around to see Sunaina tuck her saree into her waistband, and then her mother’s face splits into a smile so large Devi wants to live in it. “Rushing home, is it? I’ll rush you, little princess” says her mother and breaks into a loping run, the signal for Devi to run pell mell to the water. They both begin to laugh, and the sun warms their limbs as they run, mother and daughter exulting in the power of their own limbs. Devi skids to a stop at the riverbank, just behind a breathless Sunaina, whose hair has escaped its bun and hangs in dusty tendrils around her face.

“Well, Devi the Spectacular, I’m still your mother!” Sunaina says between breaths. Devi pouts, “You started first!” she says. And then a glint of mischief shines in her eyes. She calls the water in the river, and with a quick flick of her fingers, the Queen is drenched from head to toe in cold, clear Ganga water. “That’s for cheating” says Sita. Open mouthed, Sunaina gasps and then a second later, Sita’s floating in the river. The Queen’s movements were so fast Devi had no time to react. Instead, she begins to laugh, floating on her back in the Ganga water, and splashes her hands and feet at her mother. The Queen unwinds her saree, and makes her way into the river. “How did you do it, Ma?” Devi asks her, still floating on her back. “I didn’t see your mudras”

The Queen lifts both her hands so Devi can see them from her prone position and demonstrates, one hand undulates into the mudra for waves, and the other slides over the top – a platform of air suspended on the waves. Devi paddles her feet downward, standing on the muddy riverbed, and nods at her mother. She practices the hand gestures first and then when the Queen nods, she powers them. In a second, Queen Sunaina lies on a platform of air, resting over the waves. She smiles and Devi feels her insides swell, she wants to make her mother smile like this always. “Good, Sita” her mother says.

The two swim in silence for some time, Devi thinking about *Maya* and the things she can do with it, the Queen fighting the fear in her heart, the dread for her little girl.

The gods and demons vanished, off to their own realms to bring the greatest craftsmen of their people to the shores of the Ocean Milk. The daanavs brought Kumbhakarna, whose strength was so great he had once wrestled with a dying star and won. A dying star, Maya, is the strongest force in the universe, nothing can escape its grip. Not even light. Not even time. But Kumbhakarna, the daanav, had wrestled with a dying star and won. Then came Indrajit, the master craftsman. He had spent his long life mastering the art of creation - with a flash. And finally,

“Ravana, the daanav king!” Devi cried.

“Ravana, the daanav king. Ravana was the wisest of them. He knew

And the devas?

The devas went forth on their sky-chariots - Indra the Lord of Lightning led the charge on his sky-elephant, Airavata. Varuna the Wavemaker, rose from the oceans of space, upon a turtle so large his shell could cover the moon.

Why were there no girls? Devi asked

“Because, shona, the Allmother hadn’t made her reflections yet. No, at the beginning of all things, all daanavs and devas were male, and that, perhaps, is why they created such confusion. Don’t tell your Baba I said that” Ma winked at Sita.

Sunaina nuzzled the soft hair on Sita’s head, holding her little body close to her own. “Tonight, dearest one, why don’t you tell me a story?” Nourished on Sunaina’s stories, little Devi loved making her own. Her tales ran wild, making no concessions to geography or timelines. In Sita’s stories, little girls became adventurers, poets, devas, daanavs, and horse-mistresses. Sita’s favorite character was Mita, an adventuress who travelled to the Far East for an audience with the Great Khan, attended the deva court at Diwali, and saved the little girls of Efferek from being eaten by Beorhten traders. “Yes ma,” Devi said. “Let it be so and let it be known”

Sunaina repeated the words. Sita’s innocence made her heart raw and heavy. How was she to protect this child with stories in her eyes? She wished she could reverse the order of nature, take Devi back within her body, guard her dreams with her own blood and muscle.

Traksinfound Sunaina weeping over a sleeping Maya’s head. “What is it, wife?”

“I’m scared, Janak. I’m so scared. How am I to protect her? How can we keep her safe? The trees have been talking, something is coming. So I went to the water today.”

Traksinsits down next to Rati, wrapping her in his arms. He wipes her tears with the edge of his kurta and gently tilts her face towards him.

“And? What did you see, priestess?”

Rati shivers, even the memory of her scrying enough to frighten her. “A terrible whiteness” she whispers, “spreading from the West. It came to Veresht, and oh Janak. The Song of the River died when the whiteness came. The Story fell silent. The Words were banished. This whiteness, it eats our words, it eats the magic of this land.”

Traksinbowed his head. “But the Allmother’s blessing

Sunaina goes to the water at night. Scrying is for the darkness, the brightness of the sun distracts the seer. It shows them half-truths and impossibilities. But in the pure darkness of a night with no moon, the vision strikes true. Sunaina dresses in the regalia of the Mother, for she is a mother now. The sixteen signs of womanhood gleam on her person - two anklets, two bracelets, a necklace of gold and rubies, and finally the vermilion powder blazing in the parting of her hair. She is a Mother, married by the rites of the island to TraksinIfans, the mathematician. The memory of Traksinreddening the parting of her hair comes to her now, and she thinks of the night of her marriage. The clearing of the spring lit by a thousand earthen lamps, floating in the air and at its center glowed the marriage fire. She had been dressed, for the first time, in the red saree of the Priestesses, exchanging the silver and white of the Maiden for the red and gold of the Mother. Traksinstood at the altar, waiting for her, and when she saw him, she laughed with delight. He wept as she laughed, and whispered into her ear “You are the Goddess to me”. She thinks of the early days on the island. How did it all begin, Ma?, as Devi liked to ask. It began when I was born to the Old One of the Island. It began when I birthed you, my daughter, on the Island. It will begin when you birth your sons, greater than all that went before, on the Island. Sunaina of the isle am I , and you are my sita.

Sunaina realizes that she has seen the face of The Enemy. The One who has battled the Mothers across the ages, sending the flood against which the First Mother rose, possessing the danavas with her Will which the Second Mother foiled, and so on through the ages, until the Seventh Mother, her own master, hid Veresht magic from the Beorhten Empire, rebreaking the world.

# Chapter 4

## The Mothers

By the Padma, the marsh witches sing the spells of ancestry. In the scriptorium, a princess writes by the last diya’s light, pondering that which she is not. In the temple, a washergirl scrubs the steps, mixing tears into the wash water. In the practice yard, two brothers raise trembling arms to draw back bow strings. Gargi Vachaknavi reads a letter in her bedchamber, from her friend Yajnavalkya. Katyayani roasts cardamom and cloves in the kitchen. No one sees the marsh witches materialize from nothing, no one sees the river mist shimmer into the solid shapes of women, or witches. The witches come, answering a call they cannot disobey. They come in pairs and threes and fours, they come alone, they come clad in maiden’s white, and mother’s red and mage’s blue. They are old and young, they are soft and hard, Kosalan, Agrasan, Manikyan, Kishkindhan, and Mahishti. From every corner of Vereshterem, the witches come to the banks of the Padma, where Gargi Vachaknavi’s gurukul stands. When every inch of land between the gurukul’s outer gate and the river teems with women in red, and green and blue, a whispering voice floats over them, “Sisters, Goddessborn, why were we called?”

An answer rises, “We were called to witness. ”

“Sisters, Goddessborn, what shall we witness?”

“A mother being born”

“Sisters, Goddessborn, how shall we witness?”

The answering voices grow faint, break up. “As keepers of memory” comes a voice round with the vowels of eastern Kosala. “As the jury of truth” says a voice angled in the twang of Mahishmati. “As the goddessborn, protectors of Verestherem” says a voice sibilant with the sussurations of Manikyapuri.

Then silence falls, and the women think of that which they are and that which they are not.

“We shall witness the birth as witches will, as mothers must. We shall witness the birth as women” says one voice. And soon the others take up the chant, “As witches will, as mothers must”.

“Very well, we go then to the Gurukula of Gargi Vachaknavi and Katyayani Devi, to witness the birth of a mother”

As one the group turned to the gate, and a short, dark woman clad in red knocked on the door. By the magic of the witches her voice sounded loudly over the hushed Gurukula, “Gargi and Katyayani, Mistresses of this House, we are the witches. We come to witness the birth of a Mother. Will you let us in?”

Gargi and Katyayani fly to the door, and open it, welcoming the witches’ leader with folded palms. They offer water to wash the dust off their feet, mats to rest on, and tall tumblers of tamarind sherbet. The witches ask if they have a Hungry one in their newest class. Gargi bows her head and having thought upon it a while, says to the witches, “Devis, I cannot claim any talent in the identification of Hungry ones, and yet I must confess, none of my newest class seem to match what I know of these Khuditas.” She looks at Katyayani, “What is your thought, Katyayani?”

Katyayani, Gargi notes with some surprise, is smiling. “Ah yes, respected ones” she says in her musical tones, “there is one who may be your Khudita. No, Gargi, you couldn’t have known her. You see, I think of Kali Biralni, the little black cat who washes the temple steps. I do not know where she came from, respected ones, nor how she found us. One morning I found her shivering on the temple steps, and brought her here with me. A month later, I found her with a jhadu, sweeping up the temple steps. Then she began to boil the water for tea. I let her help, it occupies her time, and none of the work is too tiring for a girl. I think she listens to classes too, when she can. I gave her a notebook a few months ago, and she certainly knows how to read and write.”

