

Chapter 2. Panchavati

Lakshmana's sense of duty

Rama wanted to stay at Panchavati on the Godavari for some length of time. So, reclining under the cool shade of a spreading tree, Rama called his brother and said, "Lakshmana! Brother! Find a beautiful and comfortable spot in this area and build a nice little cottage there, as charming as you wish."

Lakshmana received this order as a dagger thrust! He could not bear the agony. He fell at Rama's feet, crying out in anguish: "Tell me what crime I committed to deserve this cruel command."

Sita and Rama were struck with amazement at this behaviour. Rama said, "Lakshmana! I can't understand what makes you so sad. Have you heard a single cruel word from my tongue? Have I become so insane as to utter harsh, unpleasant words to you or anyone else? You attend to my needs and wishes and serve me as the very breath of life. How then could I speak in cruel terms to you? Your grief is meaningless, mistaken. After all, what did I tell you now? I told you only this: Choose any spot you like and build a hut there for us to live in. Isn't it so?"

Lakshmana closed his ears with the palms and protested, "Rama! Rama! I can't bear to hear these words."

Rama was surprised at this gesture of grief. But Lakshmana stood before him with folded hands, supplicating with the words: "Lord! There is no one in me to say 'I'. My only treasure, my only possession, is Sita and Rama. I have no wish of my own; I have no will of my own. My wish, my will, is Rama's wish, Rama's will, Rama's command. Obeying it is my wish, my will. I am the slave who cares for nothing else. How then can I bear to listen to words that indicate that I have to choose a spot for the cottage according to my wishes? As if I had the capacity and inclination to choose! Had I preferences of my own, how could I be a fit servant of Rama? How could I deserve this privilege and pleasure? It would mean I was unfit to be alive on earth, and my life would be but a burden and a shame." Lakshmana stood, sobbing aloud, unable to stifle his grief.

Rama saw his plight and consoled him with kind words. "Brother! Your heart is highly sanctified. I used those words in the ordinary worldly sense, but don't be under the impression that your brother is unaware of your innermost quality of dedication. Don't grieve."

Rama showered His smiles on Lakshmana and continued, "Brother! I am delighted at the purity of your devotion and the genuineness of your service. Your intentions are innocent and elevating. I will not pain you by such words hereafter. I spoke to you in the language of common usage, that is all. Don't take them so much to heart. Come! Let us go and choose!"

Saying thus, He took Sita and Lakshmana with him. After traversing some distance, Rama stopped and said, "Well! Erect the hut (*parnasala*) here!"

When he heard those words, Lakshmana exclaimed in great joy. "Ah! I am blessed indeed. My duty is to carry out such commands, not to exercise my wish or will or to do anything on my own." He fell at his elder brother's feet. Rising happy and content, he began to collect branches and twigs for the hut that was to be their home.

Sita and Rama realised that Lakshmana had a highly sensitive mind, a delicately subtle intellect. They derived great joy within themselves at the recollection of the depth of his faith and devotion. Sita often confessed to

Rama that, for her, life in the forest was even more delightful than life at Ayodhya, because a brother like Lakshmana was accompanying them and serving Rama.

When Sita and Rama saw the hermitage constructed by Lakshmana, they were charmed by its beauty, its captivating simplicity and comfort, and the inspiring setting in which it shone. Sita entered the cottage and was immediately struck by the skill and artistic taste of her brother-in-law. She praised him for finishing it so quickly and with useful adjuncts and parts.

Rama constantly has visitors

The three of them spent their days happily in that cottage. News that Sri Rama had made the Panchavati his home, and that he was residing in a house of leafy thatch like their own, spread far and wide. Every day, groups of ascetics trekked there to offer their homage. They brought their pupils with them, too. They had their fill of the sight (*darshan*) of the Lord, and they had the great good fortune of speaking to Rama and being spoken to by Him. Thereafter, they left most unwillingly, praising Rama all the way back to their own hermitages.

Many others came with the intention of solving the doubts that pestered them while trying to understand the scriptures and attempting to define and interpret the codes of morality or the texts on rituals. Others prayed to Rama and sought clarification on whether their ascetic practices were correct and beneficial. Since Rama was master of all *dharmas*, and, since He knew full well all the scriptures, they derived the fullest satisfaction from His answers and directives. Each one was filled with joyous contentment.

