

## Chapter 6. The Call and the First Victory

In those days in the region east of Ayodhya, the royal city, the sage Viswamitra was engaged in rigorous asceticism. He resolved upon a holy rite (*yajna*). But however often he inaugurated it, the demons desecrated it and fouled its sanctity. They showered pieces of flesh on the sacred area and made it unfit for *Vedic* ceremonies. In many other ways, they cast obstacles and halted the holy mission. Viswamitra was at his wits' end; he went to Ayodhya, to meet the ruler himself.

When reports arrived of his coming, the King sent his ministers to bring him with due honours into the palace. They welcomed him at the city gate and accompanied him right up to the palace door. At the palace, *brahmins* recited *Vedic* hymns, while Dasaratha washed his feet and, as laid down in the sacred texts and as is customary in receptions of sages, sprinkled upon his own head drops of the water so sanctified. Viswamitra was led into the inner apartments and seated on a high chair, with the members of the royal court standing reverentially round him. "This is indeed a great day!" exclaimed Dasaratha. He expressed his joy at the unexpected arrival of the holy personage and the opportunity he gained to serve and honour him. Viswamitra directed the king and the ministers to sit, and they obeyed.

The sage graciously asked about the health and welfare of the king and royal family and about the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. He asked the king whether his reign was marked by strength and security and whether his government was ensuring the continued progress of his subjects. Dasaratha replied that, as a result of the grace of God and the blessings of saints and sages, his subjects were dutifully and gladly engaged in their tasks without fear of failure and that the administration had before it the steady promotion of the people's welfare. He said that his government was serving the people in many ways to promote and preserve their happiness and security.

Dasaratha yearned to know why the sage had come. He assured him that he was ever ready to fulfil his least desire. He declared with great devotion that he would discharge earnestly any duty that the sage may cast on him. He was only waiting to know what he could do for him.

Viswamitra nodded his head in approval and turned toward Dasaratha, "I won't declare now, before you, that you are a very righteous ruler, that you revere guests and supplicants, and that you are the embodiment of faith and devotion. The happiness of the empire under your rule is enough evidence of this. The welfare of the subjects depends on the character of the rulers. People will have peace or suffer anxiety depending on whether the rulers are good or bad. Wherever I have enquired, I was told it is only in Ayodhya that we have a people full of love and loyalty to the sovereign and a sovereign full of affection and regard to his people. In every nook and corner of your kingdom, I hear this heartening news! Therefore, I know that your words come straight from the heart. I have not the least doubt; you will not deviate from your promise. You will adhere to the word once given."

These sage's words moved Dasaratha deeply. "Great people will engage themselves only in activities that help the world. And, whatever they do, they will not stray from the injunctions of the scriptures. There must be a good reason for whatever they contemplate, since they are prompted by the divine will in every act. So, I am ever willing, with all the resources at my command, to serve you and fulfil your slightest wish." Dasaratha vowed again and again to carry out the sage's command.

This made the sage very glad. "Yes! As you said, we do not emerge from our hermitages without reason. I

have come to you on a high purpose! Listening to your enthusiastic response, I am doubly happy! I am filled with joy that my errand has borne fruit. You will stand by your promise, won't you?" asked Viswamitra.

Dasaratha replied immediately. "Master! Perhaps you should ask others such a question, but Dasaratha is not a person to break the pledged word! He will give up his life rather than bring dishonour on himself, going back on his promise. What greater treasure can a monarch have than morality and integrity? They alone stand by him as sources of strength while discharging his manifold responsibilities. If these two are lost, the kingdom would become a mansion without light, a wilderness beset with apish vagaries and factional fights. It would be torn by anarchy and terror. In the end, the king would meet with disaster. I am certain that such a calamity could never overwhelm my dynasty for ages to come. Therefore, without entertaining any shadow of doubt, tell me the mission that brought you to Ayodhya, and accept the service that this devoted servant is ready to offer."

Viswamitra said, "No, no! I had no doubt in my mind. I simply uttered those words in order to hear this assertion of your steady adherence to truth! I know that the Ikshvaku rulers are intensely wedded to the duty of fulfilling the spoken word. Well! I require from you only one thing now. It is neither wealth nor vehicles, neither cows nor gold, neither regiments nor attendants. I need only two of your sons, Rama and Lakshmana, to accompany me. What do you say to this?" the sage asked.

At this, Dasaratha lost balance; he fell back and could not recover soon. Regaining his composure after some time, he gasped for courage to utter a few words. "Master! What use will those boys be to you? The mission on which you intend to take them can be better fulfilled by me, don't you think? Give me the chance. Let me make my life worthwhile. Tell me what it is; I will derive joy from it."

The sage replied, "My firm belief is that no one but these boys can fulfil this task. Only they can accomplish it; neither your millions nor even you can carry it out! Boys such as these have not been born before! Nor will such be born again! This is my conviction.

"Listen! I resolved to perform a celebrated sacrificial rite (*yajna*). But as soon as I enter upon its preliminaries, evil spirits and demons assemble from nowhere and cause sacrilegious obstruction. They cause interruptions and pile hindrances. I want these boys to ward off the demons and save the sacrificial rite from these abominations, so that I can bring it to a successful conclusion. This is my purpose, my desire. What do you say now?" asked Viswamitra, in a serious voice.

The king replied, "Master! How can these tender little boys perform such a tremendous task? I am here, most willing and ready. I will come with my chariotry, infantry, cavalry, and elephantry and guard the area of the sacrifice and your hermitage; I will see that the ritual is conducted with full success without the least interruption. I have some experience in fighting against these demoniac forces, since, as you know, I fought for the Gods against them and brought them victory. I can do it quite easily. I shall make arrangements to accompany you even now. Permit me to do so," he appealed.

The sage said, "O king! I am not satisfied in spite of all you say. I assert once again, you cannot accomplish this assignment. Don't you realise that it is beyond even me who is acclaimed as well-nigh omnipotent and omniscient? How then could you succeed? You consider these boys just ordinary children; this is a mistake resulting from the affection you have as the father. I know full well that they are the Divine Might Itself in human form. Do not hesitate. Keep your word so solemnly given and send them this very moment with me. Or else, accept that you are not true to your word, and I will depart. Do either of these, quick! This is no occasion for wavering and delay!"