Katyayani paused, and the witch formation, which had been shifting between three women and five, flickered for a moment and settled into three figures. The youngest, who wore blue, looked directly at Katyayani with her eyes of flame, and said “And why, Katyayani half-blessed, do you believe your little black cat might be the Hungry One?”

Katyayani

They come in mage colors and crone colors, from They are seven, or nine, or ten, the girls cannot see. But when the marsh witches sing, the Lady comes. High on the branc

hes of the Sundari trees that overhang the marsh, the witches sing and cackle with laughter, and pop spicy puffed rice into their mouths.

# Chapter 5

## Queen Sunaina sees the Enemy

Queen Sunaina goes to the rivers. Dressed in the red and gold of mother-mages, she leaves the palace by night, nodding to Akhtar at the Eastern Gate. In her hands she holds the offering plate. On it are arranged the five that are One, the One that is Five – a bit of earth clinging to a flower, a conch shell of water, an earthen lamp’s flickering flame, a feather for the wind, and a drop of her blood. With these she will invoke the rivers, and beg from them knowledge of the future.

At the river bank, she calls, “Sisters, rivers of this crabapple land, I call you now. Mothers, rivers of Vereshterem, I invite you. Daughters, rivers of the peacock throne, I welcome you.” She touches the elements represented on her offering plate – “By earth and fire, by the rage wind and the void, by water of which you are made, come to me now”. She trails her hand in the water and waits.

She knows the rivers are coming when a warm current sweeps over her hand. The water gurgles and flows, and in the music of the water over pebbles, Sunaina begins to hear words.

“We are the rivers of this crabapple land, we come. We spring from the mountain king’s icy door, and swell into the great green plains. The curve of our hips holds the fruit and fecundity of all Vereshterem. We are the green buds of spring, the golden grain of autumn. We are every Veresht woman - maiden, mother, mage. The washerwoman slaps her washing stone, and we rage against the husband who beats her. The village woman simmers stew for her son, and we bubble for the boy who has returned to her. The mage woman pours us on the head of her initiates, and we steam with the girl’s eagerness. We know all, we feel all, we are the rivers of this crabapple land, and in us this land lives and dies.”

The waters swirl about Sunaina’s immersed hand, and Sunaina wades into the river bracing against the cold. Her feet sink into the river clay and she feels her saree grow heavy with water, adhering to her legs.

“What would you know, Queen Sunaina Goddessborn? Shall we tell you the story of how Mother River came to Earth, to save this crabapple land? How she fell from the locks of the Mad One himself, and so great was her force she broke the thighs of Bhrigu, great-armed ancestor of men? Shall we tell you how it feels to melt, of the cold deep beauties of our cave-home under the Mountain King? Or shall we tell you how the Enemy in the west watches?”

Sunaina’s heart clenches at the mention of the Enemy. “Sisters you know what I want. Tell me of my daughter, Devi Janaki, Daughter of Earth and Fire. Tell me how to protect our land, Agrasa the peacock throne of Vereshterem? And tell me, elder sisters, if you will, how we are to defeat the many-headed Enemy?”

The waters swirl about Sunaina’s feet, rising up her thighs and falling away. She stands perfectly still amid the whirling waters. Her saree, whirling with the force of the river, pulls her this way and that, but Sunaina digs her feet into the clay and does not move.

Images begin to appear in the water. She sees Sita, older and heavily pregnant. Devi sleeps on a pallet on the floor, and Sunaina recognizes the Hidden Isle with a pang, the red earth and shimmer of magic in the air so familiar and strange to her. An emerald-scaled lizard perches atop Sita’s belly, and the earth seems to cling to her body, powdering her skin with red dust. The image flickers, changes, and Sunaina sees a ship with a Beorhten red sail blaring the Company’s symbol. It flies over the Bearded Sea towards a jewel city on Vereshterem’s western coast. Sunaina knows the city to be Qideos, capital of Kishkindha. Images begin to appear faster, and all around her, so Sunaina has to spin around to catch them all. She sees the peacock throne broken and empty, a blue man lifts a great bow to the sky, four princes marry four girls, a woman made of stone opens her eyes. Sunaina cannot keep up, she’s turning this way and that, trying to hold the rippling waters close to herself.

Then, the waters turn ice cold around her, so fast that Sunaina is too shocked even to shudder. All the images disappear, the black surface of the river reflects nothing, not even the rippling moon and her own face. It’s as if the waters have been swallowed by nothingness and she stands not in the river but in a sucking void. Sunaina’s belly tightens and she tries to free her feet from the river mud. Her feet are sunk deep into the river clay, and weeds wind about her submerged legs. Just as she’s untangled herself a face appears on the water’s surface. The face is so pale that at first Sunaina thinks he has no skin at all. An old man, Sunaina thinks. Then the old man looks up, right at her and Sunaina rocks backward on her heels, just catching herself from falling into the river. Those eyes! Within them Sunaina senses something ancient. It’s older than the Hanged God, older than the Beorhten Empire, older even than the crabapple land of Veresht. It is older than the sun. This creature has lived for centuries, for millennia, it has survived the cold of the void, the heat of a newborn star. And it hates Sunaina. With all the accumulated years of its cold, terrible survival, it has waited for Sunaina, and it hates her with a strength Sunaina can barely understand. The old man smiles. “I see you, Queen of the Veresht” he hisses into her mind. Sunaina cannot move, so old is the consciousness in her mind, so vast is its existence that it pours over her human memory, her mind’s warp and weft of seconds and minutes and drowns her. Sunaina feels the threads of herself dissolving – every second of her existence seems to fall into dust – she cannot remember anything, what is this cold, what is this place, what thinks her thoughts. She cannot pull the exploded particles of herself back into a being. As she lets go, about to be consumed by the vastness she thinks “Sita. Janak”

And then Sunaina feels strong arms about her middle, lifting her from the river. As her feet leave the river, she crashes back into herself. She returns in pain, like fire to the limbs of the frostbitten. The time-ways and memories of her human existence slowly glue themselves together. The broken apart seconds coalesce back to pictures of people and places. And beating powerfully under the pictures – the rhythms “Janak, Sita, Janak, Sita”. Sunaina opens her eyes to look at her husband’s worried face. “I am here” she says, lifting a hand to the beloved face. “You brought me back. You and Sita.” Then she buries her face in his chest, and inhales his coconut and warm sugar scent.

They walk back to the palace hand in hand, not King and Queen for this moment, but just Traksinand Sunaina, Sita’s Baba and Ma. She tells him all that the rivers told her, and he holds her. The news is terrifying, this enemy too big to defeat, they need to plan and mount their defenses. They need to train Sita, assemble the armies of Agrasa, send word to Ayodhya and Kishkindha. They need to find the hidden isle and the mages. But for one moment, they hold each other, and find in that embrace all that they will fight for.

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Sunaina has to be careful about her messages, the Beorhten control the railways, anything that travels on the trains is open to the Crown’s gaze. But she must get the message to Ayodhya, to Kishkindha, to Kekaya, the last free kingdoms of Vereshterem.

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# Chapter 6

## The Mothers enter Siya

It begins with a flood, a great wave rising in the distance, Siya watching it from a window. She watches the water drawing itself up, receding from the shores, tightening into circles and imagines the wave to come. She sees it build in the distance, getting larger and larger, until all she can see is water, rushing toward the shore. Siya closes her eyes and bring the image of the Lord of the World into her mind. He comes to her robed in yellow, a jaunty peacock feather waving in his hair. “Why do you worry, my Meera?” he says to her. “I do not worry Lord,” Siya says, “How shall I worry when You are here. Whatever I do, whatever I am, whatever I shall ever be or do are yours, and to you I give them now as every second.” The Lord smiles, and on his finger, a golden wheel, so bright it blinds Siya begins to spin – faster and faster. “You will be the First, my Meera. First of those I claim, First of the Mothers who will birth and protect this crabapple land that I bless now. You are protector and witness, First of the Mothers. Now, bring your husband Manu, and your children. Come, I have called you my Meera, First of the Mothers.”

Siya’s cheeks run with tears, and she bows her head, “I am yours, as the speck of dust on a King’s sandal, when you have commanded, I shall obey.” She runs home to Gopalpur, finds Manu, Vaishali and Bhuvan. They gather all the rice and lentils they can and run to the shore to wait for the Lord. All the while, the gathering wave looms in the distance, not yet unleashed but simply gathering its powers. Then Siya sees a silver fin slicing the water in the distance, a great Queen of the Sea, she thinks. The great fin and lapping tail seem to be making their way to the little family standing on the shores of the great Ocean.

[They climb Matsya]

Then the wave breaks and water reclaims all that was hers. Over tree and wall, brick and stone, fire and iron, water spreads, dousing and drowning, breaking and submerging. On and on the wave breaks, beating all the rage of its bosom on the shores of the crabapple land. And the earth knows it cannot fight this rage, this immense anger, this ferocity, so it does that which it does better than all, it endures. The earth girds her borders, sinks deep into the core of herself and stands.

