

Chapter 9. The Nether Region

Rama embraced Vibhishana, Hanuman, Nala, Nila, and others and thrilled them all with the divine touch. At this, the pain that tortured them disappeared in an instant; the wounds on their bodies were healed. Rama's compassionate look fell upon the monkeys, and the monkeys were delighted at the sight of His happy face.

Sulochana berates Ravana

Sulochana, Meghanada's wife, heard the news of her husband's death through her maids, who ran to her with the tragic information. Ravana talked to her, saying, "Until now, I believed that this small task could be accomplished easily by either Meghanada or Kumbhakarna. Now I have observed with my own eyes the failure of their prowess. I'm ashamed that Meghanada fell a victim to the attack of monkeys. How can those who are killed by monkeys claim to be heroes?" Ravana said.

He tried to console Sulochana. "Respected consort! Give up your grief. Don't think that I am a hero of that type. I'll bring you solace within an hour or so. You can witness my terrific might on the battlefield—I'll pluck the heads of those who caused your husband's death and bring them with me. This shall be done, without a doubt." Ravana boasted and raved in the presence of Sulochana. His anger burned his frame, and he was beside himself with rage.

The wise and virtuous Sulochana replied, "O Ten-headed One! Is there any trace of hope in your heart that you can win victory? You are sunk in the deep darkness of delusion. I had swallowed my resentment and my disappointment for so long, for I felt that opposing one's father-in-law was improper, and in this case it was also useless to try to convince you. Your rage is the prime cause for the destruction of the demon population of this island. Let me tell you this: It is impossible for you to win this war. This is the truth, the indisputable truth."

Sulochana rose suddenly. Wailing alone, she moved toward the apartment of queen Mandodari, the mother of Meghanada. There, she fell at the feet of her mother-in-law and said, "This calamity was brought about by your husband and by no one else. You too cannot escape such a calamity, which is sure to befall this day or the next." Her torn heart poured out words that were harsh and cruel.

Mandodari was also pained when she contemplated Ravana's evil desires and his pride at his own wickedness. She wept at the realisation that Sulochana's words were awfully true. The two women sat silent for long, and later they described to each other Rama's virtues and excellence and Sita's patience and chastity. They told themselves that if only they could get a glimpse of that divine person, their lives would be rendered worthwhile.

Ravana couldn't bear to witness the agony of his bereaved daughter-in-law, Sulochana. Her words thrust his heart like sharp spikes. His grief was so heavy at the loss of such a bright and loving son that he fell on the floor and beat his heads on the ground in despair. Rising up, he poured out his anguish before the Siva idol of his favourite temple.

Meanwhile, the ministers of his court approached him there. They said, "O King, why are you grieving in vain? Sons, wives, and all the rest on whom we lavish our love are all like the lightning flash that illumines the dark cloud for an instant; they come and go. Life is a flash; it does not last. Knowing this in full measure, it is not proper for you to sink in ignorance and bewail their loss. Now is the time to plan the future. Plan the strategy by

which we can destroy the enemy at our doors.” They tried to bring consolation and remind him of the immediate task, through various arguments. At last, Ravana folded his twenty palms and, praying to Siva, fell on the floor of the temple in reverent homage.

Ahi-Ravana kidnaps Rama and Lakshmana!

When this happened on the earth above, Ahi-Ravana, living in the nether regions, became aware that Ravana was suffering a great burden of sorrow. He thought within himself, “How could this be? He has all the world under his control and within his grasp! No one can defeat him.”

Ahi-Ravana worshiped no other god but the goddess Kamada. Immediately, he meditated on her, and she revealed Ravana’s whereabouts to him. So, he could appear before Ravana right in the Siva Temple. He fell at Ravana’s feet, announcing his name while doing so.

Ahi-Ravana was another of Ravana’s sons. He asked why his father was so disheartened. Ravana told him all that had happened since Surpanakha’s nose and ears were sliced off by the brothers.

This account made Ahi-Ravana very sad. He said, “The path of morality is adored by everyone in the world. By straying away from that path and preferring the path of immorality, fear enters the heart. Instead of paying attention to the past and future, and the likely course of events, you have plunged into this foolish fatal war. As a consequence, you have destroyed your clan and your dynasty. You don’t know the heroism and the power that lies dormant in ‘man’. You have counted the greatest among them as the least and the lowest. Yet, I tell you one thing: I shall capture Rama and Lakshmana and take them with me to the nether regions. I shall sacrifice them as offerings to my god Kamada. I shall thereby bring immense fame to the demon (*rakshasa*) name.” With these words, he prostrated before Ravana, and made obeisance to Kamada.