While on the subject of questions and answers, it is best that the four grades of questions be clearly understood. Questions are generally classified into four groups: (1) trivial, (2) low, (3) passable, and (4) praiseworthy. Questions raised in order to drag another into a controversy and, later, to inflict a humiliating defeat, are trivial. Questions asked in order to demonstrate one's own cleverness and skill are "low". Questions that announce the intellectual equipment and reasoning faculty of the questioner are "passable". Questions asked with the sincere desire to remove one's doubts are "praiseworthy". It needs no mention that the sages, monks and ascetics came to Rama with only the fourth type of question.

Rama and Lakshmana were filled with delight when they saw the ascetics. Many were overcome with admiration and gratitude when they listened to the ideals propounded by Rama, so simple, so easy to grasp and realise, so truly conforming to the dictates laid down in the scriptures (*sastras*), and so free from complexity. They burst into paeans of praise and adoration. "O master supreme!" they exclaimed, "O, omniscient One, who knows the past, present, and future! Who else can be our Lord and liberator? You reside in the hearts of sages. We have secured you in our midst as a result of the austerities we have gone through. O, How fortunate we are! How our wishes have been fulfilled!" They departed from His presence most unwillingly, with tears of joy mingled with tears of grief streaming down their cheeks.

A few of them laid themselves under the shady trees a little distance from Rama's cottage, determined not to return to their hermitages. They gathered fruits and tubers from around the spot and watched out for Rama, eager for additional chances of His sight (*darshan*). When sometimes Rama came out of the cottage and walked around, they filled their eyes with the unforgettable picture, from behind some tree or bush. Thus, they spent the days in full contentment.

Rama stole the hearts of all who came into His presence; they became mad in their single-pointed devotion to

Him; they felt that contemplation of His face and repetition of His name were all the austerity they had to practise thereafter. He discoursed on *dharma* and spiritual disciplines both day and night to those who gathered around Him.

Often, He called Lakshmana to His side and told him, “Brother! Having come for this holy task, how can I stay on at Ayodhya? How can I enact the further chapters of the *Ramayana* from there? This is the purpose for which I have come. The fostering and protection of the good and the godly, the destruction of the wrong and evil that threaten the peace and welfare of the world, the promotion of righteous behaviour and activities —these will proceed from now on.” Thus, He informed his brother about what he had resolved upon and about the intent and meaning of His incarnation as man on earth.

Off and on, he raised Lakshmana to the role of a vehicle for spreading his teachings, intended for the uplift of humanity, and instructed him on the ideals of morality and progress.

Rama discourses on spiritual matters

“Lakshmana!” he said once, “Affection for the body, attachment toward possessions of any kind, egotism that breeds the conflict of ‘You’ and ‘I’, the bonds that grow between the individual and his wife, children, and property —all these are the consequences of the primal illusion (*maya*). That illusion is basic, mysterious, and wondrous. It establishes her domain over all beings and things, all species of living creatures.

“Each of the five senses of perception and five senses of action (the ten *indriyas*) has its presiding deity, and illusion (*maya*) perceives the objective world and derives pleasure therefrom through their instrumentality. Every item and particle of such pleasure is illusion-produced and is therefore illusory, evanescent, and superficial.

“Illusion has two forms. One type is called knowledge-based illusion (*vidya-maya*); the other, ignorance-based illusion (*a-vidya-maya*). The latter is very vicious; she causes boundless misery. Those drawn by it will sink into the depths of flux, the eternal tangle of joy and grief. The first kind of illusion has created the cosmos, under the prompting of the Lord; she has no innate force of her own. Only while in the presence of the Lord can she create the three-stranded cosmos (*prapancha*). (The three strands are the qualities (*gunas*) serenity, restlessness, and inertia (*sathwa, rajas, thamas*), each of which separately or in some kind of combination is characteristic of beings. *Sathwa* means the equal balanced temper; *rajas*, the sanguinary or the emotional, active temper; *thamas*, the dull, inert temper).

“The truly wise (*jnani*), who has realised the Reality, is the person who has given up the rights and obligations of caste and society, of age and status, and who lives in the constant awareness that all is Brahman. He has understood that there is no manifoldness or diversity here; it is all One. (*Sarvam khalvidham Brahma; na iha nanaasthi kinchana.*) He knows that the entire cosmos is constituted of the same Brahman, that there can be no second entity apart from Brahman.