The king was frightened by the sharpness of the sage's voice. He was overwhelmed by fear. In despair, Dasaratha wanted to invite his preceptor to court. Vasishtha came in and, on seeing Viswamitra, exchanged smiles and words of mutual respect with him. Vasishtha heard from the king an account of all that had happened. Of course, Vasishtha knew quite well the divine reality of the boys, so he advised the king not to have the least worry and to entrust the boys gladly to the loving custody of the sage.

Dasaratha pleaded that the boys had not kept good health for some months and that they didn't have even the physical stamina to engage in battle with the demons. "We have been concerned for a long time about their health, and now this demand comes like a jab on a painful sore. My mind does not agree in the least to send them forth to encounter the demons. I will guard my children even at the risk of my own life," lamented the king.

Viswamitra intervened. "King! Why do you foolishly lament in this manner? You should have desisted from making promises that you could not fulfil. It is an act of dark sin when a ruler makes a promise without considering the pros and cons and then, when asked to execute it, to delay, retract, and even to go counter to the promise. This is most unworthy of kings like you. I spurn the help you offer, sorrowfully. Help rendered, however small, if it comes from the deeper urges of service welling in the heart, is as good as the offer of life itself. Half-hearted and hesitating help, however great, is deplorable. I have no desire to cause pain and extract help from you. Well! Be happy with yourself and your sin, I am leaving."

Viswamitra rose and attempted to move off. The king fell at his feet and prayed for more light and more time. He asked to be taught his duty. He pleaded with the sage to convince him of the fairness of his demand, so that he could fulfil his plan.

Vasishtha counseled him. "King! You are coming in the way of an imminent cosmic revelation, a mighty fulfilment. Since your heart is affected by parental affection, the truth is veiled before you. Your sons will come to no harm. No, never. No height of heroism is beyond them. Formidable divine forces have taken these human forms for the very purpose of destroying demons and demoniac powers. So, without further delay, send for the boys. Don't calculate their physical strength or the measure of their intelligence. Calculate rather the divine that is bubbling up from them every minute of their lives. No strength can stand up to that, remember!"

After some more advice on these lines, Vasishtha sent for Rama and Lakshmana. As soon as they heard that the sages Viswamitra and Vasishtha wanted them, they rushed along and, entering the hall, bowed in reverence. First, they fell at the father's feet, then at Vasishtha's feet, and next Viswamitra's feet. With a smile playing on his lips, Viswamitra addressed the boys when they rose and stood reverentially on one side. "Boys! Will you come with me?" The boys were elated at the prospect.

On hearing this, Dasaratha was further disheartened. His face turned pale. Rama saw his father sorrowing over his approval, approached him softly, and said, "Father! Why are you sad when I am going with the great sage? Is there any better way of utilising this body than putting it at the service of others? This body has been given to us for that very purpose. To share in the holy tasks of ascetics and to be able to grant them some relief from harassment, is this not high use? There is nothing impossible for us, is there? We will destroy the demons (*rakshasas*), however fierce they may be, and bring peace to the sages. If permitted, we are ready to start off this very minute." These words, charged with courage, served to reduce Dasaratha's anxiety to some extent.

But the king was still struggling; he couldn't decide what to say. He drew Rama to himself. "Son, the demons are no ordinary foes! Reports say that among them are Sunda, Upasunda, Maricha, and Subahu. They are

atrociously cruel. Their physical appearance is indescribably horrid; you have never seen such terrifying forms. I cannot contemplate the moment when you come face to face with them. How can you battle with those tricksters, who are adepts at camouflage and physical transformations? So far, you haven't even heard the word 'battle' or seen actual combat on the field! And you are now suddenly called to fight such formidable foes! Alas! Destiny is indeed very cruel! Alas! Have my sons to face on the very threshold of their lives this monstrous ordeal?"

With these thoughts revolving in his mind, Dasaratha shed profuse tears out of the anguish of his heart. Lakshmana noticed his father's mental weakness. He said, "Father! Why these tears! We're not timid girls! The battlefield is our legitimate arena; war is our rightful duty; the safeguarding of righteousness is our genuine responsibility. The service of sages and the maintenance of moral codes are our very breath. I am surprised you are sad that we go on such a glorious errand! The world will laugh at you for this display of weakness. Send us with your love and blessings. I will accompany my brother and return with the glory of victory."

Rama saw his father overpowered by affection for him; he moved toward the throne and held his hand lovingly. "Father! It appears you have forgotten who you are. Remember who you are, in which royal family immortalised by which forefathers you were born, and how much fame they had attained. Then you won't weep as you are doing now. You took birth in the Ikshvaku dynasty. Till this day, you spent your years as the very embodiment of *dharma*. The three worlds have acclaimed you as the dutiful observer of vows, as the guardian and practitioner of *dharma*, and as the most redoubtable hero on the battlefield, as well as elsewhere.

"You are aware that there is no greater sin than retracting the word once given. Going back on the word you have given to the sage will tarnish your fair fame. Your sons cannot tolerate this ill fame. When you cannot act according to your word, you can have no share in the merit of the sacrifices performed by you or even of the beneficial acts done by you, like digging wells and planting trees. Why dilate? We, your sons, feel that it is a mark of disgrace for which we have to bend our heads, even to listen to the talk that Dasaratha broke his plighted word. This is an indelible blot on the reputation of the dynasty itself. Your affection for your sons is blind; it is not based on discrimination. It will bring on us punishment, not protection. If you are really moved by affection toward us, shouldn't you pay attention to the promotion of our fame?"

"Of course, we are in no position to advise you. You know all this. Your affection has drawn you into this miasma of ignorance and has made it difficult for you to recognise your duty. As for us, we haven't the slightest shred of fear. The bride of victory will certainly espouse us. Don't hesitate, but bless us and entrust us to the sage." Rama pleaded thus and, bending his head low, touched the father's feet.