Then he entered the camp of Rama. With his supernatural power, he invoked the spirit of darkness and enveloped the monkeys in thick blackness. No one could see his own palm, held before him! Such was the thickness of the pitch darkness around all. The monkeys were extremely vigilant in camp; even death dared not enter the place. Hanuman, the monkey guard, elongated his tail to such an extent that he could encircle the camp with it many times over, until the coils one over the other became a high wall, of the size and strength of a mountain barrier. Hanuman himself sat alert at the only gate through which entrance into this impregnable fort was possible.

Ahi-Ravana saw the caudal fort and was stricken with great fear. He could not conceive of any strategy to out-manoeuvre this defence. Suddenly, getting a brainwave, he changed himself into the likeness of Vibhishana and accosted Hanuman at the gate. He told him, “Friend, I must go to Rama. With his approval I had gone outside the camp to perform my evening prayers and rites. I have finished them now. If I don’t go without delay, I will incur the sin of disobeying His command. So allow me to enter the camp.”

Hanuman was taken in by those words and the form, which were to his ears and eyes the same as Vibhishana’s. He allowed him into the camp.

Ahi-Ravana found Nala and Sugriva fast asleep, exhausted by the day’s fighting. Rama was also sleeping, with his hand clasping his brother Lakshmana’s hand.

The pseudo-Vibhishana who was approaching him was not unnoticed by Rama. He had incarnated, adopting, in sport, the human frame, and his purpose in so doing was to destroy the entire demon (*rakshasa*) species.

His task would remain unfinished if Ravana's descendents survived in the nether regions. So, he played the role as if he didn't know the trick in which Ahi-Ravana was about to indulge. Others cannot understand His ways; He knows where, when, and by which means one has to be exterminated. He plays his drama in his own way.

The demon recited the *mantra* for bewildering (the *mohana mantra*), which would make whomever he wanted swoon and become unconscious. That made the monkey heroes sleep even more soundly. Then, he bound Rama and Lakshmana and carried them off to his region in the bowels of the earth, the region called Patala.

Vibhishana uncovers the plot

After some time, the monkeys woke up. They were plunged in dismay when they found that Rama and Lakshmana were not beside them. The place where they had slept had become a deep pit. The entire camp was soon filled with cries and groans. The monkeys were rendered as miserable as the sky without the moon, or lotus blooms without water. The monkeys started moving in all directions to seek out the brothers and recover them. Many ran toward the shore of the sea; many searched the borders of the campus. No one could discover any clue. The monkeys lost hope and courage; they were overcome by sorrow and despair. "All the demon warriors have been destroyed. Only Ravana has survived; his days were also nearing the end. At this juncture, this misfortune has overtaken us." Thus, the monkeys lamented their fate.

Sugriva, the king of the monkeys, fell unconscious on the ground. Vibhishana had not heard about this incident; he was returning with wet clothes on, from a sea bath, after performing his morning rites. The monkeys ran toward him and told him that Rama and Lakshmana could not be found in the camp. Vibhishana was struck with sorrow for one instant, but since he was conversant with the tricks that the demons could play, using their supernatural powers, he guessed the plot correctly. "Come. Let us go into the camp," he told them. This gave them some little consolation.

When he talked with Hanuman at the gate, he was surprised and shocked. Hanuman asked, "Why? You passed through this gate into the camp a while ago; you asked my permission to do so."

It was now clear to Vibhishana. He could picture in his mind what had happened. So he addressed the monkeys, "Monkeys! There is no need to be anxious. Ahi-Ravana, Ravana's son, is a master at such tricks. He lives in Patala, in the nether regions. Judging from the depth of this pit, I am sure it is he who carried Rama and Lakshmana to his own place underground. I have no doubt on this point, for no one else can assume my form. Don't be disheartened. It is best that someone from among us who is mighty proceed there." He looked around. Sighting Hanuman, he said, "Hanuman! Your physical and mental strength are known all over the world. Go immediately to Patala and bring back these oceans of mercy, Rama and Lakshmana. Vibhishana described also the route that Hanuman had to take to reach Patala.