“O Lakshmana! You must know that the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra) are but the reflections of the one Brahman in each of the three strands or attributes —serenity, restlessness, inertia (*sathwa, rajas, thamas*). The restless attribute is personified as Brahma, the serene aspect as Vishnu, and the unchanging aspect is known as Rudra or Siva or Iswara. The entire cosmos, including the world, is the manifestation of the one Brahman through one or some combination of these three attributes. So, the wise person goes beyond and beneath these three strands and seeks the origin in the One. Only such a person deserves the name monk (*vairagi*), for such a person

has no likes and dislikes, no attachment (*raga*).”

Sometimes, Rama explained to Sita and Lakshmana that as long as the individual (*jivi*) does not understand aright the affinities it has to illusion (*maya*) and to the supreme Brahman, it cannot liberate itself and merge in the Supreme; it has to remain just a particularised individual, bound by the coils of illusion to the limits of the name and form.

But Rama said, the instant the individual discovers and knows that it is but the image of the Supreme, and that the distinction between the Supreme and itself has no basis in truth, illusion will disappear, like fog before the risen sun. This is the genuine self-knowledge (*Atma-jnana*), for the Supreme is Supreme Self (*Param-atma*) and the individual is the same Supreme Self seen as an image in the body-with-name-and-form, the container (*upadhi*).

“Act in accordance with the rules of conduct laid down for the status you have risen to and the call that has come to you (your *swa-dharma*); you derive detachment thereby. Practise *yoga*, the search for union with the Supreme, and derive spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) thereby. This wisdom is the very last step in spiritual progress. It leads to consummation.

“Adoring the Supreme with the greatest possible love is called devotion (*bhakti*). I shower grace on one with such love; devotion will grant full prosperity. Devotion emanates from the heart, spontaneously. It doesn’t depend on extraneous things or persons. Devotion can also confer spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) on the person who has dedicated themselves to the Supreme. The joy that devotion endows on a person is unique and immeasurable. How does a person first decide to walk on the path of devotion? It all begins with the compassion of some one good and godly sage or realised soul. This path leads people quickly to Me.”

Listening to such discourses, Sita and Lakshmana forgot where they were and under what conditions. Rama also seemed unaware of all that happened in the enthusiasm with which He dilated on the attractions of the spiritual path. They spent long periods in introspection and exploration of inner delight.

Surpanakha falls for Lakshmana

One day, Lakshmana was ruminating on these deep truths and precious directives while keeping watch over the cottage. His eyes fell on a tiny sapling of lime, struggling upward under the shade of a huge tree. He wanted to plant it nearer the cottage and help it grow vigorously under his care. He was digging it up by the roots, with intense love and attention, when the wicked and vicious sister of Ravana, Surpanakha, rushed on the scene!

As soon as she saw Lakshmana, she was allured by the halo of goodness and the splendour that illumined his body. She was struck dumb at the unexpected vision. She suddenly transformed herself into a charmingly pretty damsel and approached him with amorous gestures. But Lakshmana paid no heed; he continued his task, unaffected by the apparition.

Surpanakha couldn’t bear inattention any longer. She came close to him and, with a pathetic voice, she appealed, “Lord! Why do you plunge me into despair? Cool my unbearable ardour; cast your loving happiness-conferring eye on me.” Lakshmana didn’t react to her call; he heard her words, but he only smiled within himself at her audacity. He continued with his attempt to pluck the plant safely from the shade.

Surpanakha lost patience; she prepared to draw him to herself. But Lakshmana drew back, saying, “Mother!

I am the bondslave of Sri Rama. I am not a free man; whatever I do, however small a job it may be, is done only as He commands,” as a prelude to the advice he planned to give her.

Hearing his words and curious to know with whom he was talking, Sita and Rama came out of the cottage into the garden. Rama noticed Surpanakha and recognised that she had changed into the damsel before him. He prepared himself for all eventualities.

Surpanakha pelted harsh, abusive words at Lakshmana, like ‘coward’ and ‘villain’, and laughed loudly in scorn at his unresponsive behaviour. She hadn’t noticed Rama; all her attention and anger were fixed only on Lakshmana. She pleaded with him, “O most charming! Wed me and be happy. I can delight you and serve you most loyally.”