Dasaratha drew Rama near and fondled his head. "Son! All you have said is true. Your words are gems of great worth. I am not a fool to deny them. I will proceed this moment with my four-winged army and protect the sacrificial ceremony of this sage at the cost of all that I possess. But my mind does not accept the proposal to send you, just now being trained in the arts of war and weaponry, into the arms of those demons. No father will knowingly offer his sons into the tiger's paw. And, is it right for you to plunge us into the flames of grief? We gained you through austerity and fostered you as the very breath of our lives. Alas! What can anyone do when destiny itself is against us? I won't blame you or anyone else; it is the consequence of the sins I myself committed."

Dasaratha bewailed thus, with his hand upon his head. Rama broke into a smile. "Father! What is this weakness? You speak of thrusting us into the tiger's mouth. Haven't you realised yet that we are not goats to be so offered? Believe us to be lion cubs, send us on this sacred task with your blessings. Kings must not delay sacred

tasks!”

Hearing Rama’s rather sharp remarks, Vasishta rose, saying, “Excellent! Dasaratha! Did you hear the lion’s roar? Why the jackal howl hereafter? Arise! Send a message to the mothers and fetch them; place your sons at the service of Viswamitra.”

Dasaratha felt he could do nothing else but obey; he sent word for the queens come.

The queens came with veils over their heads; they touched the feet of the sages and of Dasaratha and then moved toward the children and stood by their side, fondling with loving fingers the crown of their heads. Vasishta spoke first. “Mothers! Our Rama and Lakshmana are ready to leave with Viswamitra in order to guard his rite (*yajna*) from interference and obstruction by demoniac hordes; bless them before they leave.”

Kausalya raised her head in surprise, saying: “What? Are these saplings to guard and protect the rite that the great sage is celebrating? I have heard that the *mantras* themselves with their divine potency will be the best armour; how can a mere mortal dare take upon himself the burden of saving the rite from harm. The responsibility for the successful conclusion of the rite lies on the rectitude of the participating priesthood.”

This appeared to Vasishta as correct, but he thought it best to shed a little more light on the situation. “Kausalya! Mother! Viswamitra’s rite (*yajna*) is no ordinary one! Many obstacles are affecting it and creating anxiety.”

Vasishta was continuing with his explanation when Kausalya intervened, “I am really amazed to hear that anxiety overshadows the rituals performed by sages. I believe that no power can stand against any sacred resolve. The sage is nursing this desire and craving its fulfilment in order to manifest the supreme light and peace; that is my surmise. He might have put forward this request in order to test the king’s attachment to his children. Or else, how can we believe that these tiny sprouts of tenderness will guard from harm the rite that this sage, endowed with all mystic and mysterious powers, is proposing to celebrate?”

While Kausalya was saying this, her hand caressing Rama’s head, Dasaratha, who was listening to her talk, suddenly realised the truth in a flash and arrived at a bold decision. He said, “Yes! Kausalya’s words convey authentic truth. This is but a plan to test me; I am certain about it. Master! How can I, a weakling, encounter your test? I will abide by your wish, whatever it is!” With these words, Dasaratha fell at Vasishta’s feet.

Vasishta looked at him and said, “*Maharaja!* You have proved yourself worthy. These boys are not of common stamp. Their skills and capacities are limitless. We know this. Others do not know. This occasion is but the inauguration of their triumphal march; it is the prologue to the history of their victorious career. It is the taking on by them of the vow of the guardianship of righteousness (*dharma-rakshana*). They will return soon with the bride of victory. Therefore, without further thought, hand them over gladly to Viswamitra.”

Vasishta called the boys to his side and, placing his auspicious palm on their heads, recited some hymns that pronounced his blessings on them. The boys fell at their mothers’ feet and received their blessings. Then they stood, ready to depart.

Dasaratha noticed the glow of joy and courage on their faces and suppressed the grief that was surging within him. He placed his hands on the boys’ shoulders. Then he went to Viswamitra, fell at his feet, and said, “These two, Oh master, are from this day your sons; their health and happiness are dependent on you; if you order a few personal guards accompany them, I will gladly comply.”

Viswamitra burst into laughter. “O! King, you are really insane! Can anyone guard them, these heroes who are coming to free the rite from obstruction? Do they need any? They are out to guard the rite, which we cannot guard; do such mighty heroes need someone to protect them? Of course, your affection has blinded you. King! I will bring them with me when the task for which I am taking them is accomplished. Don’t worry. Rule over the kingdom without injustice or interruption.”

Viswamitra rose, and everyone offered reverential obeisance to the great sage. He walked out of the hall first, with the two princes following. As soon as they reached the main gate of the palace, people heard heavenly drums and clarions resounding from the sky. A shower of flowers rained upon them. As they moved along, the music of conches rose from every doorstep; the peal of trumpets was heard from every few yards of the road. They appeared to men, women, and children, to the citizens of all ages, as two cubs trotting behind an elderly lion. No one knew why the princes were walking barefoot and leaving the palace with the celebrated sage, so each one started asking his neighbour what their mission was. The ministers, courtiers, and citizens accompanied them only as far as the city gate, for that was the royal command. There, they bade farewell to the princes and turned back.

They continued their journey, with Viswamitra leading the way, Rama close behind, and Lakshmana bringing up the rear. They saw the lines of charming trees on both sides of the track; they filled themselves with the beauty of nature revealing itself before their eyes. When they had trekked some distance, they entered a jungle devoid of human habitation. Viswamitra told Rama and Lakshmana to wear wrist guards and finger guards of leather from then on. He asked them to take on hand the bows slung on the shoulder and hold them in readiness. Thus equipped, they moved along the silent terror-striking forest, through the tangled bushes, fearless and effulgent, as if they were the monarchs of the region.

### **The lesson for the world**

Soon, they reached the river Sarayu. The sun was preparing to set, so Viswamitra called to Rama and Lakshmana and spoke to them softly and sweetly.