Sugriva, Angada, and Jambavan clasped Hanuman to their breasts and shed tears of joy. Hanuman solicited permission from his royal master, Sugriva, and, before starting on his mission, he told the monkeys, "Don't fear. Don't be anxious in the least. Whoever he is, I shall destroy him, even if I have to sacrifice my life. Pretty soon, I shall stand before you with Rama and Lakshmana. Be assured." With these words and with the acclamation "victory to Rama (*Jai Rama*)" emanating from his tongue, Hanuman started off.

Hanuman rescues the brothers

Reaching the Patala region, Hanuman rested for awhile under a tree. He heard two birds sitting above him, conversing aloud. Hanuman knew the language of birds, and he sat listening to their talk. “Dear one,” spoke the bird, “Ahi-Ravana has brought two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, and he has made all preparations to sacrifice them both to Goddess Kamada just now. He will cast these holy bodies away, after the sacrifice. We can feast on those sacred bodies to our full content. This day is a festival day for us.”

Hanuman rose suddenly from under the tree; like a cobra whose tail has been trodden upon, he hissed with rage and leaped forward like a giant flame. “Alas! I fear what has happened already to my Lord,” he wailed.

He entered the city of Ahi-Ravana. At the very entrance, he had to fight and overcome Makaradwaja, the guard in monkey form. But, seeing that he was a monkey, he explored his genealogy and history; Hanuman was able to win his confidence and get from him inside information about Rama and Lakshmana and their fate. He also came to know from him that the brothers were to be taken at dawn to the temple of Goddess Kamada, to be offered as a human sacrifice to her.

Hanuman asked Makaradwaja, the monkey guardian of Patala, where the two brothers were kept by the cruel overlord of the nether regions. He gave him all the details. However, he insisted that he would not allow him to enter the area, for he had to obey his master and be loyal to him and to his interests. “Whatever suffering I have to endure, I won’t let you in,” he said. “If I showed you special consideration because you are also a monkey, I would thereby dishonour the entire monkey species as unreliable and ungrateful. My lord Ahi-Ravana is as much adorable to me as your lord Rama is to you. So, however near you may be to me, I won’t waver or deviate; I must do my duty and carry out his command. You can get in only after defeating me in combat,” he said challengingly.

Hanuman appreciated his sentiments and his sense of duty. He was happy that Makaradwaja had taken the proper attitude. He took up the challenge and fought him. After some time spent in fierce combat, Hanuman decided that protraction was not desirable, so he twisted his tail around Makaradwaja’s body and cast him far out in the distance. Then, Hanuman boldly entered the city.

He noticed a florist entering the gate with a fine big garland of fragrant flowers. Resolving that this was the best chance to reach the place he wanted to go, he suddenly assumed a molecular form and occupied the garland he was carrying. The garland was not rendered any heavier; it was as light as ever. The florist had no idea of what happened. Everything was as before, for him. The garland was delivered to Ahi-Ravana himself. He took it in both his hands and placed it around the neck of the image of Kamada in the temple. He also offered various rich dishes as sanctified food to the idol. From his vantage point on the garland round its neck, Hanuman ate up the dishes as they were placed before the idol. The demons saw the food disappearing, and they were delighted that their goddess had deigned to accept their devotion. Ahi-Ravana was happy at the thought that “this day my prayers have been answered; my fortune has reached its summit.”

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers, were brought in, decorated in the manner in which sacrificial animals are decorated. Gigantic demon warriors held them by their arms on either side. Hanuman saw them forced to stand by the side of the sacrificial altar. Hanuman bowed obeisance to Rama from where he was and filled his mind with adorations for Him. The guards placed the brothers right in front of the idol and held sharp swords near their necks. Ahi-Ravana said that the sacrificial offering of the lives of the two brothers had to take place immediately after the waving of the holy flame and that they ought to be ready to execute their task without a moment’s delay. Rama and Lakshmana, who were really divine beings playing the role of humans, had dis-

covered that it was Hanuman who had eaten the food offerings placed by Ahi-Ravana before the deity, and this knowledge induced them to look on the impending events with great good humour.

Seeing them smiling and light-hearted, Ahi-Ravana was awfully enraged. He said, “Well. If the few moments more of life that you are granted give you so much of joy, I don’t begrudge it; be happy while you can. A while later, you can smile in the realm of Yama, the ruler of the dead.” He paid no regard to the brothers but continued to relish their fate and utter harsh words to wound them even more. At this, the priest rose and, paying respects to his master, informed him that the code of political morality required that victims be permitted to pray to their guardian for peace after death. The demon chief rose from his seat and announced, “Princes! If you have any well-wishers, this is the time to express gratitude for them, since you have only a few moments to live.” Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other and smiled.