Lakshmana tried to ward her off by saying, “Pretty woman! I am a slave, so if I wed you, you will have to live as a slave.” Continuing the jocular retort, he said in fun. “Well, there is my master, Rama; if you wed him, I will be your slave.”

Surpanakha took him at his word; she believed that it was good strategy. She turned to the cottage at which Lakshmana was pointing. There, standing near the door, laughing together at her, she found a very beautiful woman and beside her, the embodiment of masculine charm!

Surpanakha was smitten with passionate love; she ran to Rama and, weeping out her distress, she prayed, “God of love! God of beauty! Accept me as yours.”

Rama also decided to treat her to a homily and derive some fun out of the ludicrous situation. With a chuckle, He said, “O beautiful woman! I cannot wed you, because I am under the vow of monogamy. I have my wife here. My brother, Lakshmana, has a wife, but she is not here. So, wed him and derive fulfilment. He is the proper person for you; approach him.”

At this, the woman hastened to Lakshmana and started her appeals once again. “Your brother has agreed to the wedding, so don’t delay; accept me.” Her attitude now was very humble and gentle.

Lakshmana grasped the absurdity of her plight and wanted to heighten the fun. He sent her to Rama and Rama sent her back to Lakshmana several times, until she grew desperate. Blinded by passion, she relapsed into her demonic nature! Her crooked intelligence told her that it was Sita that stood in the way of her success in this adventure of lust, for Rama could not wed her with Sita by His side. If she were removed, Rama would certainly yield to her solicitations. So she fell upon Sita in order to kill her and swallow her, for she was a demon to the core.

Surpanakha is punished

Lakshmana stood ready, watching Rama’s face for orders. Rama realised that the woman was far gone and had to be stopped. Feeling that an axe need not be used when nails are enough, he looked at Lakshmana, raised his hand, and counted four on his fingers.

Lakshmana immediately grasped the meaning of that command! By counting four, Rama indicated the four *Vedas*, which are collectively called *Sruthi*, that is to say, “The Heard,” which means the ear. Lakshmana had a sharp vigilant intellect, so he could rightly interpret the slightest gesture of Rama.

Rama had held his hand up toward the sky. The sky (*akasa*) is the fifth elemental force, characterised by sound; sound is the symbol for Brahman, known as Sound (*Sabda*) Brahman, or God. God resides in heaven, and

heaven is also indicated by the raised pointing hand. Heaven is known as *naaka* in Sanskrit; it has also another meaning, nose!

As soon as Rama made those two gestures, Lakshmana rushed toward the demonic woman with his sword drawn. He dragged her down to the ground, and, shouting that her effrontery must be punished, he slashed off her ears and nose! Surpanakha raised such a loud wail that the forest quaked and quivered. She assumed her real shape of ogress and yelled, “Is this just? How can you deform so cruelly a woman who has come to you? I shall bring my brother Ravana here and inflict retribution for this cruel act.” She disappeared quickly into the forest.

The demons want revenge

Surpanakha went straight to the demon chieftains, Khara and Dushana, in Dandaka Forest and wailed, “How can you bear this insult and injury dealt to your sister so silently? For what purpose have you stored so much of valour and might? It is better you burn them into ashes. Are you masculine? Can you call yourselves so? Shame on you and your boast of heroism.”

They could not understand what had happened to her, and who had deformed her so piteously. They asked her, “Sister! Who inflicted this injury? Tell us; we shall wreak vengeance with all our might.”

Surpanakha started telling her story. She began with an elaborate description of the charm and captivating beauty of Rama and Lakshmana.

Hearing this, the brothers got wild and inquired why she was wasting her time and theirs with that superfluous prologue, “Tell us, who injured you? Who defaced you?” Then, she informed them all what had happened.

Khara and Dushana were highly incensed at the plight of their sister, whose ears and nose had been slit; they collected an army of fourteen thousand ogres and marched in hot haste toward Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers who had punished her in that manner. The ogre warriors were so indomitable that they couldn’t be defeated even in dreams; they knew no retreat or defeat; they were invincible in battle. Like winged mountains, they moved fast along the valleys in terror-striking groups, while the earth shook under their feet. Each of them was armed to the teeth with a variety of deadly weapons.