“Darlings! Go to the river without further delay and do the ceremonial washing of hands and feet. I will now impart to you two mystic *mantras* that form the crown jewels of all *mantras*. They are named strength and super strength (*bala* and *athibala*). They are both charged with tremendous power. They will restore freshness to you, however exhausted you may be; they will prevent exhaustion, however heavily you exert yourselves; they will not allow illness to approach you; they will save you from demonic forces. Whenever you are journeying, they will, if you recollect them, keep hunger and thirst away, bestow exhilarating health, and shower joy and enthusiasm. They will strengthen limbs and minds. Rama! These two *mantras* are supreme over all others; they are more effulgent and efficacious than the rest.”

Viswamitra expatiated upon the potency of the *mantras* for a long time. Rama didn’t need to be told of them; he listened with apparent surprise and with wonder-filled eyes. Meanwhile, Lakshmana was watching both the sage and Rama, laughing within himself!

This incident is a good lesson for the world, wherein Rama had come to revive *dharma*. Rama taught this lesson by his behaviour, rather than by words. “Illusion (*maya*) is inescapable for anyone, however great; it will turn them upside down in a moment, it will not loosen its grasp as long as the victim is engrossed in the belief that he is the ‘body’; it will not be frightened by the name or fame, the skill or intelligence of the person it seeks to pos-

sess. Only when the individual discards name and form, releases itself from body consciousness, and establishes itself in the *Atma* can the individual escape from the misconception that illusion inflicts.”

This was that lesson! For note this! Viswamitra had these two powerful *mantras* in his control; he had accumulated a great store of spiritual treasure; he had realised, in spite of his own far-famed resources, that Rama alone had the might needed to outwit and destroy the demonic hordes intent on disrupting the rite he was set on celebrating; he had counseled Dasaratha against overaffection toward the son, blinding him to the divine majesty of Rama; he had announced that Rama was the guardian of the entire world; he believed that there was no height of heroism that Rama could not reach. Yet he was preparing to initiate those very princes into some mystic *mantras*, as if they were children of common stock. Surely, Viswamitra was shackled by illusion (*maya*)! He had yielded to the delusion of judging by apparent attributes.

Rama laid bare the strength of the stranglehold of illusion on the sage. For it was He who had shrouded Viswamitra’s mind and made him enter proudly upon these initiation rites! Rama and Lakshmana finished their ablutions in the river, as directed by Viswamitra. The sage initiated Rama into the two *mantras*. Rama pronounced the formulae after the teacher and nodded his head, as a novice should do when a *mantra* is taught. Lakshmana did the same. They bowed their heads as if they had agreed to be Viswamitra’s “disciples”.

### **Siva’s hermitage**

Soon it became dark, and the brothers arranged beds from the grass that grew thick on the ground. After they lay down, Viswamitra sat by their side and related tales of olden times. Soon the boys appeared as if they had gone to sleep, apparently as a result of the exhaustion of tramping long distances on foot. Viswamitra stopped his story and was lost in thought about his own destiny and destination.

Daylight broke across the land. Multicoloured birds flitted from branch to branch on the tree under which the two brothers were sleeping, singing sweetly, as if they were intent on awakening Rama and Lakshmana! To the ear, it was the music of aerial minstrels. But they could not rouse the sleepers! Viswamitra accosted Rama and announced the arrival of dawn. “Awake,” he said. Rama sat up; he awakened Lakshmana, who was in bed by his side, and both fell at the sage’s feet.

They finished their morning ablutions in the Sarayu river; they took the sacred water in their palms and let it down again, uttering hymns in praise of the goddess of the river. Then, they bathed in the river and performed the early morning (*sandhya*) rite, involving the recitation of the *Gayatri mantra*. Soon they got ready for the journey and stood before the sage with arms folded. Viswamitra asked, “Dear ones! Now we can move toward our hermitage, can’t we?”

Rama replied, “We await your command!” So, they started walking, with the sage in front and the brothers behind. Soon, they reached the confluence of the Sarayu and Ganges (Ganga) rivers. The brothers prostrated before the holy river and cast their eyes all around the holy spot. They saw a hermitage, with heavenly vibrations pervading the surroundings. It struck them as very ancient and full of hoary associations.

Lakshmana asked the sage, “Master! Who lives in that holy hermitage? What is the name of the great personage who dwells there?”

The sage smiled at the inquiry and said, “Dear ones! God Siva came here long ago with His divine attendants, to engage in austerities prior to His wedding Parvathi. While He was fulfilling His divine obligations from

here, Manmatha (the God of Love) obstructed the spiritual practices and caused anger to sprout in the divine heart. He opened His third eye, which threw such searing flames that Manmatha was burned to ash. His body was destroyed, so he is now known as ‘limbless (*an-anga*)’. The word for a limb is *anga*; since Manmatha lost his limbs here, in this region, this part of the country has been known ever after as Anga! This is a rich region.

“This hermitage was used by Siva and has been used by generations of His devotees, each of whom has merged in Him as the fruit of arduous asceticism. This hermitage accepts as residents only strict followers of the *dharmic* path. If you want, we will spend the night here and start out again, after a bath in the Ganga.”

Rama and Lakshmana could not contain their delight with Viswamitra’s proposal. They said, “We’re very happy” and accepted the idea. They bathed in the holy Ganga. Meanwhile, the news that Viswamitra was available near their residences and had with him two heroic sons of the emperor spread wide, and many rushed to welcome them and receive them in their own hermitages.

That night, the sage and the princes stayed at Siva’s ashram. They fed on fruits and roots and watched the activities of the hermitage with interest. The princes listened to the stories narrated by Viswamitra; time floated fast in that flood of bliss. When day dawned, they had their bath and ablutions and lovingly took leave of the hermits. Then they walked on, the two disciples following the *guru*. They had to cross the Ganga river, so some people rowed them across and set them on the other bank. Then the people reverentially bade farewell and fell at Viswamitra’s feet before returning. Viswamitra was gratified at this act of hospitality; he appreciated the depth of their devotion and their sense of surrender; he allowed them to depart, loaded with blessings.