Just then, Hanuman let out a terrific roar. Hearing it, the demons imagined that their goddess had manifested and was expressing Her anger. Hanuman jumped from the garland. Assuming his terror-striking form and grasping the sword that was in the hand of the goddess, he felled Ahi-Ravana and hit him all over, hacking him to pieces. But his body was of diamond strength, and he had won a mysterious boon that made the bits get together and become whole, as soon as they were separated. At last, Hanuman fixed Rama in his mind and with a shout of Victory to Rama (*Jai Rama*), he caught the head in one hand and sliced the neck with the other. Before they could join, he threw the head into the blazing fire, in the sacrificial pit before the idol.

Just then, Makaradwaja managed to reach the temple and the presence of the goddess. Hanuman saw him, recovered the golden crown from Ahi-Ravana’s head, and placed it on Makaradwaja’s head, proclaiming him ruler of Patala and advising him to be ever grateful to the brothers and to be always loyal and devoted to them.

Hanuman had Rama and Lakshmana seated on his shoulders and, at one jump, he rose from Patala and landed safe in the midst of the monkey hordes eagerly looking for them with their million eyes. Vibhishana and others could not contain the joy that overwhelmed them when they saw the brothers safe and sound before them. They fell at Rama and Lakshmana’s feet; they clasped Hanuman in their arms and shed tears of gratitude. The monkeys praised Hanuman in a thousand different paeans. They lifted him on their shoulders; they fed him and fondled him. They embraced him and poured their love on him.

Vibhishana stood before Rama and said, “Lord! What shall I say of your divine plays (*leelas*)? Only You can reveal to us the meaning of your acts and activities. You have come with the resolution to wipe off the demon denizens even in the nether regions. All this stage-acting, is, I know, to fulfil that resolution.”

Ravana’s last surviving son dies

Ravana learned that Rama and Lakshmana had been brought back by Hanuman from Ahi-Ravana’s kingdom. He heard the tragic news of the death of his son, Ahi-Ravana. He collapsed and fell on the ground; he lamented his loss long and loud; tears flowed in streams from his eyes. Mandodari, the queen, came to him and tried her best to console him and reduce his grief. He did not give ear to her words; he just grew more and more enraged at her soft counsel.

Ravana mustered courage and rose suddenly, to meet a minister who presented himself at that time. His name was Sindhuranatha; he was a respected elder, far gone in years. He was a very wise man, who was in close proximity to Vibhishana when he was formerly in Lanka. He advised Ravana on various moral virtues and on the

mortality of people and things. Ravana didn't listen to his words, and he even treated them with patent disgust. The minister was sad when he saw his reaction. He felt, "In times of misfortune, intelligence also gets warped. Poor fellow! He is heading for disaster, so even sweet counsel tastes bitter to him." Still, out of compassion, he continued with his words of sympathetic advice.

Ravana said to himself: "My kith and kin have been decimated; there is no one left alive."

Just then, an aged minister said, "Why do you say so? You have another surviving son, Narantaka, who has 720 million demons with him. Call him for support; send a messenger immediately. He can destroy the enemy; you need have no doubt."

Ravana was delighted at these words. He sent for a messenger, Dhumakethu, with instructions to bring with him the clever Narantaka. The messenger described the tragedies that had overtaken Lanka and communicated the urgent appeal Ravana had made for his help. Narantaka went immediately with his hordes, and as soon as he reached the field he fell upon the monkey forces.

Hanuman spied him from far. He went forward to confront him. On seeing him and his terror-striking form, Narantaka was struck with fear. He asked Dhumakethu who he was and was told that he was Hanuman, the invincible hero who had killed all his brothers. Hearing this, Narantaka became even more ferocious; he placed arrows on his bow and let them off against Hanuman, but Hanuman caught them all by the hand and broke them to pieces. He came close to Narantaka and pounded his breast heavily with his clenched fist. He lifted Narantaka aloft and, turning him around fast, threw him deep into a nether region named Rasatala. Millions of his demon followers were thrown into the sea. He broke the chariots in Narantaka's army into smithereens; the charioteers were also decimated.