The earless, noseless widow, Surpanakha, with her bleeding face, walked in front of the entire force, eager to take revenge. She was leading them to the patch of green where she had met the brothers.

But she was an inauspicious beginning for the campaign. She was a bad omen for the expedition. A bleeding face, a widow, a defective —these are considered bad omens. Surpanakha was all these. The demons (*rakshasas*) were not aware of the pros and cons of the signs and omens for starting on a march toward the battlefield; they relied on their physical and material might and their nefarious stratagems. For this very reason they were always unable to stand before the might of divine and *dharmic* (virtuous) forces. For who can withstand the power generated by the observance of *dharma* and the grace of God?

They never paid attention to righteousness or divinity; they concentrated all their energies and skills on equipping themselves with physical might. Proud of their weapons, muscles, and wickedness, they strode forward into the forest, blowing their trumpets, roaring like lions, bellowing like wild elephants, yelling about their exploits and gyrating wildly in their wild dances. They never realised that their onslaught was comparable only to the onslaught of a sparrow on an eagle!

The demons kill each other!

From a distance, Surpanakha pointed out to her brothers the hermitage where Rama was. To arouse the ogres into a final frenzy, the army shouted in unison. “Kill, catch, murder,” and ran forward. When they approached the hermitage, the brothers challenged Rama, crying out at the top of their voices, “O most wicked, O most unfortunate! You dared deform our sister, did you? Now, see if you can save your life from extinction!”

Rama was already aware of their approach; he told Lakshmana to keep Sita in a cave and be on guard. “Don’t worry about me in the least! Nothing ill can ever happen to me,” Rama said. Lakshmana knew Rama’s might, so he obeyed implicitly. He had no doubt at all about Rama’s victory, He led Sita into the cave and stayed there, with his bow and arrow ready for any emergency.

Rama stood before the hermitage, a smile lighting up his face and his bow, well strung, ready for the fray. He passed his hands gently over the matted hair on his head; at this, the ogres saw billions of blinding flashes emanating from the crown of hair. His arms appeared to their eyes as huge multihooded serpents. As a lion glares at an elephant and bares its teeth relishing the victory that was already assured, Rama, the Lion, stood defiant and terrible before the pack of frightened elephants.

The cries, “Here is the one who deformed her. Hold him. Catch him. Kill him,” rose over the tumult. But no one dared come forward to put that cry into action. However much they were prodded and encouraged, not one of them could muster enough courage to approach Rama.

The curses and cries of the ogres filled the forest, and wild animals in panic ran helter-skelter seeking shelter. A few ran into the cave where Sita was; Lakshmana sympathised with their agony and allowed them in, so that they might rid themselves of fear and anxiety. He gave them refuge and welcomed them in, for he knew that they were in dire distress.

The ogres who surrounded Rama were so overcome by his beauty and charm that they did nothing but stare at the glory and splendour; many reveled in descriptions of his grace; many were lost in admiration and appreciation; all were bound to Rama through love and reverence. Not one of them could or did raise a weapon against him or cast an angry look!

Surpanakha also joined in the praise. She said to Khara and Dushana, who were standing wonder-struck near her, “Brothers! What incomparable beauty is standing before us! I have never seen till now such charm, such grace, such pure harmony, such melodious physique. Do not kill him, but catch him just as he is and present him to me.”

The brothers were similarly entranced. “Sister! We too have never set eyes on such an embodiment of beauty. The nearer we approach him, the faster he binds himself to us, the more we are fascinated by his charm. We don’t have even an iota of anger or hatred toward him. The longer we look upon him the more profuse the joy that wells up within us. Perhaps, it is this feeling that is called bliss (*ananda*) by the sages living here.”

Khara did not like to talk with Rama, so he sent a messenger to find out from Rama who he was, what his name was, where he came from, why he entered the forest and took residence therein, etc.

The messenger neared Rama and asked him the question. Rama smiled at this behaviour. He said, “Listen fellow! I am a warrior (*kshatriya*), come into this forest to hunt wild animals like your master. I am not afraid even of the god of death. If you feel you have the capacity, come, give me battle and win. Or else, return home, every

one of you, and save yourselves from destruction. I won't kill those who run away from the field."