### **The story of Malada and Karosa**

Just then, a noise as of a rumbling subterranean flood sweeping over the land battered their ears. They saw the waters of the river raging and rising, with long chains of white foam on the crest of the waves. Rama asked, “Master! Why has the angry flood filled the basin so suddenly, and how could the waves surge so fast and so high?”

The sage replied, “Rama! The full and furious Sarayu falls into the calm quiet Ganga at this place; hence this reverberation and this rumbling!” The sage uttered these words coolly and casually. It was a familiar scene for him. He continued, “Rama! In ages gone by, on one occasion, Brahma willed, and a great lake was immediately formed near Mount Kailas. This is known as Manasa-Sarovar, meaning lake (*sarovar*) of the mind (*manasa*). The gods named it so. When the snows melt and the rains fall, the lake gets overfull, and the flow out of the lake becomes the Sarayu river, running by the side of Ayodhya toward the Ganga. The Sarayu is sacred, because the waters rise from the lake willed by Brahma Himself.” They proceeded on their way listening to the thrilling stories that lighted every river and spot of land.

Now they entered a thick dark forest. It aroused a sense of terror. Rama asked the master, “Why is there no sign of humans having ever traversed this forest!” Before he could get the answer, an eerie succession of roars from the angry throats of a huge herd of animals —tigers, lions, leopards and a host of lesser wild life— captured their attention. It appeared as if the earth was being torn asunder! They also saw wild animals engaged in mortal fight, some running into thickets, away from the scene of violent death. The forest was the home of close-grown trees that reached the skies and spread their shades thick over the ground —the banyan, the deodar, the pine, the holy fig.



There was no path to guide their feet, and they had to clear a track for progress. Lakshmana could not contain his curiosity. He asked Viswamitra, “Master! Who rules this fearful forest? What is its name?”

The master replied, “Lakshmana! Where this jungle has grown were formerly two little kingdoms, Malada and Karosa. They shone like the region of the gods; in fact, people spoke of the area as having been specially created and fostered by the gods. They relate a story about the place. When the god Indra killed Vritra, Indra suffered contamination of sin and consequently was stricken with insatiable pain of hunger. He was brought in that pathetic condition by the sages to this region and given a bath in the holy Ganga. Afterward, they poured pots and pots of Ganga water on His head, uttering all the while holy hymns and formulae. With that, the sin (of killing a person of high caste) was washed away.

“Brahma was delighted that the contamination (*mala*) as well as the pangs of hunger ended. So, He named these kingdoms Malada and Karosa. The kingdoms rose to fame with his blessing. The gods willed that the two areas be resplendent with grain and gold and with all means of plenty and prosperity.

“Meanwhile, a cruel ogress named Thataki appeared in this region and started laying waste the rich and peaceful land. She was a *Yakshini*, who could transform herself into any form she liked. It is rumoured that even as she was born, she was endowed with the prowess of a thousand elephants! She brought forth a son named Maricha. He had the might and heroism of Indra himself. Together, mother and son caused tremendous havoc and disaster. The jungle in which that vile ogress lives is thirteen and a half miles from here. She reduced these wealthy valleys, Malada and Karosa, to this dreaded wilderness.

“The cultivators of its fertile fields fled in terror at her approach, so the jungle crept on and on. The thickly populated cities and villages were deserted and ruined, leaving no trace of human habitation. She couldn’t be captured or destroyed, for she could escape from all attempts to destroy her. No one has yet dared to put an end to her depredations. I can’t think of anyone except you (yes, my deepest intuition says so), no one except you can destroy this monster, who has such overwhelming might. This vicious mother and son lead and guide the demons to disrupt and pollute the hermits’ rites and sacred rituals.”

Viswamitra’s words moved Rama’s feelings. He could not contain within himself the anger that surged up. With great humility and reverence, he said, “O great among ascetics! I have heard that the *Yakshas* are of poor might; besides, this Thataki is a female, of the weaker sex; how could she terrorise entire populations so? Where did she get all this power? How could she reduce this region to rack and ruin when it was blessed by Brahma and the gods? This is indeed astounding. It is beyond belief.”

Viswamitra said, “Rama! I will explain. Listen! There was, in the past, a *Yaksha* named Sukethu. He was as rich in virtues as in prowess. He had no child to succeed him, so he practised severe austerities to propitiate the Gods and receive their blessings. At last, Brahma was pleased with his austerity and He appeared before him. He blessed him that He will get a daughter, with extraordinary strength, cleverness, and skill. Sukethu was elated at this boon, though it was to be a daughter, not a son.

“Sukethu returned, and a daughter was born to him, as anticipated. The child grew fast and strong. Though she was of the weaker sex, through the grace of Brahma, she had the might of a thousand elephants; she moved about with no law or limit, as if she owned all she saw! She was a very charming girl, so Sukethu sought far and wide for an equally charming groom. Finally, he found Sunda and gave her in marriage to him. Three years later, she gave birth to a son, Maricha, about whom I told you. Mother and son have become invincible in combat.

“Sunda, her husband, started off on his demonic adventures and attempted to ruin the rites (*yajnas*) of sages. He incurred the wrath of the great Agastya, who hurled a curse on the vile fellow, killing him and saving the sages from further grief. In revenge, Thataki and her son fell upon Agastya’s hermitage. Agastya had forewarning of this attack, so he cursed them both to be reduced to the status of ogres. This enraged them more, and they roared abuses and advanced frightfully with blood-red eyes against him! Agastya felt that delay would be dangerous; he cursed Thataki that she should lose her charm and become an ugly fright! He willed that she become a cannibal! She was not subdued by the curse but continued the attack with renewed ferocity. But Agastya escaped from the ravage and went to a safer place. Angered by this disappointment, Thataki spent her ire on this region (Malada and Karosa) destroying crops and gardens and reducing it to a big jungle.”

### **Rama kills Thataki**

When this tale was told, Rama said, “Master! Since she was born as a consequence of Brahma’s boon, and as a gift for austerity, she had all these skills and strength. She misused them, drawing upon herself the wrath and the curse. The sin of killing a woman is, as mentioned in the scriptures, very heinous, isn’t it? Agastya must have let her off with the curse of ugliness for this very reason. Or else, couldn’t the great sage who caused the husband to die kill the wife also? I have heard that warriors should not be so mean as to kill women. Tell me what I should do now; I am prepared to obey.”