Even as the waters eat at her body, her sides, the Earth remains. She will not let the Bearded Waves, or the thing within them devour her. She simply endures. Finally, after seven nights and eight days, the wave gives up, it dissipates into streams and flows back into the bearded waves. The thing sinks below the surface, deep into the darkened pillars of water, where no light goes.

Then the Queen of the Sea swims Meera and her family to the shore, and with a great flop of her tail sends them careening to the land. She blinks one slow eye at Meera and then turns around, swimming into the open ocean. Meera looks at their friend and protector, tracking her as far as her eyes can see. When the great fish becomes a tiny dot on the horizon, Meera sees a flash in the sky, and the image of the Lord of the World appears, laughing, in the sky. The fish disappears. Meera understands that the Lord himself bore Meera and Manu on his back for seven nights and eight days, and she begins to weep her love into the thigh high floodwater they stand in.

After that Meera and Manu find coconuts floating in the floodwater, after that they build their first little home on sturdy bamboo stilts. After that, the floodwater begins to drain off, slowly, leaving marsh mud and flies everywhere. After that, the sun shows himself and begins to dry the land. After that, Meera and Manu rebuild their hut on flat land. After that, Manu braves the ocean for fish and Meera plants rice paddies in the depressed patch of land behind their hut. After that, survivors begin to come, men with salt-ravaged faces, women with babies tied to their bosoms. They find one another, they build their own huts, and Meera and Manu heal them and feed them. After that, they make Manu King, and in later days, they call him Manu the First Man, Manu the Lawgiver. Meera, who cannot die until her Lord allows her to, laughs. The First Man, indeed, she thinks. And where did he come from without a woman? Meera doesn’t really care much about Laws. The laws of woman are the laws of the Earth, the laws of motherhood are the laws of nature. She needs no ink on paper, no detailed classifications. The law of the jungle is her only law. It pleases Manu, however, and Iksh and Ila

# Chapter 7

## Devi

Devi looks up at her father, she loves this nightly ritual, lying on her father’s arm as he tells her stories.

Her heart feels like it’s full of bubbles. Devi loves bubbles, she learnt how to make them from soap and water and she loves to create them, blowing just gently enough on the brass ring to let the rainbow circle of water and soap escape. Looking into Urmila’s face, she sees

“But I have a sister!” Devi says, she’s confused. “Yes of course, darling” Sunaina hugs her daughter closer. How will she ever keep this girl safe, this girl with a heart so big it opens for every

This girl with the stories in her head and colors in her eyes, her girl, her own. Sunaina with a fierceness that surprise

# Chapter 8

## Devi hears of Renuka’s prophecy

In her thirteenth year, Devi hears of the great Parashurama. Her guru tells her, when yet again, she neglects her mantra grids and lettering for bow practice. Agrasa’s kulaguru, a middle-aged Mantrakya whose acid tongue Urmila fears, finds Devi in the practice yard. She sighs and sits down, settling her saffron-wrapped bulk on the dusty yard. The other astriyas and apprentices leave immediately, startled by the guru’s unexpected appearance. Astra-master Nabhaka emerges from the armory where he’d been supervising the delivery of new practice arrows, but the kulaguru waves him off, focusing on her errant student. Devi lowers her sword, she knows she’s about to be reprimanded, but she doesn’t feel very repentant. The kulaguru beckons. Devi goes over slowly, dragging her feet in the dust. Before Kulaguru can open her mouth, Devi says, “If you’ve come to take me back to school, I won’t go. What is the point of arranging letters in boxes? Will they save Agrasa if the Beorhten attack? Will the letters that spell the same mantra backward and forward protect my sisters? These letters are useless. I am the eldest princess of Agrasa. I must learn to protect Kashi. And my family.”

The Kulaguru blinks, her heavy lids barely opening back up. She looks at Devi with no expression on her face. Then she sighs, as if she’s going to give up, and Devi thinks she may have won. But then the Kulaguru says, “I’m going to tell you a story, errant student of mine. It’s the story of Parashurama, or Rama of the Axe, the greatest hero of this age.”

Devi startles, this was something completely unexpected. Never before had the stern and slow Kulaguru offered her a story. Being who she is, she can’t resist the lure of a new story, and she sits down. “Yes, of course I know about Parashurama, who doesn’t. Wielder of the Axe Parashu, Beloved of the Gods, the most powerful astriya mage in history.”

“Mantrakaya. He was the most powerful Mantrakaya mage in history.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense. How could a Mantrakya kill the 21 Beorht chiefs? We all know the story, Parashurama with his great Axe called on ShivaShakti and slew the Beorht army, burned the Beorht ships and saved Veresht from the Alliance of Twenty One.”

“Yes. And he was a Mantrakaya. The greatest of all. Rama, which was his name before the Axe, took birth in the house of Rushi Jamadagni and his wife, Renuka. In the kingdom of Kosala that was, near the little village of Gopalpur on the banks of the river Saraswati. His father taught him the *beej* mantras the moment he spoke his first words. The family lived in peace and joy at Rushi Jamadagni’s hermitage, the boy fished in the river and played with mantras, he loved his mother’s singing and the smells of cooking from her stove. He revered his mage-father. He didn’t know his mother was a shakti-adept.

One morning, when Rama was five, he was toddling along at his mother’s side, listening with his mouth open to a story she was telling him. Renuka didn’t hear the snake slithering in the grass, for she was looking at her son’s face. A potter from the Gopalpur had wandered to the riverbank in search of good quality riverine clay. He saw the flash in the grass making for mother and child and shouted a warning. Renuka had a few seconds to save her boy. The potter saw her form glowing red, like the iron in the smith’s foundry when it’s hunger had grown into the iron-eating heat. She kicked at the snake, and it caught on fire immediately, writhing and hissing, spitting venom. Within a minute it was done, and the mother was a woman again, brown flesh in a blue saree. The fire creature had been doused. The potter, terrified, ran from the river bank. And little Rama, who had been scared and then confused, began to weep. Renuka lifted him into her arms, and sang to him, rocking him gently. She didn’t think of following the potter. She only wanted to comfort her son.

But the potter knew he had witnessed forbidden magic, secret magic, the rumored Shakti of Vereshterem, out in the open, wielded by a woman of all things.”

Kulaguru Vaishali pauses and looks at Devi from under her eyelids. Devi knows that Vaishali is trying to make a point, but she’s confused, it isn’t clear to her at all what that point might be. So far, this story just sounds like the tale of Parashurama the Hero. So what if his mother might have been a Shakti mage of myth? Parashurama himself seemed somewhat mythical to Sita. Oh she definitely believed he had fought the alliance of twenty one and saved Veresht from the Beorhten but all the stories about him couldn’t possibly be true. How could any person, no matter how skilled, kill thirty Beorhten with one arrow? Devi had just assumed that the tale of Rama Jamadagnya had grown in the telling, as stories did, and when it said Parashurama wielded an axe made of the heart of a dying star, it was an exaggeration. So it didn’t feel significant to her that this mythical man had a mother with mythical powers. After all half the heroes in the stories were seemingly children of gods or magical creatures. But clearly, Vaishali wants Devi to note this point. So she tucks this information – Renuka, the mighty Parashurama’s mother may have been a Shakti adept — in the back of her mind, like a note she intends to read later.

Vaishali continues the story, “Rumors grew, because rumors always do, Devi Janaki, with winged feet they flit from home to home, growing and mutating as they travel. So, many-headed rumor spun out of Gopalpur village, a shakti mage hides in the village, it whispered, a terrrible witch of immense powers. Now, tell me, who was the King of Kosala thirty four years before the Alliance of Twenty One?”

Sita’s ready for the question, this is how kulaguru Vaishali is, with her Devi knows to always be on her feet. “King Kartavir, Last King of Kosala Kulaguru” she says. Vaishali grunts, and continues.

“So King Kartavir heard these rumors of a Shakteya within his borders. And what King Kartavir heard, the Beorhten Resident of Kosala, Lord Grantham heard. The Beorhten Resident convinced the King that if this Shakteya were to be found, she’d make a tremendous gift, a gesture of his goodwill for the Beorhten Crown. And in return, Lord Grantham happened to know of an unused Beorhten Binder or two that the Crown would only too happily loan their friend King Kartavir. As for what uses King Kartavir might have for a couple of Binders, well there [INSERT SOME STUFF ABOUT KING K.’s OWN BATTLES – DRAW INSPO FROM PRITHVIRAJ CHAUHAN, K is JAICHAND]

This time when Kulaguru Vaishali pauses, Devi knows why. She doesn’t need to say anything. This is the story of Veresht that repeats, every age, every time. A house divided within, Veresht blood flowing at Veresht hands, sister stabbing brother, father disowning son. And laughing, over the battlefield, the plunder, the Beorhten lords. Sita’s anger begins to ignite, she feels the tips of her fingers growing hot. Kulaguru Vaishali’s hands close over hers, and the cool pressure of another’s skin on hers releases the heat that had been building.

“Remember, princess. Hold the memories and the stories of Veresht, but do not ignite yet. Listen, instead, and remember.”