This statement was carried back to Khara and Dushana and related to them correctly. At this, the brothers took up their arms, the spears, axes, pestles, bows and arrows, and yelled until the skies were booming with the echo. They showered their missiles upon Rama. Rama cut them into pieces with a single arrow from his bow. Other arrows flighted among them by Rama did as much havoc as fire or lightning could do. The ogres retreated before the onslaught, crying out in pain, "O mother! O father! Alas! Save us!" and so on in sheer agony and despair.

Seeing them flee, Khara, Dushana and their youngest brother Thrisira called out, "Demons (*rakshasas*)! Don't flee from the fight. Whoever is found running away will be killed on the spot, by our own soldiers."

At this, they thought "Well! It is far better to die at Rama's hand than at someone else's or anywhere outside his presence." So, they came back to their ranks and moved forward toward the place where Rama stood. But they were in no mood to give battle. They were so fascinated by the personal charm and splendour of Rama that they stood entranced gazing at the divine beauty.

Meanwhile, Rama let loose the arrow called *Sammohana*, which had the effect of deluding and confounding the enemy. As a result, each soldier saw his neighbour as the person he had been deputed to destroy. Khara and Dushana had exhorted them to kill Rama, so each one fell upon the other, shouting, "Rama is here, here is Rama". They killed each other in great glee. The entire place was cluttered up with the severed limbs of the ogres. Blood flowed in streams through the forest. Vultures and crows flocked around, eager to fill themselves with the carrion. Fourteen thousand ogres faced one person on that day in that field! The ogres died, every one of them, crying "Rama, Rama" when they fell. Khara and Dushana also died, along with their loyal henchmen.

The ascetics and sages who witnessed this scene of terror realised the unique valour of Rama and felt happy that Ravana's end was also certain at the hands of this redoubtable hero. They were confirmed in their belief that Rama was the Almighty Providence, who had come to wipe the entire race of ogres or demons off the face of the earth and thereby ensure the peace and prosperity of mankind.

Ascetic sages visit Rama

As soon as the fierce engagement ended, Sita and Lakshmana came to Rama and prostrated before him. Rama raised Lakshmana gently from the ground and described to him the fate of the fourteen thousands and their masters during the battle that lasted barely half an hour. He detailed the incidents with evident joy and interspersed the narration with many a smile and chuckle. Meanwhile, Sita's eyes were roaming over Rama's body to assure themselves that he was unhurt and had not suffered even a scratch.

The next day, groups of ascetics and sages with their disciples and pupils visited Rama's Panchavati *ashram*, for they had heard of the destruction of the ogre army, achieved single-handedly by the prince from Ayodhya. They extolled Rama for his bravery and bowmanship.

Some of them who had acquired the power of forward vision approached Rama in all humility and said, "O Master! You have to be vigilant and alert in the coming days. The demons are opposed to all limitations and regulations that justice and uprightness impose. Their daily routine is to cause harm to all and sundry. Their highest goal is to fulfil their selfish desires. They do not care how they fulfil them and by what means. Their elder brother Ravana possesses vastly greater powers. His army is many millions strong. This termagant will certainly go to

him and bewail her fate. And he won't desist from taking up her cause and trying to wreak vengeance on those who disfigured her." Thus, they forewarned Rama and Lakshmana, giving them such information as they had with them.

Rama listened to them with a smile playing on his face. "Yes, yes. I am not unaware of this. I have come on this particular mission." He nodded his head, as if he was eagerly looking forward to the happy event of the encounter with Ravana himself. But he didn't speak more; he sat as if he was innocent of any knowledge of the future.

He turned his eyes on Lakshmana and, with a twinkle in the eye, told him, "You heard it, didn't you?" Turning to the sages, Rama said, "Please don't become anxious or worried. I am prepared to meet all situations."

They were consoled and comforted by that assurance and promise. Rama instilled faith and courage in them and allowed them to return to their hermitages, confident that they could continue their studies and practices in peace and tranquility, undisturbed by the demon hordes.

Ravana hears Surpanakha's story

As the sages foretold, Surpanakha lost no time in appearing before her brother, Ravana, the demon emperor, rending the air with her weeping. She barged into his audience hall and spouted angry invectives, to the astonishment and anxiety of everyone present. The demons of Lanka were frightened that some calamity had overtaken their land; they came out into the streets and began discussing what the reason could possibly be.