Viswamitra was happy that Rama put forth these qualms dictated by *dharma*. “I’m not ignorant of the fact that killing a woman is a heinous sin. Nevertheless, the protection of spiritually progressive people —the *brahmins*, the virtuous— as well as cows is important. *Dharma* is intertwined with these three. There is no sin when the act is done for the promotion of *dharma* and the removal of wickedness (*a-dharma*). Don’t you know the dictum, ‘*dharma* saves those who save it (*dharmo rakshathi rakshithah*)’? This is not violence used for one’s aggrandisement.

“I assure you: When violence is used for preserving the peace and prosperity of the world, it cannot draw down any bad reaction. Moreover, creation, preservation, and dissolution are expressions of divine law; they happen according to divine will and are not bound by the whims of people. You are divine manifestations. You have the authority and the duty. No dirt can stick to fire; so too, no sin can contaminate the divine. The will that creates, the obligation that protects, can also carry out the duty to punish.

“The punishment that awaits the sins of the mother and her son cannot be avoided; it must be considered fortunate for Thataki to end her life at your hands today, before she adds to the heap of sins for which she has to suffer much. You will only be serving her best interests and the interests of the country. It is neither wrong nor sinful. To entertain feelings of compassion now would cause unlimited damage to the world; it would promote the decline of *dharma* and would help Thataki to indulge in more sins.

“Why should I dwell more on this point and relate to you a thousand arguments? I have seen all through my spiritual eye; you have incarnated in human form to destroy the demon (*rakshasas*) brood. This is your mission, your task. You have to carry it out today and throughout your career. The guardianship of *dharma* and the destruction of the demons, or people with demonic tendencies, are the very purposes that persuaded you to take birth! I knew this truth; that is why I rushed to you for help. Why else should I seek your support and service?

“Hermits, anchorites, and those performing austerities in forest retreats entreat the help of the rulers of the

land for the sake not of themselves but of the whole world. They give up attachment and sustain themselves on the roots and fruits gathered by them; after some months or years of the regimen, they harden their lives even more, so that they may lose body consciousness and merge in the Light. Why should such people worry over what happens to the world? But the wise, the realised, besides saving themselves by the illumination of revelation, try to tell others the path they have trodden, the glory of the goal they have reached, to persuade others to practise the disciplines that made them ready to receive the truth.

If the wise cared only for themselves and their liberation what would happen to the world? People would descend further into iniquity, that is all. *Dharma* would be submerged. Hermits keep up relationship with the world for this reason, not for quenching any private craving of theirs. They live as the lotus on water. They may be entangled in the world, for all appearances, but they have no attachment with the world. They will not allow the world to tarnish them. Their aim is one and one only: the progress and welfare of the world. They attend only to the fostering of *dharma*. They depend only on God.”

When Viswamitra bared the truth in these words, Rama responded as if he was a novice, unacquainted with all that he had heard. He said: “The world will not understand that the words of hermits and sages have holy significances embedded in them. I interrogated you on the morality of this act so that we may know how you elaborate on the justice of the act. Do not read any other meaning into my question. My father, Dasaratha, told me to obey Viswamitra, the sage, and do what he commands. I wish to follow my father’s orders.

“You are a great sage (*rishi*). You have undergone severe austerities. When such as you declare that Thataki can be killed without incurring sin and that the act is just and moral, I know I do not commit wrong. I am ready to carry out any task you impose on me for fostering *dharma* and for promoting the welfare of the people.”

So saying, he held the bow in his hand and tested the tightness of the string, producing a sound that echoed and re-echoed from the ten directions. The entire jungle was awakened; wild animals fled far and wide. Thataki was shocked by the unusually loud and awesome sound; she was inflamed with rage at this disturbing phenomenon. She rushed toward the place wherefrom it emanated!

Rama saw the monster move toward him like a mountain lurching or a huge wild elephant charging. He smiled and told Lakshmana, “Brother! Look at this mass of ugliness! Can common people survive the sight of this devilish personality? The very appearance is terrible! What are we then to say of its might? And it is a woman! My mind does not fully cooperate with me when I resolve to kill it! I believe this monster will die if its hands and legs are cut apart; that may be enough to destroy it.”

Thataki rushed toward Rama with outstretched arms, so she could grasp him and put him into her mouth like a piece of cake! She was roaring wildly and in terror-striking excitement. Viswamitra was praying, with eyes closed, that the brothers would not suffer harm in this combat. Thataki moved nearer and nearer to Rama, but with greater and greater reluctance, for, in his presence, she felt a strange kind of shock. Once or twice, she went near Rama, but she had to retreat fast. She jumped about in fury, angry at herself! The dust kicked up by her rendered the area dark and suffocating.

Rama, Lakshmana, and Viswamitra stood silent and inactive for a while. Thataki was adept in the art of delusion and destruction. She created a heavy rain of rocks. Rama now decided that the ogress should no longer be allowed to live on earth; she could not be pardoned on the score of femininity! So, he drew his bow and shot an arrow at the body of the invisible Thataki, identifying exactly where it was at the time. At this, she rushed once

again at Rama. Her two arms were cut down by his arrows. She fell on the ground, crying in agony and pain. Lakshmana cut off her limbs, one by one.

But Thataki could adopt form after form, as she liked. And she gave up one form and assumed another quickly and reappeared fresh and furious before them! She pretended to be dead, but soon came up alive! She adopted a variety of forms at the same time and started her old trick of the shower of rocks. She exhibited her wicked talents and evil tricks. Rama and Lakshmana received a few injuries, however watchful they were.

Seeing this, Viswamitra felt that there should be no more delay; she must be killed straightaway. “Rama,” He said. “Don’t hesitate. This is not the moment to consider her womanhood and show concessions. Removal of her limbs will not benefit. As long as there is life, these demons (*rakshasas*) can adopt any number of forms. Kill her! When evening approaches, her dark rage will swell even more. After sunset, it becomes impossible to encounter demons, whoever might attempt to do so. She must be destroyed within the hour.” Viswamitra uttered some sacred *mantras* to ensure protection and great safety.