Devi relaxes, letting the building fire go. Vaishali continues the tale, “Well, predictably King Kartavir decided that this was a fantastic trade, one village woman for two of the Beorhten machines. So he sent out riders all over the land to find this shakteya. Reshi Jamadagni saw it in his meditations, the red stain of Beorht spreading over the map of Kosala, and waking with a terrible jolt he ran to his wife and son. With his own mantrakya abilities and the power of Renuka, they hid themselves from the riders. So for years, King Kartavir searched for the scholar and the mage, and found no trace of them.

[RENUKA SEES WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO HER IF THE BEORHTEN TAKE HER. BUT DOESN’T WANT TO FIGHT OTHER VERESHT. DIES INSTEAD, WITH THE PERMISSION OF JAMADAGNI AND HER SON]

So the riders of King Kartavir watched as the woman before them blazed into a pillar of fire. Before she ignited and returned, blazing to her fiery home, Renuka spoke in a voice cracking with thunder. “I am no civilized thing, I am the darkness of the earth’s womb, and today I shall burn. But I do not die, as fire cannot. From the first star’s fire I was made and I burn. At the center of your hearts, I burn. The strenght of your arms are Shakti. The wind that moves the wave is Shakti. I am Shakti. And in four hundred years, again I shall take the form of woman, and appear on this Earth. I am She Who Kills and She Who Births. I am the Destroyer dancing the End of all things, I am the Creator of the Golden Womb from whom all life came. I am Shakti, and I shall return. Seven times have I come, to rid this Earth of evil, and ever shall I return. This seventh.

As a fish I came to hold Manu Lawgiver on my back when the world drowned in the waves of destruction. As a turtle I came again to . As the Boar God I came, when the Crown first turned its lidless eyes to Vereshterem in the Bearded Waves. Under the sea we fought, the Crown and I and I wrested Veresht from her tentacles and set it upon this Earth. As vamana I returned, and though I wept to do it, I crushed beneath my feet Great Bali, Lord of Vereshterem for the Crown had slipped her invisible tentacles into the mind of the Great King. Then the Crown sent her agents – Hiranyakashyap the Terrible — and as the Lioness of Truth I came, to tear with my claws of steel this creature of the Crown. This is my seventh coming, as the Wielder of the Axe I have come to deliver this land from those who would . Beware the eighth coming, Queen of Nothingness, for when I return as Bow Wielder and Maiden of Justice, your end shall come at last.

And then Renuka burned, the flames grew so hot and high they turned the sky black with their smoke.

But the soldiers who witnessed this say at the very last second, when Renuka’s body had all but fallen into ash, a face appeared in the fire. A man, dreadlocked and covered in ashmarks, smiled and held out a hand. And fiery Renuka embraced him before the vision blinked away and the fire died down.”

Vaishali glares at Sita. “Do you understand, Princess of Mithila?”

Devi doesn’t quite understand. But she knows. In her blood she knows what the Kulaguru has been trying to tell her.

# Chapter 9

## Devi lifts the bow

Devi lifts the bow by accident.

Insert full out story of how Devi lifts the bow. It’s her anger, anger, anger channelled, she lets the lid off.

Devi doesn’t see Meena standing in the shadows, doesn’t even smell her sister’s signature rose and milk scent. So bright is her fire, so loud the voice of the bow, that she can barely keep herself together. Nothing else seeps through her senses. She doesn’t see Meena’s frightened face when her Didi turns into something else, a light unnatural piercing her pores.

She doesn’t even understand

[Meena’s Reaction – Stunned, scared, why not me, also first time she sees her sister as an Other]

[Devi doesn’t get it, why is her sister acting so weirdly]

[Janaka and Sunaina rush in, see Devi holding the bow, Sunaina is so scared, what is the world going to do to her little girl with stories in her head and colors in her mind. Traksinis excited, I knew Devi was special. Vaishali comes to them and tells them she thinks Devi is the prophesied Eighth Shakti. All three agree to send Devi to Ahalya, the Magician, for training. Urmila insists on going with, whose going to be there for Didi? Unnatural for her, but Kushadhvaja agrees. Meena doesn’t want to go. Devi tries to convince her to come with, but Meena refuses.]

# Chapter 10

## Meena before betrayal

Meena closes her eyes. Underneath her eyelids, she sees two little girls – giggling under the covers. One is ten and the other five, and

# Chapter 11

## Gargi’s School

Devi doesn’t know what to expect. She’s heard of Gargi, of course. She was there when Gargi outwitted the great Yajnavalkya at court.

GARGI and MAITREYI AND Ahalya/Katyayani

Teach her and Urmila about the ways of Shakti. There are many Ways of Shakti, but the ones that Devi and Urmila pick up on are the Knowledge, Love, and Rage.

Urmila is Katyayani – why caring, nurturing, loving is also POWER

Meena repents of her stubborn weirdness and comes to them, but she is consistently too hard on herself about everything, becomes harsh and weird and ascetic in search of the knowledge of Shakti.

Urmila grows beautiful, soft, feminine, lovely but her flaw is she gives all, gives too much.

Devi becomes powerful, commanding, wise but she is insecure of her looks, of ever being worthy of being loved, of her wildness and ways.

Write a list, Gargi says. Write a list of what you are not. Devi doesn’t understand what this means. “What I am not, Guruma? But I am only myself, which means I am not many many things, right?”

Gargi smiles, “It shall be a long list then, Princess. Begin now”

Devi doesn’t understand the point of this exercise, but she knows Gargi Vachaknavi has a reputation for being a great philosopher, and this kind of mysterious behavior is to be expected from them. She still doesn’t quite understand what she’s doing at the Gurukul. She’s never been particularly interested in philosophy and debate, that’s more Urmila’s thing. But Baba had promised she would learn astravidya here. Devi went to Katyayani Ma, always the sweetest of the three. She sat down quietly by Urmila and began to thread the flowers into garlands with a needle and thread. Urmila gave her a look that Devi could only describe as disbelieving, but Katyayani said nothing, she simply smiled at Sita, and continued to thread her own flowers. Urmila was creating a design of white and green, threading the bell like datura flowers in between bel leaves, and knotting them cleverly so they appeared to bloom from the same place at the garland’s center. Devi focused on threading yellow marigolds one after another, calculating that this most basic of garlands would always be needed. Katyayani was humming over her own flowers, and the sound of her voice lulled Sita. The heat of the afternoon, the repetitive task, the fragrance of the flowers all swirled around her, drawing her eyelids down. Devi jerked awake to Urmila’s elbow in her ribs. Looking around, Devi saw Katyayani Ma had gone, and two finished garlands graced the statues of the Mad One and the Lady. Sita’s own garland remained half finished in her lap.

Urmila gave her a reproving look, “Didi!”

“Sorry Urmi, sorry, I just..I wanted to ask Katyayani Ma about..” Devi trailed off seeing Urmila’s expression only tighten

# Chapter 12

## Meets Rama

I’ve rethought this, I think on graduation, Devi marries Ram. Or, on graduation is when George Rackham arrives to take Devi wit him. On graduation, Sita, Urmila and Meena have to pass this little test – go help the neighboring king who is engaged in rebelling against the Beorhten. They join the army in disguise, Urmila as a field medic, Meena as lieutenant, and Devi as a soldier.

[Joining up scene, some comedy. The girls show up and Urmila kind of has to lead on this and get everyone signed up and functional]

[Also in this army in disguise are Rama and Lakshmana. Devi & Urmi meet Rama and Lakshmana. Rama and Devi clash immediately. Lakshmana saves Urmi from death. Rama and Devi are like K. Or other way round.

Beorhten win, the four flee. Disguised

# Chapter 13

## Betrayal

Rishi Gargi’s words sound in Sita’s mind, “Princess, your power is the power of Veresht, where one drop of Veresht blood flows, one Veresht heart beats, you are the Goddess in Rage, none can stop you. But without Veresht, you have no power. Beware the Rekha, when you cross the border, your magic will not save you. The Enemy knows this, and will try every trick He knows to get you to leave Vereshterem. Do not cross the Rekha, Devi Janaki, for if the Enemy gets you, Vereshterem will fall under the Beorhten yoke.”

And yet here is Meena, eyes alight with hope. Here is her sister, her dearest little one, returned to her again. How can Devi say no and see those eyes close up again. She senses Rama tensing beside her, how well she knows the smallest movements of his body.

“Meena, can you tell me why it has to be Devi going to Beorhtenweld? We would be delighted to host Governor Ravenna at Ayodhya instead.” he stares at Meena.