Her appearance was monstrous; her body was covered with blood, and her words were poisoned by anger. Ravana understood that someone had inflicted great injury on her. He was shocked at her plight. He roared from his throne, "Sister! Tell us in full what happened."

Surpanakha replied, "Brother! If you are a genuine demon (*rakshasa*), if the superhuman powers you gained by years of asceticism are real, then come, the moment has arrived to use your valour, your courage, and your heroism. Arise! Don't ignore the calamities that await you and let things go by, lost in the intoxication that drink provides.

"You have paid no attention to events that are taking place at Panchavati—who has come there, for what purpose, and for what task. Princes determined to destroy the demons have entered Dandaka Forest. They felled hundreds of thousands of demon soldiers. They cut the brothers Khara and Dushana to pieces. They wiped out of existence thousands launched against them in the wink of an eye. Their heroism is beyond description. Their personal beauty—Ah!" Surpanakha halted and stood silent, contemplating the splendour that had enraptured her.

Ravana became uncontrollably furious. He gnashed his teeth and slapped his thighs as if in a burst of challenge. "What? Did those vile persons kill Khara and Dushana? Perhaps they didn't know my name, that I am behind them as their support. Perhaps they haven't heard of my might and vengefulness." Ravana continued to boast aloud, recounting his exploits to the people present.

Surpanakha interrupted him. "O mass of wickedness! When your arch-enemy is dancing on your head, you are sitting here like a coward, extolling yourself and your invincibility! This is no sign of an emperor worthy of his throne. Perhaps you don't know that renunciants (*sanyasins*) are ruined by the company they keep, emperors are ruined by the ministers they employ, wisdom is ruined by desire for appreciation, and the sense of shame is

destroyed by imbibing drink. Well, brother. Don't neglect fire, illness, an enemy, a snake, and a sin on the grounds that they are small and insignificant. When they grow big, they are bound to inflict great harm. Therefore, hasten; do not hesitate."

Surpanakha's words poured the poison of hatred into Ravana's ears. Kumbhakarna, the other brother who was present, asked Surpanakha with a smile on his lips, "Sister! Who sliced your ears and nose?" With a loud wail, she replied, "Alas! This wicked deed was done by those very Princes."

Ravana consoled her, to some extent. He then asked her, "Sister! The nose is on the face; the ears are on the sides of the face. They cannot be sliced at one stroke. Tell me, were you sleeping soundly when they cut them off? This is indeed surprising." Those present also wondered how it could have happened.

Surpanakha replied, "Brother! I lost all awareness of my body, why, of the region where I was, when those soft sweet hands touched me. When my eyes were drinking the charm of their beautiful faces, I was not conscious of what they did. The very sight of those princes rendered me so entranced that I lost all awareness of myself and the surroundings.

"What shall I say of the ecstasy I derived by talking to them! They always bubble over with joyful smiles; they know no other attitude or reaction. Even masculine hearts will surely be fascinated by their charm. They are really enrapturing representations of the God of love. Never have I set eyes on such beauty.

"Fie upon our demon prowess, our vile stratagems, our abnormal figures, our ugly appearance! We are indeed disgusting. Look upon them but once and you will swear I am right. Why? Khara and Dushana, who died in the battle, were reluctant to fight with them. They protested and pleaded with me, 'How can we feel enmity and fall upon these embodiments of auspiciousness and paragons of beauty?'"

The courtiers and ministers assembled in the hall listened to this description with awe and delight. Her words confounded even Ravana. The picture of Rama that she drew gave him great joy and peace when he contemplated on it. Deep within him, he felt an urge to cast eyes on that inspiring embodiment of divine charm. As he listened to his sister, the anger that had raised its hood within slowly slithered away. He decided to investigate calmly what really happened at Panchavati.

He addressed his sister thus: "Sister! Tell me, do those two brothers live at Panchavati all alone? Or are there others with them? Have they no followers, companions, or courtiers?"

Surpanakha replied, "No. They have no band of bodyguards or kinsmen or warriors. The elder of the two, Rama, has a woman with him, who is endowed with superlative beauty. She is even more charming than they; she is the very goddess of love, in human form. The two brothers live at Panchavati with this woman; they roam about freely and without fear in the forest glades and valleys. In fact, I have never so far set eyes on such perfect feminine beauty; the likes of her does not exist on heaven or earth."