Rama too directed his own thoughts. Through his power to guide arrows in the direction from where the sound emanates, he recognised where Thataki was and shot an arrow fast at that target. The arrow had the effect of binding her limbs, preventing her from making the slightest movement. Thataki shrieked ferociously and, putting out her terrible tongue, attempted to fall on Rama and Lakshmana and crush them under her weight. Rama decided that delay would invite worse consequences. He shot a fatally sharp arrow into Thataki’s chest, and she rolled on the ground and gave up her life.

The earth showed a huge crater where she fell. Trees were uprooted by the impact of the gigantic mass when she rolled in agony. Her last gasp of breath was so weird and loud that the wild beasts of the forest fled; herds of animals ran helter skelter.

When the awful demoness fell dead, Viswamitra called Rama near and, stroking his hair lovingly, said, “Son, were you afraid? No! No! How can the saviour of all the worlds be afraid? This feat is the foundation stone; it ensures the stability of the mansion. Come, you are tired. The sun too has set. Perform the evening worship and rest awhile. Come with me.” He took them to the river. Later, he told them, “Children! We’ll rest here for the night; we can proceed to our hermitage at dawn.” They spent the night listening to the stories that Viswamitra related; the master also revealed to them their own faculties and latent majesty.

### **Viswamitra offers Rama his weapons**

The dawn broke. The sage went through the morning ablutions and approached the sleeping brothers with a benign smile. He spoke softly and sweetly to them. “Rama! I am delighted at your heroism! When you were overcoming Thataki, I comprehended the truth of your being the Absolute. Really, I’m very fortunate.”

Viswamitra shed tears of joy. He held forth all the mystic weapons he possessed, and the *mantras* that shaped and sustained them, and, in a swift act of dedication he placed them all in Rama’s hands. “I have no authority to wield these weapons; of what avail are they for me, even if I have them in my possession? You are the master and wielder of all weapons. They too will be most pleased when they are with you for they can fulfil their destiny best while with you. Note this! From this moment, all the weapons I commanded so far shall be your instruments, available for the mission on which you have come.” He poured holy water with appropriate *mantras*, indicative of an irrevocable surrender of their ownership.

Thus, he offered Rama the mace weapon of punishment, the weapon of justice, the weapon of time, Indra's missile, the thunderbolt missile, the Siva-inspired trident, the principal missile of Brahma, the Siva weapon, and the most mighty and destructive of all, Brahma's weapon (the *danda-chakra*, *dharmachakra*, *kalachakra*, *Indra-asthra*, *vajra-asthra*, *trisula*, *Brahma-sira-asthra*, *aikshika-asthra*, *Brahma-asthra*).

Viswamitra sat silent for a while, with his eyes closed. He rose with the words, "Now, what have I to do with these two?" And he gave Rama two powerful maces, *Modaki* and *Sikhari*. He said, "After reaching our ashram, I will bring out other weapons too —the fire (*agni*) missile, the poison (*krauncha*) missile, the Narayana missile, the wind-blowing (*vayu*) missile, and others. Son, all these weapons are at the beck and call of the master; they are amazingly overpowering."

Thus saying, he whispered into Rama's ear the mystic formulae to materialise, activate, and direct them toward the targets with incalculable fury. He asked him to recite the formulae under his supervision. Before long, Rama was able to visualise the deities presiding over each of the divine missiles and weapons and receive their grateful homage. Each deity presented itself before Rama and fell prostrate before him. Each one said, "Rama! We are your servants from this moment. We vow and affirm that we will abide by your commands." Then they disappeared, awaiting further summons.

Rama was glad at this development; he touched the sage's feet, saying, "Master, your heart is the treasure chest of renunciation. You are, I realise, the divine embodiment of detachment (*thyaga*) and *yoga* (conquest of the senses). Would anyone else renounce and gift away such an array of potent hard-won weapons? Master! Please delight me by counseling the manner in which I can withdraw the weapons after they have wrought the intended havoc. You taught me the formulae for unleashing them. I want to know how I can recover them."

Viswamitra was elated. "These forces and weapons —called *Sathyakirithi*, *Drishta*, *Rabhasa*, *Pitrusomasa*, *Krishana*, *Virasya*, *Yougandha*, *Vidhutha*, *Karaviraka*, *Jrimbhaka*, *Vairagyam*, *Padmanabha*, *Sunabham*, *Dashaksham*, *Shathodharam*, and *Rutharam*— are automatically recoverable by the exercise of the will of the bowman using them, expressed through *mantras* that I communicate to you now." He then initiated him into these formulae. When they were pronounced, the deities so propitiated appeared and prostrated before their new master. Rama told them that they have to be ready when called and that they could meanwhile be at ease.

### **Viswamitra performs the religious rite**

Viswamitra then proposed to resume the journey, and the three of them started walking. A little distance later, they entered a region of high-peaked hills, and their eyes fell on a charming garden, whose fragrance welcomed them and refreshed their bodies and minds. The brothers were curious to know who owned the lovely spot and asked the sage to enlighten them.

Viswamitra replied, "Son, this is the holy area that the gods choose when they come down on earth to practise austerity for the success of their desires. The great Kasyapa did penance here and won his goal. The place confers victory on all holy efforts. So it is named *Siddhasram*, the hermitage of achievement! I took residence here myself, with the intention of cultivating dedication and surrender. This hermitage is the target of attack for demons who intercept and befoul every holy rite done here. You have to destroy them when they attempt their nefarious tactics."

So saying, Viswamitra entered that heartwarming seat of peace. He placed his arm on Rama's shoulder ca-

ressingly, saying, “This hermitage (*ashram*) is as much yours from today as it was mine until now.” The hoary sage shed tears of gratification as he uttered those words.