Meena says, “Well I should think my sister perfectly capable of making her own decisions. Lord knows she’s never had a problem with that.” her lip curls slightly

Sita’s heart closes around itself like a fist. She berates herself for this, what is wrong with her, why can’t she control these unruly emotions. Yet again, she wonders why she has to be tied to this girl with cords so strong that it hurts so much to fray them. She’s told Rama this, at night, slightly drunk on the ruby sura Ayodhya’s feted winemakers send to the palace for their prince. Even in the darkness, with this man who knows all the most despicable bits of her, this man who holds her to himself when she wants to run from the repulsive truth of her own being, she cannot meet his eyes. Her shame pours over her, blunted only by the jewel sura winding its way down her throat. So she rests her head on his shoulder and looks ahead as she confesses to him, “I still love her, Rama. After you, she is dearest to me.” She is both surprised and not at all when Rama simply says, “I know” and turns to her. She buries her face in his chest. She weeps into his chest, and then laughs a little, “I’ve got your angavastram all snotty” she says in a wet voice. Rama laughs, and throws his angavastram on the floor. They collapse together into their bed, and Devi sleeps that night encircled by his arms. That night, Devi doesn’t dream of a little girl with accusing eyes.

So here they are, Ram, Sita, and Meena. Devi looks long and hard at Meena, trying to find the round-faced cherub who ran along at her heels in this hard-faced woman who is all angles.

Then Meena says, “Please Didi, for me, just one meeting outside the Rekha. Don’t you trust me?” And it’s the word that breaks Sita. When Meena calls her Didi, the word carries in it every memory they share. A tiny Meena toddling behind Devi who is telling her a story, Meena’s eyes are wide and her little mouth open in a circle. “Didi, what happened next?”

Sita, too nervous to sleep, tossing and turning in bed the night before she leaves for Gargi’s hermitage, and a small hand finds its way to hers and squeezes three times. The first night at school, and Devi cannot stop crying in the night. The bed feels so big, unnaturally empty, she keeps turning with a half-formed thought in her mind, “Meenu, did you know” “Hey Meenu, guess what?” and every time she sees only the other beds in the dormitory, occupied by girls sleeping, snoring, and turning. To sleep that night, Devi has to squeeze her pillow. “Meenu, I love you” she whispers into her pillow, praying to her favorite God, Hanuman to carry the secret message to her Meenu. “Didi, didi, didi”, Meena again, at graduation. Her face is bursting with pride, “Didi, I told all my friends. They were so impressed you have no idea! My didi’s graduating from The Academy, yes, THE Academy. Urmila didn’t even believe me, she said I must be confused, no one in known history had graduated from The Academy. So I showed her the doll you sent me, and when the doll spoke to her and flew and danced more beautifully than Ma, Urmila had to agree I was right. Didi, where did you go to class? Didi, will you show me the Hall of Elements? Didi, how did you know {Tk}? Didi, were you scared? Didi, do you think I can join the Academy?”

And then Meena again, after her years at The Academy, “Mage, be welcome” inclining her head formally. “Princess”, at the wedding and “Your Highness” and “Lady Mage”, never “Didi”.

And so Devi pushes Gargi’s words and Ram’s nervousness to the back of her mind. This is her Meenu. Meenu needs her didi. Even if Meena had asked Devi to walk into The Crown’s waiting maw, no force in the world could’ve prevented Sita. Devi nods at Meena, reaches out as if to touch her, but Meena turns away. Maybe she didn’t see Devi reach out.

“I’m coming too” Rama says immediately.

Meena frowns, “Governor Ravenna has been clear, he wishes to speak with Queen Devi Janaki only. No armies, no guards, no apprentices, no ladies in waiting.”

Rama only stares back at Meena, “I am none of these. You tell me Governor Ravenna refuses an invitation from the King of Ayodhya. He cannot prevent Rama from accompanying his wife.”

Meena purses up her lips and says, “I’ve gone to a lot of effort to organize this meeting. Why can’t you understand that this might be the only way to get The Crown’s ear, to fend off the Beorhten? Don’t you trust your own wife to look after herself? Or is it that you, glorious man, need to be there to protect her from the terrors of her own sister. ”

Devi hears her sister’s voice break, it’s not used to the tone of bitter command Meena’s forcing upon it.

Rama doesn’t even blink. “Where Devi goes, I go.”

Meena turns to Sita, “Didi, please.” But this time, Meena meets her match. There is one thing only that can calm the raging storm of love that thrums Meenu, Meenu, Meenu in the center of Sita’s being. That one thing is Rama. Sita’s history belongs to Meena, but her present, her future, every life she has already lived, and every life after this one are Rama’s. Devi was Rama’s when the First Mother bore Manu Lawgiver on her back on the waves of apocalypse. Devi will be Rama’s when the Tenth Mother ends the universe with her scythe of judgement. Meena may be Sita’s great love, but Rama is Sita, and Devi is Rama. Meena waits for Devi to say something and when she realizes Devi is not going to take her side over Rama’s she smirks, “Oh well, what did I expect from you. Be ready tomorrow morning.” She turns on her heel and marches off, long strides eating the distance between the throne and the closed doors. She doesn’t ask the doorwardens to open the way to her, she simply looks at them imperiously, and they scurry to clear the path.

That night, Devi goes to Meena’s room, “Meenu, it’s me” she knocks on the barred door. “I was, er, I was thinking maybe we could chat for a bit? I read a new story this morning, and I thought maybe you’d like it too.” Sita’s voice echoes in the dark hallway of the Guest Palace. Meenu’s room remains closed and barred. Inside, Meena massages her aching head. She considers opening the door, playing the part of nostalgic younger sister. How would she do it? She’d invite Devi in, pretend to love the story, ooh and aah at the right moments. She’d tell Devi to sleep in her bed that night, “just like when we were children” and, finally, just before Devi drifted off to sleep, she’d slip her hand into Sita’s and squeeze it three times. That’s it, all she’d need to do to have Devi eating out of the palm of her hand. That “Didi” had been well-placed indeed that morning. Meena allows herself a thin smile. Yet, she doesn’t open the door. Doesn’t play the correct string at the right moment though she knows exactly how to. Sita’s always been an emotionally transparent fool. It would be so easy. “Meenu?” Sita’s voice is uncertain now, trembling a little. Meena envisions it in her mind, leaping up and opening the door, not too eager, even Devi wouldn’t believe a complete reversal. Slowly softening her expression. Peppering in the phrases of their shared childhood, referring to people and incidents from Mithila. And that final bit – the three squeezes. “The Secret Code of the Sisters Janaki”, it disgusts Meena. It is tawdry, ridiculous, childish. But Meena doesn’t get up, she lets Devi call once more, and then leave. She can picture her sister’s disappointed face, oh that one wears all her simple emotions all over herself. “Never, never, shall I be like that” Meena vows to herself, turning over in bed and beginning the sleep meditation.

Devi finds Rama waiting for her in the hallway. “She didn’t let you in” he says, and Devi can’t read his face, shadowed by the pillars of the Guest Palace. He holds his hand out to her, and they walk back to their rooms hand in hand. “Siya,” he says when they’re in their room, as she walks about lighting the earthen lamps in the chandeliers. “I’m worried about this meeting. If you cross the Rekha, the Mothers cannot protect you. Your shakti disappears. I will be there, of course, with Gandiva” he runs his fingers over the bow that Devi teasingly calls, “My sister wife” “but you will have no magical protection, nothing between your mind, and the Crown. And Siya, the Crown might access to The Mothers through you.”

Devi considers Ram’s words. He’s right, as he always is. The facts, the reasons, how they weave in and out, and the picture they paint – these Ram never gets wrong. And yet, the storm is building within her, a storm that thunders with the rhythms “Meenu” and “Didi”. She doesn’t know how to show Rama the storm. She tries to use words, logic, binding structures, but they melt into soggy bits of nothing when the storm within her touches them. Frustrated, she touches Rama’s arm and says, “Wait, let me show you”. So she opens herself to him, gently wiping away the veils of daily life – her clothes, her jewels, the role of “Queen Devi Janaki”, the role of “Mage Highest”, until only she stands before him as “Didi”, “Sherni”, and tenderest, most hidden, “Siya”. Then Rama looks at her in wonder, for he sees the raging water within her, the wind whipping them into a frenzy. He looks at her and he says, “All this? Siya, is all this just Meenu for you?” Devi nods, and drops the threads of shakti, becoming again only Sita.

Rama surprises her in a tight hug. His voice is reverent, and thick with tears as he says into her hair, “Oh what did I do to deserve you? How can you love so much?”

They sleep, as always, in each other’s arms, and Devi wakes on the morning of the meeting with Rama’s smell in her nose. She snuggles closer to his sleeping form, burrowing into his warmth. She realizes he’s woken up when quite chuckles send shudders through his body. She opens one eye and looks up at him, then quickly closes it and hides her face in his shoulder. “Let’s stay here all day, no, all year, no, all our lives”, she says. “Why do we need to wake up?”

Usually, Rama responds to this plea with laughter, or by rolling her onto her back and raining kisses on her face. Today, he says nothing, and Devi senses his fear in the arms tightening about her middle. Very quietly, Rama says, “Today, my siya, I too wish you would stay here.”  
Devi turns her husband’s face to hers and strokes his hair, “Rama, we’ll get through today. Maybe this Governor Ravenna is sympathetic to our complaints. And even if he isn’t, what’s the worst that’ll happen — we’ll waste some time dressing up and bowing.” Rama doesn’t meet her eyes, “Rama, look at me. Please, trust me. There is no danger.”

Rama nods reluctantly, and they go through their morning ablutions in silence. Devi debates for a moment whether she should wear the red and gold of High Mage or the green and gold of Ayodhya and Mithila. But this is a diplomatic meeting, she is Queen Devi Janaki of Ayodhya, Princess of Mithila, not High Mage Sita. So she wears the Heart of Fire on her neck, and the emerald Serpents on her wrists. Her saree is dark Ayodhyan green with the sunburst of Mithila picked out in golden thread. . Rama, she notices, dresses not as the King of Ayodhya but as Maharathi of the Eighth Elephant division. He winds the tighter dhoti about his legs, and pulls on gauntlets, arrow protectors, vambraces and breastplate. Alrakh, who is dressing his master as always, seems surprised by the contrast in their attire, but he gauges Rama’s mood and does not question him. So it is, that when they leave, she goes as Queen and he goes as Warrior. Meena, they discover, is waiting for them in the courtyard, attired in the regalia of Low Priestess.

Well, what a sight we make, Devi says, trying to break the thick tension but her feeble attempt does nothing. Meena nods to her, and looks at Rama with contempt. Rama slips into his warrior’s mask, betraying no emotions. Siya looks between them, sighs and walks over to where her horse, Ratri waits for her. She takes the reins from Akhtar. Without raising his eyes to her face, Akhtar says, “Princess, sorry I meant”, Devi stops Akhtar with a hand laid on his old shoulder “What is it chacha?”

Akhtar raises his eyes to her, and she sees fear in the old warrior’s eyes. “Akhtar chacha?” Devi asks, she’s never seen him scared before. “Princess, the Rekha. Promise me you won’t cross it. I was there when your grandmother, the Blessed Queen Sundari created the Rekha. I was there before the Rekha, I know what it’s like. We cannot go back to that, Princess, we cannot bear it. Veresht will fall if the Rekha breaks. Promise me, Soldier, you will not let the Rekha break.

Devi looks at General Akhtar and the ancient verse floats through her mind “

The Son of the Sun blazes forth

Serpent’s Daughter waits in the shadows

Shakti stands, Vereshterem rises

Shakti falls, the Sun fades into darkness

Serpent’s Daughter waits in the shadows

Shakti falls and Vereshterem burns.

# Chapter 14

## Ravenna kidnaps Sita

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# Chapter 15

## On the boat to the HMS Reven’s Wing

Governor Revenstowe smiles, and for a moment, Sita’s vision blurs and she sees ten heads sprouting on Revenstowe’s neck. Startled, she blinks hard, and the faces disappear, leaving only one white face looking down at her.

“Well, well, well” a voice hisses into her mind.

Devi looks around for the source of the voice, and sees only Captain Rackham, who is looking at her with concern, tense and expressionless Ram, and Meena, who is smiling into the distance. Devi shakes her head at Rackham, this isn’t something he needs to know. She silently signals Ram in the language of the Rasas. Ram understands something strange is happening and that he isn’t to show any reaction.

Devi says, “Who are you?” in her mind.

The hissing voice sounds amused, “Don’t you know me, Queen Devi Janaki?”

Devi isn’t interested, “Tell me who are you, or get out of my mind,” she’s confident she can throw this intruder from her mind if she needs to.

“Last time, you needed more persuasion to cross the Rekha. Last time, your bird friend came to save you. Last time, I won.” says the voice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about” says Devi

“No, indeed. How could you? Your Mothers decided to erase all memory when the wheel turned. But I was the greatest of mages, son of Vishrawas the Wise, and I alone remembered.”

Sita’s had enough. She clenches her fists, calling fire and earth. Her fire answers but she cannot hear the rumble of boulders and slow sussuration of plates that her Earth holds. It takes her a second, and Ram signing “water” to her in Rasabhasa, to understand. Earth is weak over the ocean. Particularly here, in the Bearded Waves, where The Crown first fought The Boar God aeons ago. The Boar God wrested the land from the Bearded Waves — carried the jewel city of Qideos cradled between his tusts and swam his way up to the surface, setting it on Veresht’s western coast as the capital of Kishkindha forever. Over the water her earth didn’t leap to her hands, over the water, earth was weak. No matter, Devi still had fire. As long as the sun burned bright in the sky, her fire wouldn’t desert her. She let the heat crawl over her arms, it felt pleasant to her, like a warm blanket just pulled from the heated sandalwood chests in Ayodhya’s bathhouse. As the warmth builds over her body, she watches George and Ram and Meena. Ram smiles his crooked half smile at her, raising one corner of his mouth. Meena notices a few minutes after Ram, and tenses. Her body moves very little, but it falls into a defensive stance. Even now, after Sita’s crossed the Rekha on the strength of Meena’s word, after she’s called Devi “didi”, she reflexively braces for attack from her sister. A deepening opens in sita’s stomach, and she feels her fire rush into the cavern that’s opened up underneath her ribs. Ram’s forehead creases, so faintly only Devi sees it. He gestures concern in Rasabhasa. Devi concentrates, she needs her fire to throw the hissing voice from her head. She shakes her head at Ram, letting him know he need not worry. Then Devi focuses on the image of Agni devata, pulling every hair on her body, every piece of her from the soles of her feet to the top of her head into the image of the fire lord. Agni comes to her as the Goddess, and Devi sees Her for an instant behind her closed eyelids – red saree billowing into flames, unbound hair, and half a smile. Then She’s gone, and Sita’s fire blazes about her.

Devi smiles.

“I’m impressed” hisses the voice in her mind. “Last time, you had no fire. Last time you were still and silent as the Earth from which you came. Last time you were my block of clay to mould as I willed.”

# Chapter 16

## The fight

Climbing up the Reven’s Wing

The HMS Raven’s Wing towers over the . In spite of herself Devi gazes amazed at this little city. All of Mithila would fit neatly within this sprawling monument. Ram seems to have had the same thought, he turns to her and Devi sees that expression of wondering amazement she loves most stamped on his face. “Siya, this, why all of Ayodhya” he says, and Devi smiles, “I was just thinking all Mithila might sit comfortably within this ship. Captain Rackham’s looking at them with a great smile splitting his face open.

“Behold,” he says, “Your Majesties, Honored Lady, welcome to the pride of Her Majesty’s Navy, the HMS Crown’s Glory.” He helps Devi onto the set of stairs hanging from the top deck. Devi begins to climb up the side of the ship, feeling like she’s climbing the back of Seshanaga, the Serpent who holds the Universe on his head. The ships sides are covered in little discs of irridiscent ceramic, which makes Devi think of scales.

Rackham sees her looking at the ceramic discs and explains, “it’s to prevent that which is within the ship, think light, heat and sound, from escaping into the ocean. And it is to prevent that which lurks in the deeps from breaking into the Crown’s Glory.”

“How can ceramic discs do that?” Devi asks, wondering if she’s found at last the mysterious magics of the Beorhten.

Rackham laughs, “Oh I haven’t the first idea. I’m not a Binder, just a simple soldier really.”

Devi says nothing and they continue the climb.

#

Meeting the Governor

Rackham bowed at the waist to this man and spoke, “Your Majesties”, he addressed Ram and Devi first, as appropriate. Even on a ship, even on Beorhten soil, a Queen outranked a Governor. “May I present Governor Revenstowe, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, Earl of Revenheld, Beloved of the Crown, and” Rakcham darted a look at Devi and Ram, before finishing “Lord Superior over Vereshterem in the name of the Crown”. Deep within her, Devi felt Bhumija wake. Ram’s face grew even more expressionless, if that was possible.

The Governor bowed. “Your Majesties” he murmured, the words falling sibilantly into the tense silence. Lakshman moved out from behind Ram, and taking his place to his brother’s left, began, “Governor Revenstowe, you stand before His Majesty Rama of the Ikshavak, King of Ayodhya and Her Majesty Devi Janaki Queen of Ayodhya.” Lakshman had argued with Ram about the titles. He thought it would be better to read the whole list of titles and honors. But Ram had convinced him that simply King and Queen of Ayodhya was plenty. “He already knows it, Lak. This is more confident, we don’t need to impress him.” The idea of being so confident that titles weren’t needed appealed to Lakshman. And so here, in front of the Governor, he announced them only as King and Queen of Ayodhya. Within Sita, Bhumija tenses.

Ram and Devi incline their heads, “Governor” they say at the same time, their melded voices ringing louder in the cold room.

“Please, shall we sit?” Captain Rackham says, and Devi almost smiles at his skittish nervousness. She remembers a time before the Gurukul, when her own emotions played all over her body as if her limbs and skin were sitar strings for her emotions to pluck and thrum. Revenstowe inclines his head and offers her his arm. Ram and Lakshman fall in behind them, and Rackham brings up the rear.

Revenstowe seats Devi in a leather armchair, and takes the high-backed chair without cushions. Ram takes the other armchair, and Lakshman assumes his usual position standing behind him, guarding his brother’s back.

Revenstowe leans forward and fixes Devi with his blue stare. “Well”, he says, “shall we begin?”