Even as they stepped into *Siddhasram*, the residents ran forward with eager haste to wash the master’s feet and offer water for ablutions to Rama and Lakshmana. They scattered flowers along the path toward the *ashram* and led them to the door. They offered them fruits and sweet cool drink. They proposed that Rama and Lakshmana rest in a cottage specially allotted to them and made ready for their use.

Rama and Lakshmana did accordingly, and after the rest, which refreshed them a great deal, they washed their feet and faces and came to the Sage Viswamitra, to know his instructions. They stood before the teacher with arms folded and said, “Master! Can the rite (*yajna*) that you have willed to perform be inaugurated tomorrow?”

Viswamitra was elated at this query and replied, “Yes! Everything is ready! In this *Siddhasram*, it is so always. There is no need to wait for preparations to be completed. We are always ready. I will take the prescribed vow when dawn breaks tomorrow.” The news spread, and everyone set about the task of collecting everything necessary for the great event.

Dawn broke. Viswamitra took the vow of initiation and the rite began. The two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, with bows and arrows, stood guard like the gods Skanda and Visakha, resolutely determined to encounter all who attempted to interfere with its due performance. Since it was improper to speak to Viswamitra while he was engaged in the sacrificial ceremony, Rama gestured to the other participants to find out when and from where the demon horde could be expected. They could only answer, “It isn’t possible to say when and from where! The demons have no regular timings and could attack any moment. Who can predict the time of their onslaught?” The hermits spoke to Rama about the demons, each according to his estimate of their character and habits.

Rama was delighted at their replies; he decided that the wise course was to be ever vigilant and ready to beat back the demon forces that attempted to frustrate the sacred ceremonies. He alerted his brother. They watched the four quarters carefully and paid attention to the slightest sound indicative of approaching danger. Recognising their bravery and earnestness, the ascetics derived vast joy and wonder, for they were of tender age and lovely complexion, barely out of the stage of boyish pranks!

For five days and nights the brothers kept unremitting guard over the sacrificial site and the hermitage without a wink of sleep or a moment of rest. The sixth day started on the same routine. Viswamitra was engaged in the rite, immersed in the ritual exactitude of each item of the ceremony. The reciters of hymns (*rithwiks*) and other participants were engaged in their tasks of recitation and oblations.

Suddenly, they were astounded by a thunderous noise that broke from the sky, as if the firmament itself was exploding into fragments! Fire emanated from everything on the sacrificial platform —the kusha grass, the plates and cups, the holy vessels holding ritual objects, the dry sticks that had to be offered in the holy ritual fire, the flowers, the *kumkum*, and other auspicious articles collected for the sake of worshiping gods! The flames rose on all sides!

Soon, the sky was overcast by dark fearsome clouds, and the bright day became a night of pitch darkness. Mysterious evil fumes spread fast toward the place where the rite was being performed! The sinister clouds started raining blood, and the drops when they fell were welcomed by tongues of flame that rose to receive them!

Rama and Lakshmana sought to locate the enemy demons amidst the phantasmagoria of cruelty and hate.

Rama, through His divine vision, knew where the leading ogres, Maricha and Subahu, were, and he released the mind (*manasa*) arrow in that direction. It struck Maricha's breast, stopping any further mischief from him. Next he shot the fire weapon (*agni-astra*) at Subahu, and it lodged in his heart. Rama understood that if their corpses dropped on the holy region the hermitage itself would be polluted. To prevent that sinful contact, Rama's arrows carried the vicious bodies hundreds of miles afar and cast them into the ocean! Maricha and Subahu shrieked and groaned in unbearable agony and struggled desperately amidst the waves, but they did not die.

The other leaders of the demon hordes fled for their lives beyond the horizon. Lakshmana said that it wasn't advisable to allow any demon to survive, however cowardly they might appear, for they would soon return to their wicked practices. So, he prompted Rama to kill off the entire gang. The hermits who watched this great act of heroism were elated with admiration; they believed that the brothers were really Siva Himself, in His terror-striking, boon-conferring form. They bowed in reverence to them—in their own minds, for the brothers were too young to accept their homage.

In a moment, the forest put on the vesture of brightness and joy. Amidst all the distractions, Viswamitra continued steadily and without interruption the meditation on the deities and the recitation of the holy hymns that were enjoined for the rite! He never made even the slightest movement of body or mind; such was the depth of his concentration. The valedictory offering in the sacred fire was fulfilled with correctitude and thankfulness.

Then, Viswamitra came smiling to Rama and Lakshmana. "O praiseworthy heroes! You brought victory to my vow! Through you, I have realised my life's desire. The name of this ashram has been justified; it has become truly the hermitage of achievement!" The sage shed tears of joy and fondled and caressed the boys. He proceeded toward the hermitage with his hands on Rama's and Lakshmana's shoulders; there, he gave them the share of the holy offerings made at the sacrificial fire. He asked them to retire and refresh themselves with a little rest.

Though the fulfilment of the purpose for which they had been brought was itself the most effective restorative for their limbs and minds, they felt that it would be improper to discard the command of the master, so they retired and slept soundly a long while. The master removed himself to another thatched cottage, to ensure undisturbed sleep for them; he also instructed some men to keep guard so that no one unwittingly created noise that might awaken them. While the brothers slept, Viswamitra exalted over the successful conclusion of the rite (*yajna*) and the divine prowess of Rama and Lakshmana.

Rama and Lakshmana woke up and, after washing their faces, hands, and feet, came through the door to find the boys of the hermit families keeping guard, lest their sleep be disturbed! They were informed that the master was conversing with the ascetics in another cottage. So, they moved thither and fell at the sage's feet. Rising, they stood with arms folded and said, "Great teacher! If these servants of yours have to do any other task, please inform us and we shall gladly carry it out."

At this, an ascetic from the group stood up and addressed them, "With the destruction of the demons, everything has been accomplished. What else is there to be done? The desire entertained for years by the Master has been fulfilled. Nothing higher is needed. You two are of the form of Siva-Sakthi. That is how you appear to our eyes. You are no common mortals. Our good fortune has given us this chance to see you. Our gratitude knows no bounds." At this, the residents touched the feet of Rama and Lakshmana.