# Chapter 17

## Devi in the ocean

Bhumija was steering when Devi woke up. “Sita?”. “Yes, …yes” Devi realized her body was floating on the grey waves of the Bearded Ocean. A cold sharper than steel was piercing her skin, seeping into her warm blood and turning it to ice. She couldn’t really feel her hands and feet, they felt more like balls of wax attached to her wrist and ankles. And within her, battling the cold, was a gnawing maw of emptiness. She was hungry and thirsty, more than she’d ever been before, more than the hunger of her 21 day fasts at The Gurukul, more than the thirst of her long practice sessions with Akhtar Chacha, this was something else, a hunger whose ends her mind couldn’t fathom. Then a word crossed Sita’s mind, “Ram”. The hunger within her belly seemed to throb, “Ram, Ram, Ram”. The steely cold slicing into her limbs shrieked, “Ram, Ram, Ram”. All about her, for as far as she could see, Devi saw only water. The great ship she had been on was gone, and the glittering shore of Qideos was a thousand miles behind her.

“Sita, Sita!” Bhumija’s voice in her mind was loud and commanding. “We are floating in the Bearded Ocean, a third of the way between Qideos and the port of Keshavgadh. I know because the water told me. If we can steer east, we’ll hit the northern shores of Kishkindha, and there, we can get help.”

“Ram” Devi said, in response.

Bhumija quietened, and then, very gently, said “Sita, we don’t know. The ship exploded. That thing, the Governor, tried to bind me. I cannot be bound. “

“Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram” Devi said, unable or unwilling to say anything else.

“Ok, alright, Ram it is” Bhumija said. She subsided, and suddenly Devi was in charge, seeing out of their eyes, moving their hands. She had exactly one way to find Ram. So she closed her eyes, leaned her body back into the bearded waves and prayed. As earth and fire were Sita, so words were Ram. “Ram, Ram, Ram” Devi repeated, fixing the image of his smiling face in her mind. “Ram, Ram, Ram” over and over she said the words. Minutes passed, then hours. Sita’s mouth was so dry that her chant had diminished to a cracked whisper. Her limbs, long since converted into the balls of wax her hands and feet had been, felt like stable weight of the earth pulling her down. All about Sita, the creatures of the sea had emerged – silver-bellied fish, and inky octopi, green fronds and spiny orange balls. As she chanted, the creatures lent their rhythms to the drumbeat, “Ram, Ram, Ram”. When Devi had counted a thousand repititions one hundred and eight times, a shadow passed over the sun. Floating on her back, Devi squinted. The shadow passed again, a living being in flight.

Devi squinted up at the sun, but her mind was so weary she couldn’t understand the colors and lights, couldn’t put them together in a picture of something that was happening. She closed her eyes, giving up, and drew in the last breath she had left to continue her chant.

Before she had uttered the first “Ram”, Devi felt a pair of arms around her, cradling her neck and lifting her below her knees. Then Devi saw the blackness of the core of the earth and knew nothing more.

# Chapter 18

## Devi in Kishkindha

Devi woke to the smell of incense and sound of conchshells. “The evening prayer” her mind supplied. Late, Devi thought to herself. Why was she waking in the evening? Devi opened her eyes. The ceiling above her head was low, panelled in wood. Not Ayodhya and not Mithila, Devi noted. Where was she? Taking in the room she was in, Devi discovered that she was lying on a low woven divan in a small room with walls of earth and wooden pillars. A brass pot of water sat beside the divan, and

- Meets the healer – Sanjivani is involved

Meets Hanuman

After dinner, Tara helped Devi into bed again. Drifting into sleep, Devi asked “When can I meet my gallant rescuer?”

“Bajrangbali returns tomorrow. He will have news of your husband, he has been in Ayodhya this day.”

Devi had a thousand questions, how did Tara know where Bajrangbali was so immediately? Surely no letters could have reached her in this secret stronghold from far Ayodhya. Why did Tara assume Bajrangbali would know of Ram?

But before she could open her mouth, Tara bade her good night, and shifting into butterfly shape, flew out of the open window. That night, Devi dreamed of a great monkey with arms the size of palaces flying to Kishkindha with Ram balanced on his shoulders.

# Chapter 19

## Devi meets Bajrangbali

“Come” said Tara’s maid. “The Queen has asked to see you”

Devi drew the end of her saree over her head in a gesture of respect, and followed the pretty maid down a veritable beehive of low-ceilinged corridors and doorways. At last, the corridor gave way to a large circular chamber, at one end of which, Tara and Ruma sat on twin thrones. Kneeling at their feet, was a man of massive proportions. Surmising that this must be the famed Bajrangbali, Devi hurried forward and bowed to the Queens, hands folded. “Your Majesties, may I have permission to thank my rescuer for saving my life?”

Ruma smiled at Devi and gestured permission, Tara didn’t move at all. Devi approached the massive man, and bowed, “Sir, I do not know how, with what words or honors I can thank you. If not for your rescue, I wouldn’t be here, and the life of Queen Devi Janaki of Ayodhya, such as it may be, would be ended. Please accept my everlasting gratitude, and this ring,” she pulled off the Mithilan Serpent and offered it to Bajrang. “This is the Serpent Ring of Mithila, show it to any soldier or citizen in Ayodhya or Agrasa, and they will be yours to command. This ring carries the bond of Devi Janaki, and my eternal gratitude”.

The big man took the ring from her and then laughed out loud, “Your Majesty, such a generous gift should be honored, I shall wear it ever and always upon me. But for that, I must become again, simply Hanuman.”

And before Sita’s eyes, his great form shimmered and shrunk, and as if stepping out of a too-large robe, a young man, perfectly proportioned and no taller than Ram, stepped forward. He bent and touched Sita’s feet in a bow of utmost respect. Startled, Devi didn’t lift him up on time, as she would have, and the tips of his fingers brushed her toes. Bhumija jolted awake at the touch. And she heard one of the Mothers sigh very softly, “My son”.

Sita, still off her balance, let the Mother take over for a moment, and she blessed the young man, touching her palm to the top of his head and saying “May your glory ring eternal, my son”. When Hanuman straightened up and looked at her, Devi saw his eyes glittering with tears, and she understood that something was happening that had not happened in a long time. “Mother” Hanuman said, and then quickly blinked away his tears. “Your Majesty, I thank you for this gift, which is much more than my actions merit. I only did what I must do.” Devi understands that this is no polite way of referring to his own honor, as men do. When Hanuman says “must” he means it, indeed, whatever she did that drew him to her is a bond that pulls on his blood and life. Hanuman could not have resisted her call, not unless he broke himself apart.

“Ma Sita,” Hanuman begins again, “please will you sit? I have news from Ayodhya.” Tara, on her throne, looks at Devi and quirks her lips into a secret smile, Sita, embarrassed, looks down into her lap. Once Devi has taken the chair by the twin thrones, Hanuman turns to face Tara and Ruma and tells his story.

“Your Majesties, I left Kishkindhan borders on the seventh, that is,” he looks at Sita, “three days ago”. Sita, still unsure of Tara and Ruma’s welcome, almost melts at this simple consideration from Hanuman. Five days, then, five days from the calamitous meeting with Governor Revenstowe, Bhumija letting the mothers take over and being rescued from the ocean. Five days since she’d seen Ram, and Lakshman. And Meena.

Ruma smiles encouragingly at Hanuman but a tiny line appears between Tara’s brows.

- Tells them about the aftermath of the ship exploding – all the beorhten have surrounded ayodhya, taking it to be an act of war.

- No sign of Raja Ram

- He finds Ram in a forest, with Lakshman and Rackham. Ram is totally and entirely bereft. Rackham is confused, and sort of has no idea what to do. Hanuman, initially suspicious, tests Ram and tells him that Devi is alive. This wholly revives Ram.

# Chapter 20

## Ninenight Festival in Kishkindha

“You have done well Bajrangbali” says Tara, and a rare smile breaks the hard lines of her face into joy and affection. That seems to be the sign Hanuman and Ruma need to abandon formality. “Bhai!” Ruma says, and runs to envelop him into a great hug. “I’ve missed you.” Tara smiles at the two indulgently, and a picture from her memory practically assaults Devi with the speed and force of it entering her head. Devi embraces Urmila in the Shiva temple, as Meena looks on indulgently.

To Sita, the Degh might be the most wondrous of all of Kishkindha’s marvels. Hanuman takes her to it. He appears in Sita’s rooms one morning, bouncing a golden laddoo, juicy and fragrant, from hand to hand. “Do you want to see where all this deliciousness comes from?” he asks her, cocking his head to one side. “The secret of Kishkindha’s great warriors, and amazing military might?” he pops the laddoo into his mouth and uses his now free hand to pat his own impressive biceps. Devi swats at him, “Is it also the secret of her warrior’s overweening pride?” she asks him sternly.

“No, that’s just facts” Hanuman says around the laddoo occupying his mouth. He swallows the whole laddoo in one great movement of his throat, and sighs as though he’s just run a marathon. “Well? Degh?” Hanuman looks at her expectantly. Devi laughs and loops her arm through his. Hanuman leads her through another interminable maze of corridors and hallways, Devi thinks she’s never going to find her way around Kishkindha without a vanar guide. Hanuman strikes a pose, bowing with a flourish. “Welcoming, well-going, welcome, come well, babus and mems, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, little ones and old ones, vanaras and gandharvas, and even beorhten scum, dust off my shoe, riffraff, welcoming to Kishkindha, the myth, the secret fortress of Vereshterem, the eternal. Myself Hanuman, your excellent guide to this beautiful booilding”. It takes Devi a second to parse the last word and she smiles at Hanuman in delight. “This, you see before you, my enraptured audience, my captive tour takers, my prisoners of beauty, these are the Kitchens. What, you think, simple the kitchens? Not the Great kitchens, fancy kitchens, kitchens of surpassing wonderment? No, indeed, for the famed inhabitants of this here Kishkindha, the vanaras, are simple people, yes not for them the books and words of the brahman reshis, not for them the poetry of Kalidasa, the wisdom of Gargi Vachaknavi, not for them the delicate curlicue and fragrant blossom doe eye lotus feet, no they call simply this chamber the Kitchen” Hanuman pauses for a breath and Devi jumps in “Oh great tour guide, your audience tires, do you think we could see the Degh now?” Hanuman gives her a look of disgust, “Well, well, well, this little lady here does not want the wisdom, the expositon, the explanation par excellence, the wisdom…” Hanuman opens his mouth to draw a breath, and this time, Devi stuffs a whole laddoo into it. Hanuman, delighted at this turn of events, grabs her hand and races down the tunnels, taking turns at what seems like random to Sita.

Eventually, they emerge in a chamber far larger than the throne room, it has no ceiling, the stone walls open into the sky above. And that’s just as well, Devi thinks, for great clouds of steam are rising through the open ceiling, and she cannot imagine how hot the subterrenean room might get if the steam had been trapped. The Degh dominates the room, leaving a narrow border around itself for cooks to manouever. Sunken into the floor of the room, the Degh is unlike anything Devi has ever seen. Thinking about how she’s ever going to describe it to Ram, she grasps for pictures and ideas that feel similar. The best Devi can do is a giant crater, purpose built into the cavern floor. It has deep sides and a huge flat surface at the bottom all lined in shiny black marble. Below it, a warren of hexagonal firepits fit together like a beehive. Each firepit glows red, and the fires – absolutely thousands of them – are tended by an army of little vanars dressed in white. Devi watches a little girl, no older than five, run into a firepit, and she screams, but Hanuman puts his large hand over hers, and says to her, totally serious, “watch”. Sita’s convinced the beautiful little girl will emerge screaming, burnt, but she enters her mind palace, lets Bhumija take over and focuses on the warmth of Hanuman’s hand over hers. Bhumija isn’t at all concerned, Devi notices, no, Bhumija, if anything is curious, and almost anticipatory. The firepit that the girl entered glows brighter, as though the fire within were being fed. Devi wants to clench Hanuman’s hand in her own, but Bhumija only draws in a breath and forgets to release it. Then, the little girl dances out of the firepit, and she’s ablaze. She raises her arms above her head, and her friend, who has been waiting for her, screws up her own face in concentration and waves her hands at the little girl.

The fire wreathing the little girl flares as her friend sends a warm breeze careening about them. They both laugh in delight and the girl on fire jumps up and down. Bhumija releases the breath she’s been holding for Sita. Devi takes over from Bhumija again, and turns to Hanuman, amazement and question writ large on her face.

Hanuman smiles, “Stoking the Degh fires is a task for the littlest agneyas and marutis. The first test of apprenticeship for them.” the nostalgic note in his voice clues Devi into understanding that Hanuman had done this himself.

“Is that what you are, Hanuman?” she asks. “An Agneya? Or, a …maruti?”

“He is *the* Maruti” said a voice. Devi turned to see Tara, her eyes full of fire, looking at them.

“Tara, bas” Hanuman said, and his jocundity had died.

Devi bristled.

“I don’t know what any of that means, Your Majesty”, she said, and bowed stiffly. “May I have your permission to withdraw? I am tired and wish to rest”.

Devi expected Tara’s wave of dismissal, but the Vanar Queen surprised her by moving to stand closer to Sita.

“Sita” Tara said, and Devi realizes that this is the first time Tara has ever said her name. She decides to wait. “Hanuman’s been showing you the Degh.”

Devi nods, still not quite mollified.

Tara watches another young vanara leap off the edge of the Degh. “That one’s a bhukampan.” she says to Sita. “Pay attention to his feet.” Devi looks at the young vanara, he is older than the agneya girl, perhaps thirteen years old in human counting. She pays close attention to his feet. The vanar is running, so his feet pound on the earth, and for a moment, Devi doesn’t believe what she’s seeing. She looks at Tara, questioning, confirming. And Tara nods slowly and smiles. Devi turns to look at the young one again, and blinks hard. There’s no denying what she sees – every time the young vanara’s feet strike the earth,

[INSERT VERY COOL THING THAT BHUKAMPANAS DO]

Tara rings a small brass bell she carries tucked into the waistband of her saree, and her mistress of ceremonies appears behind them. Devi notes the beautiful vanari’s floating pallu and windswept hair. There is, of course, no wind within the throne room. “Maruti,” she mutters. Suvarna, with the keen hearing of all vanaras, catches this, and smiles in Sita’s direction. “Yes, Devi Janaki, I am Suvarna Windborne”. Devi inclines her head and folds her palms together in a traditional namaste.

Suvarna directs a troop of vanaris in green and white sarees balancing plates and mats and low wooden seats. Within minutes, yellow cloth is laid on the floor, and two painted wooden piris – low rectangular seats facing one another are arranged. Tara gestures at Sita, sitting cross-legged on one of the piris. Devi takes the other. A vanari appears before her, holding out a jug of water floating with petals, and receptacle, Devi washes her hands in the cool stream pouring from the jug, and the vanari’s receptacle collects the washwater. Two more vanaris appear, with laden platters, and then two by two they stream from the kitchens, holding aloft heaped serving dishes. Each goes to Tara first, and if the queen nods, they serve her. If the Queen shakes her head, they move on. Next they come to Sita. First, a tiny middle-aged vanari proferrs a cunningly divided dish of pickles and chutneys. Devi spies a brilliant red peanut garlic mix she loves, and a herby green mint and coriander chutney. She requests both and the vanari also scoops out a pungent jam, “try this one” she says, “it’s my favorite”. Devi smiles at the vanari who flashes a quick, brilliant grin and moves to serve the next person. Then Sita’s plate begins to resemble all the colors of the rainbow – yellow dal cooked with ghee and cumin seeds, mounds of fragrant rice, spicy shrimp fritters, glistening greens tossed in mustard oil and nigella seeds, sweet riverfish cooked in coconut milk, briny seafish swimming in , an. Devi waits for Tara to begin before digging in, and her whole head begins to swim in happiness

# Chapter 21

## Devi meets the Poet

There is nothing left in my head to write about, all the words and rhythms and colors, all the magics I have ever known have deserted me now. Ganesha, my friend, the Lord of Beginnings and perhaps too the Lord of stuckness comes to me. “Go to her” he says, looking at me with no expression in his elephant eyes.

I balk at the suggestion, every bit of me wants to hide from this idea, curl into itself. I cannot, will not, meet her. She’s my eldest, my first creation and upon her, I’ve visited the most terrible fates, the

# Chapter 22

## The first glimpse of Qideos

Rackham, who was driving, asks, “You’ve never seen Qideos, have you Ma’am?” Devi shakes her head, not entirely sure about the point of this line of questioning. Rackham smiles at her, a big, boyish smile that makes Devi want to trust him. How can this man who is so full of laughter be the betrayer? She almost wants him to

Qideos gleams at the end of the long causeway like a diamond pendant strung in silver. Towering over the landscape, dwarfing practically every other building in Qideos, the white marble minarets of Arjmand’s Palace rise into the sky. The main dome, curling upwards blushes pink in the setting sun, and the building’s perfection – the blank spaces, the lustrous stone, the smooth curvature — stuns Ya. She looks at Rackham, who’s watching her. “Something, eh?” he asks her, and winks. “She hasn’t let us in yet. Says only veiled women may go in or the whole thing will collapse, taking Qideos with it.”

Ya’s surprise shows in her face, it’s too “So now do you see why we need you, Lt. Ya?”

“Yes, I”

# Chapter 23

## Final Battle -Pre battle

Devi wakes up in Ram’s arms, smells his coconut-sugar scent and relaxes into the soft embrace of her bed. She’s in her bed, in Ayodhya, with Ram. She doesn’t want to get up, and she definitely doesn’t want to begin her day.

“Siya” Ram whispers, and she can see a small smile tug at the corners of his mouth, though his eyes remain closed. Ram’s features soften when he sleeps, his nose seems less aquiline, his eyes, famed for their lotus shape, are rounder. Devi loves catching him in the moments when he looks like this – softer and rounder, vulnerable and hers. Devi wriggles into his side and buries her face in him. She mumbles against his chest and Ram opens his eyes to look at her. “What?”

“I said, is it odd to be so happy? You know, when the end is so near”

In the long silence that follows, Ram kisses the top of her forehead and her eyelids, slowly and light as a feather. Then he says, “Siya, happiness is the fight. What do you think The Crown desires, more than anything?”

Veresht? Our magic?